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Behind the screen: Commercial sex, digital spaces and working online

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1. Introduction

The rise of the internet and related digital technologies has had a profound impact on many aspects of people's working and social lives, including the buying and selling of sexual services. In addition to providing new ways to advertise for sex workers who provide services to clients in person, the internet has also seen the development of completely new forms of commercial sex (like web-camming) that take place entirely in an online environment. Using the largest datasets created in the UK/Europe, this article explores how sex workers use the internet and digital technologies to facilitate the range of different services that they offer. We identify the ways in which the internet has improved the ability for sex workers to organize and professionalize their services, with increasing profit and safety being core objectives. At the same time, we explore some of the challenges and potential (new) harms that arise for sex workers working online.

In this paper, we aim to explore the diversity of ways in which sex workers interact with online and digital technology. This paper advances knowledge by: a) demonstrating how the shift to online working developed for sex workers and their views on the importance of the internet to their working lives; b) exposing the different marketing strategies adopted by sex workers, including the use of social media and personal websites in building an online brand; and c) discussing the impact of online reviews and the wider culture of reviewing commercial sexual services.

2. The context of commercial sex

Whilst there is insufficient space to do justice to the burgeoning literature on sex work produced over the past few decades, it is worth noting some key scholars whose work has provided fertile ground to understand how the sex industry operates in the modern day digital era. Even in areas where criminalisation is the central model of regulation, such as the USA, there is evidence that a mainstreaming of the sex industry has occurred, both economically and to some extent socially. Brents and Sanders [1] explain how the professionalisation of the sex industry has happened as ordinary business models, networks and financing processes have become part of the everyday infrastructure in the global sex industry. The changes in how the sex industry is organised reflects the changing demographics of both the buyer and the seller, as middle class sex work influence the services, markets and actors involved, transforming the sex industry into a multi-layered and stratified consumption and labour industry [2,4]. Bernstein's [3] pivotal work allows a deeper understanding of 'what' is being sold in sex work, how this has changed over time and how it varies in different markets. She introduces the concept of 'bounded authenticity' which refers to sex workers offering 'more profound and more intimate forms of erotic connection' [[3] (69)].

Bernstein also identified the fact that the internet (in the early 2000s) was 'reshap[ing] predominant patterns of sexual commerce', to the significant benefit of some (mostly middle class) sex workers in allowing them to work without reliance on third party management, to avoid interaction with the criminal justice system and to earn better money by targeting advertising to a 'more elite and specialized' clientele [[3] (93)]. Walby [5] makes similar findings in his study of 'male-for-male internet escorting' noting that the internet has provided this group of sex workers with new ways of working that allows greater independence by facilitating direct communication with clients and providing a plethora of advertising possibilities.

A significant portion of the existing scholarship on internet based sex work has been primarily based on content analysis of platforms and advertisements [6–11] or data mined from sex work web platforms [12,13]. Castle and Lee [8], for example, undertook a broad content analysis of 76 online escort advertising

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sites and Smith and Kingston's [8] study analyses the demographic data of those who advertise on the UK's leading adult website through data provided by the web platform. Cunningham and Kendall [12], using data mined from the internet as well as a survey of online sex workers, explore the economic impact of the internet on commercial sex markets in the USA as well as other impacts such as displacement of street sex workers and risk behaviours among internet based sex workers. Tyler [14,15] combined content analysis with qualitative interviews with sex workers who advertise online, in this case focusing on male sex workers in London. Webcam models are the focus of an article by Jones [16] where she conducts a content analysis of webcam discussion forums and explores both the benefits, as well as dangers, of camming, such as the risk shows will be recorded without their consent (capping), disclosures of personal information online (doxing) in addition to online harassment. Our work builds on all these previous studies, exploring similar themes, but with the largest, to date, quantitative and qualitative dataset relating to internet based sex work.

Audacia Ray, an American writer and sex work activist, writing in 2007 observed that 'the Internet has transformed the sex industry' and 'has opened up a vast new world of opportunity' for independent sex workers [[17] (46)]. Ray documents a certain stratification in the online sex markets, making distinctions between sex work web platforms, like Craigslist,[1] which were free of charge and accessible but attracted a poor quality of clientele, 'the bottom of the barrell' [[17] (51)], to the Eros Guide, which attracts more 'professional' sex workers advertising to 'a middle-class market of men who have Internet access and money to burn' [[17] (52)].

