The precarity of platform capitalism: How collective mobilisation changes as the sex work industry shifts to online marketplaces.

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Abstract

This research sought to understand how the commercial sex work industry operates within platform capitalism and to analyse how platform capitalist models of labour impact the working, social, and political lives of online sex workers (adult content creators). This is an interpretive, qualitative study with data collected from a content analysis of online forums utilised by online sex workers globally and from semi-structured interviews with eight online sex workers based in New Zealand. Findings highlight the covert forms of structural violence inflicted on workers through algorithmic bias, exploitative platform practices demanding unpaid emotional, moral, and affective labour, punitive deplatforming measures, and economically precarious third-party payment platforms. Additionally, transnational laws imposed on workers and the monopolisation of the online sex work industry limit workers' ability to publicly mobilise against platforms due to fear of retaliation.

Given these forms of structural violence, it is critical to understand how workers are politically advocating for themselves within the platform economy, where they are classed as independent contractors without traditional employment protections. This research found that workers are restaging their collective mobilisation from public spaces to private spaces such as Discord and online forums. Workers have created private communities of care where they can support one another, offer advice, share resources, and come together in solidarity over their troubles. They also engage in what I term "imagined resistance", a form of resistance that is planned but is yet to transpire. This thesis thus offers insights into broader understandings of prefigurative politics being undertaken within the platform economy of online sex work through covert forms of resistance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

New Zealand's sex work industry is considered a success case of collective mobilisation (Hynes, 2015). With the establishment of the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC) and the Prostitute Reform Act (2003), sex workers gained important legal protections and a political voice (New Zealand Parliament, 2012, p. 4). However, these previous gains may be jeopardised as new forms of online sex work grow in popularity. Research indicates that street-based sex work is declining (McLean, 2015), and online work is now sex work's largest sector (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Jones, 2015). This change was largely driven by the Coronavirus pandemic which drove traditional, offline sex workers to take their services online (Platt et. al., 2020) and people new to sex work who have lost jobs in the pandemic also chose to do online sex work to survive (Robinson, 2020). This growth stresses the need for research into online sex work marketplaces, as there is a gap in understanding how online sex work platforms operate, how this shapes workers' experience of online sex work (Jones, 2015), and what this means for workers' collective mobilisation.

There is scepticism among labour sociologists and feminist theorists around whether the shift to online sex work may be beneficial for workers as there are risks to working online (Bleakley, 2014; Sanders et al., 2018). The appeal of online sex work is attributed to its convenience, accessibility, lucrativeness, flexibility, safety, and the empowerment that comes from being self-employed (McLean, 2015). There are downsides, however. Collective mobilisation for online sex workers is challenging due to social isolation, as workers operate individually from home rather than in the social space of brothels or the street, and because the internationally owned platforms fall outside the regulatory reach of the New Zealand government. Online platforms also categorise workers as 'independent contractors', which puts them in a precarious position as they are not protected by the same forms of employment law as traditional employees (Edward, 2020). Employment classification has been a longstanding problem in the sex work industry, with scholarship looking at the vulnerabilities of porn performers and how their independent contractor status has made it difficult to contest wage theft, copyright problems, harassment, health and safety standards, and racial discrimination - making them vulnerable to retaliation and blacklisting if they raise concern over these matters (Berg, 2021). Likewise, online sex workers continue to deal with the limitations of being classified as independent contractors (Marston, 2020).

My thesis sought to address the need for more research into online sex work. My thesis is of practical and theoretical significance, contributing to our understanding of this newer form of sex work that has grown in popularity and what this means for workers' collective mobilisation.

Theoretically, this thesis contributes to fields of labour sociology, platform capitalism, feminist theory, and social movement theory. I draw on theorisation of contemporary capitalism as 'platform capitalism', "a form of capitalism that utilises digital infrastructures to bring two possible participants in a market exchange together" (Pennell, 2019, p.8). These digital platforms are situated within the sharing economy. Organisations adopting sharing economy business models "do not own any commodity but develop platforms to connect providers and users for on demand services" (Lee et al.,2018, p. 2). Chaturbate, MyFreeCams, and OnlyFans are sex work sharing platforms who, under platform capitalism, have monopolised the sex work industry by implementing business practices that support the industries capitalistic aims, rather than supporting the interests of sex workers. For example, Chaturbate's ranking algorithm promotes, on the website's front page, top earners who generate a sizable income for the company whilst overlooking mid-low income earners (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). Such practices utilised under platform capitalism can create employment precarity (Bates et al., 2019) by influencing ones working experience (Wood et al., 2019) and collective mobilisation.

Despite the neoliberal narrative of independence, entrepreneurship, and financial freedom that platforms claim workers experience (Acquier, 2019), companies under platform capitalism do not distinguish people's identities independently, but rather through algorithmic classifications that group behaviours or characteristics into categorical markers (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). These algorithmic strategies that continually assess workers' performance against each other create income inequities and anxieties for workers and can generate a divide between workers as they are constantly driven to compete against one another. This can threaten worker collectivism and feeds into the power of platforms rather than workers as there is money to be made from workers increased competition and labour. This is troubling as it was the collective action taken previously that granted sex workers in New Zealand important legal protections and a political voice. Debates have questioned whether the increase in platform use for work threatens workers collective bargaining power and the ability for workers voices to be heard (Aloisi, 2019; Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018; Lamannis,2023). This thesis explored how traditional forms of public mobilisation are weakened due to worker fears of platform retaliation, although showed how workers are restaging collective mobilisation within private networks. The aim of this thesis was to explore the different ways sex work platforms operate under platform capitalism and to understand how these operations impact workers' experiences of work and their potential for collective action. This research addressed three key questions:

1. How is power in the sex work industry negotiated in and through platform capitalism?

The objective of this question was to understand how power dynamics operate within platform capitalist systems in the sex work industry and to uncover what these power dynamics tell us about digital labour and platform governance more broadly.

2. What can sex workers' experiences working within a platform capitalist labour model tell us about the online sex work industry including both positive and negative aspects? And how do these experiences shape sex workers' everyday lives?'

The objective of this question was to analyse online sex workers' narratives of their experiences working digitally and to understand how working digitally shapes their subjectivities and relationships online and offline.

3. How has the platformatisation of the commercial sex work industry shaped the political positioning of online sex workers, particularly New Zealand based sex workers who have had a strong political voice historically?

The objective of this question was to consider how online sex workers are positioned politically and how they might be collectively mobilising now that they're working within a global, digital system of work.

To answer these questions, I conducted a content analysis of online forum threads on AmberCutie Forum (ACF) which is utilised by online sex workers, along with semi structured interviews with eight online sex workers based in New Zealand. Online sex worker's experiences using online platforms offered insight into the nature of online sex work, the business practices sex work platforms utilise to shape work experience, and the subsequent challenges these practices have on sex workers and their ability to collectively act.

With the growth of online sex work platforms, this research was necessary to understand the changing face of the sex work industry, with particular emphasis on how workers' experiences are shaped by the business models implemented under platform capitalism. Given previous, exemplary political efforts made in New Zealand to provide traditional sex workers with a political voice and legal protections, it considered the question of whether further political reform for online sex workers is required on an international scale, particularly if the collective mobilisation of workers is hindered under platform capitalism. Thus, this thesis is of theoretical and political importance, contributing to our understanding of platform capitalism, and to feminist and social movement theory around sex work and women's empowerment, and the political bargaining power of online sex workers.

1.2 Research conceptualisation

This doctoral research is a qualitative study examining the experiences of online sex workers given the growth of the platform economy and online sex work options. My consideration for this topic came from the increased exposure I had online in 2019 with individuals choosing to work on online sex

work platforms for work. For example, people I followed on Instagram that had no prior experiences in the sex work industry were creating OnlyFans accounts and were promoting these accounts through their social media. I was curious why there had been an influx of people choosing to do this work online, especially given the stigma surrounding sex work.

My first thought was, how is this kind of work going to impact their mental health? This initial thought, which could be seen as a medical sociology perspective, was prompted as I had previously seen MyFreeCam's workers being vocal on X (formerly Twitter) about the problems they've encountered working online, including concerns for their wellbeing. For example, workers explicitly stated feeling depressed, anxious, overwhelmed, and angry, particularly when trying to maintain their CamScore (a scoring system used on MyFreeCams and Bonga, although a term used synonymously by workers when referring to algorithmic ranking systems) or when participating in Miss MyFreeCams competitions which are held monthly and offer monetary bonuses to top earners. During this time, workers would often publicly tweet making accusations of another worker "stealing" regular tippers or "manipulating" the algorithms by having their partners offer a "whale" tip right before the Miss MyFreeCams competition ended to maintain or increase their monthly rank. This resulted in arguments between workers that seemed toxic and unhealthy, but which occurred frequently.

With the influx of newcomers to the industry, meaning those that had not worked in the sex industry before, I imagined that if they were not familiar with some of these hardships there might be some mental health implications, and I wondered what that might entail. However, as I worked on my doctoral scholarship application and became more familiar with the literature on online sex work, I shifted away from a medical sociology perspective on the topic. With an absence of online sex work literature exploring the shift people were making to online sex work, and how online sex work platforms operate and shape workers' experiences, I instead sought to understand workers' experiences through the theorisation of platform capitalism. I switched focus to this broader approach situated in labour sociology in part due to my desire to not limit the study by choosing a medical sociology focus. It appeared that while workers were dealing with mental health implications, their experiences were influenced by the operations of platforms, for example, the algorithmic scoring that spurred competition, and stress, in workers. Consequently, I considered that there might be other ways platforms might impact workers' experiences and sought to uncover what this entailed. I had been studying labour sociology which included a focus on the 'platform economy' and 'gig workers' and knew of precarious working conditions and platform power in ride share and short-term accommodation rental industries such as Uber and Airbnb, however, I had not seen equivalent analyses of sex work platforms. I was especially curious about how workers might contest platform practices that they do not agree with and what workers collective mobilisation might look like within the platform economy. As New Zealand based sex workers have achieved political gains to improve their working conditions and rights, I

wondered what working on platforms outside of New Zealand jurisdiction might look like, and how that might impact worker mobilisation and their ability to influence change.

Previous research I have undertaken has explored marginalised groups' lived experiences and their collective mobilisation efforts. I believe that understanding the challenges faced by people is necessary if positive change is to ensue. A large part of endorsing that change, I believe, comes from the political climate that can impact groups and their advocacy efforts. For example, my master's research explored traditional Chinese medical groups and their efforts to become a regulated profession in New Zealand under the same Act as Western medicine (the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act). These regulatory debates illuminated the epistemic tension between both medical modalities and the political power afforded to Western medical groups. However, tension also occurred within the traditional Chinese medical community with opinions varying among practitioners on whether having greater political leverage through regulation was necessary. Another research project I was involved with looked at women's collective mobilisation and political activism that occurred through social media on Facebook outreach groups and online protests. These women had suffered adverse effects following their pelvic floor surgery which was suggested to them by their doctors as a solution for postpartum pelvic floor dysfunction. Together they utilised digital spaces to collectively mobilise to support and console one another post-surgery, to rally against the medical device industry, specifically against the use of polypropylene mesh, and to warn other women to the surgical dangers. My doctoral research is a blend of themes from these past projects, combining aspects of marginalisation, lived experience, and collective mobilisation to understand the precarity of platform capitalism and its economic, social, and political implications for online sex workers.

Overview of the thesis

This thesis contains eight chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter 2, the theoretical frameworks chapter, looks at the three key fields of scholarship this thesis contributes to: labour sociology, social movement theory, and feminist theory. I offer a broad explanation of these fields and discuss how this research is situated within each of these disciplines.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach utilised for this thesis research, including the research design, sampling strategies used to recruit participants, my positionality (which documents recruitment challenges as an outsider), and data collection and analysis methods. It also provides participant information and insights that were unable to be incorporated into the thesis' findings and finishes with a detailed explanation of ethical considerations that were worked through prior to commencing phase one and two of this thesis project.

Chapters 4-6 comprise of the research findings of this thesis and include three manuscripts that have been submitted for publication and have been accepted for publication, with academic journals. Chapter 4, "Structural violence of platform capitalism: A case study of online sex workers' experiences", is a manuscript submitted to the *Journal of Sociology*. It explores the structural violence online sex workers experience due to the operations of platforms - and third-party payment platforms - that exacerbate workers' economic precarity. It argues that structural violence is being enacted against workers due to the economic power platforms have over their workers. It shows how the global operations and systems platforms employ create inequities, economic risk, and disadvantages for workers, and shows the lack of power workers have over these economic systems. Stronger labour protections are required to ensure that workers have access to secure financial resources while working online.

Chapter 5, "Currying favour with the algorithm", is a manuscript that was submitted to the *Sexuality & Culture* journal. It analyses how online sex workers attempt to create boundaries between their online and offline lives to manage the competing expectations placed on them by their partners and viewers. These expectations are based on the desire for monogamous values to be upheld, however, the nature of online sex work conflicts with these values, proving problematic for workers who can experience risks such as cyberharrassment from viewers and challenges within their relationships when partners impose rules on how workers act toward viewers. It argues that these expectations affect workers' emotional and financial wellbeing and reproduce gendered power relations by prioritising stereotypically masculine pleasure over workers' economic interests.

Chapter 6, "Prefigurative politics in the platform economy: Online sex workers' restaging collective mobilisation through informal communities of care" is a manuscript submitted and conditionally accepted to the *Journal of Political Power*. It explores how the shift to platform capitalist labour models has affected workers' ability to collectively mobilise in public spaces. However, workers have restaged their collective mobilisation within private communication networks, such as Discord and online forums, and have established communities of care where they not only look out for one another and offer advice, but also engage in subversive forms of everyday resistance against platforms. This manuscript argues that these communities of care are spaces where prefigurative political work occurs.

Chapter 7, the discussion chapter, provides a summary of findings which outlines how this research answered the thesis' research questions. It also documents the original contribution this thesis provides to scholarship on online sex work. These original contributions included:

1. The conceptual creation of the term 'affective boundary work' to understand how workers manage the affect of others while trying to create boundaries between their professional and private lives. This conceptual contribution led to theoretical insights in the sociology of labour and feminist theory on workers' affective labour in the online sex work industry and highlighted the complexities involved, including understanding how parasocial relationships are formed because of affective labour – posing considerable risks to workers.

2. The conceptual creation of the term 'imagined resistance' to refer to workers' use of private spaces to strategise and plan the collective action they wish to enact against platforms in future, and the formation of online communities. Imagined resistance offers theoretical contributions to social movement theory, illustrating the nuanced understandings of online sex workers' resistance in the context of platform capitalism.

3. Novel findings regarding the economic power platforms wield over workers, drawing on data that hasn't been discussed in other academic literature. This included insights regarding platforms and interconnected third party payment practices and the lack of consent involved in platforms' decision-making practices that affect workers' economic livelihoods.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by bringing together each chapter's findings to show how online sex work platforms are structurally violent toward workers. Platforms employ operations that intensify workers' economic precarity and experiences of misogyny. These experiences of economic precarity and misogyny are seen in the very economic, social, and political systems platforms utilise that exploit workers' labour, control and mismanage workers' income, reproduce patriarchy online, and politically situate workers in a vulnerable position. Despite the hardships they face, workers have found unique ways to take political action. Workers are restaging their collective mobilisation within private Discord and online forum networks, because they worry about platform retaliation if they were to mobilise publicly. On Discord and online forums, workers have established communities of care where they have built solidarity with other workers by conveying their experiences and problems, sharing advice and supporting one another, and engaging in imagined resistance. Imagined resistance involves workers planned collective action and considerations of alternative platform operations that would better serve workers interests. These insights provide new ways to understand workers collective mobilisation and the forms of prefigurative political action workers are engaging in while dealing with contemporary problems in the platform economy of online sex work.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I explain how I draw on the theorisation of labour sociology and platform capitalism to show how the shift of work to digital platforms has changed the nature of work, increasing precarity for workers who work as independent contractors and do not receive the same protections as traditional employees. I discuss worker precarity through the lens of feminist theory, particularly neoliberal feminism, to contextualise workers' experiences economically, socially, and politically. While acknowledging that online sex workers have the choice of working online, and conceptualising online sex work as labour, this research highlights the challenges workers face within a labour market that is largely unregulated, operates outside of the jurisdiction of New Zealand law, lacks employment protections for workers, and is exploitive of workers and their labour in various ways. I then turn to social movement theory to show how online sex workers' ability to collectively mobilise against platforms in public spaces is complicated by platforms retaliation against those who decide to act. However, workers are restaging their collective mobilisation within private spaces to avoid platform retaliation and are instead engaging in everyday, covert forms of resistance against platforms, offering unique insights into online sex workers prefigurative political action.

2.1 Labour sociology and platform capitalism

Labour sociology's history and focus

The sociology of work, or labour sociology, refers to the study of work and employment; "it analyses the social settings, conditions, and dimensions of work, including the relations between workers and other agents within the work process" (Rodeheaver & Zafirovski, 2017, p. 1). It is rooted in the classical foundations of sociology, such as Karl Marx's work which offers an extensive critical analysis of capitalism (Marx, 1992), "built on these foundations, the study of work was central to the academic discipline of sociology" (Halford & Strangleman, 2009, p. 811-812). The focus of labour sociology has developed across time as work itself has transformed. Early theory in labour sociology considered how work altered as it shifted away from pre-industrial society and its implication for workers (Edgell, 2012). For example, when more advanced production systems emerged during the industrial period (machine tools, inanimate energy, factories) this changed the nature of how and where work was conducted, shaping workers' experiences (Edgell, 2012). Within industrial capitalism there was separation between home and work life that was unlike pre-industrial horticultural and agrarian societies where workers mostly worked cooperatively, within the realm of family and the household. As factories emerged, workers became independent from the home, albeit reliant on employers (Edgell, 2012). The market economy developed and became characterised by capitalist incentives such as competition rather than cooperative models of work, profit maximisation, the division of labour, and

the expansion of trade (Edgell, 2012). With this new organisation of work, workers' exploitation became noticeable, especially given the recurrent economic crises that occurred due to "endemic fluctuations in the business cycle that caused overproduction from time to time, leading to lower prices, less profits, and eventually reduced output and hence [the] economic failure of some companies" (Edgell, 2012, p. 19). This led to job losses, a reduction in workers' wages to maintain profitability, and other kinds of economic stress for workers (e.g., bankruptcy). Labour sociologists are interested in understanding these changing dynamics of work, the conditions that spur change, workers' experiences and the kinds of exploitation they face, as well as workers' collective mobilisation and bargaining.

Today, classical lenses of labour sociology continue to be relevant in analysing "new conditions of work" (Rodeheaver & Zafirovski, 2017, p. 2), with more recent scholarship looking at the role neoliberalism and platform capitalism have played in reshaping the global economy and the precarity and inequalities workers' experience (Kahancová & Meszmann, 2020; Montgomery & Baglioni, 2021). Precarity is also highly gendered in the platform economy, with studies (Adams-Prassl & Berg's, 2017; Gerber, 2022) showing that women working on the same platform as men earn less on average per hour. One reason for this, is due to the domestic responsibilities that have impacted women's ability to work – particularly lucrative jobs that require uninterrupted periods of work. This affects their earning potential as well as their algorithmic favourability and visibility on the platform with implications for their future earning potential as well (James, 2024). However, the flexibility of platform work is what motivates women to participate despite this gendered precarity, but as Wallis (2021) states "platform capitalism leverages the fact that people are partly bound to a particular place for a wide variety of reasons (p. 14) – namely their own profit motives. Ruiz García (2022) further argues how:

> Old patterns and traditional gender relations are being stressed in terms of what and how tasks are valued. For instance, social reproduction fails to be fully recognised, it is mainly invisible, not well distributed either between women and men, nor among the state and the private sector and when it is mercantilised it is performed in precarious conditions (p. 6).

Women's involvement in the platform economy shows the persistence of the sexual division of labour with Milkman et al. (2021) looking at this issue in context to platform-based food delivery drivers. The authors note how:

> It [the food delivery sector] is predominantly female in composition, especially in the grocery segment, where women are the vast majority of "shoppers" and "pickers," many of whom also deliver orders to customers. Moreover, this type of employment commodifies the tacit shopping and food preparation skills that many women routinely

> develop in their households, usually without monetary compensation. And crucially, this occupation attracts women in part because of their disproportionate responsibility for and commitment to family caregiving, in the context of the frayed U.S. social safety net and the nation's underdeveloped work–family policy (p. 2).

Thus, platform work is "far from being a 'social equalizer' … it is an insecure form of work underpinned by structural, labour market and household constraints" (Hoang et al., 2020, p. 3). This research applies the tenets of labour sociology to contemporary manifestations of platform work to understand online sex workers' experiences working within the platform economy due to its recent growth. Below I discuss the economic shift to platform labour, debates central to platform capitalism, and how this research is situated within the intersections of both labour sociology and platform capitalism.

Labour sociology and platform capitalism

In the late twentieth century (1970's), the rise of neoliberalism saw the foundation of the global economy shift, resting now upon socioeconomic and political logics which emphasise market competition, destablise the role of the state, and place the onus on workers to succeed (Leonardi & Pirina, 2020). With the growth of internet technologies and the digitalisation of everyday life, digital platforms now play a key role in facilitating social, cultural, and economic activities taking place both digitally and globally (Viljoen, et al., 2021). Moreover, digital technologies have transformed and expanded the market economy providing new methods of consumption and new ways of understanding the world of work (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). Platforms have supported this new mode of capitalism by providing the tools and software necessary for different users, including entrepreneurs (workers), consumers (customers), advertisers, and service providers, allowing them to connect with one another, share information, sell or consume products and services, and to establish their own marketplaces (Srnicek, 2017). This new mode of capitalism is known by many scholars, including labour sociologists, as platform capitalism (Liang et al., 2022; Srnicek, 2017, Vallas, 2019), although there are associated terms that are often used such as the platform economy, sharing economy, and gig economy which speak to different facets of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017).

The genealogy and debates of platform capitalism and how this research is situated within platform capitalist debates

The impetus for the use of the platform economy was financially motivated and stemmed from the surge in venture capital investments following the deregulation of banking which occurred during the mid-1990's (Vallas, 2019). In the emerging platform economy, the platform, be it digital marketplaces, social networks, or payment and trading systems, become the site where traditional

market exchanges take place (Cohen, 2017, p. 136). As platforms have become a site of economic activity the platform economy has reshaped work. Proponents of platform capitalism speak to the ease which businesses can outsource work to platforms who then match them with suitable platform workers, decreasing production and transaction costs and increasing productivity for the business (Papadimitropoulos, 2021). Platform workers then benefit from being allocated to jobs that suit their skillset. Moreover, labour platforms have been heralded for promoting economic growth and opportunity by offering the unemployed or under-employed the ability to enter the labour market. For online sex workers there are a variety of digital platforms they can choose, with most open to all workers, although some are restricted to female workers (Henry & Farvid, 2017). Flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurship are key tenets pushed by platform capitalists who argue that platform workers have the freedom to choose if, and when, they work and how long they want to work for (Haidar & Keune, 2021).

Critics of platform capitalism argue that precarious working conditions have emerged and claim that the system is exploitative (Howson et al., 2021; Srnicek, 2017). Critics highlight how platforms have undermined economic growth through emphasising self-responsibility for one's own success, which has intensified competition among workers (Pasquale, 2016). Subsequently, wages for platform workers have fallen as workers are forced to take up any gig, despite low remuneration, to be offered the job over other platform workers (Edward, 2020; Pasquale, 2016). This has led to growing concerns surrounding the lack of labour legislation and social protections afforded to platform workers, who are usually classified as self-employed, independent contractors, and therefore are not entitled to the same protections as employees (Edward, 2020). Given the global, digital environment it is easy for labour platforms to avoid national employment regulations as both employer (platforms) and worker (platform workers) may be situated in different countries, making it difficult to know which regulations to apply and more importantly, how to enforce them (Haidar & Keune, 2021). Platform workers thus lack the bargaining power and collective representation that mechanisms like trade unions provide to traditional employees, raising questions around how to protect platform workers within a platform capitalist system that is out of reach of labour and social regulatory systems (Vandaele, 2021).

The flexibility and autonomy afforded to platform workers has also been criticised due to the multimodal surveillance systems utilised to monitor platform workers, to ensure they are fulfilling the goals of the corporation. The different kinds of surveillance consist of algorithmic, managerial, and customer surveillance measures (Newlands, 2021). Algorithmic surveillance refers to the computational processes that rely on a constant stream of data illustrating the platform workers' activities. This data is used to assess the platform workers' behaviours and output to gauge their productivity and profitability (Newlands, 2021). Managerial surveillance is often used in conjunction with algorithmic forms of surveillance and involves additional monitoring conducted by humans (Newlands, 2021). Customer

surveillance involves systems such as customer ratings and reviews (Newlands, 2021). In the platform economy, individuals will work to conform to entrepreneurial ideals, and will feel pressure to do so due to the different kinds of ongoing surveillance platforms implement. Because workers conform and self-surveil, power remains with the platforms, ultimately subjugating sex workers while providing a profit for platforms (Athreya, 2020).

Debates on platform capitalism are largely delineated by these two camps: proponents who see platform capitalism as a positive for the future economy and who recognise the possible opportunities open to workers, and critics, such as labour sociologists, who are more attuned to the risks and the lack of regulations that are impacting workers (Au-Yeung & Qiu, 2022; Pasquale, 2016). This thesis aligned more with critical responses to platform capitalism and examined the forms of structural violence built into online sex work platforms (including algorithmic bias) and third-party payment platforms that are used for online sex work. It exposed the increased forms of emotional, moral, and unpaid labour, the objectification and exploitation of online sex workers, and their continued marginalisation in wider society. Below I map out how workers' experiences are also of theoretical relevance within feminist theory (2.2) and social movement theory (2.3).

2.2 Feminist theory scholarship

One of the key debates around online sex work is whether sex workers are empowered entrepreneurs or victims of the patriarchy (Karandikar et al., 2014). It has been argued that feminism has become co-opted by neoliberal ideologies of work; rather than challenging capitalism, neoliberal feminists have accepted and aligned with it (Prügl, 2015). Neoliberalised feminism is built upon the principles of individual freedom, choice, and empowerment and claims that individuals have entrepreneurial capacity (Prügl, 2015). Furthermore, neoliberal feminism encourages women's growing economic involvement, while favouring environments which encourage individuals to monitor themselves and respond in ways that align with market-based logics (Prügl, 2015). Responsibility is placed on individuals to improve themselves and remain competitive, which is claimed to support gender equality (Wilson, 2015). Therefore, rather than finding solutions through collective organising or cultural politics, it is the attitudes of self-responsibility and one's entrepreneurial identity that becomes paramount for establishing change. This logic ensures that accountability is placed on oneself and not the broader economic structures that exist and perpetuate inequality. Essentially, neoliberal feminism shapes the goals of the movement to align with political and economic projects of the globalised market and, using individualised language around women's empowerment, neoliberalised feminism has backhandedly denied the collective struggles of workers (Rottenberg, 2014), struggles which are occurring within patriarchal platform structures.

To understand feminist debates about sex work and empowerment, it is useful to separate feminist perspectives into two main camps – liberal (sex-positive) and radical (anti-sex work) feminism. However, feminist perspectives are more complex than these two distinctions and feminists in either camp may have more nuanced interpretations of their beliefs (Weatherall & Priestley, 2001). Nevertheless, radical feminists assert that sex work oppresses by objectifying women for the gratification of men (Comte, 2013). Sex work isn't seen as a choice, but rather something that is done out of coercion (Gangoli, 2007). Radical feminists of the anti-pornography movement argued against women's involvement in pornography, seeing it as a form of patriarchal control that facilitates violence against women and reproduces inequality between men and women (Dworkin, 1989; Kohut et al., 2016; MacKinnon, 1993). Conversely, liberal feminists recognise sex work as genuine labour and believe sex workers deserve the same rights as other forms of workers. They argue that women should have the agency to choose whether they engage in sex work and recognise how empowering that choice can be (Rubin, 2002; Henry & Farvid, 2017).

While liberal feminists are also concerned with patriarchal control, they believe that enforcing legalisation which functions to control women's bodies, and choices, does not address the broader issue of the patriarchy (Musgrave, 2003). Neoliberal feminists are more likely to align with liberal feminism given its support of women having the choice to advance their careers -- in fact, neoliberal feminists encourage women's economic participation and career advancement (Rottenberg, 2018). However, many claim that neoliberal feminism is anti-feminist given the pressure placed on women to "invest in themselves in order to approximate the contemporary norm of female" (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 2), that being someone who "never cease[s] [to work] on themselves to enhance their value" (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 2).

Feminist scholar Silvia Federici (1965; 1975) offers a useful lens for considering how women's reproductive labour, including emotional and sexual labour, is devalued in society, speaking to feminist debates on the commodification and oppression of sex work. Federici argues that domestic labour is overlooked and devalued within our capitalist society despite being necessary for capitalism to function. In part of her analysis, Federici (2012) notes how "sexual liberation has intensified our work. In the past, we were expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double workday, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing" (p. 37). This criticism highlights how the invisible labour done by women has become normalised in society, and this is largely through naturalising certain tasks as a "female attribute" (p. 80). Federici (1975) discusses the implications of gender roles, noting how housework has:

> Been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration supposedly coming from the depth of our female character.

> ... Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable and even fulfilling activity to make us accept our unwaged work. In this turn, the unwaged condition of housework has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it (p. 77).

Federici's analysis not only shows how certain tasks are imposed on women, but how these tasks are framed as naturally fitting for women, capturing the intersection of gendered labour, gendered expectations, and capitalist exploitation. From a pro-sex work and neoliberal feminist perspective, Federici's critique can be interpreted through the lens of agency and economic empowerment. For example, women might choose to do sex work for economic purposes as opposed to something imposed on women in their relationships free of charge. In this way, sex work provides a means for sexual labour to be validated and compensated and for women to reclaim a sense of agency over, and empowerment from, their sexual labour.

However, Federici's critique of invisible and naturalised labour also complicates the expectations placed on sex workers. In many western societies, heteronormativity and monogamy has normalised women's bodies being available for their male partners and their availability is bound to the desires and control of men (Lamont, 2017). For anti-sex work feminists, sex work reinforces the commodification of women's bodies for the pleasure and profit of men, further entrenching patriarchal, heteronormative power dynamics between men and women.

Yet, as Smith and Mac (2018) argue in their work, pro-sex work feminists challenge radical feminists in their defence of sex work (pornography and prostitution) as a challenge to heteronormativity and the institution of monogamous marriage, particularly with the sex work industry advocating for diverse forms of sexual expression. For example, "Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) and the queering of lesbian and gay identities" (Smith and Mac, 2018, p. 17) directly oppose the constraints of heterosexual, monogamous relationships. In this sense, Mac and Smith (2018) emphasise the "the hypocrisy of conservative, monogamous heteronormativity" (p. 17) arguing how patriarchal structures limit people's sexual expression and therefore, women's sexual liberation is contingent upon dismantling the patriarchal control embedded within traditional sexual roles and the institution of marriage. Regardless of whether sex is performed within one's marriage or within paid contexts, Federici's work helps us engage with pro and anti-sex work perspectives by offering a framework for examining the broader economic and sociocultural relations inherent to sex work. Moreover, these varied perspectives around agency versus exploitation are useful for understanding the complexities these varied experiences have for sex worker rights movements.

In their work, Smith and Mac (2018) also evaluate how the sex worker rights movement continues to be impacted by the tension between the agency versus exploitation discourse. They highlight how:

> Today, the anti-prostitution agenda focusses on eradicating sex work through harsher penalties for clients. Despite the fact that their movement is almost exclusively comprised of those who previously sold sex and those who have never sold sex, modern day anti-prostitution campaigning works to eliminate the means for other people to *currently* sell sex. Few in their number will themselves be materially affected by prostitution policy (p. 20).

Smith and Mac (2018) discuss in the preceding quote how anti-sex work movements shape the current landscape of sex work with consequences that do not necessarily impact those in the movement. This has raised questions around "the sense of 'ownership' that many feminists have over prostitution [sparking] debates about who is entitled to speak as a sex worker, or on our behalf" (Smith & Mac, 2018, p. 19). This statement reflects issues over representation where certain groups impose their own narratives of victimisation and exploitation despite not having direct experience with sex work. This has been evidenced with radical feminists of the 'rescue industry' who conflate sex work with sex trafficking. A case in point is the implementation of the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA), known together as FOSTA-SESTA (Are & Paasonen, 2021). These are laws that have been influenced by abolitionist feminists (Jones, 2022) with the purpose to thwart sex trafficking following increased concern of individuals being trafficked over digital platforms (Bronstein, 2021). However, as liberal feminists argue, online sex work is a legitimate form of labour that most online sex workers willingly choose to do for work (Anderson, 2021; Liu, 2020). Thus, in their efforts to protect sex workers, radical feminists have systemically disempowered them.

Research has looked at the implications of FOSTA-SESTA for sex workers. Offline sex workers who utilise online sex work platforms to advertise their services have been greatly affected. In Jones (2022) work, she notes how "due to the passage of FOSTA-SESTA, low-income transmasculine and non-binary escorts reported that after free advertising sites [such as Craigslist and Backpage] pre-emptively shut down, what remained were high-cost subscription-based sites that were cost-prohibitive" (p. 84). Safety risks also emerged given that these advertising sites provided workers with a means to screen clients before meeting them. Additionally, not being able to utilise advertising sites hurt "their ability to find new clients, [and] the financial losses they suffered affected their ability to begin taking testosterone" meaning that they had to service "older clients who only knew them as a cis woman" (p. 86). Jones offers an "intersectional analysis of FOSTA's harms [showcasing the] unique challenges for trans and non-binary sex workers" (p. 86). Online sex workers have also been affected most notably

with being deplatformed from social media and economic platforms even if they live in economies where sex work is decriminalised. Jindal-Talib (2021) note how "some sex workers and support groups, as a result of the legislation's implementation, directly addressed SESTA-FOSTA online and provided sex workers with tools and strategies for staying safe on online forums and blogs" (p. 20). Other sex worker activists have tried to overturn SESTA-FOSTA (DeChiaro, 2021).

Smith and Mac (2018) query who should be spearheading sex work conversations and their work illustrates the power dynamics within feminism, spotlighting how certain voices may be overshadowed by dominant discussions, particularly those from anti-sex work camps who lack industry experience. Such disagreements can prevent a unified front for the sex worker movement; however, Smith and Mac (2018) acknowledge the need for a more nuanced focus of sex work away from romanticised sex positive narratives:

> Recent years have seen a significant shift in the sex worker movement away from protective 'Happy Hooker' myths, towards a Marxist-feminist, labour-centred analysis. Sex workers who are survivors have become more vocal in the movement, citing their experiences of violence and criminalisation as a driver for their activism (Smith and Mac, 2018, p. 20).

The limitations of sex positivity are further critiqued by Ray (2012) who reveals how sex positive frameworks can neglect intersectional factors (e.g., race, (dis)ability, class, gender etc.) in sex work activism:

> The promotion of pleasure and sex positivity within the sex industry and as an element of sex worker rights activism, is proprietary to a small but very vocal group of people, namely: white, cisgender women who are conventionally attractive, able-bodied, and have some degree of class and educational privilege (Ray, 2012, para. 3).

Beloso's (2012) work speaks back to these discussions, arguing that certain privileges, such as ones race, class, or appearance, can affect opportunity and lessen the oppression one could experience. This is important to understand, because if movements are to fully capture the voices of sex workers, they must consider the broader structural and cultural systems that privilege or marginalise workers. Jones' (2015) work offers an explicit example of how notions of privilege affect workers experiences. Jones documents how white bodies are privileged over Black bodies in the online sex work industry offering greater exposure to white women on platform interfaces, revealing how whiteness helps us to understand the power of racial privilege. Moreover, Jones shows how Black female workers are not

only affected by gendered expectations, but racialised labour practices whereby platforms position their work as less valuable, hence oppression can intersect (Crenshaw, 2015).

With Jones' intersectional lens in mind, it's important to recognise how colonialism underpins racial hierarchies, particularly with lasting stereotypes. Speaking to the colonial impact on Māori sex workers, Escaravage (2016) states how:

> Misconceptions and stereotypes of Māori women as 'native princesses', 'wild' and 'promiscuous' were born of distorted ideas and misinterpretations of colonizers who read traditional Māori sexual mores through their Christian lens. Tragically, these stereotypes and misconceptions still face Māori today. Moreover, Christianity was not open to ideas of non-heterosexuality, and rejected other genders such as kōhine (transgender). Stigma against non-heterosexuality and against gender minorities contradict traditional Māori values. It is therefore important to identify the role colonialization has had in shaping the reality of Māori sex workers today (p. 13).

Escaravage pays attention to how colonial, heteronormative culture has marginalised non-conforming sexualities, such as those who do not practice monogamy and are viewed as promiscuous as well as queer sexual and gender identities. As Schippers (2016) highlight, "queer theorists place normativity at the centre of understanding, interrogating, and deconstructing how institutionalised regimes of sexual normally are implicated in stablishing and maintaining social privilege and material inequalities" (p. 6). This kind of scholarship makes clear how gender, race, and class can intersect as oppressive forces shaping workers experiences, with colonial legacies undoubtedly shaping these forms of oppression. Ray (2012) argues that "if we believe in the positive power of sexuality, we must also examine what happens when people's lives are infused with sex negativity, and we must listen and support people with this experience in sharing their personal truths" (para. 16). Acknowledging this is vital for marginalised workers representation and ensuring inclusivity in social movements. This thesis agrees with the feminist standpoint that online sex work is legitimate labour for those that consent and freely choose to do sex work, although acknowledges how these feminist discourses mirror social norms held by people about sex work which can impact the climate of online sex work and attitudes toward online sex work(ers).

Whilst this thesis is situated within the liberal standpoint that online sex work is genuine labour and that workers have the agency to engage in sex work if they choose, it contextualises workers' experiences against broader systems, highlighting how patriarchal forces function to exploit workers and their labour and examines the complexities of platform control and governance and what this means for workers' collective mobilisation. Applying feminist discourse to understand workers' experiences

helps recognise the structural and cultural landscape online sex work sits within, its influence on platform operations and workers' experiences, and can provide the opportunity to identify new feminist theoretical insights in relation to platform capitalism.

2.3 Social movement scholarship

There are different understandings of what constitutes a social movement. Touraine (1995) defines a social movement as "the effort of a collective actor to take over the 'values', cultural orientations of a society by opposing the action of an adversary to whom he is linked by relationships of power" (p. 239). Touraine's perspective is useful as it examines the role power and domination have in spurring individuals' collective action to challenge existing power relations. Because online sex workers are marginalised within society, power dynamics play a huge role in understanding workers social and political positioning in society and the kinds of collective action they engage in. Nevertheless, social movements are typically understood by either formal (overt) and informal (covert) types of collective action (Whittier, 2002). In his contributions on social movements and collective behaviour, sociologist Smelser (1963) categorised social movements into 'results-orientated' and 'values-orientated' frameworks with each being driven by different goals and incentives, these perspectives largely speak back to formal and informal types of resistance seen within movements (Jamison, 2010).

With results-orientated social movements, the objective is for individuals to achieve concrete results, whether that be policy changes, higher wages, safer working conditions, whatever tangible outcomes are desired based on the groups goals (Weldon, 2012). Their mobilisation efforts are also formal and strategic with movements often collectively mobilising publicly through protests or strikes (Smithey, 2009) for greater visibility and influence (Whittier, 2017). Additionally, results orientated movements will focus on the resources required to reach their desired outcome whether that's financial resources or strengthening alliances with existing organisations such as unions, advocacy groups, or even allies for additional support (Whittier, 2004).

For values-orientated social movements mobilisation can appear more informal, relying on grassroots networks with local community level participation (Meyer & Whittier, 1994). The goals of value-orientated movements can also differ as they are more concerned with immaterial goals, for example the group may strive for broader cultural or social change which can include changing attitudes, social norms, behaviours, and other cultural practices in society (Moland, 2002; Smelser, 1963). Subsequently, the focus of values-driven movements is likely to be placed on long-term rather than immediate transformation. When considering the kinds of collective action undertaken by values-orientated movements, their efforts can be thought of as a form of everyday resistance. Scott's (1985) work "Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance" conveys that everyday resistance

involves subtle acts of resistance undertaken to challenge dominant power structures. His examples when discussing peasant workers' everyday resistance include "foot-dragging, escape, sarcasm, passivity, laziness, misunderstandings, disloyalty, slander, avoidance or theft" (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). Everyday resistance can be covert, but it is still subversive, as workers challenge the power dynamics that exist between themselves and their employers (in this case platforms) by undermining hegemonic discourse directed by the platforms, discussing ways to undermine platforms' systems of operation (Rand & Stegeman, 2023), and by building solidarity that counters platform efforts to keep workers separate – strengthening their collective power (Bonini et al., 2024; Woodside et al., 2021). Still, everyday resistance can be overlooked, especially if it doesn't align with traditional understandings of politicalisation.

Previous studies on sex workers' collective action have largely focused on more overt forms of resistance, such as offline sex workers and their attempts to decriminalise sex work and fight for the human rights of sex workers (Aroney & Crofts, 2019; Gall, 2014; Gooptu, 2000). Social movement scholarship on online sex workers' collective mobilisation efforts is scant, although Coombes et al. (2022), discuss how online spaces are important for "political and community organising for both the disabled and sex worker communities" (para. 8). However, because of the increased surveillance and policing of sex work following FOSTA-SESTA laws being implemented it has become "harder to build community, share resources, and organise towards social justice" (para. 8). Stegeman et al. (2024) explored how online sex workers engage individually in everyday forms of resistance by resisting "platform visibility logics" which equate visibility to monetary gain. For example, webcam models might entice paying customers by revealing more of themselves in private chatrooms as opposed to more commonly used public chatrooms, whilst other webcammers prefer to not show their faces online. Hence, workers "subvert common understandings of competition and income in the creator industry by benefitting from partial invisibility" (Stegeman et al., 2024, p. 8). Similarly, Jones (2019) examines how Big Beautiful Women (BBW) webcammers "challenge normative standards of embodiment and beauty [and] anti-fat discourses by branding themselves as BBW" (p. 2). While Stegeman et al. (2024) and Jones' (2018) work incidentally speaks to workers everyday resistance and highlights the ways workers subvert platform logics or broader sociocultural discourses, my research makes these everyday forms of resistance explicit and considers the broader implications this has for understanding the political positioning of online sex workers.

This research extends existing scholarship in social movement theory. While Coombes et al. (2002) discuss the importance of online spaces for community building, this research reveals how communities of care have been forged by online sex workers in private spaces proving to be safe sites for prefigurative political action through the counterpublic work workers engage in and the everyday resistance they undertake. This notion of counterpublic work derives from Ticona and Tsapatsaris'

(2023) work which examined platform counterpublics, which are "alternative discursive communities constructed by users coming together to share their experiences using a platform" (p. 3995). In their work, they discuss how Care.com workers have established communities which "circulate knowledge on their experiences, which are marked by vastly unequal power relations between platform companies and everyday users" (3995) and highlight how these communities engage in a more “relational model of resistance” (p. 4007). Ticona and Tsapatsaris argue that “leaning into consumer activism may bring new alliances among users or new tactics of resistance” (p. 4007).

I extend understandings of possibilities for political mobilisation amongst sex workers by putting Scott's framework of everyday resistance alongside Gallo-Cruz and Tullinski’s (2020) work on restaging, which considers how individuals can restage political discourse in where they choose to discuss political issues. I am extending how collective action is being restaged into private environments within the communities of care online sex workers have established on Discord servers and online forums. These communities of care demonstrate how collective mobilisation has adapted with online forms of sex work, given the distinct and new kinds of challenges workers face within the platform economy (e.g., spatial separation and neoliberal subjectivities which can impact workers’ ability or desire to mobilise, platform surveillance, patriarchal punishment through deplatforming, and algorithmic bias). Within these communities of care workers have built solidarity through the kinds of networked gossip (counterpublic work) they do and have engaged in ‘imagined resistance’, an everyday form of resistance where workers consider collective action that is yet to occur. These communities are transformative for workers, not only in their everyday lives with the shared solidarity between workers which includes various kinds of support, but in providing a foundation for workers to consider alternative futures for work that are rooted in the best interests of online sex workers.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter explained the theoretical frameworks used in this thesis, including labour sociology and platform capitalism, feminist theory, and social movement theory. This thesis brought together these theoretical frameworks to generate new knowledge into online sex workers’ experiences working within the platform economy, the challenges they face, and how they address these challenges.

First, labour sociology and platform capitalism provided a lens to understand online sex workers’ experiences within the platform economy and to identify the pros and cons of working online. Research in labour sociology has examined the conditions of work that impact workers such as the renumeration, benefits, and labour protections afforded to workers - or a lack there of. It also explores the power dynamics and workplace hierarchies that function to control and influence workers’

experiences and the inequalities that can occur. Moreover, labour sociologists are interested in labour movements and workers' collective bargaining and unionisation support. As more people turn to work online, the tenets of labour sociology were pivotal to understanding the conditions of the online sex work industry under platform capitalism and its impact on workers. This thesis drew on labour sociology to pinpoint the forms of structural violence enacted against workers and the implications this has in their everyday lives.

Second, integrating feminist theory into the analysis provided a way to understand how online sex work is seen by others, with debates centering about liberal and radical feminist perspectives. These perspectives are important as they have greatly impacted the landscape of online sex work with the recognition of laws such as FOSTA-SESTA that conflate legitimate, consensual sex work with harm and exploitation, with specific concerns over sex trafficking. This thesis speaks back to these feminist debates on sex work, while it acknowledges workers autonomy to participate in online sex work, it pays close attention to how workers are exploited and how workers labour is often overlooked and devalued, particularly against the needs of others.

Lastly, social movement theory was important to understand workers' collective mobilisation efforts given the problems that they face online. With previous scholarship in sex work industry largely focusing on overt forms of resistance, this thesis provided insight into covert kinds of resistance that workers engage in by drawing on Scott's concept of 'everyday resistance'. Moreover, Gallo-Cruz and Tullinski's (2020) work on restaging was useful in this project as it showed how online sex workers are restaging where their collective mobilisation takes place due to the constraints and risks associated with public mobilisation within the platform economy. In all, this thesis offered an interdisciplinary perspective to online sex workers' experiences within the platform economy, their political positioning, and subsequently, the kinds of political action they undertake.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the research design employed for this project, which was split across two phases: phase one was a content analysis of online forums utilised by online sex workers and phase two involved undertaking interviews with eight online sex workers based in New Zealand. I discuss the strategies I used to recruit participants, my positionality in respect to this research project and one of the obstacles I had to overcome to recruit participants. I then outline the data collection and analysis methods used. I also dedicate a section to the research participants and focus on insights they offered that could not be included within my manuscript's findings. The chapter ends with a thorough discussion of the ethical considerations of this project for both phases one and two, with phase one deemed low risk and phase two high risk.

3.1 Research design

This is a qualitative study that was split across two phases. Phase one was a content analysis of an online forum, AmberCutie Forum, utilised by online sex workers who are based globally. Phase two comprised semi structured interviews with eight participants based in New Zealand. It is important to note that while I did not intend to exclusively research the experiences of cisgender heterosexual women, this is a limitation of the study that reflects the cis-heteronormative language used on the forums and within the interviews. For context, sex traditionally refers to the biological male or female characteristics assigned at birth and gender "refers to traits associated with being female or male" (Hayman, 2024, p. 110). This is known as the gender binary, which assumes a rigid assumption that there are two oppositional categories "rather than a spectrum where people might possess various traits associated with either sex" (Hayman, 2024, p. 110). Cisgender individuals are those whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth, whilst heteronormativity is the assumption that individuals have a "normal" sexual orientation (heterosexual). As Vanyoro (2020) argues, heteronormative language creates "a binary of fixed male and female heterosexuality that epistemically erases gender non-conforming and homosexual identities" (p. 8). When we think of this in terms of research, it means that the experiences, and knowledge that derives from the experiences of queer and gender non-conforming people can be overlooked. The forums I studied reflected this tendency for cis heteronormativity. Language used by forum posters and interviewees often saw them frame their experiences within the traditional gender binary against traditional gender roles and norms.

I analysed the data from each phase through an interpretivist, feminist framework. Interpretivism is an epistemological framework that recognises how reality is contextualised through the subjective experiences of individuals and their interpretations of certain phenomena (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Its key strength is that it allows researchers to see how participants ascribe meaning to

certain experiences and allows for the lived realities of participants to be made known (Ryan. 2018). Thus, the nuances of those experiences allow for rich data and in-depth insights in contrast to more structured data collection approaches as it can capture multidimensional elements of the human experience (Chowdhury, 2014). As this project sought to understand the lived experiences of online sex workers, an interpretivist framework was especially useful for situating the findings within economic, social, and political contexts whilst ensuring that the findings were rooted in participant voices. This interpretivist framework that guided the research was also supported by feminist research principles.

A central focus of feminist forms of inquiry is that social injustices faced by women are recognised. Feminist theorists view "inequality as pervasive, systemic, and structural, ... embedded within and reinforced (and sometimes enforced) by society" (Brisolara, 2003, p. 29) in different ways, such as within organisations, cultural and education systems, religious and governmental institutions, and social institutions such as family. When looking at factors that account for inequality, feminist researchers will consider the asymmetric power arrangements within society, such as the patriarchy (Bennett, 2006). The patriarchy has been defined by feminists as “male domination and the power relationships by which men dominate women” (Mawa, 2020, p. 243). Patriarchal systems create gender hierarchies and thus inequalities between genders within society (Walby, 1989). Another area of importance in feminist inquiry are the intersecting forms of oppression people face, for example, looking at how gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect and impact one’s lived experience (Carastathis, 2014; Carbado et al., 2013). As Phoenix and Pattynama (2006) explain, intersectionality “aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it” (p. 187). Feminist research is also critical of traditional scientific (positivist) modes of inquiry which purport that knowledge must be objective and attained through empirical, observable evidence (Brisolara, 2003).

Many feminist researchers argue that positivist forms of knowledge have become privileged over others, overlooking and devaluing knowledge that has emerged from qualitative modes of inquiry (Mauthner, 2020). However, qualitative evidence accounts for subjective experience which is important for understanding the complexities that play a role in impacting individual’s lives and the inequalities they face, something which is necessary to know to advocate for broader change (Maddison & Shaw, 2012) and to advance theoretical insight (Hidayat, 2018). Furthermore, feminist theorists argue that research findings from feminist projects should be used to advocate for change or be practically applied (Brisolara, 2003). For this research, feminist research principles have been utilised to bring attention to online sex workers subjective, lived experiences working online and the forms of exploitation they’re exposed to. This knowledge needs to be made known, particularly as online sex work continues to grow and given that the platform economy of online sex work is still a relatively under-researched area. Ultimately, workers insights could help inform on challenges that need to be addressed and may be

useful for existing sex work organisations to find better ways to support online sex workers in an economy that is largely unregulated.

3.2 Participant sourcing and participant recruitment hurdles

Participant sourcing

Phase one's content analysis involved collecting data from the online forum AmberCutie Forum (https://www.ambercutie.com/forums/) from December 2021 until May 2024. AmberCutie is utilised by online sex workers across the globe and was created by a webcam model. It is described as "an adult community for cam models and members to discuss all the things!" (AmberCutie, 2024) and encompasses a wide range of information, from threads that include everyday conversations and general topics (e.g., a 'random chat' thread 'video games' and 'TV and Movies' threads, to unofficial support threads where workers can ask questions in relation to the platform they work on). While it is primarily used by webcam models, models also work on subscription platforms so many kinds of online sex workers utilise the forum. The forum has 44,922 threads, over 1,190,987 messages, and 66,948 members as of 14th June 2024, showcasing the high levels of engagement it has. This made it a valuable forum to analyse given the large data set that data could be collected from. While I went into phase one of this project only expecting to gather data from online sex workers, with no limitations upon where they were located, I also ended up using data from viewers of online sex workers, partners of viewers, and partners of online sex workers within chapter 5. These perspectives showed how online sex workers' labour is perceived by others and were pertinent in understanding online sex workers' experiences with the patriarchy, misogyny, discrimination, objectification, and exploitation. Therefore, phase one was more flexible with its inclusion criteria and adapted as data was collected from the forums.

Phase two's semi-structured interviews occurred from the 2nd - 9th of June in 2023 with eight online sex workers. A purposeful sampling strategy was utilised with participants needing to meet a certain criteria for involvement (Patton, 2014). Participants needed to be of legal age to work in the industry (18 years), they needed to live in New Zealand as I wanted to understand how the political gains made for New Zealand sex workers might be impacted working within the online sex work industry which mostly operates outside of New Zealand jurisdiction. Participants were required to work on an online sex work platform as this project sought to understand the online sex work industry and online sex workers' experiences, and they also needed to be comfortable with being audio recorded. Participants also needed to be English speaking.

Prior to recruiting participants, I developed screening questions that I went through when they initially reached out to me, asking for potential participants date of birth, the platform(s) they work on, their location, and their comfort with being audio recorded. If they didn't meet all these criteria, they were excluded from participating. A challenge during the recruitment process was trying to find individuals willing to participate. Below, I describe the obstacle of acquiring social trust with potential participants and how it affected the recruitment process.

My positionality and trust building with participants

It is important that researchers consider their positionality when conducting their research (Bukamal, 2022). Before I make my own positionality clear, sex workers' marginalised positionality in society must be explored to make sense of how I situated myself within this research project and its participants. Sex worker stereotypes, although largely based upon misconceptions, have created considerable stigma for sex workers and have functioned to marginalise them in society (Phillips et al., 2012). These common stereotypes centre around sex workers immorality, deviance, and promiscuity with the perception that sex workers are promiscuous, and that the sale of sex is immoral, largely due to the sexual encounters occurring outside of a monogamous relationship (Comte, 2014; Geary-Jones, 2017). Other prevalent stereotypes centre around worker criminality, with sex workers frequently being perceived as drug addicts with involvement in other criminal, underground activities (Erickson et al., 2000). Additionally, given the nature of sex work, there are stereotypes of workers being diseased and carriers of sexually transmitted infection, despite many workers taking precautions to be safe and protect their health (Desyllas, 2013). Another popular stereotype is that workers are exploited either by pimps or human traffickers. Although trafficking is a serious problem, many workers enter the industry by choice and are not being coerced to engage in sex work (Russo, 2019). These stereotypes are not only misrepresentative of many sex workers but have largely contributed to the marginalisation of sex workers across economic, political, legal, and social contexts (Aveling et al., 2009).

Consequently, this can affect workers and their willingness to share their experiences (Tate, 2015) given that they have been historically misrepresented and may hold concerns over further skewed portrayals of themselves and the sex work community. In the interview recruitment process sex workers' mistrust of researchers became apparent, providing an obstacle that needed to be overcome. For me, this required examining my own positionality within this research project and building social trust with potential interviewees. One avenue I took to recruit interview participants was through the online forums I had collected data from for phase one of this research. I felt unhopeful about this recruitment route for two reasons: one being that the forum was mainly used by workers in the United States, and I was only seeking to interview New Zealand based workers; the other being that previous researchers

only seemed to have luck with their recruitment if they were insiders, either currently or having previously worked in the industry.

I have never worked in the sex work industry in any capacity (online or offline), I have only ever worked in the construction industry and more recently in academia. With that said, I am a woman, and while I cannot assume that means I've had similar experiences as the potential interviewees, there are likely experiences we share, such as our experience with patriarchy, particularly in the workplace. Having worked in a male-dominated industry (construction) this manifested in different ways, but included experiences with double standards, gender bias – especially in the performance review process (comparable to algorithmic surveillance) – and microaggressions such as not being listened to, being undermined, and being micromanaged. These experiences perpetuated inequality and reinforced power dynamics that were incredibly uncomfortable and disempowering for me at the time. It is these experiences that have largely shaped my feelings and allyship toward women and other marginalised groups, and I recognise how a part of my allyship to the sex work community comes from understanding the inequities that take place within the workforce, inequities that are only made more complex within the platform economy where workers lack employment protections.

Additionally, I felt that my educational background in sociology would equip me well for this project. I thought that I could leverage my background in sociology to provide a comprehensive understanding of online sex workers' experiences, with the hopes of raising awareness about some of the challenges workers face and the ways platform-capitalist systems might be made more equitable for online sex workers. Sociologists undertake research and inform on phenomena through micro and macro lenses of analysis (Allan, 2013). This dual approach is useful for contextualising one's micro-level experiences, such as an individual's everyday interactions, behaviours, actions, and emotions, against broader macro-level structures, such as economic, legal, social, cultural, and technological infrastructures - to name a few (Amzat & Maigari, 2021). This helps to identify systemic problems that need to be addressed. Moreover, the collaborative possibilities sociologists have to work alongside other disciplines contributes to a wider understanding of phenomena and offers an opportunity for sociological research to have a broader impact, potentially reaching researchers in other fields (O'Reilly, 2009). I felt that this project would offer an interdisciplinary lens given that it is rooted in theory of platform capitalism which has been utilised across various disciplines, and also offers theoretical insights that speak to both feminist and social movement theory. In fact, two of the thesis chapters were submitted to journals outside of sociology.

Still, I questioned whether being an ally and sociological researcher would be enough. While insiders appeared to have greater success in recruiting participants on the forum, outsiders trying to recruit participants were quickly shot down, not to mention their research project was heavily criticised by

workers. Admittedly, I worried if my skin was thick enough to face the kinds of criticism I had seen other outsiders face and I wondered whether a part of that came back to my own imposter syndrome, not only feeling as though I was an imposter who managed to get accepted into a PhD program, but one who was a complete outsider to the community my entire PhD project was based upon. Additionally, when I read worker responses and criticisms, I was wondering whether I was mistaking their criticism as snarky, hearing it in my mind in a critical, curt tone when in fact it may not have been how I was interpreting it in my mind. If I were to receive the same response, how would I feel? Below is one of the responses another student researcher received on the online forum, highlighting concerns regarding one's outsider status, which prompted my anxieties around recruitment:

> The idea that anyone who is or was a full-service sex worker is going to want to share and discuss their experiences with a college student (a *stranger* who they do not know, for the "glory" of being cited in a BA paper lol) strikes me as beyond naive. You obviously have not researched this field and the social stigmas surrounding it at all [Worker, ACF, May 20th, 2021].

The individual who originally posted asked a series of questions for workers on the forum and mentioned how their opinions would be included in their bachelor's thesis. Undoubtedly their approach was flawed and came across as self-serving. Additionally, no compensation was offered to workers for their involvement. But the worker's response reiterates some of the challenges I identified around the role stigma plays in workers' distrust toward people outside their community.

Scholars have engaged in debates around the pros and cons of being either an insider or outsider to the communities one is researching. It has been argued how outsiders are more likely to be objective, neutral observers who can emotionally distance themselves from research participants (Kerstetter, 2012). However, as noted above, the downside is the difficulty outsiders may find accessing the communities they want to research without having established prior connections to the group (Kerstetter, 2012). Conversely, insiders have greater access to the communities, making it easier for them to connect and engage with research participants. In fact, it has been argued that insiders may be able to obtain richer data due to the shared experiences they're likely to have with participants (Kerstetter, 2012). Although, given this, there are concerns that insiders may overlook their "potential bias in their research" (Kerstetter, 2021, p. 100) and what they're trying to understand.

While I acknowledged my outsider status and chose to recognise the strengths that exist in being an outsider with a sociological background, I still felt in constant negotiation with myself as to whether I, as a PhD student, could produce research of value in both academia and the online sex work community. I tried to reconcile how my research would be placed in both academic and online sex work

communities. For example, there is no denying that the end goal for me is to obtain a PhD, that personal interest cannot be removed from the equation, and as this is a thesis that will be submitted based on publications, I must meet academic expectations and standards of the journals I am submitting my work to. There were aspects of my decision to submit my thesis by publication that are undoubtedly beneficial to me, including increasing my publication count for career advancement.

My intention going into my degree was to complete my thesis by monograph; it was only changed to the publication option in the last 7 months when I realised that my results chapters were largely going to repeat information that I had already included within existing drafted manuscripts. Nevertheless, as academic research has been criticised for its lack of accessibility to the public (Gair et al., 2021), especially with publications that are not easily available through open access, I felt my research needed to be made available to those who became involved in the project. Subsequently, I decided to provide a thesis summary of all key findings to participants who chose to be involved in this project as well as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (see Appendix A) and chose journals that have open access agreements with Massey University, so the manuscripts will not be behind pay walls.

Moreover, my goal was that workers could see that their concerns conveyed to me were raised within my work and communicated to a wider audience, and that the suggestions offered might help to support online sex workers. This dynamic of reciprocity is a fundamental principle in feminist research projects, with reciprocity seen as a strategy to "challenge hegemonic practices of hierarchical research and is important in establishing a non-exploitative relationship" (Bakas, 2017, p. 127-228). For me, it was an opportunity to give back in a small sense and a way to decrease the power imbalance within researcher-participant relationships. Therefore, this research wasn't solely undertaken to complete a PhD, I also hoped that it could be used to support change for the participants and others within the online sex work community (Nencel, 2013). As Cooky et al. (2018) state, "the ability to seek subjugated knowledge—particularly that from marginalised groups which are too frequently silenced in mainstream outlets—is critical to the production of knowledges that can potentially address oppression and injustice" (p. 9).

Still, the distrust toward academia and researchers, prior to me starting my recruitment through the forums, was clear:

> As of academia, I have a personal distrust towards the entire field, and I do not need their validation. I do not need anyone's validation really but having the validation of academia would almost feel like I am doing life wrong haha [October 8th 2016]

> We have students come to do this pretty often. It's played out. It's easy. You've picked a group to study and paired us with the answer that everyone wants to hear. Your peers can smile and listen and think you're oh so edgy having chosen something a little sexy. Realistically though, it's boring. It's mediocre. It's totally college student. … We're the only ones who will question the validity of your "study". And, lord knows, no one listens to us. Pick something else or take a more interesting angle [Worker, ACF, September 30th, 2017].

> I'm tired of these college kids trying to study us like we are in a god damn nature preserve [Worker, ACF, May 19th 2021].

Workers' cynicism over not being listened to and feeling objectified by researchers took me aback, I thought to myself, is this what workers are going to think of my research, that I am some voyeuristic outsider getting a kick out of researching a community I have no connection to? While in my mind I had considered how my research fits within academia and the online sex work community, and knew this research had a dual purpose, I needed to consider how I could ensure workers' voices weren't overshadowed by my own dialogue within the manuscripts. Charmaz (2021) claims that researcher reflexivity involves researchers acknowledging their position within existing social structures and reflecting on aspects of their own identity and privilege. Practising reflexivity allows researchers to recognise where they're situated in relation to the research project and its participants and recognising how one's own positionality can play a role in the assessment and production of knowledge (Whitson, 2017).

I acknowledge that there is a power asymmetry between researchers and participants (Del Busso, 2007). For example, if researchers are interviewing marginalised communities, this often means that researchers and participants occupy different social positions (Grimaldi et al., 2015). In my case, I am working within an academic institution that many people in society may hold in esteem, which can place me in a position of authority in comparison to an online sex worker who doesn't have affiliations with an academic institution and whose employment role has been historically marginalised. Accordingly, feminist principles of reflexivity and a feminist ethics of care (discussed further in Chapter 3 - Section 3.5) underpinned how I chose to conduct my research and felt necessary. A large part of this involved being reflexive and deliberate about my methodological approach and my interpretation of the data, to ensure I adequately represented the research participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2021). While I discuss my data analysis in section 3.4, the interviews were semi-structured which allows participants to share power in the interaction as they can express themselves how they see fit, reveal what they choose to, re-direct the conversation back to myself if desired, and ultimately it allows for more "nuanced understandings of participants perspectives and experiences" (Cooky et al., 2018, p. 10) to be

made known. It was also important for me that verbatim quotes were included within the work to provide rich descriptions from workers themselves to support my findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). It was only forum data quotes that were slightly paraphrased for added privacy measures.

After uploading the recruitment flyer onto the forum, there were zero replies. I had at least expected the project to be interrogated to some degree, as that was the common response to previous student researchers, but there was nothing. I was not surprised that no participants were recruited from this route as many workers on the forum are not based in New Zealand, but it did make me consider whether this silence would foreshadow my other recruitment methods. Next, a contact that I had met at the beginning of my PhD who works at the NZPC kindly distributed my information sheet and recruitment flyer (Appendix B) to their members. Only one individual was recruited through the NZPC. At this stage I began to question whether I was going to be able to proceed with phase two, feeling somewhat defeated by the prospect of only being able to use forum data, or only undertake one interview.