This stratification in the online sex industry, it is argued by Jones, tends to be neglected in existing academic work, which presents an 'overly homogenized portrait of digital sex work' and 'neglect[s] the diversity that exists among types of sex work … and among sex workers themselves' [[19] (559)]. Jones wants to know 'how do different types of sex workers (not just prostitutes) and their customers use the Internet … ?' [[19] (558)]. She also argues that existing studies on internet based sex work are 'altogether too optimistic' by focusing on the benefits or advantages of online sex work and fail to engage fully with the 'dangers that emerge online' [[19] (559)]. She suggests that the 'affordances' brought about by the internet will have varied impacts for differently situated sex workers. Jones also calls for an 'intersectional perspective' asking 'how do sex workers of various races, ethnicities, nationalities, social classes, ages, etc., use the Internet?' [[12] (559)].

3. Methodology

This article is based on findings of the Beyond the Gaze (BtG) research project, an Economic and Social Research Council funded study (ES/M007324/2), run by the Universities of Leicester (where ethical approval was granted) and Strathclyde. The BtG study is a three year multi method study exploring how the internet has impacted the UK sex industry. Data was gathered in a number of ways including a survey of outreach and support projects working with sex workers, qualitative interviews with internet based sex workers[2] (n = 62), with individuals representing online sex industry web platforms and those with IT and marketing experience in the adult industry (n = 12), representatives of various police forces (56 officers covering 16 police forces) and other key informants (n = 8), for example, a lawyer with specialist expertise in digital sex work. A survey of online sex workers hosted by Bristol Online Surveys, was undertaken between 7th November 2016 and 23rd January 2017, this gathered 641 valid responses. We had worked hard to forge relationships with the website platforms that hosted advertisements, ranging from the most popular platforms in the UK to smaller niche and specialist platforms such as BDSM and male escort sites. We were fortunate to achieve a significant amount of 'buy in' and support from these businesses who freely advertised the survey through mailouts and banners popping up on their sites. This support from the sex industry online platforms certainly increased the response rate from sex workers.

In the survey 73% (n = 469) of respondents were women, 19% (n = 124) male, 3% (n = 19) transpeople and 3% (n = 18) non-binary or intersex. We expected the majority to be women, but surmise that these proportions are most likely reflective of the actual gender distribution of sex workers in the UK. In addition, a survey of the people who purchase sexual services in the online sector was conducted with 1309 responses. These constitute the largest surveys of online sex workers and of their customers carried out to date in the UK. This article draws mostly on the qualitative interviews with sex workers and sex industry web platforms as well as the sex worker survey.

Demographics from the survey of 641 are interesting to share here to place the sample in context. What we can summarise from the demographics is that the sample of sex workers is diverse certainly in terms of sexuality, less so in terms of ethnicity, and is largely from an educated population. While 51.3% (n = 239) of female respondents gave their sexuality as straight/heterosexual and 43.6% (n = 203) were bisexual, only four identified as lesbian. In comparison, 63.7% (n = 79) of male BtG survey respondents identified as gay, 28.2% (n = 35) as bisexual and only eight respondents as heterosexual. Over half of respondents were aged between 25 and 44: 36.8% (n = 236) were aged 25–34; 26.5% (n = 170) were 35–44. A further 20.4% (n = 131) were aged 18–24. Only one respondent was aged under 18; 11.1% (n = 71) were 45–54 and 4.7% (n = 30) were aged 55 or over. The largest group of respondents (43.8%; n = 281) entered the sex industry when they were aged 18–24; 15.4% (n = 99) were aged 25–29; and 18.9% (n = 121) were aged 30–39. Only 5.1% (n = 33) entered sex work when they were aged 13–17. The majority of respondents (87.2%; n = 559) were white; 5% (n = 32) were of mixed ethnicity; 2.7% (n = 17) were Asian/Asian British and the same number Black/Black British. Nearly 15% (n = 94) of respondents were of non-UK nationality. Respondents were comparatively highly qualified: 22.9% (n = 147) were educated to degree level; 14.4% (n = 92) had a postgraduate qualification; 33.1% (n = 212) possessed qualifications to A-level or diploma level. Most respondents (71.1%; n = 456) did not have any financial dependents.