My final approach was to then contact people directly. To do this I went onto Google and used keywords "OnlyFans content creators New Zealand" and "OnlyFans New Zealand creators" which led me to a fan metric site that had a grid of creators from New Zealand and their usernames. I typed their usernames into Google and when their OnlyFans page appeared clicked onto it. The profiles are protected behind a paywall, but you can read their bios which will often have their emails or Instagram accounts, I also double checked to see whether their location was in fact New Zealand before reaching out to them. Additionally, I located eligible participants through New Zealand's 'Erotic Escorts' advertisement platform. If workers listed an online sex work platform on their advertisement, I made contact via email or direct messaging them through Instagram. Two more participants were recruited through this approach, one through Erotic Escorts via email and one from OnlyFans via Instagram's direct messaging feature.

The first participant to respond from my direct approach asked to read the interview schedule prior to commencing the interview and was emailed the schedule. While it was a semi-structured interview, they felt more comfortable knowing the line of inquiry that I had in mind for our conversation. This helped build trust between me and the participant and they then felt comfortable to proceed with the interview. Participants were also made aware that they were welcome to terminate the interview at any time or skip over any questions that they didn't want to answer. After my first interview, the participant shared the research flyer on their X account and from there snowball sampling occurred, with five other contacts being recruited. I think the snowball effect is indicative of some degree of social trust that was felt, in that they recommended that others participate. All interviews went well, and although some participants naturally divulged more than others, in my opinion, I felt some degree of

trust was established with each participant, given the length of interviews, with some running over the allocated hour time slot. Overall, my anxieties around building social trust and the efforts I made to build trust seemed to have worked and I can only hope that what comes from this research project is of value to both the academic and online sex work community.

3.3 Data collection

Phase one:

Phase one's content analysis commenced following the submission of an ethics application to Massey University which was deemed low risk (application number: 4000025322). A content analysis is a technique used to analyse various forms of data sources "including textual data, visual stimuli (e.g., photographs/videos), and audio data" (Stemler, 2015, p. 1) and can be "empirically or theoretically driven" (Stemler, 2015, p. 2). The aim of a content analysis is to "make replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts, and a practical guide to action" (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 108). The process of undertaking a content analysis can be either inductive or deductive; this project utilised an inductive approach. An inductive approach allows "research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2003, p. 2) – as opposed to a deductive approach which goes into the data collection phase with the intent of testing hypothesis and existing theories (Casula et al., 2021). Each approach involves the "preparation, organisation, and reporting of results" (Elo et al., 2014, para 4).

The strengths of an inductive approach in qualitative research are that the data collected is drawn from various participants and their lived realities, providing rich and diverse accounts which adds credibility and nuance to the research findings (Liu, 2016). Moreover, an inductive approach helps researchers build an understanding of a particular phenomenon through the identification of recuring key patterns and themes (Thomas, 2003). This contrasts with deductive approaches which can overlook key themes due to "the preconceptions in the data collection and data analysis procedures … such as those used in experimental and hypothesis testing research" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). Inductive approaches are also valuable for the flexibility of the approach, particularly in terms of being adaptable as research findings continue to emerge (Liu, 2016). Researchers can decide to adjust their research questions and methods based upon what's been discovered and what appears most relevant and useful to the project (Azungah, 2018).

As for criticisms, the focus of inductive research has also been called into question given the exploratory nature of the approach and the lack of hypotheses going into the project, researchers may find it challenging to keep a clear direction / structure as they progress with their research (Yuwono &

Rachmawati, 2023). As this research had a research aim and questions identified from the outset, this helped to guide the direction of the study from commencement until completion. A strong organisation system (NVivo) also helped with the categorisation of data.

Despite there being a high volume of forum threads on AmberCutie there were methods employed to prevent the data collection process from ballooning. First, I made the decision to collect data from the threads with the highest level of engagement. I analysed threads from the forums “General Cam/Creator Chat” section which comprises of seven "sticky threads" pinned by the forum owner that are the most relevant and repeated topics of conversation across several forums, and the "normal threads section," which consists of posts not pinned by the forum owner and filtered by engagement levels, from the most engaged to the least engaged. Second, data collected centred around the aim of my research project, that is to understand how the commercial sex work industry operates within platform capitalism and to analyse how platform capitalist models of labour impact the working, social and political lives of online sex workers. If data on the forum spoke to the aim of this research and aligned with the projects research questions and objectives (see Chapter 1), data was extracted from the forums and the initial coding occurred (see section 3.4 for the data analysis and coding process). To avoid multiple comments relaying the same theme, I chose to extract the comments that best articulated what was being conveyed. In some instances, I extracted entire paragraphs of data, others only sentences were extracted. Ultimately, it depended on the level of analysis required. For example, some quotes were primary quotes where greater contextual insight was needed, whereas others were secondary supporting quotes to a particular point that may not have needed the same depth of analysis as the primary quote.

As I undertook the content analysis of threads, I also conducted grounded theory memoing (Charmaz, 2008) to identify emergent themes (see section 3.4 for the memoing process). I then expanded my data collection to additional, smaller threads by using the forums search function and typing in key words relevant to the emerging themes of interest. This helped locate additional discussions on these most notable themes that emerged from the initial read through of the most popular threads. I used NCapture, a browser extension for Google Chrome, to screencap the page that relevant quotes were on. This would generate a PDF which I could then important into NVivo for analysis. Once in NVivo, I then highlighted the part of the quote I wanted to code. As this project utilised a grounded theory approach (see section 3.4) the data was collected and analysed simultaneously with data continuing to be collected, imported, and comparatively analysed (Charmaz, 2008). In appendix C, I provide a table of the number of threads analysed across all three manuscripts for phase one, the assigned codes (initial and focused coding), and the number of participants in the threads.

Phase two:

Phase two of this project involved conducting semi-structured interviews with eight online sex workers based in New Zealand and commenced following the submission and approval of an ethics application to Massey University which was deemed high risk (application number: 4000026982). Semi-structured interviews were chosen given the flexibility of this interview style; by not following a predetermined set of questions, researchers are able to ask additional questions and probe further into topics of conversation that may not have been expected (Horton et al., 2004). Semi-structured interviews can therefore allow for a greater depth of understanding, particularly given the conversational flow of such interviews. The conversational approach can help build rapport with interviewees as they may feel more comfortable with a less formal, rigid approach which can make interviewees open up more with the researcher (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Prior to the interviews I created an interview schedule with potential questions that I could ask participants (Appendix D). This guide was roughly drawn upon; while all interviews opened with the same question, "can you tell me about your journey to becoming a sex worker?", from there the interviews took a conversational approach and spoke back to the interview guide organically.

Each interview took place via Zoom, as per the participants' preference, and were audio recorded on my iPhone's voice-recording application. Following the interview the audio files were uploaded to my laptop and Trint where they were transcribed and produced into a Microsoft word format. These transcripts were then read and edited to capture any mistakes in the automated transcription process. I also undertook memoing on the Microsoft word file before uploading it into NVivo (see section 3.4 for information on the memoing process). Once the transcripts were uploaded to NVivo, I then undertook further data analysis and undertook my coding. The original audio recordings are stored securely on my personal password protected laptop and are stored in a secure password protected folder using my Macbook's disk utility option. (Please refer to Reyes (2023) work (method 3) for a breakdown on how to password protect individual folders on MacBook computers.) In Appendix C, I provide a table of the number of the assigned codes for the interview quotes that were incorporated into manuscript three, which was the only manuscript to draw on interview data.

3.4 Data analysis

The data analysis involved the dual use of a content analysis and grounded theory approach to sort and finalise the representation of findings from both phases of the data collection (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2008, Charmaz 2017, Charmaz 2021; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). A grounded theory approach involves researchers engaging "in simultaneous data collection and analysis" (Charmaz, 2017, p. 28). While the project undertook a content analysis of online forums and interview

transcripts, it was the constructivist analytical underpinnings, and the use of initial and focused coding processes, that helped determine which data to prioritise in the selected findings within each of the manuscripts.

On a separate note, Charmaz (2021) advocates for researchers to engage in "strong reflexivity" where consideration is given to participants' standpoints along with "our research projects and how we conduct them" (p. 161), something that aligns well with the feminist research principles I sought to employ in this project. By engaging in strong reflexivity, Charmaz (2021) claims that researchers:

> Can develop "methodological self-consciousness" (Charmaz, 2016), which involves examining who we are and what we do in our research practice as we proceed with our studies. Methodological self-consciousness also underscores becoming aware of our unearned and taken-for-granted privileges. Through engaging in such scrutiny, we may see intersecting relationships between power, identity, and marginality that otherwise may remain invisible. This approach helps us to understand the situations of people we study, particularly when our research participants are disadvantaged (p. 161).

Reflexivity in this project has been ongoing. From the outset of this project, it meant identifying my positionality as a researcher and outsider of the community, ensuring that my preconceptions of the industry did not influence the direction of the research. Rather, the project was grounded in workers' understandings. Additionally, the co-authorship of the publications meant engaging in peer reflection (Patnaik, 2013) where we extensively discussed the findings in regular meetings and assessed the appropriateness of how we framed our own conversation following the quotes. Moreover, by drawing on feminist principles of intersectionality to understand the intersecting influences that help explain workers' experiences, this helped ensure that factors that are often overlooked are brought to light.

Phase one:

As forums were filtered by those that had the highest levels of engagement, and were read, this meant that the threads held an abundance of information - consequently, before data was collected and formally analysed and coded, suitable data needed to be understood and identified. To do this, I undertook a content analysis of the most highly engaged forums which included grounded theory memoing tasks to help interpret the data contextually for this project. A content analysis is a useful, unobtrusive research technique allowing for a wide variety of text and communications to be analysed; a content analysis allows arguments to be deeply grounded in data and is a "systemic and rigorous approach" (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 22). A key part of a content analysis involves the researcher's efforts to "make sense of the data to learn what is going on and obtain a sense of whole" (Elo & Kyngas,

2008, p. 109). This sensemaking formed part of the early preparation phase (e.g., the initial read through of forums). Whilst the content analysis helped to make sense of the data and identify tentative themes, a grounded theory approach helped to prioritise which data to formally collect and upload into NVivo for coding. Moreover, it guided additional data collection efforts if it became apparent in the memoing work that themes needed further exploration. Charmaz (2008) explains memo writing as follows:

> Memo writing is about capturing ideas in process and in progress. Successive memos on the same category trace its development as the researcher gathers more data to illuminate the category and probes deeper into its analysis. Memos can be partial, tentative, and exploratory. The acts of writing and storing memos provide a framework for exploring, checking, and developing ideas. … Grounded theory approaches to memo writing shift qualitative inquiry into an explicit analytic endeavour (Charmaz, 2008, p. 166).

During my content analysis of the most highly engaged threads, I started a Microsoft Word document where I memoed key areas of conversation and what was being said on each thread. Undertaking memo writing helped me categorise topics of conversation and themes and helped to determine which data to collect and import into NVivo, particularly given that some threads better spoke to the aim, questions, and objectives of this research. When these tentative categories and themes began to emerge, I decided to capture that data into NVivo for coding.

The coding phase involved initial and focused coding. Bryant and Charmaz's (2007) initial coding process is a starting point for researchers to identify key insights of participant accounts, including "themes, topics, ... actions and analytic possibilities" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 163). Moreover, researchers can start to identify similarities and differences between participants accounts, "in this way, conceptually similar ones [can be] grouped together to form categories and their subcategories" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 423). My initial codes picked out key aspects of a worker's forum comment, whereas the focused codes were more synthesised to capture the exact phenomena in question. Of focused coding, Charmaz (1995) explains that:

> Focused coding refers to taking earlier codes that continually reappear in your initial coding and using those codes to sift through large amounts of data. Thus, focused coding is less open-ended and more directed than line-by-line coding. It is also considerably more selective and more conceptual (p. 40).

For example, one threads overarching topic of conversation discussed the 'consideration of establishing platform cooperatives' and showed how workers were 'imagining future alternatives of

online sex work' which became the initial codes that reappeared often. After the initial codes were determined, the "focused coding" phase commenced. During the focused coding phase of data analysis researchers dive deeper into how these categories interconnect, seeking to organise the data more formally (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). What was once initially coded as 'consideration of establishing platform cooperatives, and 'imagining future alternatives of online sex work' became 'imagined resistance" as this focused code explained the phenomena in question. This work involves constantly comparing data and analysing codes that are emerging to ensure validity between what's been analysed and the conceptual categories that are being established, Charmaz (2008) explains how "these codes then become tentative theoretical categories" (p. 164).

Phase two:

This iterative process flowed from phase one to phase two, in that after data was collected for phase one and tentative themes were established, I then moved on to phase two and continued analysing and comparing the data as the interviews were completed. What was helpful with phase one was that it set the scene for potential topics of discussion within the interviews and gave me insight into the industry that I didn't have previously. The interviews largely corroborated with the findings from phase one's forums, but there were new insights that also emerged. The interview data was analysed and coded in the same manner as the forum data. Once the interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents, I began memoing on the Word document. This involved commenting on participants' quotes, emerging thoughts, ideas, and themes. Following this, the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo where they were coded, either against existing codes that emerged from phase one, or new codes. Next, I provide information on the participants who were recruited for the interviews.

Participants

Participant pseudonym:	**Date interviewed:**	**Platforms worked on:**	**Reason for entering online sex work:**
Vivan	2nd June 2023	Fansly, Lacanto, and Erotic Escorts (for uploading advertisements for her offline sex work).	Vivan entered the industry after being influenced by a television show that discussed the possibility of making money from selling feet pictures to those with a foot fetish. Once she had success from this, she then transitioned to escorting and other online platforms finding it less stressful than her previous job.

Amy	4th June 2023	Loyalfans and AVN stars (prior to its shutdown).	Amy entered the online sex work industry in 2018 after her offline clients requested to see more of her. She found working online a means to fulfil clients demands and a good way to influence those who have not seen her offline, to do so.
Madison	7th June 2023	Fansly and Chaturbate	Madison entered the online sex work industry during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. Inspired by friends at the time who were also working in the industry, she decided to work on Fansly and webcamming to earn an income as she could not engage in offline sex work during that time.
Dee	7th June 2023	Loyalfans, Fansly, AVN Stars (prior to its shutdown), Escortify (to upload advertisements for offline sex work),	Dee entered the online sex work during the COVID-19 lockdown period and started working on the subscription-based platform, AVN Stars. Once that shut down, she moved to Loyalfans and Fansly.
Cushla	7th June 2023	OnlyFans.	In 2021 Cushla left her regular "vanilla" job to work online on OnlyFans. Cushla felt the transition was natural given that her existing platform on Instagram was based around sex, whether it be sex education, sex conversations, sexuality, all things which she claims were normal topics for her. She mentioned that no one was surprised that she took up OnlyFans given that it fit her existing brand. She is currently in the process of transitioning out of the online sex work industry.
Kat	9th June 2023	OnlyFans and MyFreeCams.	Kat started working online to supplement her offline sex work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adora	9th June 2023	Fansly**.**	Adora entered the online sex work casually, first she started selling explicit content through Snapchat not really knowing about online sex work industry platforms. Once she became familiar with online sex work communities such as Discord, she found out about formal ways to sell her content, through online platforms and joined Fansly. At the time of our interview, Adora had formally been working on Fansly for ten months. Adora found that working on Fansly her content seemed better protected than on SnapChat where she did not watermark her content.
Jane	9th June 2023	Fansly and AVN Stars (prior to its shutdown).	For her first four years of being a sex worker Jane solely worked offline, however, AVNStars started to become popular within the sex work community and so she then created an account and started making online content. Jane prefers offline sex work but has used online sex work as a side hustle to help pay her bills.

As interviewees provided a wealth of information, there is still further information that could be used in subsequent manuscripts with a deeper level of analysis, that I was not able to include in the PhD manuscripts. However, I wanted to include these insights within my thesis as I believe these sentiments deserve recognition. Below I provide the names of interviews and go on to discuss some of the aspects of the conversations that stood out to me throughout the interview process and help to provide context to the interview data used in Chapter 6.

Interviewee insights - Adora and Jane:

Two participants, Adora and Jane, both work online and their work niche is 'Big Beautiful Woman' (BBW) which refers to women who are typically plus size or larger than standard societal body size norms. I found their conversations relevant to how workers' market their bodies to fulfil a niche market and therefore spoke back to neoliberal understandings of strategized marketing and self-

branding. However, their insights reflect both the opportunity and challenges of being a BBW working within platform capitalist structures that are discriminatory. While both interviewees spoke of their BBW niche, Adora mentioned the personal struggle she has with being authentic due to feeling as though she must edit her photos to look more mainstream and to not include "every roll, scar and mark". Even with catering toward a niche, there's pressure to create one's content in ways that align with more mainstream beauty ideals, particularly given the demand audiences have for "aesthetic" content. Adora mentioned how she grapples with the desire to be authentic versus the need for money. Additionally, Adora acknowledged how her algorithm on social media is flooded with women who fit mainstream ideals and has found that this has influenced her own content. I thought Jane and Adora's insights offered a unique intersectional lens on sex workers' experiences in the platform economy of online sex work, and I believe that more could be done in the space of online sex work literature to understand the experiences of niche creators. For example, research can unpack the factors that influence the kinds of content that workers produce to remain competitive. In Adora's case, that factor was the pressure to adhere to traditional beauty standards. Moreover, future research might analyse the income disparities between different content creators to provide insight into the discrimination against larger workers, in a similar manner to Jones' (2015) work that looked at the racialisation of webcamming with black workers being undervalued in comparison to white workers.

Interviewee insights – Adora, Cushla and Kat:

Adora offered further insight into her marketing strategy; whilst she grappled with the desire to be more authentic, as noted above, she also questioned the moral and ethical dilemma she felt in marketing herself as a Mature BBW Māori in an objectified sense, questioning what this meant alongside her values, as well as concerns over which platform she marketed herself on:

> I market myself as a mature BBW Māori or indigenous or Polynesian. And I am choosing to objectify, to create that in an objectified sense. And, I'm like, how do I feel about that as a Māori woman, you know what I mean? So, there's the argument, as a Māori woman, am I okay with using that to make money when I feel strongly about Te Aro Māori, I do not know. I am kind of working into this stereotype of Polynesian woman being easy maybe, or, you know, sexually more adventurous or whatever the trope is. But that goes against my true feelings as me, myself. That's actually not okay to do either.

Additionally, Adora has utilised Snapchat to market her content and has made sales through this platform, however, she also stressed that these sales could have been made to minors:

> … Who am I selling to? Because there's no way to check. And I didn't check. I didn't use to check ID or whatever. So potentially there is a potential that I sold to underage, which is not what I ever intended to do. …. To me, any of the platforms, it's their problem, so I feel less liable. Because I'm like, well, they actively sought out a platform that they knew was going to contain explicit material whereas Snapchat it's not. So, I kind of get why Snapchap is cracking down. Even though it's a pain in the arse because it was quite a good little money spinner. Well way to advertise, but yeah, it is kind of weird ethical dilemma as to, how much attention do I pay to that, versus I want to make money.

The moral/ethical issue of where one should market themselves or sell their content was also discussed by interviewee Cushla, who is mindful of where she markets herself, noting how she will not use Tik Tok because she knows that platform is utilised by younger audiences. Additionally, Cushla and Kat both feel that there is a lack of transparency and accountability when it comes to influencing younger girls to get involved in online sex work, particularly given the exposure younger viewers have to online sex workers across platforms. Kat wants the long-term repercussions of online sex work to be made known rather than romanticised understandings of online sex work being something that can be done easily with instant success. These interviewees each offer insights into navigating platform norms where sexualised content is common, versus one's own personal ethics on promoting content that is not suitable for underage audiences. These discussions could be researched further, looking into the kinds of moral and ethical labour online sex workers do when considering content appropriateness within the platform economy and the complexities of brand strategizing and marketing within a digital age that is now more accessible to impressionable younger individuals.

Interviewee insights: Cushla, Amy and Dee

In Cushla's interview, she discussed how physical boundaries have been crossed in offline environments by viewers in the form of sexual harassment:

> Because of my platform and the way that I see my sexuality, I was viewed as a sexual object. So, when I would go to places where people were drinking, for example, music festivals, that was not good for me being groped, being grabbed at, being yelled at, being asked to twerk for people and people taking photos of me and unsolicited videos. And it was by females, probably more than men, because I find that females feel a certain level of entitlement around another woman's body like, Oh, well, I'm not a man, I'm not a creep, like, let me touch. So, crossing of physical boundaries definitely has happened before.

I found her discussions on this matter relevant to understanding how the objectification of workers occurs across different environments, providing insight into the offline lives of online sex workers. My research within this thesis primarily interrogates the dynamics that occur online that influence workers' experiences and the kinds of discrimination and exploitation they're subject to through covert forms of structural violence. While my research has included offline consequences -- for example, with workers' relationships and economic livelihoods -- Cushla's experiences speak back to these findings in other ways, with offline troubles experiencing sexual harassment. Amy also discussed harassment and discrimination she experienced working offline, having to leave two of her jobs once her employers found out she was also a sex worker. In one instance, the employer was discriminatory toward Amy; if she had a day off, she would be accused of doing sex work. In another scenario her employer made sexual advances toward her. I believe that further work could be done to highlight online sex workers' experiences in offline spaces. Alternatively, another interviewee, Dee, discussed the forms of discrimination she has faced offline when trying to rent a property, noting that she now must lie about her job to avoid being discriminated against in the property-application process. Again, workers are experiencing harassment and discrimination in their offline lives because of their online work, and further research could better determine the extent of these offline challenges.

Interviewee insights - Madison and Cushla:

Both Madison and Cushla provided insight into the kinds of labour-offloading that they do working in the online sex work industry. For example, during her time on webcamming platforms Madison would choose a moderator, someone who had the ability to permanently ban or mute people from entering or communicating within her chatroom. Cushla has employed a personal assistant who she offloads a large portion of her work to, including answering direct messages from viewers and uploading and making content live on her OnlyFans account. Cushla mentioned how if it weren't for her hiring an assistant, she wouldn't have had the longevity she has in the online sex work industry. This made me consider how labour-offloading is being employed within the online sex work industry and how it mirrors the actions of other industries who employ such practices. Essentially, both Madison and Cushla's insights spoke to the business strategies they employed to enhance their business, with Cushla's experience in particular speaking to aspects of business scalability, in that by hiring someone to respond to customers' direct messages she was able to maintain a loyal customer base as her subscriber count continued to grow. It also shows how there are new economic opportunities within the online sex work industry for those who are not online sex workers. Research into these adjacent roles in the industry and workers' experiences could be explored for greater insight into the online sex work industry.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Informed consent

The decision was made that both written and oral informed consent would be obtained for this project. As sex workers are a marginalised population subject to discrimination, many work hard to protect their legal identities for reasons of wellbeing and safety. There can be considerable risk for their livelihoods if their identity is known, for example, there can be threats to workers physical safety with clients stalking workers if their addresses are made known (Dellner, 2022). Family and friends may not approve of their work resulting in conflict, isolation, and mental health concerns (Stutz, 2022). Landlords and future employers may also be discriminatory toward sex workers which can explain why some sex workers choose to keep their identities protected (Campbell et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020). Moreover, sex workers can work in illegal or quasi-legal environments, such as those based overseas where sex work is illegal or migrant workers who do not have the right to be involved in sex work but are staying in New Zealand where sex work is legal (Campbell et al., 2019).

Therefore, workers may not feel comfortable providing written consent as it may be seen as a threat to their legal identity or residential status. Providing their legal name on written documentation could make workers feel uncomfortable and may have made them less inclined to participate in the study. All participants were given the option to choose written or verbal consent, 5 provided written consent, 3 chose verbal consent. With that said, when going through the ethics review process the ethics committee strongly suggested obtaining written consent in favour of verbal and wanted clarification over how verbal consent would be recorded. The verbal consent was attained prior to the commencement of the interviews at the beginning of the audio recordings and both written and verbal consents were stored on my password protected computer.

Criminal disclosures

In making the argument for verbal consent, as the illegal and quasi-legal nature of online sex was raised, the ethics committee questioned how references to illegal activity would be dealt with and wanted such information to be made known on the information sheet sent to potential participants. I made the decision that any illegal activity mentioned in the interviews would remain confidential and that no information would be given to the authorities. Participants were made aware that criminal disclosures would remain confidential on the participant information sheet and again in the interview if they divulged illegal activity and expressed uncertainty about what they had shared and whether it would be relayed in the research.

Data collection and storage

Phase one: Internet forums hold a wealth of information into different communities, as argued by Holtz et al. (2012), "even small forums usually contain more than enough text material for any kind of social scientific analysis. Because the material exists already in digital format, labour-intensive procedures like the transcription of audio material are not necessary" (p.3). Moreover, online forums are "used almost exclusively by members and supporters of the organization or community for discussing matters of concern of the respective interest group" (Holtz et al., 2012, p.3). They are also utilised by members who may not have met one another in person making it a great space to analyse the different discourses that are taking place within the community. Data for phase one was collected from the AmberCutie forum. While the forum has private threads that are only accessible to members, all the data collected for this research were accessible from publicly available threads. However, there are debates around covert forms of research where the data collection occurs from publicly accessible domains.

The main debate with covert forms of research, in particular utilising online forums as a data collection source, is whether informed consent should be obtained from the users and groups being observed for the research. Kozinets (2002) argues that researchers "should fully disclose his or her affiliations and intentions to online community members during any research" (p. 62). However, Langer and Beckman (2005), find that Kozinets ethical guidelines are too restrictive and "also endanger the unobtrusiveness of online communication studies" (p. 195). It could also "endanger the whole research project if participants oppose the research" (p. 197) only leaving those who are comfortable posting on the forums or could lead to 'observer effects' whereby those who know they're being observed change their behaviour which can invalidate the research findings (Monahan & Fisher, 2010). Those in favour of conducting covert research, like Kraut et al. (2004), argue that if no negative effects were to come to participants and that their rights and wellbeing are not at risk, then the research can be carried out without consent. As this research is well intentioned, and the likelihood of participants facing risks because of this research is extremely low, I decided that I would not disclose my presence on the forums to ensure that observer effects were avoided. Nevertheless, ensuring privacy forms part of minimising the risk to individuals and groups that are utilising forums and ensuring that members' wellbeing is protected:

> It is necessary, for each single case, to deliberate whether the public interest in the discourse within the respective group outweighs the members potential wish for privacy. In any case, the privacy of the users should not be compromised more than necessary. For example, there is no need to publish the user's nicknames in scientific

> publications, making them potentially identifiable. … A publication should contain as little potentially identifying information about the individual (Holtz et al., 2012, p.6).

The data that was collected from the forums included no identifiable information, for example usernames weren't explicitly mentioned within any of the manuscripts. Effort was made to paraphrase the quotes to minimise Google search possibilities, although as I wanted to ensure that my research findings were rooted in the voices of online sex workers, only slight paraphrasing was done.

Phase two: There were several ethical considerations in respect to the data collection for the interviews, with phase two deemed high risk due to the possibility of psychological harm to participants if they were to relay upsetting experiences. First, ethical consideration was given to where the location would be held. Participants were given the option to meet in person or via Zoom, wherever they felt most comfortable. For in person environments, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective kindly offered their office space to conduct interviews. Another option that I considered was booking a private room in Massey University's library where I could meet with participants located in Auckland. Alternatively, participants could choose their preferred location. However, all interviews ended up occurring on Zoom, as per interviewees preference and since not all participants were located where I was (Auckland). The interviews were held within my private meeting room only accessible to participants. Second, ethical consideration was had over audio recording the interviews. A part of the informed consent process was ensuring that participants were willing to be audio recorded; all those that reached out to me during recruitment were comfortable being audio recorded so were able to proceed with the interviews. My reason for audio recordings is that given the length of the interviews (60-90 minutes) I did not want any information to be lost as I would have had to write notes while they were likely to continue with their conversation. I did not feel that this would be suitable, especially since I didn't want to be distracted during the process. It was important to me that I was fully present in the conversation and that participants understood that their voices were being heard. Deep listening is considered a component of a feminist ethics of care, as Yeo et al. (2023) explains:

> A good, active listener recognises the speaker as a social, cultural, and emotional body and relates to them with an ethics of care, grounding themselves in the narrative of the other person (Back, 2007). It is through the *art* of listening, both to one another and also to ourselves, that we also understand *ourselves* as such cultural, social, and emotional bodies (p. 1).

Having audio recordings of the interview would provide an accurate record of what was said, including the contextual cues, or inflections of the conversation such as silences, hesitation, and emotional reactions (Clausen, 2012). Interview audio recordings were taken on my iPhone's voice memo

application and were then uploaded onto my password protected laptop and stored within a password protected folder. As interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, an adjacent consideration was whether participants would have the opportunity to edit the interview transcripts. I decided that the manuscripts would not be edited by participants. As some participants may want to edit the naturalised transcript, this might mean that the data will go from verbal, conversational talk to a written, formal style conversation resulting in a loss of nuance from spoken discourse (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Some participants may also choose to retract statements from the transcript due to embarrassment or a change of circumstance that makes what they said no longer relevant, at least no longer relevant to them (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Both edits and data removal raise questions to the epistemic integrity and therefore my preference was for the transcripts to remain in their original form.

Data confidentiality: Phase one's forum data that was captured through Ncapture was stored on my password protected laptop on NVivo, if the forum data was used in one of the manuscripts, the quotes did not include the posters username to protect their identity. The quotes were also slightly paraphrased to reduce searchability through Google. As for phase twos interview data, interview audio recordings were stored on my password protected computer within a password protected folder. Consent forms were also stored within the same folder. If interview data was used within the manuscript, participants went by their chosen pseudonym. During the ethics review process, it was decided that data would be kept for 7 years before being destroyed. It was determined that after seven years all data should've been used for publication purposes and would no longer be required.

3.6 Treaty of Waitangi / Te Tiriti o Waitangi

In New Zealand the Treaty of Waitangi "formalised a relationship between the British Crown and Māori to recognise and protect Māori values, traditions and practices" (Hudson & Russell, 2009, p. 61). Today, the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi are important for researchers to consider when conducting research. However, there has been considerable contention over its interpretation and whether "Māori actually understood the Treaty and what was being negotiated" (Kingi, 2006, p. 2) and whether "Māori interests have been protected" (Kingi, 2006, p. 2). The Treaty of Waitangi, as explained by Kingi (2006):

> Was essentially a treaty of cessation and as such resulted in a transfer of sovereignty (or absolute control) from Māori to the British Crown. While the Māori version of the Treaty placed some restrictions on this notion of sovereignty, the Treaty nevertheless facilitated British rule, colonisation, and the establishment of British systems of governance, land tenure, law, and social development (p. 2).

In 1975 the Waitangi Tribunal was established to investigate grievances and circumstances where the Treaty had been breached by the Crown with the purpose of resolving "claims between New Zealand and the Maori" (McGinty, 1992) which has included settlements and other forms of compensation. While matters with the Treaty are ongoing, New Zealand's colonial history and the role of the Treaty of Waitangi is critical to acknowledge, particularly in conducting research and ensuring that the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi which include partnership, participation, and protection, are implemented, especially when working with Māori communities. Hudson and Russell (2008) state how:

> The Treaty of Waitangi is recognised as an integral part of New Zealand's ethical framework, but its interpretation needs to reflect the ethical understandings of both parties, Māori and European, particularly in relation to the contribution that research can make towards addressing inequalities within our society (p. 62).

This research considered the Treaty of Waitangi's principle of partnership in terms of the researcher (myself), recognising and respecting the voice of Māori individuals and acknowledging that their cultural knowledge, traditions, language, and norms may form part of their experiences working as an online sex worker. It was my cultural and social responsibility to ensure that such knowledge is recognised and respected regardless of how it is relayed. As a Pākehā researcher it can be intimidating to work with groups where there is cultural difference, however, I have done so in the past with my master's research involving Chinese participants, and it provided me with the opportunity to learn alternative ways of knowing. As Vaeau and Trundle (2020) state in their sentiments on "decolonising Māori-Pākehā collaborations" (p. 207), researchers must "call into question … prior knowledge about what research methods, research relationships, and even what research success looks like" (p. 212) which involves questioning the status quo many of us researchers have become accustomed to.

For me, questioning the status quo was done in a couple of ways. First, ethics norms were challenged when it came to how consent would be obtained. Participants were given the option to provide verbal consent if that's what they felt more comfortable with given that they may have concerns regarding any form of paper trail. While I understood that written consent would be secure, for those outside of academia who may not understand the extent of ethics protocol, it is not unreasonable to see how they may be fearful of having their identity obtained by a researcher. Adopting this kind of consent process respects participants' rights to privacy, their preferences in the research process, and is a more inviting way to encourage participation. Second, the project centred around participants' perspectives by utilising the forum data and interview quotes; these qualitative insights allowed for policy suggestions (Chapter 7) that emerged from workers experiences and helps bring attention to underrepresented issues that might be overlooked in the platform economy. As noted earlier, there can

be a bias toward quantitative research, with some claiming quantitative evidence is epistemologically superior due to its objectivity and rigor. This research demonstrates that qualitative research is methodologically rigorous with detailed, valuable insights that inform on the platform economy and contemporary issues that must be dealt with.