One area we did not progress was addressing the calls from scholars like Jones [19] to engage more deeply with the intersectional nature of online sex work, particularly in relation to race and ethnicity. One of the weaknesses of the BtG study was the limited diversity in our sample, with regard to migration status. Even though we have made a number of findings with respect to how migrant sex workers use the internet we also acknowledge that research targeted specifically at migrant sex workers, with for example bi-lingual peer researchers, will help reach a group of sex workers that were excluded from our research project due to language barriers.

[1] Craigslist had an adult services section but this was removed by the company in September 2010 after protests and campaigns alleging that the advertising of sexual services on the website facilitated human trafficking [18].

[2] The vast majority of interviews were conducted over the telephone or online using Skype. Sex worker interviewees were compensated with a £20 shopping voucher.

4. Internet based sex workers

While the existing literature on online sex work is said to focus 'almost exclusively on how prostitutes (and their clients) use the Internet' [[19] (558)] the BtG study was premised on a much broader definition of internet facilitated sex work. We define internet based sex work as:

> Sex workers based on their own, or in collectives, or working through an agency, who use the internet to market or sell sexual services either directly through in-person services (i.e. interacting with clients in person e.g. escorting, erotic massage, BDSM) or through online indirect services (i.e. interacting with clients online e.g. web camming)

This makes a clear distinction between the work of 'prostitutes' or 'escorts' who provide services to their clients in person (direct services) but who use the internet for advertising and marketing and sex workers who provide technology-mediated indirect services, like webcamming, phone sex chat or instant message. In webcamming the models perform shows, often but not always including nudity or sexual content, in front of their webcams, which are then streamed to customers watching on their own personal devices (computers/tablets/phones). Phone sex chat is not an innovation of the digital age but we classify it as a form of indirect internet based sex work because it has also evolved with technological innovations.

Instant messaging involves sex workers providing a text chat service to customers. It operates like text messaging where the sex worker and customer communicate via typed messages on their personal devices. Some adult platforms facilitate instant messaging and allow the sex worker and customer to receive messages from each other without having to share any contact information as the messages are sent through a facility on the website. Instant messaging is charged by the messages received from the sex worker and there are character limits per message. A key finding from the BtG study was the extent to which there was significant crossover between indirect and direct work with the majority of sex workers offering a range of different services [20].

There are no specific laws unique to internet based sex work in the UK and it is currently legal to advertise sexual services online. It is also legal to sell physical sexual services from an indoor premise (soliciting on the streets is criminalised) only if the property is occupied by just one person working independently. If two or more sex workers decide to share an indoor premise then they can be prosecuted for brothel-keeping. In Northern Ireland, laws were passed in 2015 to criminalise the purchase of sex but this does not apply throughout the rest of the UK. There are no laws that regulate the conduct of webcammers or those providing instant message or phone sex services.

5. Spaces of online sex work

The diversity of types of work undertaken by online sex workers is reflected in the diverse online spaces in which commercial sex is facilitated. We produced a typology of online sex work spaces, which identifies twelve unique forms of online environments that, in some way, facilitate or support the sex industry in the UK (see Table 1).

6. The shift online

Our sample of internet based sex workers included those who had worked through the shift to online working and could, therefore, comment on the changes that the internet had brought. Most respondents to the BtG survey (67.7, n = 434), however, had been working in sex work for less than five years, starting at a time when online working was already firmly established.

For those who made the transition from other forms of sex work to internet based working there was no clear pattern in terms of the timing of their adoption of online working practices with some being early adopters and others coming to online working later. Alice (46, provides escort and other services), an early adopter of online working, for example, described how she *'started working via the internet as an independent in America around the year two thousand'* while Ben, (43, provides escort, webcam and other services), felt that *'the explosion on the internet [for sex work] came in about 2007.'*

As the influence of the internet in general social, cultural and commercial life increased, the options for advertising sex work offline declined, to the extent that for indoor sex workers to have a viable business internet advertising became almost essential. The internet was described by the BtG participants as *'extremely important'* (Amanda, 50, provides webcam and other service-s),*'fundamentally important'* (Hannah, 34, provides webcam and BDSM services), *'a hundred million per cent important'* (Jill, 53, provides escort, wecamming and other services), '*absolutely crucial'* (Kisses, 32, provides escort, webcam and BDSM services), '*absolutely essential*' (Slapper, 60 provides escort, webcam, BDSM and other services) and '*the number one important thing to my working life'* (Jane, 26 provides webcam and other services). Many participants felt that without the internet they simply would not be able to continue working in sex work. This was obviously pronounced for sex workers who conducted all of their work in an online environment (webcamming, instant messaging) and so without the internet there simply would be no possibility at all of offering their services:

> There wouldn't be a working life without it. There's no way that I could function, this doesn't function outside the internet. Because I wouldn't be able to log on, I wouldn't be able to do instant messaging. (Rebecca, 48, provides phone and instant message services)

Many of those who offered services in person also felt that without the internet they would not be able to continue working. Boyd (32, provides escort, massage, BDSM and webcam services), for example, said that *'if there was no internet tomorrow, then I think I'd be out of work on this side of things'* and Slapper (60, provides escort, webcam, BDSM and other services) felt that she '*couldn't work without it [the internet]'*. For many there was a perception that without the internet there would be no way to reach clients given the decline in other forms of advertising and others explained that they would not be able to continue working without the internet because other modes of sex working (e.g. street, brothel) did not appeal to them.

7. Diversity in engagement with digital technology

A key finding of the BtG research was that online sex workers engage with online and digital technologies in such diverse ways. Some online sex workers operate from just one advert on one website as their sole marketing source as Heather (31, provides escort services) describes:

> I only use one website which is Platform 1. And I find that it works fine for me, it provides plenty of custom, so I don't feel the need to advertise anywhere else. I mean, in the past I've thought about, getting my own website and advertising on directories,

Table 1
Typology of online spaces.

	Typology of online sex work spaces
Escort directories/advertising platforms	Third party websites that allow sex workers who offer in-person direct sex work to create profiles to advertise their services. Some are international; others focus on the national level and others operate at a more local level.
Webcam platforms	Sites dedicated to the facilitation of webcam shows that provide an interface between the webcam models and the customers.
Multi-service adult entertainment platforms	Websites that offer a range of different sex work services within the one site. The market leading website in the UK is a multi service adult entertainment platform and facilitates a range of services, including providing advertising for escorts, webcam shows and instant message.
Dating and hook-up platforms with commercial advertising	Websites/applications whose main function is to facilitate connection between people for personal relationships and unpaid sexual encounters but some have designated commercial advertising space where sex workers can openly advertise their services, a relatively small number compared to the overall number of these platforms in operation and mainly for men who have sex with men.
Dating and hook-up platforms without commercial advertising	Websites/applications which function to facilitate connection between people for personal relationships and unpaid sexual encounters but have policies prohibiting any kind of advertising for paid sex on their sites/applications so any commercial advertising that is undertaken is done covertly.
Customer Review Forums	Online space where customers post messages about their experiences of buying sexual services including reviews of individual sex workers. They are also a marketing space for sex workers.
Agency websites	Websites run and controlled by third party agencies who act as intermediaries between sex workers who provide direct in-person services and their clients. The agencies are responsible for the running of the websites, which are used to advertise different sex workers working for the agency.
Individual sex worker websites	Websites used to market individual sex workers who work independently, created and managed by the sex workers themselves or by web designers/IT specialists on their behalf.
Classified websites	Online advertising spaces/forums that allow individuals to post user generated advertisements for a range of goods and services. Some classified sites permit sex work advertising and have dedicated and separate space for these while others prohibit it altogether.
Social media platforms/apps	Sex workers engage with social media (for marketing, networking and peer support) in a range of ways and to varying degrees. Many of the above online spaces have a social media presence.
Sex worker forums	Sex worker led online spaces where sex workers can network, get information advice and peer support.
Content delivery platforms	Some sex workers upload and sell photos and film clips on escort advertising sites but there are also dedicated platforms that host and sell user generated adult content online, these are content delivery platforms.

but it all seems like a bit of a hassle, so I just stick with this one website and that works quite well for me.