With the Treaty's principles of participation and protection in mind, Māori individuals were more than welcome to participate and there was no obligation for them to participate if they were not interested in the research project. However, insights by Māori participants would provide greater representation in online sex work research, capturing their lived experiences and intersecting social locations, and could allow them to put forward recommendations that best serve Māori workers. One of the key aims of this thesis questions how power in the sex work industry is negotiated in and through platform capitalism, therefore, understanding how oppressive structures such as neoliberalism, capitalism, and colonialism, which are rooted in white privilege, impact Māori sex workers, would deepen understandings of Eurocentric systems and the experiences of minority groups, specifically in New Zealand's post-colonial environment. In seeking to uphold these principles (participation and protection) and by recognising how this research might be beneficial for Māori, I believe this research has tried to protect Māori knowledge and culture and demonstrates a respect toward Māori autonomy. Māori participants also received the same protections as other participants, including informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, the mitigation of harm, and data protection from unauthorised access.

Only one participant, Adora, identified themselves as Māori to me, and within the interview they freely shared their perspective which included some cultural insights. Adora noted how she questioned whether her work aligns with Te Ao Māori values which she stands by. In specific, she mentioned feeling conflicted over marketing herself as a mature BBW Māori woman and whether that kind of objectified framing was something she was ok with given her values. While I do believe that those insights could've been incorporated into manuscript 2 (Chapter 5) and sat alongside discussions regarding workers moral and ethical feelings toward sex work. I felt that her conversations would be better represented in a future manuscript that I'm interested in that discusses workers feelings toward their marketing strategies, their audience awareness, and moral and ethical dilemmas they experience when considering how and where to market their content (see Chapter 3 – Section 3.4). It is important to me that participants' insights are given the attention they deserve, and I felt this Māori viewpoint of Adora's deserved greater attention than what I could have offered in manuscript 2.

I feel that this process of consideration encapsulates another factor raised by the ethics committee who asked how Te Ao Māori views would be incorporated in this research or how they would be understood. Forster (2022) explains how Te Ao Māori:

> Is an approach to social science that is grounded in a Māori worldview and contributes to Māori development; it is a contemporary rendering of a Māori worldview. The goal is to reaffirm and reclaim the validity of mātauranga—Māori ways of knowing and associated practices—and resist continuing oppression. Research therefore becomes a highly political activity, committed to a social justice agenda for achieving equitable outcomes and the recognition of Māori rights and interests (p. 220).

I believe my feminist research practices support Te Ao Māori views in that feminist research pays attention to intersectional viewpoints and prioritises understanding the kinds of discrimination, oppression, as well as privileges afforded to people which can shape their experiences. In context of this research, this involved bringing to light knowledge that isn't rooted in platform-capitalist ethos of entrepreneurship that are heavily romanticised and pushed by platforms themselves. Instead, it meant opening space for Māori participants to share their Māori worldview and what this means for them as Māori, as was the case with Adora's experiences online. Moreover, with the help of my supervisors, I consulted with Associate Professor Rochelle Stewart-Withers, a Māori scholar (Te Atiawa) and Kaiarahi in the School of People, Environment and Planning. She generously offered to provide guidance for me during the research process, including guidance in the analysis of interviews from Māori participants if it was required and there were concepts that I did not fully understand. Additionally, she identified ways that I could ensure respect for, and inclusion of, Te Ao Māori within the interview process including sharing information about myself or starting the interview with a few words to bring both the participant and me into the space. As well as bringing attention to things of importance, in both the human and non-human world and letting the interview flow in a way which could look different from traditional style interviews. During the interviews I introduced myself and discussed my research project and I started the interview with a casual question "can you tell me about your journey to becoming an online sex worker?" I felt that this question might address participants' nerves by starting the interview on a casual note and showing that I valued their insight. This conversational mode continued throughout most interviews, including with the Māori participant, Adora.

The ethics committee also sought elaboration on how the involvement of Māori participants would be managed during the research process (i.e., recruitment/selection, interview, data analysis, etc.) by using Te Ara Tika principles. Came (2013) explains how:

> "Te Ara Tika guidelines are a Kaupapa Māori ethical framework based upon the application of tikanga and Western ethical principles … *Te Ara Tika* framework incorporates the elements of whakapapa (relationships), mana (justice and equity), tika (research design) and manaakitanga (cultural and social responsibility)" (p. 65).

Going into the project, I let participants lead the process and allowed them to talk about their identity however they wanted. I did not ask participants about their ethnic identity. The main reason I chose not to have participants disclose their ethnicity was that I wanted to minimise the possibility of harm, and felt it was best they raised it naturally on their own. For example, as some ethnic minority groups are subject to stigma, they may conceal their identity which can help bring "protection from social rejection [and] free one from concerns around other's judgements" (Dobai & Hopkins, 2022, p. 4). I wanted to ensure that all participants felt comfortable and respected within the interview process and that their experiences relayed to me weren't going to be defined by an ethnic focus.

With the principle of Mana in mind, Māori participants had the right to act upon their own authority, and to choose whether they want to participate in this project, and their experiences were respected and considered. Potential participants were welcome to consult with me about any concerns they may have, matters that require further clarification, or offer advice on how they would prefer to engage in this project, including their preferred outcomes. Again, Associate Professor Rochelle Stewart-Withers was available for me to consult with if I had questions and required support with how to accommodate participants' needs. However, no instance occurred where specific concerns were raised that required Associate Professor Rochelle Stewart-Withers' advice. Participants are also encouraged to arrange a meeting space where they feel comfortable and are welcome to meet with me on their own terms (Aroha ki te tangata) (Smith, 1998).

Considering the principle of Tika, I believe that the study was designed in a way that was mutually beneficial for participants and myself. While I hope to get my doctorate following this research, I believe sharing their stories is an important thing and can mean a lot to some people, particularly minority groups who often feel their voices are silenced in society (Mcgarry, 2024). Following the interviews, I plan on issuing a short summary of findings to participants as well as offering a presentation of the key results. I encourage participants and their input on where they may like to see the work disseminated, including which platforms and certain stakeholders they may have in mind, to increase the utility of the research. I want for this research to bring light to some of the issues with online sex work in hopes of helping the online sex work community, and Māori may find that there are certain issues that are best looked at through the lens of Māori understanding (Mātauranga Māori) that can support both sex workers and Māori communities.

3.7 Benefits and risks

Before commencing with a research project, the benefits and risks must be assessed to ensure that the research is conducted ethically and responsibly. As Tanke and Tanke (1982) argue researchers:

> Ultimately remain accountable for the protection of their subjects and the ethical standards and reputation of their professions. Investigators should make substantial efforts to identify in advance the risks in their research, and to design informed consent and risk management proposals appropriate to those risks. They should integrate subject interest protection into their design as they do any other research procedures (p. 147).

During the ethics application process, I had to consider the possible benefits (if any) of the project to individual participants, groups, communities, or organisations. I thought that participants sharing their personal experiences could be rewarding especially as a marginalised group that is often overlooked and misunderstood in society. Having their voices heard might reassure participants that their needs, advice, and opinions do matter. Moreover, by participating in the study and by communicating their needs, this might benefit the sex worker community more broadly, making participants feel recognised for their contribution to their own community. For example, the information obtained from this research could support organisations, such as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective, in understanding the needs of online sex workers and could be communicated to government institutions. With that said, I did not make any promises to participants in terms of what I thought could come from this research, as I didn't want to set unrealistic expectations that could lead to disappointment.

As for risks, I had to consider what discomfort (physical, psychological, social), incapacity or other risk of harm individual participants were likely to experience because of participation and needed to make clear the strategies that would be used to deal with any of the situations identified above. Since this research project involved participants talking about their personal experiences, there was the risk that some psychologically upsetting topics could emerge during the interview. Given the industry, this could include topics such as sexual assault, sexual violence, sex trafficking, online harassment, and stalking. However, other than asking participants to speak about their positive and negative experiences working online, distressing themes such as those mentioned above were not explicit in any of the line of questioning that I went into this project with.

Still, participants were made aware prior to the interview that they could pause or end the interview at any time should they feel upset and were given the option to skip over any questions. There was also a link to the New Zealand Prostitutes website on the participant information sheet that provided resources that could be of use, including resources for sexual assault. During the interviews I responded empathetically to participants who did choose to relay difficult experiences, sometimes this was conveyed in my body gestures (nodding) or facial expressions, and through intentional pauses. There were four interviewees who discussed difficult experiences although these experiences were largely

mentioned in passing and all seemed to have worked through their assaults and felt comfortable communicating those past challenges unprompted. Following the interview, I sent handwritten thank you cards to each participant along with a Koha ($100 Prezzy card).

3.8 Ally power

Ethical allyship is an important ethical factor to consider, as Murphy (2022) explains, "it is imperative that well-meaning allies and advocates do not speak over, or for, sex workers, but instead take the lead from them. Allies can use their power, platform, and cultural capital to create the space for sex worker voices. ... The act required is two-fold: to listen to and actually hear sex workers; and to amplify their voices rather than speaking over them" (p. 226-227). For me, as part of my ongoing reflexivity, I considered my cultural capital as a PhD researcher who could try to amplify the voices of sex workers. For example, during my studies I had access to opportunities where I could have my work recognised by others such as the Sociological Association of Aotearoa New Zealand conference in 2022 where I presented findings from phase one of my analysis. Additionally, as noted earlier, each of the three manuscripts I published are open access, this will help with the visibility of the articles. Hopefully these articles will be cited and received by a wider audience. As Fitzgerald et al. (2020) state: “an agenda for change for sex workers begins with the realisation that the ‘doings’ of our research and practice are ‘key sites of social changes’ and must be both inclusive and democratic” (p. 260). Thus, ensuring that the findings are made known forms part of that change.

3.9 Avoidance of harmful binaries

The sex work industry is known for its harmful binaries of either empowerment or exploitation, as mentioned in Chapter 2, happy hooker and exploited victim stereotypes are the two categorical markers of a worker’s experience (Smith & Mac, 2018). These extremes do not account for those who fall somewhere in the middle of these extremes. I made a conscious effort to highlight both positive and negative experiences of workers to avoid epistemic exploitation (Murphy, 2022); my intention was never to focus solely on the negative experiences or oppression that workers face, but that workers experiences were understood in a more nuanced manner. As Murphy (2022) states:

> Sex workers have been abused for speaking up for their rights and labelled as trafficking apologists. These intimidation tactics have resulted in the silencing of sex workers, and the perpetuation of hegemonic discourse and unconsidered binaries, which do not acknowledge the nuances and spectrum of experiences in sex work. It is imperative that a counter-hegemonic narrative is developed, which recognises the full humanity of sex workers (p. 228).

By incorporating counter-hegemonic ideas within my research, I sought to highlight broader understandings of sex work to uphold the integrity of this research and to document more pluralistic understandings of sex work. Novis-Deutsch (2020) comments that “promoting a metaepistemic attitude of pluralism will allow others to be fully included, while respecting them in their alterity” (p. 412),

3.10 Radical democratic imaginary

In Murphy's (2022) work where they spoke with a sex work activist regarding the ethics and welfare of working with sex workers, they discussed the use of a 'radical democratic imaginary'. This involves "opening up new and more democratic ways of "being" and "becoming" [which] are dependent upon imagination, imaginaries and hope for the future. To move towards a better future, we must first imagine it" (p. 228). At the end of each of my interviews, I asked all participants what they would hope to see in future for the online sex work industry, this generated some important insights, giving voice to participants and encouraging civic and democratic engagement (Majic, 2011, p. 831). In obtaining their feedback about the industry and its future direction, I hoped that workers would see that their voices matter, fostering a sense of empowerment and influence, illustrating that workers are not just passive workers but are active agents who have a say in shaping the industry they participate in.

Chapter 4: Structural violence of platform capitalism: A case study of online sex workers' experiences

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
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UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION
DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Brittany Palatchie
Name and title of main supervisor:	Dr. Alice Beban
In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Chapter 4

Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:[1]

Brittany: Devising research design, designing and carrying out methodology, reviewing literature, data analysis, theoretical framing, manuscript preparation and submission.
Alice and Tracey: Supervision of research, contribution to research planning and design, detailed feedback on manuscript drafts, advice regarding submission process.

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Introduction to manuscript 1

The first manuscript of this thesis documented one of the most discussed forms of structural violence enacted against workers, that is the economic forms of structural violence which are perpetuated through platform operations which are exploitive of workers' labour, exacerbate worker precarity, and impact the wellbeing of workers. Manuscript one utilises the theoretical frameworks of structural violence, platform capitalism, and neoliberal feminism to reveal the economic forms of structural violence embedded within the platform economy of online sex work which have become normalised. This manuscript speaks back to one of the research questions which is, how is power negotiated in and through platform capitalism?.

The structural violence framework originates from the work of Johan Galtung, who understands structural violence as a system of violence that is less identifiable than physical, overt forms of violence given its normalisation through structures and institutions (which Galtung (1990) theorises as 'cultural violence'). Economic structural violence includes the algorithmic bias that exists on online sex work platforms and the ways algorithms function to exploit workers for their unpaid, moral, and emotional labour. It also includes the economic uncertainty platforms intensify by controlling workers' finances either by withholding or retaining workers' income without explanation. Third-party payment platforms are complicit in this economic precarity as well, playing a significant role in the monetary landscape of the platform economy with workers' income crossing international borders. Manuscript one highlights how understanding the flow of workers' income, and the lack of transparency and consent around these practices, is imperative for understanding how platforms wield power over workers and influence the power imbalances we see within the platform economy between different parties, including viewers, workers, and the platforms themselves.

The normalisation of these economic forms of structural violence can also be attributed to neoliberal feminist ideologies of entrepreneurship and self-responsibility. Within the platform economy, the rhetoric of entrepreneurship is prevalent and has co-opted feminism into a neoliberal discourse, as is seen with Sheryl Sandberg's insights offered in her book 'Lean In', which encourages women to continually improve themselves and work hard to ensure that their value is increased within the marketplace. Sandberg sees self-responsibility as a key factor to becoming competitive (Mastrangelo, 2021), however, she overlooks the broader structural conditions that can affect a women's success within the market economy, such as the oppressive power relations that underpin capitalist marketplaces (Prügl, 2015).

The manuscript drew on findings from phase one of this project which involved conducting a content analysis of an online forum called AmberCutie Forum (https://www.ambercutie.com/forums/) which online sex workers use. Ethics approval was given by Massey University's Human Ethics Committee (application approval number: 4000025322). Manuscript one was submitted to the *Journal of Sociology* who welcome "interdisciplinary pieces with concerns that are sociological in nature, in an acknowledgment that sociological thinking takes place across a range of disciplines, such as in cultural, gender and organisation studies, and outside of the academy" (*Journal of Sociology*, 2024). Manuscript one felt suitable for submission to the *Journal of Sociology* and would benefit their readership by contributing to conversations regarding the platform economy and work, especially given that the journal has previously published platform economy scholarship (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu 2019). With that said, existing literature on the platform economy has largely centred on platforms such as Airbnb (Pennell, 2021) and Uber (Churchill & Craig, 2019) and little attention has been given to online sex work, despite the rapid rise in online sex work platforms.

Structural violence of platform capitalism: A case study of online sex workers' experiences

Abstract:

With the rise of Web 2.0 and online sex work platforms, it's important to understand the structural violence faced by online sex workers. Utilising data from an online forum, AmberCutie, and drawing on structural violence as a theoretical framework, we argue that platform capitalism enacts violence against online sex workers structurally, through algorithmic systems and precarious financial payment options embedded within platform interfaces. Platforms exploit workers through algorithms demanding intense competition, unpaid labour, and emotional and moral labour to remain visible to earn a living. This algorithmic bias disproportionately affects low earners, leading to emotional and financial struggles. Payment issues exacerbate economic precarity, as platforms sometimes withhold or refuse payments without explanation, or rely on third-party payment platforms utilising risky offshore bank accounts. Stronger labour protections and access to secure financial resources are necessary to address systemic barriers faced by online sex workers in the digital realm.

Keywords

Economic insecurity, platform capitalism, structural violence, unpaid labour, emotional labour, online sex work

1.0 Introduction

With the growth of digital technologies to facilitate exchange, scholars argue that a new form of capitalism has emerged, 'platform capitalism', which "utilises digital infrastructures to bring two possible participants in a market exchange together" (Pennell, 2019, p. 8). Offline jobs have moved online, including in the sex work industry. Online sex work has grown exponentially with platforms offering diverse services, including advertising offline prostitution services, live stream webcamming (e.g. MyFreeCams, Chaturbate), and content sharing (e.g. OnlyFans). Street-based sex work is declining (McLean, 2015), while the online work industry continues to grow (Jones, 2020). However, these platforms have developed systemic inequalities that amount to structural violence against sex workers.

Previous scholarship on platform capitalism has interrogated the restructuring and casualisation of work (Srnicek, 2017) and lack of protections of platform workers (Vallas, 2019). Labour protections—from earning a minimum wage, receiving sick leave, vacation pay, and bonus incentives—are unavailable for platform workers who work as independent contractors (Srnicek, 2016). This has led to criticism over whether platform workers should be classified as employees rather than independent contractors (Rolf et al., 2022) and whether platforms are escaping accountability (Graham, 2016). The global nature of platform work has led to fierce competition, resulting in declining wages and limited bargaining power for workers (Graham & Woodcock, 2018).

Literature examining the platform economy and workers' experiences focuses on ride-sharing platforms such as Uber (Seidl, 2022), accommodation platforms such as Airbnb (Pennell, 2021), and freelance labour platforms such as Upwork (Howson et al., 2021). Literature on platform capitalism and online sex work remains limited, although studies raise concerns about censorship and 'deplatforming' (being banned from platforms) (Are & Paasonen, 2021; Tiidenberg, 2021), dangers of working on webcamming platforms (Jones, 2016), and the ways platforms undermine workers' labour by failing to classify webcamming as sex work (Stegeman, 2024). Other research points to the safety benefits of meeting clients online (Argento et al., 2018). However, there is limited research utilising structural violence as a theoretical tool to understand online sex workers' experiences on platforms and third-party payment systems.

This article unpacks the covert ways structural violence is enacted against online sex workers by being built into the structures of the platforms and third party payment platforms they use. We make two key arguments; (1) The algorithmic bias of sex work platforms exploits online sex workers, demanding high levels of emotional, moral and unpaid labour, and (2) the structural control platforms and third-party payment sites have over sex workers' access to their earnings is also a form of economic violence that leaves workers in a precarious position. Through this analysis, we show how the industry's

structure reproduces a patriarchal status quo that leads to the objectification and exploitation of workers, and unequal power dynamics among platform owners, viewers, and workers.

2.0 Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Structural violence

Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence helps us understand how structural systems can disadvantage or harm online sex workers. Galtung (1969) defines structural violence as a form of violence that is caused through building social structures or institutions in ways that prevent individuals from meeting their basic needs or ensuring life outcomes that a member of their society might reasonably expect. Unlike physical violence, structural violence is often less noticeable as the systems perpetuating it have become normalised as the status quo (which Galtung (1990) theorises as 'cultural violence'). Marginalised or vulnerable groups, including sex workers, are more likely to experience structural violence, evident in social arrangements like the criminalisation of sex work and the stigma surrounding sex workers, which can be seen as "institutionalised everyday violence" (Ryan & McGarry, 2022). The social conditions that the concept of structural violence helps us to see, and to name, are those in which one's life chances are being undermined or impeded by a 'system' in which there is no identifiable human being(s) to blame.

While previous scholarship has utilised the framework of structural violence to analyse offline sex work, its application to online sex work remains limited. For instance, Krüsi et al. (2016) examined how structural forces, like criminalisation, influence the experiences of violence faced by sex workers, while Sultana and Subedi (2021) explored the symbolic and structural violence faced by Bangladeshi sex workers in various social contexts. Ryan and McGarry (2022) examined interactions between offline sex workers and healthcare providers in Ireland, finding that many sex workers do not disclose their work due to concerns about stigma, judgement, or worries about migration status, leading to unequal health outcomes. This article employs the framework of structural violence to examine online sex workers' personal experiences dealing with worker exploitation and economic insecurity within the online sex work industry, situated within the broader platform economy.

2.2 Platform capitalism and Neoliberal feminism

We draw on theorisation and critiques of platform capitalism and neoliberal feminism to illustrate the complexities of working in an environment that expects workers to abide by "entrepreneurial feminist" principles, whilst obscuring macro-level structures that shape workers' ability to succeed within the platform economy. The rise of neoliberalism in the 1970's saw the foundation of the global economy shift to emphasise market competition, destabilise the role of the

state, and place the onus on workers to succeed (Leonardi & Pirina, 2020). With the growth of internet technologies and the digitalisation of everyday life, digital platforms now play a key role in facilitating "social, economic, and cultural activities" (Viljoen et al., 2021). These technologies have transformed the market economy, providing new methods of consumption and reshaping work dynamics. Platforms have become instrumental in enabling various users, including entrepreneurs (in this case, online sex workers), consumers (viewers or subscribers, who are the paying customers of online sex workers), advertisers, and service providers, to utilise the tools and software necessary to connect, share information, buy, sell, or consume products and services, and establish their own marketplaces (Srnicek, 2017).

The rhetoric of entrepreneurship under platform capitalism has co-opted feminism into neoliberal discourse, exemplified by 'feminist' manifestos such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*. Such books argue that women should view themselves as ongoing projects, constantly working to increase their market value through hard work and self-improvement. Sandberg's message emphasises the need for greater involvement of women in corporate spaces to advance their representation and progression in the market economy (Mastrangelo, 2021). Essentially, neoliberal feminism aligns the movement's goals with the political and economic projects of the global market, individualising the language of women's empowerment and neglecting the collective struggles of workers (Rottenberg, 2014). However, the conditions of empowerment and entrepreneurship must be understood in the context of oppressive power relations that underpin this neoliberalised feminism. The capitalist, patriarchal system women are working within isn't designed to help women succeed, making the emphasis on individual responsibility a subject of strong criticism (Prügl, 2015). Critics identify women as bearing the responsibility to adapt to a system designed to fail them, and argue instead, that structural systems need to be reshaped for a fairer workforce (Gregoratti et al., 2018). In this article, we critique the implications of these theoretical efforts to impose self-responsibility despite platforms operating in ways that impinge on an online sex worker's ability to act in their best interest.

3.0 Methodology

Data was obtained through a content analysis of an online forum called AmberCutie Forum (ACF) utilised by online sex workers. The research commenced following ethics approval from Massey University, with the ethics application having been deemed low risk (application approval number: 4000025322). Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use. Initially we filtered forum threads to identify the most popular and highly engaged discussions. Once filtered, we analysed forum threads from the "General Cam/Creator Chat" section which comprises of "sticky threads" pinned by the forum owner that are the most relevant and repeated topics of conversation across several forums, and also the

"normal threads section," which consists of posts not pinned by the forum owner and filtered by engagement levels, from the most engaged to the least engaged.

The sticky threads consisted of 7 threads, of which all were read. Out of the normal threads 48 threads were read across the first 3 pages. From these threads we identified 9 common emerging themes by undertaking an interpretive (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) grounded theory approach. Our data analysis phase of the forums used the constant comparative method typical of a grounded theory methodology (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). By constantly comparing data as it was read, significant themes and coding categories began to emerge. We also used the search function by typing in keywords to locate specific topics of interest once themes had been refined, which led to further threads outside of the sticky threads and the first 3 pages of general threads. Data (forum quotes) used in this study were extracted from twenty forum threads in total. Below, we identify the posts within each of the twenty threads, their relative themes, and the number of participants within each thread:

Thread post count	**Theme identified**	**Number of participants**
Thread one: 15 posts	Lack of viewer engagement	9
Thread two: 22 posts	Lack of viewer engagement / Emotional labour	14
Thread three: 22 posts	Lack of viewer engagement / Emotional labour / Unpaid labour	15
Thread four: 53 posts	Lack of viewer engagement / Emotional labour / Unpaid labour	16
Thread five: 29 posts	Algorithms	10
Thread six: 9 posts	Algorithms	4
Thread seven: 5 posts	Algorithms	4
Thread eight: 11 posts	Algorithms	5
Thread nine: 2 posts	Deplatforming	2
Thread ten: 269 posts	Deplatforming	66
Thread eleven: 1 post	Lack of platform support	1
Thread twelve: 15 posts	Payment precarity	10
Thread thirteen: 3,330 posts	Payment precarity	304
Thread fourteen: 5 posts	Payment precarity	2
Thread fifteen: 28 posts	Payment precarity	19
Thread sixteen: 38 posts	Payment precarity	25

Thread seventeen: 102 posts	Payment precarity	39
Thread eighteen: 19,457 posts as at 11/03/2024	Authenticity	Not identified due to the size of the thread and the volume of users / new users continuously adding posts.
Thread nineteen: 13 posts	Authenticity	11
Thread twenty: 7 posts	Multi-platform use	7

4.0 Findings

4.1 Algorithmic bias as a source of exploitation: The role of emotional labour and webcamming scores

Within the platform economy, online platforms are known to use specific algorithms as a mode of management, helping to evaluate workers and to maximise usability and profit on the platform (Pignot, 2023). This section examines the emotional and unpaid labour online sex workers engage in. Applying the framework of structural violence reveals the normalisation of uncompensated labour and potential impairment of emotional well-being that is enacted through algorithmic bias.

The algorithms used on webcamming platforms largely remain undisclosed to prevent individuals from manipulating platform systems (Velthuis & Van Doorn, 2020). Webcamming platforms operate on a tip-based model, where viewers purchase token packages to tip models during live shows. Webcammers have a tip menu in their chatroom that specifies which sex acts they will do for a certain number of tokens. The more tokens a webcammer earns per hour, the higher their CamScore is. CamScores are crucial for success in the webcamming industry as the higher one's CamScore, the greater visibility one receives on the platform, helping people generate a higher income. While MyFreeCams (2022) asserts that the CamScore is an effect of a webcam model's success rather than the cause, the reality is that exposure on online sex work platforms significantly affects one's earnings. The pressure to keep a good CamScore can leave webcammers feeling defeated on slow days where tips are minimal, as their CamScoring and visibility on the platform becomes jeopardised:

> I do not feel motivated to log onto MFC anymore and smile at people, because when this happens [no tipping] I feel like I'm just wasting my cam score away. It's not a good feeling when your precious time has been wasted [Worker via ACF - October 4th, 2022].

Smiling and trying to appear happy is high-demand emotional labour. Viewers do not want to interact with someone who is visibly upset, so a positive and engaging atmosphere must be established. Hochschild (1983) refers to this kind of emotional labour as surface acting, whereby people act with their audiences' preferences and possible reactions in mind. It's also important to note how moral labour is a normative characteristic of emotional labour, in that workers can feel a moral obligation and responsibility to uphold this heteronormative system in hopes of earning a wage. Nevertheless, being cheerful and mindful of how viewers are perceiving you isn't the only form of emotional labour conducted:

> With regulars, I listen to their issues, check in with them to see how their day is going, etc. I do not mind at all, but I do think it's a form of emotional labour [Worker via ACF - April 2nd, 2018].

This kind of emotional labour goes beyond what one might expect for a job that is sexually orientated, and points to the service nature of online sex work that has become normalised and is often expected by viewers. Moreover, sex workers discussed specific emotional management strategies they undertake offline to ensure they appear happy for their viewers:

> The unfortunate thing about camming is that if you look bored or upset people will be less likely to engage with you and the emotional labour demands are high. Sometimes if you cannot shake off the bad mood it's best to log off for a while, chill out, have a snack …. and then try again with a refreshed mindset [Worker via ACF– 23rd September, 2021]

This comment shows the degree of emotional labour being done privately in offline, uncompensated contexts for the purpose of future work. While these emotional management strategies might be sufficient for some, other forum contributors spoke critically to the patriarchal power dynamics at play between themselves and their viewers, showing how the platform capitalist environment contributes to the marginalisation of workers and reinforces gender inequalities:

> Why are new women in the business told how great it is to be a camgirl and that you have the "power" over men when it is the other way around. You must behave how they want, or they'll tip someone else. If you're not a model making $500 a day from regulars or great traffic that the site sends you, you are stuck with the men who make demands because they sit in your quiet room and take advantage of an "unpopular" model [Worker via ACF – 25th September, 2022]

For popular webcammers who receive high levels of traffic due to their CamScore, there's less chance of being economically exploited. Problematically, this system mirrors social class hierarchies visible in offline spaces and exemplifies how forms of cultural violence precede and normalise structural violence (Galtung, 1990). For example, there are cultural norms and attitudes that function to legitimise certain class practices, in this instance western, neoliberal cultural attitudes that celebrate wealth. This normalises the use of algorithmic ranking practices that support high earners, despite being structurally violent for those who are unable to earn considerable sums of money, albeit not for the lack of trying. Speaking to the trouble of CamScores, one ex-webcammer mentions the circular issue of wanting to increase their CamScore but being unable to:

> MyFreeCams would only make me feel stressed since I would have to be online more to positively change it and being online but not earning tokens affects it negatively. It wasn't for me [Worker via ACF May 19th, 2022]

As CamScores are contingent on one's earnings, the desperation for visibility on the platform's interface appears to be a common theme amongst many workers. One webcammer mentions the tactics she's used to bring in an audience:

> I have tried everything MFC Share, promoting myself on Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. I have tried all the approaches teasing, free shows. Nothing seems to work [Worker via ACF - May 4th, 2022]

Their approach raises additional concerns around the unpaid labour that is being done to combat CamScoring. As visibility is difficult to come by, many workers utilise social media for greater exposure. However, in instances where it is not generating any income, it could be argued that there's no justifiable means to engage in such unpaid labour. Moreover, to entice viewers to tip, workers have engaged in free shows while online; such unpaid labour is done at the worker's own expense, trying to work around an algorithmic system that has positioned them unfavourably on the platform. One webcammer speaks to how they felt objectified and exploited by their unpaying viewers:

> Someone said to me that I'm always available, so that seems to be what they think of me. I felt even worse and taken advantage of. I have now taken a few days off because it just burdens me too much to be under this pressure all the time [Worker via ACF – July 14th, 2021]

The hetero-patriarchal cultural power dynamics involved in the sexual interaction leads to an inequitable and structurally violent experience, with one-sided interactions occurring, webcammers being

objectified, and even blamed for their own inability to remain upbeat when they're being exploited for their physical and emotional labour. In response to the topic of what to do on slow days when tips are minimal, one webcammer offers additional suggestions for newcomers getting started on MyFreeCams:

> The key is to be super consistent it takes time to build your audience. To help you meet your bills while finding your audience on MFC, you could try split cam [camming on multiple platforms at once]. If you use any other platform for selling your content try to make the most of those sales, that will add to your income. A lot of people that check your room might not stay and tip but might check your OnlyFans [Worker via ACF – 4th May, 2022].

The suggestion of diversifying income streams, choosing other platforms, and joining subscription platforms is mentioned multiple times on the forum by others. People have recognised the ecosystem that exists in the platforms and how it can increase one's discoverability. Such unpaid labour is normalised, and from an entrepreneurial feminist perspective is encouraged to enhance one's career opportunity and market power:

> Finding ways to get in front of more eyes, even when you're not streaming, is a good goal [Worker via ACF – March 21st, 2023].

Some workers have even argued that having multiple streams of income to fall back on when one platform is slower than another can help prevent the burnout that might occur solely working and placing your energy on one platform. This obscures the reality that trying to maintain work on multiple platforms can be considerably time consuming and can impact one's work-life balance, contradicting the idea that utilising multiple platforms can prevent burnout:

> I'm still trying to figure out how to manage my time between live shows, social media, and everything else. How to make new content, do live shows, make social media posts, and accommodate private shows and still have a life? [Worker via ACF – February 8th, 2021]

Even those who only work on one platform still utilise other generalist platforms as part of their work. Social media plays an important role:

> It's really important to share on social media that you are online… it makes for a deeper connection between you and your members, and you keep them engaged even when

> you are off cam by teasing them or communicating with them if you want [Worker via ACF– 7th April 2022]

This is another form of unpaid labour as social media posts and communications are done outside of sex work-based platforms. However, in the neoliberal economy where self-branding and entrepreneurship is sought after and rewarded, such engagement and marketing has simply been built into the work independent contractors must do to succeed (Whitmer, 2019). Interestingly, using social media to build connections with viewers by allowing them to see more of your daily life and interests is a strategy that corresponds with other conversations on the forum around authenticity and its role in online sex work:

> It's your personality that will earn you the big tips. Talk to your members, laugh, smile, interact, open up, make jokes! Be a real person, because only real people form personal connections - and only personal connections give high tips [Worker via ACF – April 12th, 2012].