Others opted for a much more diversified online presence with profiles on a range of different platforms and spaces:

> …as many different UK sites as I can find, I'll use. So my profile will be out maybe about twenty-five/thirty times on various different sites. (Kisses, 32, provides escort, webcam and BDSM services)

> And pretty much if you type in gay escort and [city in North West England], everything that will come back on Google I'm on …. I I think I'm on about fifty-two marketing locations at the moment, and still expanding as I move into new areas. (Spartan, 25, provides escort, massage, BDSM, webcam and other services)

During the interview, the reasons sex workers gave for adopting different marketing strategies were varied and decisions on how to engage with the internet were influenced by a range of factors. These included practical considerations like financial outlay and privacy concerns but the study also found structural factors, for example, migration status and educational background may also impact choices and decisions. In exploring sex workers' use of the internet these structural barriers will be discussed in greater detail.

7.1. Escort advertising and online verification: a barrier for migrant sex workers

Despite the plethora of advertising options available for sex workers a key finding of the BtG study was the reliance on a small handful of market leading websites in the UK. Platform 1, for example, is a key market leader for the vast majority of sex workers in the UK (especially cis-gender[3] female sex workers). Our survey results show that 93.4% (n = 436) of cis-female sex workers (offering all kinds of services) use Platform 1. Male sex workers use Platform 1 much less often[4] (33, n = 41) but trans men (100%, n = 2), trans women (88.2%, n = 15) and non-binary people (76.5%, n = 13) also appear to use Platform 1 in consistent numbers (although the number of respondents to the BtG survey in these gender categories was so low that no firm conclusions can be drawn on the practices of these groups of sex workers).

Platform 1, however, is known to have extremely stringent verification procedures in place that affects the ability of some migrant sex workers to use the site. Platform 1 requires advertisers to provide some combination of a copy of their formal ID (with their real name), a face picture and proof of residency in the UK. It is not known exactly when these identity verification procedures were introduced nor what precipitated their introduction but Platform 1 explained, in a written response to our interview questions, that using these verification procedures *'makes it easier for service seekers to avoid un-verified and potentially troublesome people.'* The emphasis here is on how the verification procedures benefit clients and Platform 1 did not discuss the issue of sex worker privacy or the potential risks to sex workers in providing this level of personal information.

Kim (25, provides escort services), a migrant sex worker, explains how this policy impacted on her:

> I had a problem beginning with trying to get on the Platform 1, because I'm not UK citizen. I mean, I've got a passport now but when I was trying to apply I didn't have a passport. And I've been

[3] We use the term cis-gender/people to refer to those whose gender identity corresponds to the gender they were assigned at birth.

[4] Platform 16 was found to be the market leading website for male sex workers with 76.6% (n = 96) of cis male survey respondents using this site.

> asked the questions like, I'm making a photo of myself holding the newspaper on the corner of the street, which I literally find ridiculous (laughs). Basically they saying it's for their own protection and they're trying to validate if you are in UK but the questions I been asked to do, like literally being asked to make a photo of myself on the corner of the street I find ridiculous. And difficult to get through to anyone, and they're asking you to send a photo of your passport, you holding the passport and newspapers, it's something that is a bit off-putting when you're trying to get through it.

The elaborate verification procedures applied to certain groups of workers, as described by Kim, inevitably impacted on their decision to choose different platforms for marketing and advertising. Some of the migrant sex workers we interviewed were unable to, or chose not to, use Platform 1 because of the difficulties in getting verified. Lavy (33, provides escort and massage services), for example said *'it's very hard to go inside to Platform 1 … the Platform 1 it want the identity card, passport, for me it's difficult because I don't want that –I want be very discreet.'*

There was a perception even among some non-migrant sex workers that Platform 1's verification policy was unfair and discriminatory towards migrant sex workers. Amber (25, provides escort, massage, BDSM and other services), for example, felt that the process was *'really, really hit and miss, really ad hoc and also displays quite a lot of kind of xenophobia.'* It seems that Platform 1 is transparent about having different (more stringent) verification procedures for certain nationalities which was reflected when they responded to our interview questions by writing '*we are ruthless with the verification of Eastern Europeans be they in the UK or elsewhere, offering escort or cam services only.'* This maybe because they are concerned about attracting attention from the authorities who are actively seeking out sectors where modern slavery and trafficking may be suspected.

The BtG survey results support the fact that migrant sex workers in the UK use Platform 1 in less numbers than British nationals. Among British national respondents to the survey 83.2% (n = 426) used Platform 1 to advertise while only 66% (n = 62) of those with non-British nationality used the site. Considering Platform 1 is the market leading advertising platform in the UK this may present real disadvantages to migrant sex workers in their ability to compete with others and attract clients.

Privacy was also raised, both by migrant workers and some non-migrant workers, as a reason to avoid escort advertising sites that required any kind of verification procedure. Kay (48, provides escort services) was so concerned about privacy that not only did she avoid sites that required verification but she did not use any escort advertising site that required payment because she '*didn't want anything to link [her] to [her] real identity*'. She did, however, have her own website and noted that her webmaster was '*the only person I've actually paid anything to*'. For Kay having her own website was a central feature of her marketing strategy and livelihood.

7.2. Sex workers with cultural capital: personal websites and online branding

While having a website was crucial for Kay this was not reflected across our sample with just under a third (28.9%; n = 185) of those who responded to our survey stating that they had their own website. Only four respondents who exclusively provided technology-mediated indirect services had their own website, suggesting that personal websites are predominantly used by those offering in-person services whether that be escorting, BDSM or massage, either solely or in combination with other services.

In qualitative interviews, some sex workers spoke about not needing a website because they were able to generate sufficient business from their profiles on escort directories and advertising platforms. For others, there was a desire to have a website but there was a perception that it would be too expensive or too technically challenging. Cheryl (38, provides escort services) said that *'when it comes to setting up my own website, I don't think I'd be very skilled'* and Kisses (32, provides escort, webcam and BDSM services), was concerned not only about the cost of a personal website but also the technical side of things, like *'keeping it maintained, like hosting it, making sure people's credit card details are secure.'*

The perception that websites required technical skills was, to an extent, confirmed in our research and having a personal website seemed to provide a strong impetus for sex workers to develop their own technical capabilities. Even when participants had their websites professionally designed they were still keen to learn the basics of the website's functionalities in order to be able to update it without relying on a third party designer to do so.

Amber (25, provides escort, massage, BDSM and other services), for example, has her own website, which she built herself and describes the work she does around the website:

> So I have my own professional website. I taught myself how to build my website. And it's something that I enjoy, the technology and learning … Things that I work on quite aggressively is my SEO, so my search engine optimisation, so my rankings in Google basically … I read up. I tried lots of things. It took me a few years. And it's one of those things, I was happy to tinker about on it almost as a hobby. And then obviously just Googled things and, yeah, I put – I put a lot of work into it. But I'm quite happy to do the research and see the results.

Eloise (37, provides escort and erotic massage services) echoes this point when she says *'I have learnt sort of quite a few IT skills, you've got to do really'* and Amy joked that she *'could barely send an email before [she] had the web[site], but you just have to learn'.*

The entrepreneurial spirit and self-directed learning required to develop a website may suggest that those sex workers with a certain degree of cultural capital and educational privilege are more likely to pursue this particular advertising source. This hypothesis was, to a degree, confirmed by the results of the BtG survey, which showed that among those who had their own website, 65.9% (n = 120) had some form of post-secondary education. There were no significant differences in those having personal websites across race or nationality but a personal website was more common among cis-female sex workers (31.7%, n = 147) than cis-gender male sex workers (16.9%, n = 21).

In terms of the advantages of having a personal website some sex workers spoke about how this freed them up from having to rely on escort advertising sites, especially those that dominate the market. As well as reducing overall reliance on other forms of escort advertising many of the interview participants talked about how advertising via their own website gave them more freedom to express themselves and be clear about the services they offer:

> So the two, there's two main benefits to having a website, really. One is that Platform 1 has lots of rules and regulations about what you can say and what you can't say, so I wanted my own site so that I could put exactly what I needed to put on it. (Kay, 48, provides escort services)

It was also clear from interviews with sex workers who operated their own personal websites that branding was a key advantage and

reason for developing their site. Amber talked about how her website enabled her to take advantage of her '*niche*' and allowed her to '*differentiate [her]self*' in a crowded market. Liam (38, provides erotic massage services) felt that creating a strong brand through his personal website really paid off in terms of attracting clients that were specifically interested in the type of service he offered:

> …what I've found is that people who come through my website are people who are directly interested in the service that I offer … Whereas people who came through much more generic websites, like Platform 18 or Platform 21 will often say, "And can you also do this? Can you also do that? Can you give me this? Can you give me that?" I want this, I want it next time. Whereas now I get, I would say, pretty much the clients that I want to see. You know, I've created a product that – and a business that is now – is now attracting the people that I want to attract.