As authenticity is seen to foster genuine connections between the worker and the viewer; many people encourage being 'authentic'. What counts as authentic interaction is contestable; for example, one webcammer discusses how pornified versions of orgasms have skewed their interactions with some viewers as her orgasms aren't porn-like:

> Many guys claim to want to see a model get herself off, yet they won't even let you genuinely get yourself off the way that YOU want to. It must be the way that THEY demand it to be. Then they wonder why so many models end up faking it [Worker via ACF – February 26th, 2023].

In fact, viewer satisfaction can be translated in the rating system that some platforms utilise where tipping viewers can rate a performer, in some cases unjustifiably:

> I got my first four-star rating. Everything was fine and the guy even tipped me before he left exclusive. …. I truly believe he did this just to be a jerk. I literally lost sleep over this incident and it's triggering my anxiety to think all it takes is a few assholes like this to come along and completely ruin the good thing. [Worker via ACF – January 2nd, 2023]

By being able to unfairly rate a performance, viewers can hurt workers' reputation, which given the difficulty of entering the online sex work industry and how long it takes to build an audience, can

be considerably damaging. While CamScores penalise workers for not earning what platform owners desire, customer ratings provide another algorithmic means to penalise workers, this time for not meeting the expectations of viewers. Galtung (1969) defines structural "violence [a]s whatever causes people to be less well off than what they otherwise could be". While MyFreeCams claims that their CamScore is the effect of one's success rather than the cause, CamScores can also be seen as a cause of structural violence being perpetuated against some workers, as without CamScores people might have greater visibility on the platform and a chance to be better off. Similarly, viewer ratings can discourage engaging with specific workers, therefore when these systems are in place and give power to platform owners and viewers, workers are at a disadvantage working within a structurally violent system, that in many ways, is designed to work against them.

4.2 Payment precarity in the online sex work industry

Working online, several payment options are made available to workers and they must choose a payment option that best suits their personal circumstances. For example, while those based in the United States often choose direct wire transfers into their bank accounts, international workers must consider whether their bank will accept foreign payment, exchange rates, and other service fees. Alternative options include issued cheques, and more commonly, the use of third party payment processors. Platforms using them are choosing to embed into the worker's circumstances an ongoing precarity around receiving payment. One common problem raised in forum conversations was around instances of delayed payments:

> It's been two weeks and I haven't received my bank wire, I called my bank and they have nothing on their end. Chaturbate is going in circles with me and now won't reply [Worker via ACF – March 8th, 2017]

As online platforms operate from a legal grey zone, the lack of enforced policy around payment disrupts the dependability of being paid on time. Additionally, workers have experienced issues with payments been withheld for unjust reasons. For example, Chaturbate bans the accounts of people who are streaming if they look underage, despite webcammers providing government ID upon registering with the platform. If any underage discussions occur in their chatroom, even by viewers, the workers risk being banned. When individuals' accounts are banned, they're unable to receive payment for their work:

> Yesterday my account got banned due to underage report violations which I never violated, one of my users kept insisting that I do an [underage roleplay] show for him but I never performed it. I am really depressed because I never cashed out my money.

> I am broke, they [the platform] have all my tokens [Worker via ACF – December 11, 2021]

Alarmingly, the aforementioned poster was making pleas to a Chaturbate support employee who utilises the ACF. From an outsider's perspective the process comes across as dehumanising, pleading to support staff to be reinstated on the platform while on a forum where others can view such conversations. However, the lack of support is all too common:

> I do not know how to approach this issue [being banned without explanation] with Chaturbate support anymore. Models firstly get banned for no reason, losing a customer base they worked years to obtain, they lose the tokens in their account at that point in time, and receive no explanation besides the same automated response that doesn't give any clarity at all [Worker via ACF – 6th April, 2023]

Because workers are independent contractors, platforms can avoid responsibility for their concerns, even if it's the platform that has created the problem they're facing. Employment rights and protections that workers would typically be entitled to aren't upheld in the platform landscape, and with online sex workers already being a marginalised working group, their likelihood of exploitation is already high. Not to mention, workers have provided free labour for the platform, helping grow its popularity, and are then penalised by the very platform they've supported through their labour.

Similarly, others discussed the insecurity they experienced working online when their payment is contingent on financial credit card institutions who are distancing themselves from online sex work platforms. Recent examples include Backpage, a platform sex workers advertise on, and AVN Stars, a subscription-based platform (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023). Both platforms had to shut down due to the increased pressure and discrimination they felt from banks following the implementation of FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) (Bronstein, 2021). In October 2021, OnlyFans proposed to remove online sex workers from its platform, causing panic within the online sex work community. One worker discussed the anti-trafficking discourse that has swayed banks in their decision to withdraw support from sex work platforms:

> Its impetus [anti-sex trafficking legislation] was to combat sex trafficking, but as usual all it does is fuck over legit consenting sex workers. It's the reason Porn Hub got hit, it helped kill Backpage and the adult sections of Craigslist, it's the reason OnlyFans is bowing to the whims of its payment processors, and it's the reason I'm worried about all the other platforms I might move to from here [Worker via ACF – August 20, 2021].

Because of anti-trafficking discourses, some online sex work platforms utilise third-party payment processors as a way to avoid big financial institutions like Visa or MasterCard. However, there can be accessibility issues when it comes to using the cards provided by third party payment processors. For example, Paxum has joined with Union Pay bank as an option for workers, but locations to use Union Pay are limited, making it difficult to find places to use or withdraw their money:

> Paxum doesn't offer visa or Mastercard anymore, they are union pay cards. I would check they are accepted somewhere in your city before ordering the card as union pay is not widely accepted so you might have issues getting the funds off the card [Worker via ACF – February 18, 2023]

By not having the same access to financial resources as others and having to use less well-known third-party payment cards or bank providers at a high cost, workers are not given full levels of citizenship as they continue to be pushed to the outskirts of society by a lack of access to the same financial resources available to others. This form of structural violence continues to economically oppress online sex workers as financial institutions refuse to serve them, or charge substantially to do so.

Additionally, the security of their money has been called into question as third-party payment processors often use offshore banks, with some having been subject to bankruptcy or abrupt shutdown (Griffin, 2022). One ACF thread discussed the 2018 bankruptcy scandal that occurred with the bank utilised by third-party payment processor Firstchoice pay. Firstchoice pay utilised Choice Bank, based in Belize, where workers' money was being held. Firstchoice pay, and other third-party payment processors, issue pre-paid debit cards to their users; however, these cards often have load limits. Firstchoice pay had a load limit of $10,000, meaning that any additional funds were stored in a virtual balance, in the offshore bank account of the payment processor, which workers must request be loaded onto the card once it goes under $10,000 again. This highlights the injustice workers face: their money is managed by others and isn't instantly accessible to them. Nevertheless, there are various reasons why people choose to use pre-paid cards, one key reason being to avoid wire transfer fees to international bank accounts:

> It cost me $50USD per time for pay out, plus $30USD from an intermediary bank, plus the exchange rate from USD to Euro. Two pay outs a month equals to 2,400.00 USD a year I lose, just to get my own money [Worker via ACF - July 31st, 2020]

Standard wire transfer fees add up to a considerable amount of lost income per year, so third-party payment processors can seem like a more attractive option with lower fees. However, they're far less secure. When the bank Firstchoice pay utilised (Choice Bank) filed for bankruptcy, online sex workers who held pre-paid debit cards were troubled to learn that most of their money became inaccessible. In fact, people were under the impression that they were using a payment processor based in the United States, not Belize, and therefore trusted their funds would be safe:

> I didn't sign up to have my funds in a fiscal paradise country. I signed up with Payoneer which is in the U.S. and then they transferred me to Firstchoice pay without my consent [Worker via ACF – 3rd July 2018]

Many workers had initially signed up with the payment processor Payoneer. Payoneer then created a subsidiary company, Firstchoice pay, specifically for adult industry work, likely to distance themselves from adult-related transactions given the implementation of SESTA/FOSTA and the additional risk that brings. When this change occurred, workers claim that they were not given a new contract or an updated term of service; they were simply told that from now on the payment service they would be using would be Firstchoice pay [refer Appendix 1 for email correspondence from Payoneer].

New pre-paid debit cards were issued, and things seemingly went on as normal. However, many were not aware that virtual funds were now being held offshore in Belize. When the bankruptcy occurred, funds over the $10,000 load limit that weren't loaded onto the pre-paid card became frozen for three years, with some never receiving payout from Choice Bank's liquidator, Quadrant. Problematically, workers on the thread claimed that no formal announcement of the bankruptcy was made by Firstchoice pay initially, with many comments expressing confusion after hearing speculation from industry insiders about the possible shutdown:

> Why haven't we officially been informed by Firstchoice pay? There was no email sent out, there's no warning or flag on the website, where can we get an actual update from the site itself? [Worker via ACF – April 10th, 2018].

Due to the lack of communication from Firstchoice pay, the online forum became a space where workers would collectively communicate with one another, providing updates about their cases, sharing contact numbers of key persons at Choice bank, offering support to one another, as well as explaining confusing legal information during the liquidation process and repayment of frozen funds. This was a notable example of workers collectively mobilising despite the individualising effects of the platform economy.

When the liquidation process began and funds were being released after three years, bank wire was the only option made available for payment. This was difficult for workers in countries where sex work is illegal, as they worried that a large wire transfer would raise concerns with their bank in their country of origin, and some feared that their bank account would close due to the known discrimination sex workers face with banks:

> I do not even know how to get my money. I cannot accept it in my local bank due to bunch of other problems, a SWIFT with a big amount from offshore can really affect my reputation in future, my bank history won't be perfect, and I might be rejected in credits, loans, and other bank transactions I might need in future [Worker via ACF - May 18th, 2018]

While some workers tried to resist wire payments, it was the only option the company was willing to move forward with. Because of the known risk, others explained that they withdraw the money as soon as possible rather than letting their money sit in their virtual balance:

> I cash out my latest pay outs as soon as I get them to try and avoid this. Sucks that international models are more restricted on pay out options, hate that we have to rely on e-wallets or have twice the pay-out barrier and higher fees [Worker via ACF – February 12th, 2020].

However, being unbanked and using cash has its risks and limitations. Unbanked individuals must keep cash on their person or at home, raising questions about the security of the money. They can also have trouble accessing "mainstream sources of credit [including] short term consumer borrowing or home ownership, because without a bank account, it is more difficult and more costly to establish credit or qualify for a loan" (Barr, 2004). Thus, unbanked individuals aren't able to fully participate within the economy, an everyday right that should be open to all.

When the initial bankruptcy took place, conversations turned to other payment processors available at the time; some people even suggested cryptocurrency payments. However, responses were quick to shoot crypto options down:

> Our industry is already scrutinized, we need as much transparency as possible to remain legal in this political climate. To rally around bitcoin payments would be irresponsible and morally questionable. Payments that are hard to trace should not be used in legal sex work, it opens the doors wider for exploitation. We work in an industry that

> requires responsibility and reverence for the safety of others [Worker via ACF – 14th August, 2018]

This line of thinking shows how the exploitive conditions workers face with payment precarity have become internalised, in this case normalising the notion that workers have a moral responsibility to ensure that others in the industry are safe by desiring more common economic standards of practice. This is despite current payment systems being exploitative contributing to women's oppression within the global economy. Such moral labour mirrors the emotional labour that workers conduct, in that it's labour done for the benefit of others, despite cryptocurrency potentially providing an avenue to avoid third party payment processors. Nevertheless, without access to secure financial resources, a fear within the community is that the safety of workers will be jeopardised in their attempts to be paid by their clients:

> It's becoming so difficult to be a sex worker. I forsee [sic] girls being forced to compromise their safety and address in order to be able to get paid. I really liked Firstchoice pay. I am sad. Canadian pay out options are so limited [Worker – 11th April 2018]

5.0 Conclusion

Online sex work platforms have become a popular and attractive option for people to earn an income, however, the architecture of online sex work platforms is one that demands considerable emotional, moral, and unremunerated labour from those who utilise it for work. This article has examined webcamming as a case in point. Online webcamming platforms are built with algorithms that encourage competition between workers, as the algorithmic system rewards high earners by offering better visual placement on the platform's interface. Consequently, one will receive greater traffic, continuing to earn more money. Algorithmic control in studies that focus on the platform economy have largely explored ridesharing platforms such as Uber (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017) and food delivery platforms such as Deliveroo (Woodcock, 2020). The few studies on algorithmic control in online sex work have explored how algorithms function to shadow-ban sex workers' social media pages (Blunt & Wolf, 2020) and analysed the racialised nature of erotic labour on webcamming platforms (Jones, 2015).

With encouraged competition, workers often rely on the emotional labour that they conduct to help them generate more tips from their viewers. This emotional labour not only involves the surface-level acting they conduct to please their viewers, which can include casual conversation, listening to their problems, and faking pleasure so they're perceived as enjoying themselves, but also the emotional

management, and unpaid labour, of one's own feelings of stress, anxiety, anger, and sadness, particularly during slow days or months when their CamScore and income is jeopardised.

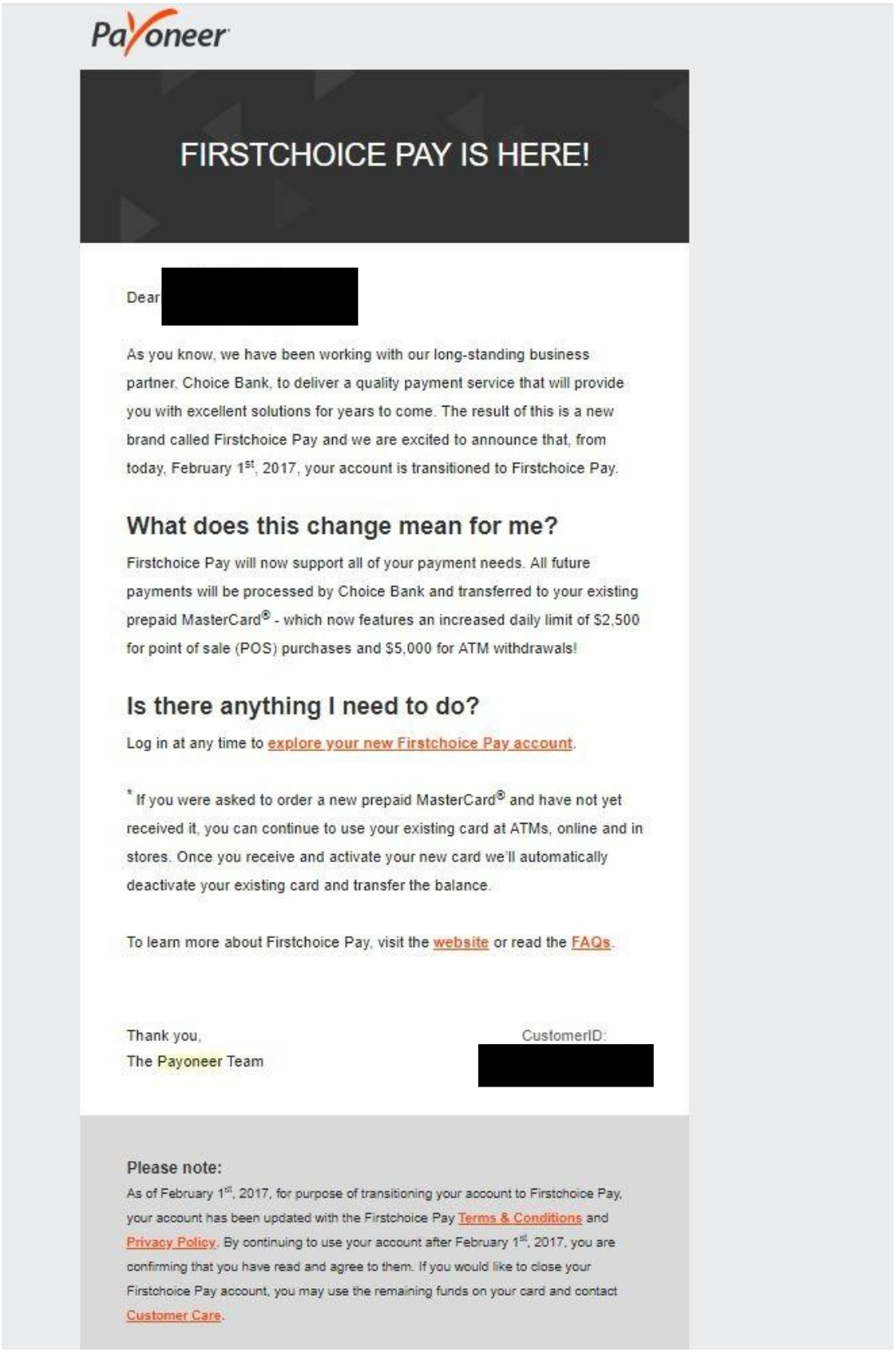
These algorithmic systems place workers in a bind of keeping up with emotional and physical labour when viewers do not reciprocate their labour by tipping. This lack of reciprocity reveals the exploitive patriarchal nature of online sex work, whereby platforms have not only normalised such labour practices for their own profit, but viewers, who are primarily male, can objectify and undervalue the work of online sex workers. This plays on workers' desperation to earn money, especially those with low room counts who have fallen out of favour with the platform's algorithm. And it reinforces the asymmetrical power relations between men and women in online spaces, akin to what we see in offline workplace environments. Despite their best efforts to be economically prosperous, women are marginalised and oppressed within the constraints of platform practices, with low-income workers affected at a disproportionate rate. Additionally, this economic precarity is further exacerbated by the insecure payment methods made available to workers, whether it be the platforms delaying or withholding payments without sufficient reasoning, or the need to use questionable third-party payment processors, which is often the only option available to low earning, unbanked workers who cannot afford the fees associated with international wire transfers. This economic insecurity is structurally violent as it prevents workers from having equitable access to financial resources and can limit their full economic participation in society.

However, the legitimisation of these forms of structural violence is largely a consequence of cultural norms in a given society, such as norms around neoliberalism, individualism, and gender inequality, all of which have functioned to perpetuate harmful platform practices whilst obscuring how these practices are inherently violent. For example, neoliberal ideology in contemporary capitalist society has supported entrepreneurial ethos and endeavours, and the competition that stems from this ethos justifies notions of self-responsibility when it comes to one's own success or failure. 'Personal accountability' messages therefore help platforms escape culpability for the structurally violent systems that are designed in ways that prevent many workers from earning a liveable wage. As the online sex work industry has grown, it's important to understand how the expectation of neoliberal entrepreneurship has burdened workers, who work as independent contractors and have no employment protections in place to support them and avoid exploitative circumstances. These exploitive circumstances impact their livelihood in very real ways, including emotional and financial wellbeing, as mentioned earlier. Yet, instead of addressing existing structural injustices, these systems remain unchanged, and workers still lack power to negotiate better working conditions and payment processing options. In fact, online sex workers have spoken about the difficulty of having their problems heard and recognised by platform owners, often being met with generic, automated response from the platforms' interfaces. This demonstrates the dehumanisation of platform work, as technology changes, the typical

employment relationship between workers and their bosses and the ability to adequately voice concerns is erased.

This research has exposed the gendered power dynamics occurring on online sex work platforms and raises concern over how patriarchal workplace relations are being shaped and reproduced at the expense of online sex workers, while platform owners and viewers reap the rewards of their labour. As these gendered power relations are structurally embedded within each platform's interface and perpetuate the performance of violence against workers, such violence may go unrecognised, particularly to visitors of the platform who might naturally fall into familiar gender roles and assert dominant forms of masculinity against workers. Better labour protections and access to secure financial services are required to address the systemic barriers faced workers in the digital realm. This will allow for a more equitable work experience whereby the level of emotional and unpaid labour conducted by online sex workers could be reduced, hopefully lessening the levels of exploitation seen at this point in time. However, because of the legal grey zone that online sex work platforms operate from, and the decentralised nature of the platform economy, finding a way to employ such protections and changes will be no easy feat.

Appendix one



Payoneer

FIRSTCHOICE PAY IS HERE!

Dear [redacted]

As you know, we have been working with our long-standing business partner, Choice Bank, to deliver a quality payment service that will provide you with excellent solutions for years to come. The result of this is a new brand called Firstchoice Pay and we are excited to announce that, from today, February 1st, 2017, your account is transitioned to Firstchoice Pay.

What does this change mean for me?

Firstchoice Pay will now support all of your payment needs. All future payments will be processed by Choice Bank and transferred to your existing prepaid MasterCard® - which now features an increased daily limit of $2,500 for point of sale (POS) purchases and $5,000 for ATM withdrawals!

Is there anything I need to do?

Log in at any time to explore your new Firstchoice Pay account.

* If you were asked to order a new prepaid MasterCard® and have not yet received it, you can continue to use your existing card at ATMs, online and in stores. Once you receive and activate your new card we'll automatically deactivate your existing card and transfer the balance.

To learn more about Firstchoice Pay, visit the website or read the FAQs.

Thank you,
The Payoneer Team

CustomerID: [redacted]

Please note:

As of February 1st, 2017, for purpose of transitioning your account to Firstchoice Pay, your account has been updated with the Firstchoice Pay Terms & Conditions and Privacy Policy. By continuing to use your account after February 1st, 2017, you are confirming that you have read and agree to them. If you would like to close your Firstchoice Pay account, you may use the remaining funds on your card and contact Customer Care.

Chapter 5: Currying favour with the algorithm: Online sex workers' efforts to satisfy patriarchal expectations

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Student name:	Brittany Palatchie
Name and title of main supervisor:	Dr. Alice Beban
In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Chapter 5

Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:[1]

Brittany: Devising research design, designing and carrying out methodology, reviewing literature, data analysis, theoretical framing, manuscript preparation and submission.
Alice and Tracey: Supervision of research, contribution to research planning and design, detailed feedback on manuscript drafts, advice regarding submission process.

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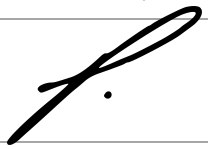
Student's signature:		Main supervisor's signature:	 Digitally signed by Beban, Alice Date: 2024.08.27 08:24:28 +12'00'

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Introduction to manuscript 2

While manuscript one introduced the structural violence that occurs through economic relations and the impact economic forms of structural violence have for workers, manuscript two documented sociopolitical forms of structural violence. Manuscript two utilises the theoretical frameworks of monogamy and misogyny alongside affective labour and parasocial relationships to convey to readers how monogamous understandings of sexuality are being reproduced online and have influenced the expectations being placed on workers by their viewers and partners. The manuscript details how the affective labour that workers must conduct for their viewers to establish parasocial relationships with them is fraught with risks. These risks include misogynistic retribution from viewers by way of cyberharrassment and cyberstalking if workers are not willingly available or single for them. Partners can also expect workers to adapt how they conduct their work, arguing that showing affect crosses boundaries pertinent to monogamy. In both cases, workers' affective labour is not recognised as legitimate labour that is a part of online sex work this affects workers' economic livelihood and interpersonal relationships. These risks reveal how misogyny is a social, structural force used against online sex workers within the platform economy.

This manuscript answered one of the research questions which sought to understand what sex workers' experiences working within a platform-capitalist labour model can tell us about the online sex work industry, including both positive and negative aspects, and how these experiences shape sex workers' everyday lives. This social dimension of analysis illuminated the struggles workers have in both online and offline contexts from a relational lens, with monogamy being an unexpected theme influencing workers' experiences. With that said, manuscript two threads back to manuscript one in several ways. Manuscript one introduces readers to the platform economy showing readers how neoliberal feminism provides a foundation for understanding what workers must do to attain success working digitally, something affirmed in manuscript two.

Manuscript one also shows the economic struggle to earn and receive money due to platform operations, and relays the kinds of emotional labour workers conduct, that is, the labour they conduct to manage *their* emotions to ensure they put their best foot forward to clients. Manuscript two shows the affective labour workers conduct, that is, the labour they're conducting to ensure *viewers* and their *partners* maintain a positive emotional state. Thus, the role of emotional management is present in both manuscripts, albeit rather than interrogating the platforms that cause economic precarity, manuscript two looks at how monogamy being reproduced online can result in economic precarity. Where manuscript one's focus was on platform operations themselves, manuscript twos focus is on the ways platforms shape relationships. Moreover, manuscript two, like manuscript one, also appreciates the

normalising role of neoliberal feminist theory. While neoliberal feminist insights offer a lens to view workers' efforts to remain competitive (in manuscript two this is seen in workers' affective labour), manuscript two also speaks back, and extends on, broader feminist theory on women's unseen labour. It does so by illustrating how online sex workers' affective labour is not being acknowledged as legitimate labour and is being overlooked in lieu of men's pleasure and needs.

Manuscript two also drew on findings from phase one's content analysis. The manuscript was submitted to, and was accepted for publication with, the *Sexuality & Culture* journal whose interest is on "ethical, cultural, psychological, social, and political issues related to sexual relationships and sexual behaviour" (Springer Nature, 2024). The journal has previously published works relating to online sex work, for example, Stutz et al. (2024) looked at how online sex workers experience and manage the stigma they face. Lippmann et al. (2023) examined how users utilise OnlyFans for sexual learning and education and Tynan and Linehan (2024) explored how OnlyFans creators navigate the fan-model relationship and the kinds of boundaries that can be crossed when fantasy and reality become blurred. Tynan and Linehan highlighted how the intimacy given by creators can be misconstrued as genuine intimacy, not something occurring within a commercialised setting. Jones' (2015) work examines the racialised and gendered nature of webcamming, unpacking the ways racism is perpetuated through online webcam platforms.

Manuscript two speaks back to scholarship published within the journal that problematises intimacy through crossed boundaries and workers' attempts to establish boundaries with clients (Tynan & Linehan, 2024) and, although it doesn't provide a racial lens of analysis like Jones' work, it does look at how gender situates workers within the platform economy of online sex work with cis-hetero-patriarchal, misogynistic systems that impact workers. What makes manuscript two unique is that it is the first contribution to the discourses that analyses online sex work through the theoretical framework of parasocial relationships and affective boundary work. It points out that parasocial relationships are not just something that's occurring in celebrity culture but are a required facet of undertaking affective boundary work in online sex work to earn money. While studies on celebrity fandom look at the commercialisation of parasocial relationships, sex work studies are yet to do this same kind of analysis through the interdisciplinary lenses of feminism and labour sociology. Manuscript two offers new ways to consider parasocial relationships in the context of labour, precarity, and risk.

Currying favour with the algorithm: Online sex workers' efforts to satisfy patriarchal expectations

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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

1.0 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' 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 'whorerachy' 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 ‘whoreachy’ 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, 1975; 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 do not 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 (AmberCutie 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.

2.0 Theoretical frame

2.1 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 feminist 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 has pinpointed some of the troubling dynamics of sex work (Barwuloret 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.

2.2 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 (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.

3.0 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 & Kyngas, 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 screencap 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.

4.0 Findings

4.1 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, do not 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 section 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 do not 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 should not 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 woman'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.

4.2 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 do not 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 do not want the types who want me to maintain the illusion of attainability, partly because it makes me uncomfortable and partly because I do not 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 do not 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 cannot believe how few morals they have. My only hope is the world bites them in their ass for acting this way. They do not 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, women 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). Furthermore, 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 do not 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.

4.3 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 cybersex, 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 do not 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 supress 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 clients, 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 do not 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 should not 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 do not 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 do not find it empowering and do not make bank. Jobs do not need to be empowering to still require safe working conditions and rights, etc. I work in an office right now and I do not find it empowering, and I do not 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.

5.0 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.

6.0 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 do not 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.

Statements and Declarations

Funding: *This work was supported by a Massey University Doctoral Scholarship, Brittany Palatchie has received research funding from Massey University.*

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Author contributions: The PhD student (Brittany Palatchie) is the lead author and has done the substantive work of collecting and analysing the data, framing the argument, and drafting the article. Successive drafts of the manuscript were critiqued and revised by both co-supervisors/secondary authors (Alice Beban and Tracey Nicholls) in a shared-labour approach that saw us trading off 'first read' (substantive comments and contribution to writing) and 'second read' (commentary) responsibilities.

Ethics 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 to publish: *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.*

Data Availability Statement: *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.*

Chapter 6: Prefigurative politics in the platform economy: Online sex workers restaging collective mobilisation through informal communities of care

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Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:[1]

Brittany: Devising research design, designing and carrying out methodology, reviewing literature, data analysis, theoretical framing, manuscript preparation and submission.
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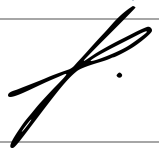
Student's signature:		Main supervisor's signature:	 Digitally signed by Beban, Alice Date: 2024.08.27 08:26:39 +12'00'

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Introduction to Manuscript 3

Like the first two manuscripts, manuscript 3 looks at the kinds of structural violence enacted against workers due to platform operations. However, it offers a political lens, introducing new forms of structural violence and paying particular attention to its impact on workers' political positioning. The structural issues examined highlight the power and control platforms hold over workers and how this power can inhibit workers' bargaining power, including the legal Terms of Service agreements that platforms implement to regulate user activity on the platforms and to impose hegemonic American laws on workers in ways that undermine their working rights under New Zealand law. User chargebacks see platforms siding with users to refund them their money whilst immediately taking money out of workers' accounts. Deplatforming sees workers unjustly banned from the platform, and platform monopolies can limit the available platforms for workers, causing them to be reliant on platforms that may operate unfairly. While existing scholarship looks at these structural concerns (Beebe 2022; Swords et al. 2023; Tiidenberg 2021), this study also examines how these concerns can impact workers' collective mobilisation – something that has not previously been done in existing online sex work scholarship. This manuscript addresses the research question concerning how the globalisation of the commercial sex work industry has shaped the political positioning of online sex workers, particularly New Zealand based sex workers who have had a strong political voice historically.

Drawing on theoretical understandings of the platform economy and social movement studies, a key finding within this manuscript was that workers are restaging their collective mobilisation within private spaces such as Discord and online forums to evade risks of public mobilisation, which includes platform retaliating by deplatforming workers. Within the manuscript, I coin the concept 'imagined resistance' to illustrate this strategic restaging of collective mobilisation, and show how the resistance taking place on Discord and online forums -- where workers have established communities of care -- is prefigurative. Workers' collective action can be thought of as a form of informal everyday resistance. Social movement scholarship on informal resistance considers more covert forms of political action what Scott (1986) terms, 'everyday forms of resistance'. This includes actions taken that can undermine systems of power (e.g., foot-dragging, laziness, gossip, slander, petty theft, disloyalty (Scott, 1986; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). These everyday forms of resistance can be thought of as "invisible organisation" (Alquati, 2013) where workers are informally organising without the support of formal unions. While everyday resistance might not be visible as public revolts and demonstrations are, it is subversive and proved useful for this study to understand online sex workers' restaging of collective mobilisation from public to private spaces and the covert kinds of subversion workers engage in within the communities of care they establish on Discord servers and online forums.

Although some forums are available for the public to read, it's important to note that AmberCutieForum, which this research drew from, also features membership threads that are only accessible to verified members. I did not have access to member only forums. Moreover, when signing up to use the forum, membership is approved by the forums administrator who is a sex worker. This gatekeeping mechanism shows that access is carefully controlled, creating a distinction between public and private content. This membership distinction is noteworthy as it facilitates the establishment of counterpublic spaces, which are discussed in this next manuscript.

The manuscript drew on findings from phase one and phase two of the project. Phase one involved a content analysis of an online forum called AmberCutie Forum (ACF), a public forum utilised by international and New Zealand-based online sex workers. Data collection for phase one commenced following low risk ethics approval from Massey University (application approval number: 4000025322). 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 been deemed high risk (application approval number: 4000026982).

Manuscript three was submitted to the *Journal of Political Power*. The journal welcomes "focused studies and scholarly debates surrounding the origins, development, and application of power in contemporary society" particularly:

> Empirical and theoretical work on the diverse arenas in which power can be understood including: class and class relations, culture and cultural systems, gender, globalization and international relations, institutions and institutional change, ethnicity, nationalism and the nation-state, politics, race and racism, and violence and war (*Journal of Political Power*, 2024).

The *Journal of Political Power* felt appropriate for manuscript three given the theoretical contribution it provides by examining the facets of power that operate within the platform economy of online sex work on a transnational scale, and the impact platform-capitalist power relations have on workers' political positioning. Manuscript three provides an original theoretical contribution to the political engagement online sex workers are involved in and, to date (20/08/2024), appears to be the first journal article contribution to scholarly discourses on sex work utilising the theoretical perspectives of the political economy and workers' organisation to understand how online sex workers are restaging collective mobilisation within private environments due to the risks of public mobilisation.

This work also speaks to scholarship within the *Journal of Political Power* that examines resistance through a gendered lens, although the studies do not have a sex work focus. Medina's (2023)

study explored the kinds of feminist mobilisations occurring in Latin America to call attention to the gender-based violence women face. The study noted how activism occurring through public statements and actions sees that issues typically thought of as private become public, in line with "the feminist belief that the personal is political" (p. 241). Our study also acknowledges the personal being political, showcasing how workers are sharing their experiences within politicised private communication networks and are engaging in everyday forms of resistance. Thus, we demonstrate how workers are restaging where collective mobilisation is taking place (privately instead of publicly). Additionally, Wiksell's (2020) study published within the *Journal of Political Power* explores workers' cooperatives as a form of constructive resistance against capitalist exploitation, examining how workers have established alternative institutions of work in lieu of traditional capitalist systems. Our research speaks back to themes within Wiksel's work by examining how online sex workers are engaging in what we term 'imagined resistance' where workers consider alternative ways to work within or against platform capitalist systems, including their ideas for creating worker cooperatives. Overall, manuscript 3 shows how workers' imagined resistance holds considerable prefigurative potential, a novel contribution to political theory on online sex workers' collective mobilisation.

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

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.

Keywords: Platform economy; prefigurative politics; everyday resistance; collective mobilisation; online sex work.

1.0 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 & Zysman, 2016, p. 61). With the growth of digital technologies, it has become important to understand how the independent contractor model and the platformatisation of work are reshaping the current landscape of worker advocacy.

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 stigma 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 platformatisation 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 engaged in 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 & McCoy, 2022). As platforms do not 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 & Preoteasa, 2022). User-generated rating systems function similarly to control workers, as viewers can weaponise their ratings if workers do not conform to their expectations. Workers who breach Terms of Service agreements, which are also monitored algorithmically, are punished through censorship (Swords et al., 2022), chargebacks - 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 and Zysman (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 & Walsh, 2020). Jeffrey and McDonald (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 platformatisation 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).

2.0 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 & Corbin, 1998) grounded theory approach using the constant comparative method typical of grounded theory methodology (Bryant & 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.

3.0 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 & 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 & Rodriguez-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 & 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 (1985; 2012) 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 & Maccarrone, 2020). Additionally, informal strategies include Instacart drivers campaigning for separate customer tips and base wages (Joyce & 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 & 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 & 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 & Barbagallo, 2021). This is also witnessed in workers making "platform affordances work in their favour" (Rand & 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 & 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 & 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 Rodriguez-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).

4.0 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 do not 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 in this place right now? And I'm like, no, do not! 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 do not 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 (Fancentro, 2025) 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 & 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 do not 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 amongst 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 hierarchal 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 (Stavrakakis, 2016; Zizek, 2004). Everyday forms of resistance, according to Zizek, 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 and Mygind (2018) argue a “limitation of this Zizekian 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 & 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 Zizek 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 cannot 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 amongst 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 & 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 & Gilmour, 2016).

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 of 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 do not [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 do not 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 do not 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.

5.0 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' (Hanish, 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" (p. 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 Zizek'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. Zizek 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, 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 & 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., 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 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, offer advice and support to one another, and consider 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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Chapter 7: Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the different ways sex work platforms operate under platform capitalism and to understand how these operations impact workers individual experiences of work and their potential for collective action. Below the summary of research findings lays out the research questions that guided this project and how these questions were answered within the three manuscripts compiled in this thesis, all of which speak back to the broader aim of this research. I then discuss the original contributions this research has made, including conceptual, theoretical, and empirical contributions. Following that, I discuss future research that I believe would be beneficial as the online sex work industry continues to evolve. Lastly, I discuss the implications this research has for policy.

Summary of research findings

7.1 Research question 1

The first research question asked, '**how is power in the sex work industry negotiated in and through platform capitalism?'**. With this question, I sought to understand the power dynamics operating within platform capitalist systems in the sex work industry and to analyse what these power dynamics reveal about digital and platform governance on a broader scale. I found that power is negotiated through economic, social and political relations in platform capitalism. The next three subsections show how power is being negotiated through economic (section 7.1.1), social (section 7.1.2), and political relations (section 7.1.3). Section 7.1.4 then summarises these findings.

7.1.1 Economic relations of power

This thesis found that the flow of money within the platform economy is an important factor to consider when looking at how platforms retain control and power over workers and their finances. Most notably, the economic power platforms have has allowed them to maximise their revenue, with algorithms, such as CamScore systems, playing a crucial role in driving competition on the site between online sex workers (Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023). These systems operate on the metric of worker performance, in that the more income one earns the greater visibility they will have on the platform (Gaunt, 2021). This incentivises workers to earn more money which platforms get a large percentage of (Motterle, 2023). For example, MyFreeCams takes a 40% cut from workers earnings (Wiki MyFreeCams, 2024) and OnlyFans takes a 20% cut (Safaee, 2021). While revenue records are difficult to come by, OnlyFans reportedly earned 6.6bn in 2023 (Berger, 2024), showcasing the profit they're making from workers. I found that these systems can exacerbate workers' economic precarity as workers must engage in high-demand emotional, affective, and unpaid labour to maintain favour with

the algorithm (see Chapters 4 and 5). For low-income earners, this adds pressure to increase viewership and conform to viewers' demands to receive tips. With CamScore systems favouring high earners, success is concentrated amongst high-income earners with loyal viewers who have the spending power to boost their visibility on the platform (Jones, 2015). Meanwhile, low-income earners can have difficulty gaining exposure and achieving the same level of economic opportunity (Caminhas, 2023). This can intensify economic inequalities among workers and power imbalances within the online sex work industry.

To fully capture how platforms impose control over workers through economic power, the flow of money to finance companies beyond the platform workers are engaging with cannot be overlooked. Workers can receive their income by wire transfers, cheques, or through third party payment platforms (Chatburbate, 2024). Given the high transaction fees incurred if a worker's money is wired to their bank account, and as chequing options are not available to all workers, third-party payment platforms are a commonly used, cheaper alternative (see Chapter 4). Both platforms and interconnected third-party payment platforms process workers' payments, impacting their economic livelihood. I found that platforms can retain and delay workers' income, and in some instances, this occurs due to suspected breaches to a platforms Terms of Service agreement which can result in workers getting banned. If workers are banned, their money can be withheld, sometimes indefinitely, impacting workers' financial flow and putting financial strain on workers (see Chapter 6).

I also found that platforms impose control over workers through client chargebacks. This is where platforms remove and reimburse workers' earnings to clients if clients complain and request a refund, a finding that correlates with the work of Beebe (2022). Chargebacks illustrate that platforms are more interested in retaining clients by prioritising their satisfaction and interests over protecting workers' economic livelihoods. Clients can therefore exploit these systems, knowing they're not going to face recourse (Beebe, 2022), particularly as platforms do not implement proper dispute-resolution processes before undertaking chargebacks. Therefore, workers must cope with the financial risks and losses of working online, something that appears to have become a normalised problem that workers knowingly deal with despite the injustice of it.

Third-party payment platforms used by workers to access their income also hold considerable power over workers' economic livelihoods, including how much money they can access at a given time, and where workers' money will be held. If workers use third-party payment platforms, they are issued a pre-paid debit card that they can use, however there are limitations on where pre-paid debit cards can be used, as not all merchants accept them (Hayashi, 2012). Additionally, load limits determine how much money workers can put onto their card and how much they can withdraw at one time. Cosmo Payment, a popular payment method for online sex workers, has a maximum card limit of $20,000; any

money above this gets held in a secondary account. If a worker requires more than $20,000 in a 30-day period, they must wait until the following month. Likewise, there is an $80,000 annual cap (Cosmo Payment, 2022). While these sums may seem reasonable for everyday life, if workers want to make high value purchases this places considerable restrictions on them. Platforms thus control and manage what workers can and cannot do with their finances, impacting their purchasing power. The precarity of using a prepaid debit card is akin to some of the problems we see with unbanked populations (Barr, 2004).

A significant finding noted within this thesis (see Chapter 4), was that the third-party payment platform Firstchoice Pay, formerly Payoneer, was holding workers' secondary balance (also referred to as virtual balance) (e.g., funds above the load and withdrawal limits that are not accessible to workers) in offshore bank accounts. However, workers were unaware their money was being held offshore. When Payoneer, a United States-owned company, rebranded workers were automatically issued new pre-paid debit cards and informed of the change. Yet, consent was not obtained from workers, and they weren't made aware that the bank Firstchoice was utilising, Choice Bank, was based in Belize. When Choice Bank filed for bankruptcy, workers' income was frozen for 3 years with some never receiving their income from liquidators. Workers' experiences show the imbalance of power between third-party payment platforms and workers who are reliant on them for their income. Workers lack alternative options and must accept inequitable, risky services, preventing them from having equitable access to financial resources and limiting their full economic participation in society (Stardust et al., 2023). Moreover, it shows the lack of regard payment platforms have for their clients (online sex workers), as it is unlikely that these platforms are not aware that some workers are utilising these pre-paid debit cards to store their entire earnings.

These concerns around offshore banking are not specific to the online sex work industry. As other industries turn to online work, these payment forms are going to be increasingly used by other platform workers. This illustrates the financial control and impact platforms, including third-party payment platforms, have in the broader global financial ecosystem of the platform economy, and the need for stronger financial protections and surveillance systems tracing the flow of workers' money. People might assume that because they're using a reputable United States-owned platform to manage their money, their finances are being held in the United States, but this isn't always the case. Greater transparency is required with where third-party payment platforms are holding clients' money, to establish safer banking practices for current and future workers. These insights are of theoretical importance; by looking at economic power as a form of structural violence within the platform economy, it demonstrates how platforms wield their lack of transparency in international monetary transactions as a form of economic power. For researchers, knowing how this works and following the monetary trail to illuminate platforms' financial relationships adds a new dimension to scholarly

understanding of economic power within the online sex work industry, and potentially, other platform-based industries.

7.1.2 Social relations of power

This thesis found that social norms established in society can be reproduced online influencing power dynamics that can shape workers' experiences. I found that the reproduction of sexuality discourses of monogamy, which are typical in many western societies (Rothschild, 2018), affected workers' professional and private relationships. As online sex work involves workers undertaking relational labour, including affective labour (Cardoso et al., 2022), workers' affect can be misconstrued as genuine romantic interest rather than labour being done to make viewers feel comfortable and for viewers to form parasocial connections with workers. These misunderstandings speak back to work by Shultz (2006) who discusses how emotional labour is often devalued, instead of being looked at as labour it is viewed as a form of gender expression and is de-professionalised. Like earlier conversations raised in Chapter 2, this highlights how gender hierarchies are reproduced in the platform economy because of the invisibilisation of such labour. This has implications as viewers can retaliate in deeply misogynistic ways if workers do not meet their expectations of availability, with some workers having experienced cyberharrassment and cyberstalking if workers reject viewers advances - or viewers find out they are in a relationship.

Workers' partners can also place expectations on them, with some partners preferring that workers show no affect to viewers, a difficult expectation to adhere to given that affective labour is necessary for workers to grow an audience and to connect with their viewers. In chapter 5, I coined the term 'affective boundary work' to explain the work online sex workers do to manage the emotions of both their viewers and partners whilst trying to create firm boundaries between their online and offline lives. It showed the difficulty of undertaking online sex work when affective labour is not viewed as legitimate labour and workers' boundaries are not respected by others. In looking at workers' experiences dealing with monogamous expectations, the gendered power dynamics that exist are evident in men's pleasure being prioritised over women's economic interests. Ultimately, these monogamous expectations see workers' occupational role confused with their private life, with people failing to recognise the professional boundaries that workers want to have between online and offline contexts. Moreover, pressuring workers to abide to monogamous expectations presumes that their labour is something that interferes with, or undermines, monogamy -- making it seem that online sex work is a moral failure of the worker. This can constrain workers' agency as they may feel compelled to live up to these social expectations, compromising their ability to establish firm boundaries in their lives which can threaten their economic security.

These findings are of relevance to the disciplines of the sociology of labour and feminist theory. This research builds on feminist debates on whether sex work is legitimate labour (Tyler, 2021) and concerns about patriarchal control of sexuality (Kambarami, 2006). It illustrates the challenges of online sex work where commercialised intimacy is compared to monogamous understandings of intimacy, with consequences for online sex workers' economic security, wellbeing, and autonomy. Within section 7.2, I elaborate on the theoretical connections this research brings to both disciplines, discussing the interplay between the reproduction of social norms of monogamy online and the expectations placed on workers - and how this undermines workers affective labour and exacerbates worker precarity. In section 7.5, I discuss how these findings provide an original contribution to feminist theory and labour sociology.

7.1.3 Political relations of power

Platforms have considerable political power as they fall within a grey zone that sees them operating within an ambiguous digital environment that is difficult to regulate and assess due to operating globally (Törnberg, 2021). Platforms will follow local laws depending on where the platform is headquartered (Pollman, 2019), employing these laws within their Terms of Service agreements that workers must agree to if they want to work on the platform. Terms of Service agreements dictate what workers can and cannot do and can sometimes conflict with the laws in the country where a worker resides. This thesis discusses how hegemonic American laws are imposed on online sex workers who work globally, affecting their rights and experiences working online. These experiences revealed the political power platforms have over workers, which will be discussed within this section, and also how workers attempt to regain some political control through the more subversive forms of political action they take against platforms (discussed respectively in sections 7.2 and 7.3).

In chapter 6, online sex workers discussed the political hegemony of platforms who are in a position where they can enact Terms of Service Agreements that impinge on the legal rights workers have fought for and earned previously. If platforms operate from the United States where prostitution is mostly illegal, workers are unable to initiate offline meetups with clients as it breaches the platform's Terms of Service. If platforms do find out that workers have breached the Terms of Service agreement, they will be banned or permanently deplatformed (Stegeman, 2024; Tiidenberg, 2021). I found that this kind of regulatory overreach affects the labour rights of workers and limits the scope of work that should be legally acceptable for them to do. With some platforms achieving market dominance, workers have no choice but to comply with these rules that dictate how they must utilise the platform. Workers' dependence on platforms for their income has meant that they have become fearful of facing repercussions. Even in cases where viewers have been the one to breach a platform's Terms of Service

and workers have faced repercussions, workers still get anxious to reach out, not wanting to put further attention on themselves because they fear further consequence. Hence, I identified how the political power platforms have can supress workers' voices, limiting the ways workers can challenge platform authority, and oftentimes having to accept these unjust conditions. I explore this political context of power further in research question 2 (section 7.2) and most extensively within research question 3 (section (7.3).

7.1.4 Summary of findings (Research question one)

In sum, power is negotiated through various economic, social, and political relations. Platforms hold economic power over workers, starting with how they structure their platforms to be exploitive of labour. As workers vie for visibility, their labour can go uncompensated, and they're more prone to be taken advantage of by viewers. The economic vulnerability that workers face is further exacerbated by the power given to patriarchal-misogynistic societal norms that prevail online. Workers' affective labour, done to build interpersonal connections with viewers who form parasocial bonds with workers, is overshadowed by the monogamous expectations viewers and their partners want workers to abide by. This has implications for workers' professional and personal lives, creating hardship in trying to appease others whilst establishing boundaries between online and offline contexts. Workers' affective labour and economic interests are overlooked in favour of men's needs -- which are deemed more important, exposing the patriarchal power dynamics that result in inequalities for workers in both their professional and personal lives.

If workers do manage to earn an income, despite these hardships, there are additional worries that emerge. Workers finances are managed by both platforms and interconnected third party platforms which are unreliable and risky. Platforms can withhold and retain workers' income and third-party payment platforms can control workers access to their finances and hold their finances in offshore bank accounts without workers' knowledge. Analysing these practices as a form of structural violence illustrates new aspect of academic understanding regarding economic power within the online sex work industry and other platform-based industries. While these injustices exist, the political landscape of the platform economy supports the authority platforms have over workers. Operating from within a regulatory grey zone, platforms are not homogenously regulated (Caratozzolo, 2019) and have the authority to impose laws of other countries on workers. Workers dependence on platforms makes it difficult to contest platform operations diminishing their autonomy and labour rights within this globalised platform economy.

7.2 Research question 2

The second research question asked: '**what can sex workers' experiences working within a platform capitalist labour model tell us about the online sex work industry including both positive and negative aspects**? **And how do these experiences shape sex workers' everyday lives?'** The objective of this question was to analyse online sex workers' narratives of their experiences working digitally and to understand how working digitally shapes their subjectivities and relationships online and offline. My research suggests that platform work can place workers in precarious positions, prone to exploitation. I identified multiple forms of structural violence that the platforms enact toward workers. However, I also identified positive aspects of working online, including workers finding their job empowering, an opportunity to explore their sexuality, a service to others, a job where it's easy to make money, as well as a job that's highly flexible which allows for greater work-life balance and aligns with one's capabilities.

7.2.1 Negative experiences working online (Operations that impact workers economic precarity and wellbeing)

In relaying the negative aspects of working online, most workers conveyed how the operations employed by platforms result in their precarity. As noted earlier, platforms employ algorithmic operations that generate competition between workers and influence one's visibility on the platform (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). Platforms also endorse third-party payment platforms that constrain workers' full financial participation in society and pose risks to their financial security (Stardust et al., 2023; Swords et al., 2023). While these operations can intensify workers' experiences of economic precarity, they also affect them in other ways, causing workers considerable anxiety and sadness, and can reduce worker motivation and leave them feeling disempowered and exploited (see Chapter 4). The emotional toll felt by workers saw them managing these challenges through the forms of emotional labour they engage in (Dellner, 2022). However, the broader systems that lead to workers' emotional wellbeing being negatively impacted remain in place. These experiences reveal the need to implement more equitable systems that are designed to best support workers and mitigate both the financial precarity and the emotional challenges they experience online.

7.2.2 Negative experiences working online (Sociocultural understandings that are reproduced online and affect workers)

Another aspect that has negatively influenced workers' everyday experiences is the sociocultural understandings of sex work within society that shape people's attitudes toward sex work and sex workers. The stigma associated with sex work largely stems from ethical and moral outlooks

and norms that shape people's perceptions of sex work (Wong et al., 2011). Ethical and moral considerations centre around worker consent and exploitation (Cowen & Colosi, 2021), with concern over the power dynamics operating between clients and workers (Ye et al., 2023). Legal frameworks, such as the criminalisation of sex work in some countries, perpetuates social stigma by rendering sex work criminal and deviant (Krüsi et al., 2016). Moreover, religious beliefs can contribute to workers being stigmatised, with some religions denouncing sex outside of marriage, finding it to be immoral (Huber et al., 2019). Sexuality discourses of monogamy also function similarly (Jansson et al., 2023). Workers highlighted their troubles dealing with stigma, feeling pressure to prove that their professional identity as a sex worker didn't define their personal identity (see Chapter 5). Workers also described how their everyday interactions with others were carefully navigated and approached, whether that was making the decision not to disclose their job, or to disclose their job and overcompensate for that in how they spoke and acted with individuals post-disclosure.

Creating boundaries between their online and offline lives is challenging and was further evidenced in the monogamous expectations placed on workers by their viewers and partners. As stated earlier, viewers and partners can undermine the relational, affective labour involved in sex work, misconstruing workers' affective labour as romantic intent. Workers have discussed the ambiguity of working online when the work involves communicating in ways that can easily be misinterpreted. Nicknames of endearment toward viewers such as "love" can insinuate a deeper connection than implied, and other efforts made to build connections with viewers and feed into 'the girlfriend experience' can also be misinterpreted (Carbonero & Garrido, 2017). However, a key part of the job involves viewers forming parasocial relationships with workers as without a bond toward the worker, they're less likely to tip for their services.

Bernstein's (2007) framework of bounded authenticity is useful to consider here as she explores how broader economic, cultural, and political changes have shaped the commercial sex work industry, explaining the demand for affective labour. Bernstein argues that bounded authenticity, which is "the sale and purchase of authentic emotional and physical connection (p. 103), has occurred with the shift from a relational to a recreational model of sexual intimacy ... [which has been facilitated] by the information economy and commercial sexual consumption" (p. 141).The likes of "tourism and business travel [have fostered] the insertion of men into the commercial sexual marketplace, and, more generally, by the myriad merging's and inversions of public and private life that are characteristic of our era" (p. 141). Moreover, the gentrification of certain cities and political urban initiatives to clean up the streets has also normalised different "forms of commercial sex" (p. 141), such as online sex, and has created spaces which "middle-class men can safely indulge in recreational commercial sexual consumption" (p. 141). Bernstein argues how the shift "from the street to indoor venues such as private homes, rented apartments, and "gentlemen's clubs"'(p. 102) has changed the nature of sexual labour. Now, "what is

bought and sold frequently incorporates a great deal more emotional as well as physical labour within the commercial context ... [with] the transaction more likely to involve emotions and eroticism that had formerly been relegated to the private sphere" (p. 102).

Bounded authenticity involves this "new variety of sexual labour" (p. 103) whereby client's desires for authenticity see workers "trying to simulate - or even produce - genuine desire, pleasure, and erotic interest for clients" (p. 103). This manufacturing of authenticity is typical in the 'girlfriend experience' noted earlier where sex workers emulate girlfriend activities, such as "cuddling and closeness" (p. 126) and is common in other industries where performances are highly gendered. Berg (2021) speaks back to this in her analysis of late-capitalist workplaces, discussing how "the exhortation "Just be yourself!" functions as a managerial tool" (p. 72) as seen in porn and other industries. Consequently, authenticity can become a disciplinary mechanism used against workers as their success is contingent on whether they're perceived as being authentic and enjoying the work that they do. Berg offers the example of porn performers who desire authenticity in the hopes that they will be hired again to film new scenes. However, as Berg rightfully argues, "management's commitments to authenticity are inextricably tied up with the profit motive" (p. 72). Additionally, despite feminist porn "being an ethical alternative to mainstream porn ... they're an international corporation paying next to nothing for people to style, shoot, produce, edit, and perform in their work. It is not so much that authentic scenes are less produced but that the labour of their production is both concealed and concentrated with performers" (p. 76).

Both Bernstein and Berg's work illustrate how affective labour is relational work that is required within late capitalist industries, such as the online sex work industry, commodifying emotion and intimacy and bounding workers to perform 'authentic' displays of affection to meet client expectations. Nevertheless, while manufacturing authenticity through the affective labour workers conduct has become normalised, I show workers struggles to delineate boundaries between their online and offline lives and manage their relationships with their viewers and partners in ways that serve them best (e.g., relationships that are transactional versus those that are emotional). In fact, viewers can retaliate through the cyberharrassment and cyberstalking of workers if their affect is misperceived as authentic romantic interest showcasing the dangers of workers' experiences and the continued disrespect of workers' professional-private boundaries.

At the time of writing, no research has used 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 offers a unique understanding of online sex work platforms as spaces where parasocial relationships occur and are necessary for workers' success. The demand for affective labour is high, albeit shows the challenge of maintaining *effective* affective boundaries when

monogamous expectations are present. The demand for affective labour and the challenges workers face resonates with Weeks (2007) sentiments around feminist struggles whereby she argues how "the gender hierarchies and divisions of labour within both work and life must be made visible and subject to contestation" (p.247). Weeks' analysis of caring practices, including affective labour, examines the difficulties of drawing "the boundary between what is work and what is life" (p. 247) – feminist struggles spotlighted in this research. As studies that explore parasocial relationships have largely emerged from media, communication, and psychology studies, this interdisciplinary sociological and feminist work 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 – whilst also speaking back to feminist theory through its gendered analysis and pinpointing of patriarchal systems that impact workers' experiences of misogyny.

If workers boundaries were able to be effectively established and respected, it is likely that they would have greater job satisfaction and feel a greater sense of control over their professional and private lives and the relationships within each sphere. For now, there is a need in society to recognise online sex work and monogamy as separate constructs, one being economic and the other being social. While some workers have been able to manage viewer confusion or retaliation, this is not the case for all workers as the social stigma and monogamous discourses continue to influence how sex work is perceived and how sex workers are treated. These insights build on longstanding feminist conversation regarding whether sex work is legitimate labour and issues with the patriarchal-misogynistic control of sexuality (Tyler, 2021).

There are opposing views between radical and liberal feminists around sex work that speak to whether sex work is considered legitimate labour. Radical second-wave feminists see sex work as exploitive, a form of control, and advocate for its abolition (Tyler, 2021). Whereas liberal feminists consider sex work a personal choice, legitimate labour, and continue to fight for the rights of workers while acknowledging possible sources of exploitation (Tyler, 2021; MacDonald et al., 2021). This research aligns with liberal feminist sentiments on sex work and contributes to these debates by looking at them in context to online sex work and the dynamics of the platform economy. While I agree that sex work is a personal choice, like liberal feminists, I understand that exploitation occurs in sex work – having recognised the economic, social, and political forms of structural violence enacted against workers that is exploitive of workers and exacerbates their struggles with economic precarity and their overall wellbeing. Looking at these dimensions of structural violence reveals the continuing fight to recognise sex work as legitimate labour, particularly as online sex work has grown, and more people continue to enter the industry and be affected by patriarchal-misogynistic systems. Online sex workers rights must be fought for; this research helps determine some of the challenges that must be addressed

if workers are to have more equitable experiences working online with their labour being acknowledged as one worthy of protection.

7.2.3 Negative and positive aspects of working online (Political factors that constrain workers and how they have reclaimed a sense of power despite political constraints)

Lastly, workers' political positioning within the platform economy can affect them both negatively and positively, with workers noting that despite feeling constrained in their ability to challenge platforms, they have created communities of care in private online networks where they have built solidarity and a strong support system to deal with their everyday experiences. As noted earlier, the global operation of the platform economy sometimes sees laws different from those in a worker's country of residence being imposed on them, constraining their autonomy and ability to carry out their work in ways that would best serve them. With workers being surveilled against the platform's Terms of Service, they must work within the scope of the boundaries laid out within these agreements and ensure they comply with them, which can prevent workers from undertaking work outside of the formal scope of the platform (Swords et al., 2023). The threat of platforms retaliating against workers for not only breaching Terms of Service agreements, but for speaking out against the platform, has influenced how workers deal with the struggles they face online and how they collectively mobilise.

Workers have found safer ways to communicate their experiences and troubles within the private communities of care they have established on social networks such as Discord or online forums (Ticona & Tsapatsaris, 2023). There workers can meet and interact with others that they may not have otherwise met due to working in isolation from home. These communities are important as workers feel that their voices are heard and can relay their grievances regarding the platforms they work on. Workers also offer support and give advice to one another, warn of exploitive clients, share resources regarding platforms and the rules each platform implements, and provide tips or coping strategies that can help workers manage their work (see Chapter 6). My thesis found how important these communities have become in helping workers cope with, and navigate, the online sex work industry. These communities undoubtedly provide workers with new ways of thinking about their work and new ways to approach it and protect workers in ways that platforms do not offer. Despite the political power platforms hold, a positive consequence that has stemmed from this is that it has resulted in the formation of these private communities, strengthening social ties within the industry. Thus, even though unequal political power dynamics exist between platforms and workers, workers have reclaimed a sense of power, organising outside of traditional platform structures. Section 7.4 discusses how the political action occurring within these communities can be thought of as subversive and prefigurative politics being undertaken by online sex workers.

7.2.4 Positive aspects of working online

Despite the findings within this thesis focusing on the operations of platforms and the dynamics that shape workers' experiences negatively, workers noted positive aspects of working online. My forum analysis and interview data found that some workers were empowered by their work and found that it provided an opportunity for them to explore their sexuality. Workers also enjoyed feeling in control and having the autonomy and choice to choose sex work, with some viewing sex work as a service to society – comparable to any other services provided to clientele (see Chapter 5). Unseen insights from interviewees that I was not able to include within the manuscripts discussed how online sex work is 'easy' money –this wasn't the case for all workers, but one interviewee, Vivian, had success working online. Others mentioned how working online has allowed them to work around their parental responsibilities, finding that they had more time for their caregiving duties and a better work life balance than when they worked a regular 9-5 job. Additionally, one interviewee, Amy, discussed how she enjoys the freedom and nature of the job and the fact that it doesn't feel like a typical job:

> I do not ever want to feel like I am working a job, and that the job owns me. I do not want to feel like a slave to it. I'm doing this job because I am given freedom and so I'll do whatever I feel like doing. Sometimes I'll make a whole heap [of content] in one day and then I will try to space it out and upload throughout the month. I do what I can, and the clients can feel lucky when I've uploaded [Interviewee – 4th June 2023].

Amy's discussions showed how the flexibility of online sex work works well for her, as she finds it difficult to stay organised. While online sex work requires some degree of consistency, the nature of the job is largely flexible; workers do not have set hours and, as Amy noted above, workers can bulk batch content on the days they feel capable of working:

> Online sex work requires consistency to keep subscribers and so I struggle with that, and I feel lucky that some subscribers keep subscribing *laughs*. If that stuff is easy, I probably wouldn't even be doing sex work, I would probably have some fancy career, and I wouldn't have any issue going to work every day and being organised *laughs* [Interviewee – 4th June 2023].

7.2.5 Summary of findings (Research question 2)

In sum, workers' experiences within the platform economy are contingent on the economic, social, and political dynamics that shape the conditions of online sex work and how online sex work is

understood. Workers' experiences are influenced by the structural organisation of the platforms that they work on, with platforms implementing structurally violent systems that can disadvantage workers in various ways. This is exacerbated by the social stigma in society toward sex workers which impacts workers' interpersonal relationships. Similarly, sexuality discourses undermine the labour of online sex workers given the monogamous understandings of sex and the affective labour workers undertake. The political landscape of the platform economy also shapes workers' experiences online and offline influencing the kinds of work they can participate in and how they voice their concerns with the industry. While this thesis documents many of the challenges workers' experience and how that impacts their lives and relationships, there are positives that workers relayed including feeling empowered, able to explore their sexuality, enjoying the flexibility of their work, and finding that their work suited their capabilities. An instrumental factor in worker empowerment appears to be the role of the communities of care workers have established and the solidarity and support systems within these communities. Workers showed how, despite their political positioning within the platform economy being one that is largely supressed, there's still possibility to build social ties with others within the industry and to work in ways that they find manageable despite the hardships they face.

7.3 Research question 3

The third research question queried '**how has the platformatisation of the commercial sex work industry shaped the political positioning of online sex workers, particularly New Zealand based sex workers who have had a strong political voice historically?**'. The objective of this question was to consider how online sex workers are positioned politically and how they might be collectively mobilising now that they're working within a global, digital system of work. This thesis found that the globalisation of online sex work has weakened workers' political rights and their voice with the imposition of foreign law being imposed on workers globally and workers' fear of platform retaliation if they were to challenge platforms. However, this thesis also found that workers are undertaking prefigurative political action within the communities of care they have established on private networks where workers engage in subversive practices through counterpublic work and imagined resistance.

7.3.1 Avenues of platform political control

I found that the globalisation of online sex work has seen platforms rise to power, exerting control over online working conditions which includes forms of political power that have impacted and shaped workers' political positioning and collective mobilisation efforts. This finding extends research by Vallas (2019) that acknowledges the constraints platforms impose on platform workers and the

consequence this can have for workers' collective mobilisation. However, this research offers context from the online sex work industry. To reiterate, platforms customise their Terms of Service agreements to reflect local laws, creating standards that conflict with the laws in force where other workers are located (Musto et al., 2021). Sometimes these terms undermine important rights sex workers have fought for and were granted in the past, such as the legalisation of sex work in New Zealand. The punishment that platforms enact through deplatforming workers if they breach platform Terms of Service agreements, along with the monopolisation of some platforms, has supressed workers' voices and dissent as they do not want to face any repercussions for challenging platform authority (Vasudevan & Chan, 2022). This is particularly the case when workers lack alternative options for work if platforms did penalise them (see Chapter 6).

7.3.2 Factors preventing workers from publicly mobilising

Chapter 6 discussed workers' views on publicly mobilising through social media, noting their concerns over being identified in organising against platforms who have the power to deplatform workers. Yet, previous political efforts made by New Zealand sex workers were public and were pivotal in granting important rights and protections to workers. Given that sex work also occurs online, and many workers are dependent on these platforms for their livelihood, there is a need for workers' rights and protections to be reevaluated within the platform economy. Fear instilled in workers supresses their right to dispute unjust treatment and to find resolution for the issues they are encountering. Workers are tolerating injustices and are deterred from politically participating in public forms of collective action. This limits the scope of their political activities, perpetuates unequal power dynamics between workers and platforms, and weakens workers' democratic rights.

Yet, it is not just concerns around platform retaliation that can prevent workers from mobilising. This thesis found that a broader neoliberal ethos of entrepreneurship can also shape workers' political subjectivities and their approach to problems they encounter (Sun & Chen, 2021). Since workers are independent contractors, they often internalise notions of self-responsibility (Watts, 2022), preventing them from engaging in collective mobilisation and advocating for their needs, as they're not employees, meaning they find it their responsibility to deal with the problems they face. A part of the entrepreneurial self is showing one's competence, adaptability, and resilience (Joseph, 2013) and persevering through difficulties. Thus, these characteristics become normalised, shaping workers' political positioning within the platform economy.

Another factor regarding workers' subjectivities is how workers understand and label themselves and their work. The online sex work industry has blurred into the lines of content creation, with those who use OnlyFans for work being known as "content creators" (Felkins, 2021) – despite

uploading explicit, pornographic content. This has skewed some workers' interpretation of themselves, not seeing themselves as online sex workers. In chapter 6, discussions illustrated how younger generation workers are less likely to know of advocacy organisations, such as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective because they consider themselves content creators. This prevents workers from joining union-like sex work organisations that could perhaps support them. Workers may want to call themselves content creators instead of sex workers to avoid some of the societal stigma that surrounds sex workers – allowing workers to instead redefine how they view themselves and their work.

7.3.3 Restaging of collective mobilisation to private networks

Although many workers fear public mobilisation, and workers' subjectivities can prevent workers from collectively mobilising, this thesis found that workers are restaging their collective mobilisation within private online spaces and the communities of care they have established. Within these private communities of care, workers engage in counterpublic work through networked gossip (Ticona & Tsapatsaris, 2023), they support and offer advice to one another (Gerber, 2021), and they engage in imagined resistance. This thesis added to the existing literature by coining the term "imagined resistance" to conceptualise how workers are restaging their collective mobilisation in informal, private spaces where they imagine the ways they can take collective action against the platform and consider future alternatives for the online sex work industry. I examined workers' imaginings regarding the formation of a union for online sex workers and the development of cooperative business models within the online sex work industry, both of which would better support workers' rights.

Workers private mobilisation challenges political norms where collective mobilisation centres around formal and public forms of action (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013), instead prefiguring alternative models of collective organising outside of dominant structures. As the online sex work industry has grown with offline workers also shifting online and newcomers entering the industry (Platt et. al., 2020; Robinson, 2020) and given the lack of literature regarding how online sex workers are collectively mobilising, these insights shed light on the political dynamics of online sex work. This thesis offers theoretical insight into how the digital landscape of online sex work, which is structurally violent toward workers, has shaped the ways workers collectively mobilise. Understanding these changes shows the evolution of sex workers collective mobilisation efforts alongside the evolving online landscape. Importantly, it reveals how workers show resilience, empower one another and build solidarity, and endorse systemic change.

7.3.4 Summary of findings (Research question 3)

In sum, the globalisation of the commercial sex work industry has shaped the political landscape of the online sex work industry and has influenced workers' political positioning. While New Zealand sex workers have had a strong voice historically, this can look different now that they're working online. Because of the risks of public mobilisation and the retaliation platforms can enact against workers, it is safer for workers to voice their concerns in private domains. We are seeing how workers are restaging their collective mobilisation within online networks such as Discord and online forums where workers have established communities of care. While these avenues may seem counterproductive, in that their mobilisation is not overt and public, workers' actions on these networks are subversive as workers engage in counterpublic work, imagine resistance, and prefigure new understandings for what collective mobilisation can look like for platform workers and what the platform economy of online sex work could look like in future.

7.4 Original contribution

This research offered an original contribution to scholarship on online sex work. The first contribution is the creation of the concept 'affective boundary work' (see Chapter 5). This concept provides a framework to understand the complexities of online sex work, as workers must perform affective labour in order to be successful, yet there is a simultaneous need for workers to establish boundaries between their working (online) and private (offline) lives. This is the first study of online sex work that has analysed workers' experiences through the theoretical lenses of affective labour, monogamy, and parasocial relationships. This thesis illustrated how monogamy expectations are being reproduced online in the parasocial relationships that are formed by viewers who can misconstrue workers' affective labour as genuine romantic interest. Workers' partners also impose monogamous expectations on workers, including setting boundaries that workers cannot uphold, such as showing no affect to viewers. However, affective labour is a crucial part of online sex work (Hamilton et al., 2022; Swords et al., 2023), as it helps viewers establish parasocial relationships with workers which is beneficial for increasing audience engagement and loyalty which can boost revenue (Cardoso et al., 2022). But parasocial relationships can be risky, with this thesis having shown the misogynistic retribution, such as cyberharrassment and cyberstalking, enacted by viewers toward workers and by workers' partners trying to impose rules on workers (such as not showing emotional affection to viewers).

Evidentially, workers are placed in a difficult position when their affective labour is misperceived: sex work is legitimate labour in an industry that favours men's pleasure. Chapter 5 showed how there are new spaces where parasocial relationships can be observed, and while once a term associated with celebrity-fan culture, parasocial relationships can be analysed in different digital contexts and within the context of affective labour. Establishing the concept of affective boundary work

helps denote workers' efforts to manage the affect of others while attempting to establish boundaries between workers' online (parasocial) and offline (romantic) relationships and online and offline lives.

When looking at affective boundary work in relation to feminist theory, there are questions that arise which could guide future research. As feminist theory explores the power dynamics that operate in workplaces (Mumby, 1998) and the forms of exploitation workers, particularly women, face (Fotaki & Pullen, 2024), affective boundary work could be explored through a gendered lens. For example, in which workplace settings is affective boundary work being conducted and does it disproportionately impact women or other marginalised identities? Moreover, does undertaking affective boundary work reinforce patriarchal power dynamics within said setting? And is the affective boundary work being recognised within the workplace? What hardships may factor into workers' difficulties establishing boundaries and what factors contribute to the successful development of boundaries? As feminist research has noted, women disproportionately bear the responsibility of undertaking care work (Bahn et al., 2020). Affective boundary work could be considered a form of care work, given the management of others' affect and the unpaid labour this often involves (Antonopoulos & Hirway, 2010). Studies on care work, whether that's in healthcare, education, or another industry where care forms a key part of one's labour, might find affective boundary work useful to understand workers' management of affect in their relationships and the kinds of boundaries they're interested in establishing (e.g., between working and personal environments or completely different boundaries).

In the online sex work industry, affective boundary work could also be a useful concept to explore the impression management work that workers engage in. Speaking back to labour sociology theory, studies have explored the emotional labour done by workers who manage their own feelings for their job and have analysed the power dynamics within workplaces (Dill et al., 2016; Toerien & Kitzinger, 2007). Additionally, labour sociology studies have examined the precarious labour conditions that affect workers in the platform economy (Zanoni, 2019). As this study looked at affective boundary work instead of emotional labour it provided details on the labour workers do to manage the emotions of others rather than themselves. However, this management of emotions can extend beyond economic relations as noted earlier in the thesis when looking at social dimensions where affect is managed in relationships.

In chapter 5, this thesis discussed how workers try to manage stigma in their lives and the pressure they feel to prove they are not an immoral person. This is also a form of affective boundary work whereby workers are seeking to leave a certain impression with people (e.g., shape others affective response to them) and create boundaries between themselves and the stigma that surrounds their workplace identity. Therefore, affective boundary work does not have to restrict the boundaries workers are establishing to online and offline scenarios or working and private lives, it can also be thought of in

broader terms in any instance where workers attempt to achieve boundaries between themselves and something specific, such as stigma.

Further still, this thesis showed how workers practice affective boundary work through their labour of marketing and self-promotion. To gain an audience, workers will often promote themselves on social media (Sanders et al., 2018; Stutz et al., 2024) operating in ways where a certain emotional response is sought from potential clientele to benefit them financially. However, while workers are curating a marketable version of themselves, they're still often maintaining boundaries between their online persona and who they are in real life. Additionally, workers' affective boundary work and audience awareness can be considered in workers choice of where *not* to market themselves. As briefly mentioned in chapter 3, two interviewees discussed how they wouldn't market themselves on Tik Tok due to the minors utilising the platform. This shows workers' forethought in the affective consequences their marketing could have on minors. Hence, affective boundary work could be examined alongside broader social and ethical concerns by looking at workers 'own beliefs about their work and the boundaries they seek to establish between what's considered appropriate and inappropriate forms of marketing.

The second conceptual and theoretical contribution is the creation of the concept 'imagined resistance' to understand workers' strategic restaging of collective mobilisation to informal private spaces (see chapter 6). Chapter 6 showed how the structural violence enacted against workers and the threat of platform retaliation has prevented workers from wanting to engage in public forms of collective mobilisation. These power dynamics between platforms and workers undoubtedly shape workers' political positioning (Vandaele, 2021). However, workers have shown that political action doesn't have to be overt and publicly visible; important political action occurs covertly in private networks (Aloisi, 2019). Mobilising and undertaking collective action privately differ from the forms of collective action sex workers have engaged in in the past where their collective action has been public with traditional methods of action such as protests and a focus on law reform. Nevertheless, feminist theorists often claim that private experiences can be inherently political (Bargetz, 2009). This thesis has found that using private networks to relay personal experiences can be a form of prefigurative political action.

With workers having established communities of care in private Discord servers and online forums, these communities have fostered solidarity, in the same way other kinds of platform workers have utilised Whatsapp and Facebook networks to build solidarity (Morales-Muñoz & Roca, 2022; Soriano & Cabañes, 2020). Workers have utilised these private networks to discuss issues, give advice, and offer support to one another (Yao et al., 2021). In this thesis I showed how online sex workers use these networks to engage in imagined resistance, that is imagining future forms of action that could be taken against platforms and discussing alternative visions for the industry (see Chapter 6). The idea for

imagined resistance developed from looking at workers' collective mobilisation online and trying to gauge the different ways these communities are subversive and challenge platform authority. With workers discussing various ways they could act against the platform and the changes they would like to see (including union organisations for workers and co-operative platforms), their discussions showed future forethought and, despite not being actioned, these imagined ideas could one day transpire. Hence, 'imagined' resistance formed as a concept to describe the prefigurative work taking place within the private networks workers mobilise in and how workers demonstrate subversiveness within these communities.

When considering imagined resistance and its place within existing scholarship, this work contributes most centrally to social movement theory. While there are studies looking at platform workers' collective mobilisation and their use of platforms such as Facebook to organise public forms of collective action (Hau & Savage, 2023), this study differs in that workers are engaging in imagined resistance that is yet to happen. Imagined resistance can be thought of as a form of everyday resistance, which Scott (1985) conceptualises as the everyday, subtle acts that people do to challenge dominant power structures. This thesis has indicated how the private communities of care where workers mobilise involves everyday resistance, in the imagined resistance work that workers do when discussing alternative visions for the online sex work industry. These networks are also used to warn others of platforms that are more prone to deplatforming workers, and to criticise platforms and their operations – undermining those in power, raising awareness of issues and certain working conditions that can impact workers, and informing workers of forms of exploitation such as risky customers. These actions are everyday forms of resistance whereby workers build solidarity, collectively come together to challenge platforms, and assert their agency despite platform constraints.

While there is prefigurative promise in workers' everyday resistance, the platform economy has undoubtedly affected workers' ability to take collective action in traditional ways, because they fear retaliation (Aloisi, 2019). This limits the ability for pressure to be placed on platforms which could encourage more timely results that would benefit workers. Workers still bear the burden of dealing with inequitable systems that expose them to forms of exploitation. While greater accountability needs to be taken by platforms to protect workers and to address the inequalities that exist online, this research has shown the importance these private networks have in helping workers manage their work and assert agency within the constraints of the platform economy.

Other researchers may use the lens of imagined resistance to explain the pre-planning work of social movements and how ideas go from something that's imagined to something that's actioned. Imagined resistance will be particularly valuable for social movement scholars studying movements and their long-term vision for change, and could be insightful when looking at how movements'

imagined visions adapt across time. This is especially the case as circumstances change or groups build coalitions with other allies who may also come on board to support the movement and imagine their own ideas for collective action. Moreover, future research could inform understanding of the ways imagined resistance builds momentum within a movement, as ideas imagined generate hope in a movement and could help to clarify a movement's goals. In this thesis workers discussed the logistics of a worker-run union and the logistics of a cooperative model of platform work. Thus, imagined resistance initiated logistical discussions and could be analysed alongside those kinds of discussions occurring within other movements in future. Future online sex work research could use this analytical lens to document the imagined work being actioned and to explain the transition from imagined to enacted. This could include public and platform reactions, what was required - including the tools used – to execute what was planned (e.g., how was a cooperative platform achieved), whether planned goals were achieved, and the challenges, including what wasn't able to be achieved.

The third contribution involves empirical findings that shed light on issues that have not been fully explored in other literature on online sex work. One of the key insights that is useful for broader literature on the platform economy is my interrogation of workers' financial precarity. Studies examining the precarity of third-party payment processors in the online sex work industry are scarce, although several studies note how payment platforms can be discriminatory toward sex workers (Swords, 2023; Tusikov, 2021) with platforms such as PayPal refusing accounts to sex workers (Hamilton et al., 2022). Beebe (2022) discusses how:

> "The United States' dominance in the global financial market means it exercises a disproportionate influence over what may be bought or sold when a bank, credit card, or online payment app is involved ... this means that to use standard electronic payment processes, customers are obliged to obey sex work law from the United States, even if the commercial sex industry is permitted in their country" (p. 142-143).

Beebe's work illustrates how workers often face discrimination because of the criminalisation of sex work, experiencing customer chargebacks, exclusion from certain payment processing platforms, and frozen or terminated accounts. Likewise, Stardust et al. (2023) also argue how the criminalisation of sex work (e.g., anti sex work laws) has led to a state of regulatory overreach imposed by platforms who must not be complicit with illegal activities, and therefore are more discriminatory toward sex workers. Additionally, Stardust et al. (2023) state how identify verification methods mean "connecting [workers] legal and sex working identities in a way that would be permanent, traceable and place them at risk" (p. 62). For example, workers are at risk of facing financial vulnerability and violence if they are unable to access secure financial resources.

This thesis builds on the work of Stardust and Beebe by examining workers' economic precarity and identifying three critical issues in this area that needs more attention: the handling of workers' finances by the banks used by third-party payment platforms, the lack of consent obtained from online sex workers regarding where their finances are held, and the risks associated with the bankruptcy of these banks. Chapter 5 illustrated a bankruptcy scenario where Choice Bank, a bank utilised by third party payment platform Firstchoice pay, was located offshore in Belize. Choice Bank filed for bankruptcy causing considerable financial instability for workers whose finances were frozen for a minimum of 3 years, with some never receiving reimbursement from liquidators. However, prior to using the third-party payment platform Firstchoice pay, workers were using Payoneer, a United States owned company – with workers believing their money was being held in the United States. Payoneer rebranded to Firstchoice pay and during this rebrand process did not obtain consent from workers that they would be utilising their new system. Instead, workers were given letters informing them of the change and were not made aware that their money was going to be held by a bank based in Belize. This shows the lack of transparency third party payment platforms have toward their customers regarding their offshore banking practices. It also reveals the control payment platforms have over workers' finances and their financial livelihoods and new ways for understanding how platforms are obtaining economic power over workers on an international scale through international money management.

As the online sex work industry grows (Stutz et al., 2024; Tibbals & Worthen, 2021), and more people turn to the platform economy for work (Xue et al., 2020), understanding the flow of workers' finances is critical to identify risks and to educate on practices that could be implemented to address some of the inequalities workers' experience. This is especially the case as workers are already restricted in accessing their money - from delayed and withheld payments and chargebacks from platforms (see chapter 5) to third party payment platforms placing thresholds on how much money workers can access at a given time as well as placing annual withdrawal limits on workers (Chaturbate, 2022). This situation reveals systemic inequalities that are being reinforced through the economic practices used by payment platforms and exposes the economic insecurity faced by workers. These practices are critical to understand given the implications this has for workers and future workers entering the platform economy. This thesis recognises that the interrogation of the platform economy needs to extend beyond that platforms themselves, incorporating analysis of not only third-party payment platforms, but the financial institutions they also use which can be located offshore.

7.5 Further research considerations:

While this wasn't within the scope of my thesis, if I had more time on this project, I would have liked to examine the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Technology and its impact on the world of online

sex work. Nowadays, there are "creators" who are entirely AI on platforms that are rivalling OnlyFans such as Fanvue, which is a phenomenon that didn't exist when I commenced this project. These AI creators have tapped into a lucrative business for themselves, in some cases reportedly earning upward of $20,000 per month (Llach, 2024). Within my research, the theme of authenticity was raised numerous times within the forum and interview data, with workers discussing the importance of being genuine online and their success being attributed to their authenticity. Yet, while AI content is based on viewers' fantasies, which is also what human creators play into, they are inauthentic (unreal). For me, I am curious about this tension between authenticity-inauthenticity, how AI technologies might impact human creators, how AI creators' work differs from human creators and the different kinds of difficulties they might experience, as well as understanding how viewers think of their sexual interaction with an AI creator versus a human creator. There is an absence of literature discussing the role of AI technologies in the platform economy of online sex work, thus further research is required as AI technology continues to grow and become a viable income option for workers.

Further research could explore whether workers' reshaping of subjectivities from sex worker to content creator represents a conscious effort made by workers to reframe societal understandings of sex work and sex workers. For instance, given the scope of content creation, recognising and labelling oneself as a content creator may not only reflect workers' own negotiation and perception of self, but it could reflect a wider effort to align with other forms of content creators to legitimise their work. As there are struggles for online sex work to be recognised as legitimate labour, and given the existing stigmatised understandings of sex work, content creation terminology could be a step toward greater societal acceptance and recognition of sex work as labour that involves the same form of skillset typical to other forms of content creation.

This research focused on cisgender workers who are in heterosexual relationships. Further research would be useful to explore gender-diverse individuals' experiences working online. For example, while gender-diverse individuals, such as those who are non-binary, may be accepting of monogamy and be in monogamous relationships like many cisgender workers, some may prefer, or be in, polyamorous or ethical non-monogamous relationships and hold different values toward sexual encounters. If these workers are in polyamorous relationships, they may not experience the same level of difficulty within their offline relationships. The reason I believe polyamory might circumvent some of the challenges which online sex workers experience is due to the nature of polyamory. Research (Balzarini et al., 2017) has explored polyamorous relationships and has highlighted the importance of communication in these relationships, noting that those practicing polyamory often make agreements and rules communicating their boundaries regarding appropriate behaviour with others, the level of information they want to have regarding other partners, and appropriate/inappropriate behaviours with others. Essentially, because those in polyamorous relationships are more likely to have firm boundaries in place they may be less

likely to experience some of the emotional troubles this research uncovered, particularly in terms of boundary setting. Still, Klesse's (2018) research on polyamorous relationships shows how this may not be the case as jealously and cheating have been reported in polyamorous relationships, with cheating been seen as lying or breaking agreed upon rules, as opposed to having relationships with others. Nevertheless, jealously is experienced in polyamorous relationships, but as Klesse (2018) states:

> In contradistinction to mainstream culture, jealousy is neither demonised nor tabooed within polyamory. Rather, polyamory elaborates a complex ethics and etiquette that is designed to control, modify and channel jealousy in order to stop this complex feeling from interfering with and damaging intimate relationships which are built upon the assumption that in principle it should be okay for partners to get erotically involved with others (p. 3-4).

However, their experiences with viewers may present different, unique challenges. Viewers might not understand gender-diverse identities which could lead to misunderstandings or hostility (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2023). Workers might have trouble with people invalidating their gender identity such as by misgendering them (Johnson et al., 2023), or by imposing binary standards or traditional gender norms on them (Costello, 2020). Consequently, workers may feel pressured to act in ways that do not resonate with them, presenting themselves in ways that are more traditionally acceptable in order to make others feel more comfortable. Research might look at online sex workers' gender presentation or passing and its relation to how they do or do not want to be perceived online. On another note, some platforms, such as MyFreeCams, only allow cisgender women to work on their platform. Understanding workers' experiences with platform exclusion could provide further insight into how platform infrastructure could be made more equitable for marginalised online sex workers.

7.6 Implications for policy:

As the platform economy of online sex work operates transnationally, this can impact the political dynamics of online sex work and have implications for policy enactment. However, there are still possibilities to bring awareness to the issues workers' experience working online and for advocacy efforts to be built across borders.

1. This thesis found that the classification of workers' as independent contractors affects workers' rights and protections. Consideration might be given to the reclassification of workers by platforms as employees or dependent contractors to address the inequitable experiences workers have within the platform economy. This reclassification would provide workers with the same protections as employees including benefits such as a minimum wage or overtime pay,

helping address issues around the unpaid labour workers often engage in online and minimise some of the economic precarity workers experience. As employees, there would also be greater legal rights when it comes to possible disputes. Workers have discussed their experiences with being deplatformed and with having their income retained by the platform, as employees there would be greater economic security as without a proper disputes resolution process platforms would be violating employment agreements and labour laws. Moreover, if workers are unhappy about their working conditions, they could have greater collective bargaining power and be able to negotiate with platforms without the fear of retaliation. Employee status would strengthen workers' rights and protections and amplify the voices of workers, which could promote fairer working conditions.

Scholars have debated 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). An example of this is seen in the Case of Uber; Bales (2017) notes how in the United States over one hundred lawsuits have been filed in 8 states since 2012, trying to determine "whether Uber drivers should be classified as employees or independent contractors" (p. 472). However, it has been argued that the control tests that are used to make this determination are outdated and unsuitable for the platform economy (McHugh, 2018). Essentially the more control a company has over a worker, the more likely they are to be classified as an employee (Bales, 2014). But Bales (2014) states how:

> Many factors can favour either the drivers or Uber, depending on how the test is applied or on the specific facts pertaining to an individual driver. Because no single factor is controlling or dispositive in an analysis of Uber's business model under either the control test or the economic realities test, it can safely be said that both tests are largely unhelpful in reaching a definitive answer on the question (p. 484).

Even in cases where courts have determined that workers should be classified as employees, it's unclear how this change is being enforced. Adams-Prassl et al. (2021) explain that "in March 2021, the UK Supreme Court unanimously agreed: the platform's drivers were not genuinely self-employed, and thus are entitled to the full set of rights and protections associated with their status as workers" (p. 7). However, Adams-Prassl et al. (2012) point out how:

> At first glance, Supreme Court decisions solves the employment status problem: when do gig-economy workers qualify for employment rights? However, the real elephant in the room is that even when there are clear

> entitlements, they are impossible to enforce in practice. After more than five years' and hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of litigation, the extent to which Uber will comply with the law remains unclear (p.13).

Therefore, enforcing this status change and ensuring that workers are receiving the benefits they are entitled to is critical. A middle ground that has been discussed is the label of dependent contractor, however that too can be challenging. As platforms can push workers into standard shifts that preclude the possibility of employment on other platforms, workers become more likely to fit within the definition of "dependent contractor" (Cherry and Aloisi, 2017, p. 655). In Canada, as Cherry and Aloisi (2017) argue of Uber drivers, being classified as a 'dependent contractor' could confer benefits to workers, but 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. Thus, even with dependent contractor status classifications the control tests that would determine someone's status could be inefficient for making a correct assessment. Another consideration, is whether workers even want to be classified as employees or dependent contractors, as some may be content with how things currently are and may see becoming an employee as a threat to their autonomy.

2. Platforms must be held accountable for their algorithmic bias. A key form of structural violence noted within this research is the algorithmic operations upheld by platforms. Implementing requirements that call for greater transparency and ensuring that platforms disclose how and why they employ the algorithms they do, along with acknowledging how these algorithms can impact workers, would help to identify bias. Policy makers can consider best practice protocol that is platform specific and consider alternatives to create more equitable standards of use.

   A more everyday way to attempt to deal with algorithmic affordances could be for local groups such as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective, to consider educating their members, or future members, about the kinds of bias that exists online which they could experience. In understanding platform affordances, such as CamScoring algorithms, workers can try to "make use of affordances in unexpected and subversive ways to promote their interests" (Rand & Stegeman, 2023, p. 2112). For example, Rand & Stegeman's (2023) study found that although platforms cater toward viewers interests and evaluations, workers can "utilise this process of their valuation to their interest" such as by "lying about their age and/or sexual orientation, using standardised categorisation to their advantage, to attract more customers" (p. 2108) when customising their profile.

Similarly, understanding other affordances such as the earning potential that comes from worker collaboration and utilising private chatrooms to encourage interested tippers, helps workers work within the limits of these affordances (Rand & Stegeman, 2023). While understanding these affordances doesn't offer a solution to the broader forms of structural violence enacted against workers, it can provide workers with knowledge that might empower them, reducing the kinds of emotional labour they often experience when grappling with the troubles of increasing their viewership and paying customers.

3. I found that consent processes need to be implemented by platforms to thoroughly inform workers of the risks involved when using their services. I illustrated how workers utilising Payoneer were not issued updated Terms of Service agreements when Payoneer rebranded to Firstchoice pay and started utilising an offshore bank, Choice bank, in Belize. This shows the loopholes that exist around obtaining workers' consent and impinges on the rights of workers to make their own decisions around where their finances are held. Within the platform economy, these Terms of Service agreements are the only contractual documents that workers follow, therefore, it's critical that workers know of any changes to make informed decisions including assessing the pros and cons (benefits/risks) of utilising the platforms service. In the case of Payoneer's rebranding, workers weren't given the opportunity to assess the risks of where their money was going to be held with Firstchoice. Consequently, workers couldn't make a fully informed decision and were under the wrong impression about how secure their money truly was. Workers should have been given the opportunity to decline the change and Payoneer should have allowed workers to withdraw their funds and find alternative arrangements such as finding a third-party payment platform that doesn't utilise offshore bank accounts, or if they do, in countries that are less likely to face economic instability or ones that have a better reputation, e.g., countries not under scrutiny for being a tax haven such as Belize (Brei, 2013).

   While workers deserve to consent in any Terms of Service changes, another way to ensure workers are protected is by allowing them to negotiate with platforms and their Terms of Service agreements. Moreover, platforms should be regulated through the oversight of external government bodies who can identify risks or means of deception and rectify platform agreements accordingly. Nevertheless, there are challenges with implementing regulatory oversight; the fact that platforms operate transnationally makes it jurisdictionally difficult for governments to enforce changes. Additionally, as platforms are privately owned, they establish their own terms, albeit against mandated laws. Therefore, long-term solutions may centre around enacting laws that provide the mechanism for governments or chosen bodies to penalise platforms that have inequitable terms or are not appropriately obtaining worker consent once changes are implemented. In the interim, organisations like the New Zealand Prostitutes

Collective might find it useful to have their own team keep up to date with the most used platforms and interconnected payment platforms utilised by online sex workers, identifying Terms of Service changes and making members aware.

4. Understanding worker subjectivities is imperative if organisations want to ensure they reach the communities they seek to support. I found that worker subjectivities influence how workers see themselves -- whether that is as an online sex worker, or a content creator. These diverse understandings are important to acknowledge, especially when considering future policy that involves workers. Policies should be designed with inclusive terminology that appreciates these different definitions of self. Advocacy organisations such as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective have made steps to utilise inclusive terminology on their Instagram pages, but their webpage could also benefit from this inclusivity, and can help workers understand that they are an organisation that supports content creators who utilise adult platforms.

5. Given the global nature of the platform economy, existing unions or advocacy organisations might consider building international coalitions with other groups that support online sex workers. This could involve working together to advocate for international regulations that protect the rights of workers or bargaining for fairer working conditions. International pressure can amplify the voices of workers who are in a position of not wanting to publicly address the issues they face, instead leveraging strength from cross border organising behind the protection of union of advocacy groups. These groups can also share information with one another, discussing emergent issues within the globalised platform economy in attempts to overcome the barriers associated with working within a transnational landscape that creates barriers for worker to formally join unions and bargain.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This final chapter provides an overview of the key findings, bringing together the threads from each of the three manuscripts. It explains the economic, social, and political forms of structural violence enforced against workers and shows how workers' labour is exploited and undervalued. It illustrates how despite workers facing constraints from intersecting economic, social, and political avenues, they have also developed ways to manage the challenges they face. Workers have restaged their collective mobilisation within private Discord and online forums that support the communities of care that they have established. These communities of care see workers engaging in everyday forms of subversion and resistance, particularly in the imagined resistance work they do where they communicate their plans for collective action and discuss alternative visions for the online sex work industry. The chapter finishes by recognising how important prefigurative work occurs within these communities, spotlighting the nuanced kinds of collective action workers engage in working digitally.

The online sex work industry has grown in popularity (Tibbals & Worthen, 2021). While the platform economy is largely viewed positively as a source of economic opportunity and is considered by some to be the future of work (Ghosh et al., 2022), the precarious labour conditions and its effects on workers cannot be overlooked (Piasna, 2022). Utilising platform capitalism as a lens to understand the online sex work industry, this thesis has analysed platform operations along with the third-party payment platforms that online sex workers use for work. Looking at both online sex work platforms and third-party payment platforms provided insight into the broader online ecosystem that online sex workers operate within and experience, offering a comprehensive understanding of the intersecting forms of structural violence workers are exposed to, and how these systems impinge on workers' rights and political positioning within the platform economy.

Online sex work platforms utilise algorithms that significantly effect platform operations, the power dynamics on the platform, and workers' experiences (Vlase & Preoteasa, 2022). These algorithms provide greater visibility to high earning workers on the platform, perpetuating inequalities within the industry (Caminhas, 2023). Nevertheless, the algorithmic bias toward high income earners creates a competitive environment that compels workers to engage in high levels of unpaid, emotional, and affective labour to enhance their visibility on the platform. This kind of labour exposes how exploitive the online sex work industry can be of workers and illustrates the patriarchal practices that are being upheld where men (e.g., platform owners and viewers) are the ones to predominantly benefit from these forms of unrecognised labour (e.g., benefitting from the capital earned and having their sexual needs being met in some cases without proper compensation for workers' labour).

In looking at the labour workers must do to remain competitive and in favour with a platform's algorithms, this thesis identified the role of workers' affective labour in helping to facilitate viewers' formation of parasocial relationships, something that is necessary in the online sex work industry to earn money. Although parasocial relationships have largely been analysed in celebrity-fan relationships to explain how fans' parasocial relationships can be leveraged for celebrity endorsements and the sale of products (Chung & Cho, 2017; Rasmussen 2018), or the parasocial relationships people form with media personalities (Bond, 2016) and the role gender plays in the formation of parasocial relationships (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), this research examined parasocial relationships in context of labour and precarity. If workers' affective labour does not cultivate an emotional connection with the viewer and viewers do not form parasocial relationships with workers, they're unlikely to earn an income. Workers' financial stability rests on these parasocial relationships being fostered, but simultaneously exposes them to risks.

Viewers can place unrealistic monogamous expectations on workers, perceiving their connection to be romantic instead of transactional. As affective labour largely parallels monogamous values, in that both prioritise emotional expression and connection to sustain interpersonal relationships, this is where the confusion lies. Additionally, the dominance of monogamy in Western societies likely influences these expectations (MacDonald, 1995). Problematically, viewers have responded in deeply misogynistic ways through cyberharrassment and cyberstalking, threatening workers' economic and emotional wellbeing if their advances are rejected. But it is not only viewers who misconstrue workers 'affective labour; workers' partners have also found showing affect to be inappropriate and have tried to place restrictions on workers' labour and the acts they can and cannot do online. Creating the term 'affective boundary work,' this thesis examined workers' attempts to manage the affect of both their viewers and partners and their efforts to create boundaries between their online and offline lives. It showed the impossible bind workers are in when sexual constructs function to undermine workers' labour, and the inherent double standard that exists where men's interests are prioritised over workers' (women's) economic needs.

Workers demonstrated the hardships they go through to earn an income and to have their labour recognised as legitimate within the constraints of the platform operations, as well as broader social constructs that influence these operations. However, this is complicated further by each platform's payment dynamics. There are different ways workers can be paid, including by cheque, direct wire transfer to one's bank account, or through using a third-party payment platform (Chaturbate, 2024; Wiki MyFreeCams, 2023). As cheques are not available to all workers given global platform usage (Wiki MyFreeCams, 2023), and due to the high fees associated with direct wire transfers, many workers opt to use third-party payment platforms (see chapter 5). Once workers' money is released by the platform they work on, it is then sent to the third-party payment platform they're using. These payment platforms

provide workers with a pre-paid debit card which money is loaded onto. However, there are limits to how much money can be loaded onto the pre-paid debit card at one time, and limits to how much money can be withdrawn monthly, with an annual maximum amount as well (Cosmo Payment, 2022). This thesis revealed not only the challenge of earning money within the competitive platform environment, but inability of workers to manage their money, with payment platforms having power over their finances.

This kind of power and control has also seen payment platforms determine where workers' finances should be held, with this thesis contributing novel insight regarding third party payment platforms offshore banking practices. Findings exposed an instance where Firstchoice pay, a payment platform formerly known as Payoneer, was storing workers' funds offshore in Choice Bank, a bank based in Belize. When Choice Bank filed for bankruptcy workers' finances were frozen for 3 years, and some were unable to receive reimbursement from the liquidators. Prior to its rebranding, Payoneer was being used by workers who believed their income was being held in the United States where the company is headquartered. Payoneer rebranded to Firstchoice pay notifying workers of the change, although they did not obtain consent from workers and did not make them aware where their income was going to be held. This rebrand was likely done to distinguish their services between Payoneer (regular users) and Firstchoice pay (high-risk users) due to the scrutiny platforms have come under following FOSTA-SESTA laws coming into effect, with some payment platforms having to shut down due to financial discrimination (Bell, 2023; Cole, 2023).

These FOSTA-SESTA laws are intended to prevent sex trafficking and hold platforms accountable if trafficking incidents occur on their platform (DePasquale, 2020). This has resulted in some sex work platforms closing due to the reported risk (Bronstein, 2021) or outright refusing their services to sex workers (Tripp, 2019). Nevertheless, it helps explain why third-party payment platforms have become popular, as many are "designed specifically for the sex industry" (Swords et al., 2023), albeit workers become dependent on these platforms given the financial discrimination they face with traditional banking services (Stardust et al., 2023). To date, no academic scholarship has looked at offshore banking risks associated with online sex workers use of third-party payment platforms.

This thesis highlighted the importance in recognising that workers' precarity is not solely shaped by the primary platform that they work on. Interconnected third-party payment platforms they must use for work -- and their selected bank providers -- also shape worker precarity. Hence, the flow of money in the online sex work industry becomes a critical point of interest, showcasing the need for greater transparency between platforms and workers around how workers' finances are being handled and the need for proper consent protocols to be implemented so that workers can understand and mitigate financial risk where possible. Furthermore, these systems expose the lack of agency and

financial freedom workers have in society, and the need for workers in all industries to have greater control over decision-making processes and access to their finances.

With the criminalisation of sex and the over conflation of trafficking and sex work discourses (Tripp, 2019), platforms attempt to mitigate the risk involved in hosting sex workers on their platform through their Terms of Service agreements. These agreements lay out what is appropriate conduct on their platform and can include anti sex work rules that conflict with laws in the workers' country of residence (Beebe, 2022). For example, New Zealand based online sex workers who also work offline cannot solicit customers through the digital platform they work on otherwise they can be deplatformed with their earnings being retained by the platform (Beebe, 2022). This regulatory overreach, and the risks associated with breaching the Terms of Service, impacts the political gains workers have made previously, such as those made by New Zealand sex workers who successfully fought for the decriminalisation of sex work in 2003. Moreover, the control platforms exhibit over workers is exacerbated in how they organise workers on the platform, classifying workers as independent contractors which limits their bargaining power and ability to negotiate for worker protections and fairer platform operations (Rogers, 2016).

Independent contractors' platforms escape the responsibilities they would otherwise have if workers were classified as employees (Rogers, 2016). Online sex workers do not receive benefits that many employees do such as paid annual leave, insurance benefits, or workplace retirement plans (Rogers, 2016). They also lack job security, as not all platforms offer minimum wage standards (Piasna, 2022), with platforms utilising algorithmic systems that can impact worker visibility on the platform. Workers' bargaining power is also weakened given that they are isolated from other workers as they work form their homes (Bunders, 2021), and often see other workers as competition given the entrepreneurial narrative that surrounds the platform economy where workers vie for success. This can limit their ability to collectively bargain with platforms, and given the risk of deplatforming, workers are hesitant to act against platforms as it is.

With workers' precarious positioning within the platform economy, and their dependence on platforms for their income, their livelihoods are contingent on platforms, making it difficult for workers to negotiate better, or fairer, terms that would best serve them. This research sought to understand how the globalisation of the commercial sex work industry shapes the political positioning of online sex workers, as New Zealand workers, for instance, have had a strong political voice historically. Findings revealed that given platforms' patriarchal power, their punishment systems, and the regulatory overreach they have, workers' fear of platform retaliation is preventing them from mobilising publicly against the platforms. Instead, workers are restaging where they are collectively mobilising, utilising private networks such as Discord servers and online forums to communicate with one another. On these

networks, workers have established communities of care and support for one another, where they offer advice, share resources, and come together in solidarity over their troubles. They also engage in "imagined resistance", a term this thesis conceptualised to refer to resistance that is planned but is yet to be actioned.

Workers imagined resistance shows their subversion against platforms, regaining their voice and a sense of power through the counterpublic work that they do. It also illustrates the prefigurative political action they are taking in envisioning how to take collective action against a platform or envisioning future alternatives for the online sex work industry. This prefigurative work is important in creating a blueprint for transformative change that can mirror the values and operations that workers desire. These communities have also shown how useful they can be and their timeliness at addressing unfolding situations. For example, when OnlyFans announced it was banning sex workers from their platform, workers were quick to meet online and discuss this issue and what it meant for their work – along with other platforms they could work on in the event they were banned from the platform. The timeliness of these communities with unfolding events helps prevent workers from further harm, either through the advice offered such as finding another, more secure platform, or supporting workers' emotional wellbeing in times of stress.

The conditions of the platform economy expose unique insight into the changes that are occurring for sex workers' collective mobilisation now that they're working online. While historically sex workers have mobilised publicly with union-like support, the precarity online sex workers experience makes it difficult to achieve the same kind of collective action without consequence. For online sex workers restaging their collective mobilisation within private networks has provided a safer alternative given the risk of retaliation from platforms. While private forms of collective mobilisation can limit the forms of pressure workers place on platforms and can see workers managing ad hoc platform issues, rather than systemic change occurring, these communities are invaluable support systems for workers and are inherently subversive. Discord servers and online forums are "spaces for the articulation of discontent and sharing strategies for coping and success" (Soriano & Cabañes, 2020, p. 10). Through the shared gossip workers engage in, they build solidarity among themselves, empower one another, and enhance their resilience whilst strengthening their social networks that could be beneficial for when their imagined resistance becomes actioned.

This thesis offers theoretical and empirical contributions to the sociology of labour, feminist theory, and social movement theory in an era of platform capitalism across several disciplines, with the choice of journals reflecting this. Manuscript 1 was submitted and has been conditionally accepted with minor revisions, to the *Journal of Sociology*. The *Journal of Sociology* accepts interdisciplinary works that are "sociological in nature, in an acknowledgment that sociological thinking takes place across a

range of disciplines, such as in cultural, gender and organisation studies, and outside of the academy" (Australian Sociological Association, 2024). Manuscript 2 was submitted to *Sexuality & Culture* and was accepted by the journal. It is an interdisciplinary journal publishing works from a wide variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, health sciences, behavioural sciences, and indigenous studies (list not exhaustive); with authors whose works have been published within the journal indicating the interdisciplinary relevance of their articles (Christensen & Woods, 2024). Similarly, the *Journal of Political Power* "provide[s] an interdisciplinary venue for focused studies and scholarly debates surrounding the origins, development, and application of power in contemporary society" (Taylor & Francis Group, 2024), having published works from diverse disciplines. Manuscript 3, which is currently under review with the *Journal of Political Power*, offers an interdisciplinary lens speaking back to sociological and feminist theory. However, it is also of relevance to readers interested in the platform economy, technology, and finance.

In looking at the economic, social, and political relations whereby structural violence is enacted against workers, we can see how workers' experiences are largely guided by the intersecting forms of power and control held over them. Although there are significant power imbalances within the online sex work industry that affect workers, they have demonstrated their resilience through the informal everyday forms of resistance they engage in, which are covert and subversive. Workers' imagined resistance in particular shows their forward thinking and shows that workers are committed to industry change. While mobilising privately may be understated, their work contributes to important discussions about legal and organisational changes to the platform economy in order to support workers.

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Appendix A - Summary of Research Findings (For participants and NZPC: Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers' Collective)

Dear [Participant's name / NZPC]

I wanted to share with you a summary of my research findings from my PhD research that you participated in, or that could be of interest to you. Your involvement in this project was invaluable and provided key insights into the online sex work industry through your lived experiences. In the end, the key findings from my thesis were incorporated within three manuscripts, although there are future publications I would also like to work on. Once the manuscripts have been published, I would like to provide you with copies. I also welcome any feedback and if you have any ideas of what you might like to see discussed in future, or if you have specific journals or audiences that you would like this work in front of, I am open to hearing your thoughts.

Manuscript 1:

Manuscript one was submitted to the *Journal of Sociology*. This manuscript discussed the economic forms of structural violence enacted against online sex workers. It spoke of how platforms exploit workers through algorithms, such as CamScoring systems, that demand intense competition, unpaid labour, and emotional and moral labour by workers to remain visible on the platform to earn a living. Workers noted the difficulty they had navigating their work within structurally violent systems and the economic precarity they face as they try to build an audience. The manuscript also revealed how interconnected third-party payment platforms that workers use to receive their earnings are risky and can exacerbate worker precarity. As chequing payment options aren't available to all workers, and direct wire transfers into one's bank account are costly, third-party payment platforms that offer pre-paid debit cards to workers are a cheaper, commonly used alternative. However, workers must know of the risks involved when using third-party payment options.

Manuscript one relayed how payment processor, Firstchoice pay, formerly Payoneer, held workers' money in an offshore bank account, Choice Bank, in Belize without workers' consent. Workers had signed up with Payoneer, a payment processor headquartered in the United States, thinking their income was being held there. When the company rebranded, workers were told of the change and issued new prepaid debit cards without knowledge of where their money would be held. It wasn't until Choice Bank filed for bankruptcy and workers' finances were frozen for three years, that workers became aware of their finances being held offshore. Some workers were never able to recover their income from Choice Banks liquidator, Quadrant. The manuscript discusses how economic power within the platform economy extends beyond the platforms being used for work and includes interconnected third-party

payment platforms. It illustrates the financial control and impact platforms, including third-party payment platforms, have in the broader global financial ecosystem of the platform economy, and the need for stronger financial protections and surveillance measures tracing the flow of workers' money.

There are a few recommendations that both online sex workers and the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective may find useful from these findings. First, given the competitive environment online and as workers will often engage in unpaid, emotional and moral labour to build an audience, its important workers, or future workers, are aware of the structurally violent economic systems that work against them. This may better prepare workers for the realities of working online, especially with the allure of platforms like OnlyFans being a platform where one can earn money quickly, with success stories often focusing on the top 1% earners (e.g., Devine, 2024, Gissen, 2023). If workers know of platform affordances, such as CamScoring systems, they can try to "make use of affordances in unexpected and subversive ways to promote their interests" (Rand & Stegeman, 2023, p. 2112). Rand and Stegeman's (2023) study noted that although platforms cater toward viewers' interests and evaluations, workers can "utilise this process of their valuation to their interest" such as by "lying about their age and/or sexual orientation, using standardised categorisation to their advantage to attract more customers" (p. 2108) when customising their profile.

Likewise, other affordances include taking advantage of being able to livestream and work with other workers and utilising private chatrooms to encourage interested viewers to tip. These are acts workers can do within the limits of these affordances (Rand & Stegeman, 2023) but are sometimes overlooked as solo livestreaming and utilising public chatrooms, at least on webcamming platforms, are the more common alternative. While understanding these affordances doesn't offer a solution to the broader forms of structural violence enacted against workers, it can provide workers with knowledge that might empower them, reducing the kinds of emotional labour they often experience when facing troubles with increasing their viewership and paying customers. By working closely with online sex workers, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective may uncover other platform affordances that can be used to online sex workers' advantage as well and perhaps provide a 'cheat sheet' of these tips and tricks.

Second, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective may find information regarding workers finances useful to warn online sex workers about utilising third party payment platforms to receive and hold their income. Some workers will utilise payment processing platforms in a similar manner to traditional banking systems. However, payment platforms can store workers income in offshore bank accounts which can be risky. If possible, workers should have their income directly wired to their bank account, traditional banking services are more secure. If payment processors are used, workers should consider withdrawing their earnings from their accounts frequently and consider safer storage methods.

Alternatively, they may want to use a third-party payment processor who is transparent about where their funds will be held. Albeit there appears to be a lack of transparency from platforms with where they store clients' money. Future consideration by sex work advocacy organisations might be given toward taking action against third party payment platforms and strengthening the regulatory landscape involving workers' finances.

Third, as workers' consent wasn't obtained in the rebranding and change over from Payoneer to Firstchoice pay, loopholes evidently exist around obtaining workers' consent - impinging on the rights of workers. Within the platform economy, these Terms of Service agreements are the only contractual documents that workers follow, therefore, it's critical that workers know of any changes to make informed decisions including assessing the pros and cons (benefits/risks) of utilising the platform's service. Organisations like the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective might find it useful to have their own team keep up to date with the most used platforms and interconnected payment platforms utilised by online sex workers, identifying Terms of Service changes and making members aware of these changes. Moreover, they may also consider negotiating with platforms regarding their Terms of Service agreements if anything appears unethical or uncertain. Ideally, workers would be able to negotiate Terms of Service agreements in ways that protect their interests.

Manuscript 2:

Manuscript two was submitted to the *Sexuality & Culture journal*. It examined how the cultural logics of monogamy function to delegitimise the labour involved with online sex work and increase the risks of 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. The article focussed on the relational labour online sex workers must engage in to build and maintain an audience of paying customers, specifically examining the affective labour workers do to manage the emotions of others and to ensure viewers build parasocial relationships with workers. The article discussed the difficulty of engaging in affective labour when workers' affect can be misconstrued by others – not being seen as labour done as part of a transactional exchange and to make others comfortable in the interaction – but as romantic interest. As workers discussed the difficulty of managing affect and creating boundaries between their professional and private lives, I termed the concept 'affective boundary work' to illustrate not only the affective labour workers engage in, but the boundary work they do to manage affect whilst creating clear boundaries in their lives. Workers insights from this project have therefore provided new theoretical ways to understand online sex work through the lens of affective boundary work and understanding the online sex work industry as a space where parasocial relationships are a relational aspect of the job, but expose workers to risks.

Manuscript 3:

Manuscript 3 was submitted to the *Journal of Political Power*. This manuscript examined how workers are using Discord and online forums as spaces where they can discuss problems they are experiencing, warn others of these problems, offer advice and support to one another, and engage in everyday chat and gossip. Through these spaces workers have built solidarity and have established communities of care. These communities of care show how workers are restaging where their collective mobilisation takes place and where they are meeting to discuss problems and consider solutions - or the appropriate action that needs to be taken. While previously offline sex workers collective mobilisation was visible, and workers collective action occurred publicly through the likes of protests and joint efforts with union-based organisations, online sex workers have found public forms of collective mobilisation too risky. One of the reasons it is too risky is due to the power platforms have over workers, and their ability to deplatform workers if they act against the platform. The structural organisation of the platform economy, where platforms hold power over workers, undoubtedly shapes their political positioning and how they choose to mobilise and act. Still, important political work occurs within these communities of care, with worker subversion and resistance been seen in multiple ways. This includes through the counterpublic work they do to challenge hegemonic discourses set by the platform through their own forms of truth telling, along with the imagined resistance they do, that is the planned collective action they imagine that is yet to transpire, albeit is prefigurative and sees workers envisioning alternative futures for the online sex work industry.

If the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective is able and workers are comfortable, if they haven't already, they may consider whether having a representative on these private Discord servers or online forums (such as AmberCutie forum) utilised by workers. As industry problems are conveyed in these networks, and workers discuss strategies to deal with certain issues and propose future changes they would like to see implemented in the online sex work industry, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective might find ways to action these concerns or to advocate for these changes. However, as the online sex work industry operates globally and is influenced by foreign law, it can be difficult for local organisations such as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective to challenge platforms alone. If they haven't already, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective might consider building international coalitions with other groups that support online sex workers. This could involve working together to advocate for international regulations that protect the rights of workers or bargaining for fairer working conditions.

International pressure can amplify the voices of workers who are not able to address the issues they face, instead leveraging strength from cross-border organising behind the protection of union or advocacy groups. These groups can also share information with one another, discussing emergent issues

within the globalised platform economy in attempts to overcome the barriers associated with working within a transnational landscape that creates barriers for workers to formally join unions and bargain. A more immediate solution may be using information gathered from the forums to compile up to date reports of platform practices that workers need to be aware of. This kind of reporting can serve as a guideline for policy and advocacy efforts while also informing workers, who may not be part of these online communities, of current risks and possible mitigation strategies.

In this study, online sex workers also discussed their desire for a union that solely caters to online sex workers. An online sex worker union or advocacy organisation could be beneficial as another finding that emerged from this study was that worker subjectivities can influence how workers think of themselves and can shape their political alliances. For example, with OnlyFans labelling workers as "creators" – online sex workers may not think of themselves as sex workers. Understanding worker subjectivities is imperative if organisations want to ensure they reach the communities they seek to support. I found that worker subjectivities influence how workers see themselves -- whether that is as an online sex worker, or a content creator. These diverse understandings are important to acknowledge, especially when considering future policy that involves workers. Policies should be designed with inclusive terminology that appreciates these different definitions of self. Advocacy organisations such as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective have made steps to utilise inclusive terminology on their Instagram pages, but their webpage could also benefit from this inclusivity, and can help workers understand that they are an organisation that supports content creators who utilise adult platforms.

Appendix B - Participant Information Sheet and Recruitment Flyer

ARE YOU AN ONLINE SEX WORKER?

DO YOU UTILISE PLATFORMS SUCH AS ONLYFANS, MYFREECAMS, CHATURBATE, OR SIMILAR PLATFORMS FOR WORK?

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES OF WORKING ONLNE? IF SO I WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

18+ PARTICIPANTS ONLY
MUST BE BASED IN NEW ZEALAND

I'M BRITTANY, A PHD CANDIDATE AT MASSEY UNIVERSITY. I AM CONDUCTING RESEARCH THAT EXPLORES ONLINE SEX WORKERS EXPERIENCES WORKING DIGITALLY AS PART OF MY PHD.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES AND PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT, I WILL CONDUCT A 60-90 MINUTE CONFIDENTIAL INTERVIEW WITH YOU EITHER IN PERSON OR ON ZOOM.

KOHA: YOU WILL RECIEVE A $100.00 PREZZY CARD AS THANKS FOR YOUR INVOLVEMENT AND TIME IN THIS PROJECT.

For more information or if you're interested in participating please contact Brittany on: b.palatchie@massey.ac.nz (021 103 3940)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 23/02. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, telephone 09 414 0800 x 43347, email: humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix C - Data Analysis Coding Table

Manuscript one:				
Thread post count	**Quote placement within manuscript**	**Initial Coding**	**Theme identified (Focused coding)**	**Number of forum participants**
Thread one: 15 posts	Quote 1	Lack of motivation CamScore anxieties Time wasted	Slow number of traffic in chatroom	9 participants
Thread two: 22 posts	Quote 7	Payment precarity from lack of audience tipping. Feeling taken advantage of. Time off work to deal with stress.	Slow number of traffic in chatroom / Emotional labour	14 participants
Thread three: 22 posts	Quote 3	Upset mood with slow traffic. Emotional labour required to compensate low moods.	Slow number of traffic in chatroom / Emotional labour / Unpaid labour	15 participants
Thread four: 53 posts	Quote 9	Discoverability with multi-platform use. Unpaid labour and emotional labour involved finding a suitable platform to work on.	Slow number of traffic in chatroom / Emotional labour / Unpaid labour	16 participants
Thread five: 29 posts	Quote 5	CamScore anxieties. Difficulty increasing CamScore.	Algorithms	10 participants
Thread six: 9 posts	Quote 6 and 8	Quote 6: Unpaid labour because of lack of visibility on platforms. Exploitation. Quote 8: Consistency for audience building. Multi-platform use to increase income / visibility.	Algorithms	4 participants
Thread seven: 5 posts	Quote 11	Social media for viewer engagement.	Algorithms	4 participants

		Unpaid labour communicating to audience while offline.		
Thread eight: 11 posts	Quote 14	Rating systems unjustly used by viewers. Rating systems causing concerns for personal brand.	Algorithms	5 participants
Thread nine: 2 posts	Quote 16	Money withheld while banned. Banned from platform unfairly.	Deplatforming	2 participants
Thread ten: 269 posts	Quote 18	Political discourse impacting online sex work industry. Anxieties over future platform shutdowns.	Deplatforming	66 participants
Thread eleven: 1 post	Quote 17	Spontaneously banning workers. Income withheld if workers banned. Platforms not responsive when workers reach out.	Lack of platform support	1 participant
Thread twelve: 15 posts	Quote 20	Hefty payout fees and exchange rates.	Payment precarity	10 participants
Thread thirteen: 3,330 posts	Quotes 21 - 26	Quote 21: Payment processors unknowingly located offshore. Quote 22: Lack of communication regarding payment processing company change. Quote 23: Payout concerns following payment processor bankruptcy. Quote 24: Third party payment processors the only option for some workers. Earnings to be cashed out and not left with third party payment processor.	Payment precarity	304 participants

		Quote 25: Anti-cryptocurrency sentiments. Online sex work payments should occur through transparent companies.		
Thread fourteen: 5 posts	Quote 19	Third party payment options limited places of use.	Payment precarity	2 participants
Thread fifteen: 28 posts	Quote 15	Platform payout not occurring. Lack of communication from platform regarding payment.	Payment precarity	19 participants
Thread sixteen: 38 posts	Quote 12	Authenticity required to build connections with viewers and receive tips. Authenticity to combat payment precarity.	Payment precarity	25 participants
Thread seventeen: 102 posts	Quote 4	Power dynamics between worker-client. Reliance on viewers for income. Emotional labour required to appease viewers.	Payment precarity	39 participants
Thread eighteen: 19,457 posts as at 11/03/2024	Quote 13	Acts of authenticity can be perceived as inauthentic. Viewers have own ideas of what's authentic in sexual interaction.	Authenticity	Not identified due to increasing number of participants due to everyday activity on the thread.
Thread nineteen: 13 posts	Quote 2	Being genuine as part of the job. Emotional labour required to appease viewers.	Authenticity	11 participants
Thread twenty: 7 posts	Quote 10	Time management with multi platform use.	Multi-platform use	7 participants

Manuscript two:				
Thread post count	**Quote placement within manuscript**	**Initial Coding**	**Theme identified. (Focused coding)**	**Number of participants**
Thread one: 102 posts	Quote 1	Keeping job a secret. Guilt felt over not telling partner about job.	Job disclosure	23 participants
Thread two: 277 posts	Quote 2	Keeping job a secret poses difficulties for partners of online sex workers.	Job disclosure	77 participants
Thread three: 13 posts	Quote 3	Risks associated with job disclosure. Strategy to protect oneself if job disclosed to partner.	Post disclosure	9 participants
Thread four: 13,287 posts	Quote 4	Overcompensating to prove a 'good' person post-disclosure.	Post disclosure	Not identified due to increasing number of participants due to everyday activity on the thread.
Thead five: 123 posts	Quote 5	Finding partners with shared values. Agreement on personal boundaries.	Partner suitability Boundaries	32 participants
Thread six: 57 posts	Quote 6 and 7	Quote 6 and 7: Imposed and broken boundaries. Surveillance of boundaries.	Boundaries	18 participants
Thread seven: 239 posts	Quote 8	Mindful approach to communication with clients. Management of online-offline boundaries.	Developing boundaries	28 participants
Thread eight: 288 posts	Quote 9 and 10	Quote 9: Difficulty establishing boundaries. Lack of recognition toward online sex workers unpaid labour. Quote 10: Sex work a violation of monogamous values	Boundaries Developing boundaries Patriarchal policing Monogamy	77 participants

Thread nine: 51 posts	Quote 11, 13, 14, 15	Quote 11: Social norms impacting how women's sexuality is viewed. Quote 13: Financial consequences disclosing whether in a relationship. Quote 14: Workers management of viewers affect through the creation of a fantasy. Using the fantasy to develop boundaries between online-offline worlds. Quote 15: Risks of disclosing ones relationship status to viewers. Viewers crossing boundaries	Patriarchal policing Relationship disclosure Affective boundary work Boundary making. Developing boundaries. Boundary crossing.	28 participants
Thread ten: 41 posts	Quote 12	Neoliberal branding through the creation of a fantasy. Purposeful non-disclosure regarding personal relationships	Neoliberal self-promotion.	30 participants
Thread eleven: 79 posts	Quote 16	Viewers making threats toward workers	Cyber harassment	21 participants
Thread twelve: 4 posts	Quote 17	Risks associated with relationships.	Cyber harassment Cyber stalking Misogyny Parasocial relationships	3 participants
Thread thirteen: 16 posts	Quote 18	Viewers questioning workers morals. Lack of recognition toward the kinds of labour involved in online sex work	Misogyny Parasocial relationships.	8 participants
Thread fourteen: 45 posts	Quote 19	Fantasy seen as manipulation.	Parasocial relationships	10 participants

		Lack of recognition toward the kinds of labour involved in online sex work.		
Thread fifteen: 77 posts	Quote 20	Viewers need to recognise boundaries between online-offline environments. Lack of recognition between fantasy and reality.	Parasocial relationships	43 participants
Thread sixteen: 21 posts	Quote 21	Viewers misconstrue fantasy for genuine romantic interest.	Parasocial relationships	12 participants
Thread seventeen: 74 posts	Quote 22 and 23	Quote 22: Viewers in relationships justification of using online sex work platforms. Double standards with how online sex is viewed between viewers/workers. Quote 23: Gender dimensions of online sex work Prioritisation of men's sexual needs over women's economic needs.	Monogamy Gendered double standard	16 participants
Thread eighteen: 40 posts	Quote 24	Blame placed on online sex workers if husbands utilise online sex work platforms.	Gendered double standard Stigma	16 participants
Thread nineteen: 29 posts	Quote 25 and 26	Quote 25: Societal norms influencing beliefs on sex work. Personal beliefs regarding sexuality can shape one's experience of sexual shame. Quote 26: Online sex work as an exploration of sexuality. Redefining sexuality	Sexuality discourses Empowerment	21 participants
Thread twenty: 7 posts	Quote 27	Empowerment discourse as a defence mechanism. Empowerment not required for work.	Empowerment	7 participants

Manuscript three:				
Thread post count	**Quote placement within manuscript**	**Initial Coding**	**Theme identified. (Focused coding)**	**Number of participants**
Thread one: 166 posts	Quote 6	Since workers are not employees, they do not receive employee protections. Workers should not speak out against platforms, or they will face consequences.	Anti mobilisation sentiments.	44 participants
Thread two: 15,162 posts	Quote 9	Desire for unions. Inequitable platform control over workers.	Mobilisation Unionisation Platform power Deplatforming	Not identified due to increasing number of participants due to everyday activity on the thread.
Thread three: 22 posts	Quote 10	Nonprofit unions for online sex workers. Logistical walk through of potential union offerings. Insurance and health coverage for online sex workers.	Unionisation	16 participants
Thread four: 23 posts	Quote 11	Consideration of platform cooperatives. Platforms that support workers interests. Imagining future alternatives of online sex work.	Platform cooperatives Everyday resistance Imagined resistance.	8 participants
Thread five: 49 posts	Quote 12	Challenges with starting a platform cooperative.	Platform monopolisation. Imagined resistance.	14 participants
Thread six: 168 posts	Quote 13	Online sex workers advocacy on private forums.	Advocacy. Communities of care.	37 participants

			Alterative political sites.	
Thread seven: 269 posts	Quote 18	Loss of trust with platforms. Withdrawing support from certain platforms.	Everyday resistance.	62 participants

Manuscript three (interview data):

Manuscript three		
Interview quote placement within manuscript	**Initial Coding**	**Theme identified.** **(Focused coding)**
Quote 1	Viewers use of fraudulent credit cards. Theft of workers money. Viewers chargebacks accepted without question.	Payment precarity. Patriarchal punishment bias.
Quote 2	Platform terms of service violations. Workers punished for client terms of service violations.	Patriarchal punishment bias.
Quote 3	Transnational laws imposed on workers.	Terms of Service violations. Transnational law.

Quote 4	Disputing terms of service violations.	Emotional labour. Terms of Service violations. Disputes process.
Quote 5	Fears over publicly mobilising. Platforms unfairly imposing terms of workers that are akin to employee-employer relationship.	Collective mobilisation. Platform monopolisation. Independent contractors misclassified.
Quote 7	Worker's subjectivities impacting their outreach to support/advocacy groups. Lack of recognition of content creation as online sex work.	Worker subjectivities. Strengthening existing organisations.
Quote 8	Further training required for existing organisations to support online sex workers.	Strengthening existing organisations.
Quote 14	Online support. Solidarity building between workers.	Communities of care. Solidarity.
Quote 15	Overcoming personal challenges. Communities of care as supportive networks.	Communities of care.

Quote 16	Worker's creation of a blacklist for dangerous clients. Information sharing within online networks.	Communities of care.
Quote 17	Humour as a source of support and encouragement. Uplifting one another within the Discord server.	Communities of care.
Quote 19	Real time information sharing as events unfold.	Communities of care. Networked gossip. Information sharing. Collective mobilisation.
Quote 20	Discord server is a space to hold clients accountable.	Communities of care. Networked gossip.

Appendix D - Interview Guide

Interview Schedule (Semi structured interview)

(The interview itself will be conversational these questions simply act as a checklist for topics of conversation I want to have versus directly reading them and having participants answer).

1. **Opening**

(Establish rapport / Introductions)

(Transition: Let me begin by asking you some questions about your work)

2. **Body**

(Topic: General information about work)

Can you tell me about your journey to becoming an online sex worker?

- *Prompt* if not mentioned: How long have you worked as an online sex worker?
- *Prompt* if not mentioned: Which platforms do you work on?

Tell me about the favourite parts of the job for you?

- *Prompt* if conversation doesn't naturally continue into disadvantages of the job: Can you tell me about your least favourite parts of the job?

(Topic: Personal branding)

With the increased popularity of working online, if you do not mind sharing, what are some of the strategies you use to stand out against other online sex workers?

- *Prompt* if not mentioned: In the online sex work industry there are those who cater toward distinct niches, do you cater toward a certain market or clientele?

- *Prompt* if the conversation doesn't naturally flow to explore clientele and managing client's expectations etc. How have you found working with clients who are interested in your specific niche?

Being online, you and your personal brand are potentially exposed to a wide, global audience have you had any privacy concerns at all?

- *Prompt* if not mentioned: How to you protect your privacy while still portraying your brand to your audience/potential audience?

(Topic: Platform economy)

Do you use external platforms to support the work you do, such as social media or even payment providers? (Social media should be mentioned in personal branding conversations, but if not, they can think about that as well as payment platforms).

- *Prompt*: Have you encountered any problems with censorship of your content on social media platforms?

- *Prompt* if conversation doesn't naturally move to deplatforming: Have you encountered any problems with payment platforms shutting down before or have you faced a complete shutdown of your social media pages?

- *Prompt* Are there any problems with working online that you would like to see addressed?

- *Prompt* Have you used any third-party companies to support you in your online sex work (e.g., marketing agencies)?

(If the individual works on a webcam site). On webcamming platforms there are incentives to earn more money and to place as the Cam Girl of the month, how have you found these kinds of incentives?

How do you manage working from home and do you find any challenges with having your work and home life being conducted in the same space?

Do you think the cut that platforms take from sex workers is fair?

- *Prompt* if sex worker works in a studio: Can you tell me about some of the rules and regulations that you must follow while working for a studio?

- *Prompt:* Does the studio have any expectations that sex workers must fulfil while they're working?

- *Prompt:* Do you think working independently would provide you with greater control over your work?

(Topic: Collective mobilisation)

<u>How do you voice your concerns about the industry or platform you're working for?</u>

- *Prompt*: Has social media given you an opportunity to mobilise and connect with others in the industry.

<u>What would be your hope for the future with the online sex work industry?</u>

(Transition: It's been a pleasure meeting with you today and finding out more about the industry and your experiences. I appreciate the time you took to have this interview with me today.)

3. **Closing**

(Maintain rapport)

(Action to be taken: Mention following up with summary of findings)