Liam's ability to more clearly and directly brand his service through his website was seen as a major benefit. There was also a strong sense in interviews with sex workers that personal branding with a website was a key way to attract a certain 'higher class' of client:

> I was so sick of the kind of customers that I tend to get, I wanted to e-market myself to, I know this sounds horrible, but like high class, I don't actually use that wording at all in my advertising, but that kind of thing I wanted to do, and you can't really do that without a website. (Bethany, 20, provides escort services)

Personal websites were identified as an important tool to help sex workers develop a clear and targeted online brand that allowed them to attract a particular kind of client. Another major way that sex workers built their online brands was through the use of social media.

7.3. Mainstreaming: sex workers' use of social media

Social media is a relatively new yet pervasive aspect of modern life and sex workers use these mainstream internet platforms in the same way as many other online entrepreneurs and businesses. Like every other form of internet based marketing, however, social media was used in a range of diverse ways by the sex workers interviewed in the BtG research. There were many sex workers in our sample who chose not to engage with social media at all in their working life and the reasons for this almost always revolved around privacy concerns. Aaron (30, provides escort, massage, BDSM and webcam services) explained that he did not use social media for work because it was something he used in his personal life and that he was '*really strict about keeping it all separate*' and Jane (40, provides BDSM services) felt that '*if you go on social media … you're more likely to get outed*' and as a result chose not to use it.

Privacy concerns were, however, divergent with regard to Twitter and Facebook, perhaps the two most widely used social media platforms. Twitter use was far more common amongst research participants and Facebook presented significantly more concerns about privacy as Susan (50, provides escort and massage services) reflects when she says *'I'm just gonna do a Twitter page, but Facebook I'm a bit more dubious of because it's so interlinked and I worry then that it'll target somebody I know.'*

Just under 30% of respondents to our survey used Twitter as a marketing source (28.9%, n = 185). Twitter use was slightly skewed in our quantitative sample towards younger sex workers with lower proportions of the 45–54 and over 55 age groups using Twitter (16.9%, n = 12, and 16.7%, n = 5 respectively) compared with 18–24 year olds (28.2%, n = 37), 25–34 year olds (30.1%, n = 71) and 35–44 year olds (35.3%, n = 60). There was also a difference in Twitter use depending on the type of services that a sex worker provided. Kate (43, provides escort services) had a Twitter page but found it really limited in reaching local clients seeking in-person meetings and said *'if I was camming I think it would be helpful because it's reaching people all over the world but it's not very helpful to reach local punters.'* Kate's suggestion was reflected in the results of our survey with 26.7% (n = 20) of those who *only* offered indirect services (camming and phone sex)[5] using Twitter compared to just 11.2% (n = 22) of those who *only* offered direct escorting services.

Those who did use Twitter used it for simple practical purposes like letting clients know when they are available and ready to work, either in person or on cam. Others saw social media, especially Twitter use, as operating in the same way as a website, as a key way of building up their personal brand and there was a strong perception among social media users that having a presence on social media contributed to building trust among clients. Some people in our research gave considered thought to the creation and ongoing development of brand in terms of image projected and the segment of clients they wanted to target, synchronising brand across the online platforms and social media networks.

Using Twitter to communicate with other sex workers, instead of, or as well as, clients were another common theme that arose from the interviews. Some sex workers, like Anne (25, provides webcam services), used their friendships with other sex workers on social media as a specific marketing strategy:

> I mainly use [Twitter] to engage with other models, cos people absolutely love the engagement between models. Especially when they think that we're all friends. Like my best friend, she's also a cam model, so we really monetise on our friendship. We'll send Tweets together and Snaps together and everyone wants us on cam together, and it never happens, but they just love the fact that we're friends. (Laughs)

For other sex workers social media was a way to connect with fellow sex workers, not as a marketing strategy but more for peer support and friendship. Alice (46, provides escort and other services), for example, uses Twitter *'primarily to connect with other working girls' and* said she had *'zero interest in being contacted by punters through Twitter.'*

Social media gives sex workers the opportunity to use mainstream internet platforms in a relatively controlled way to shape their online presence and develop their personal branding. Online reviews, on the other hand, provide sex workers with substantially less control over their representation online and while they may be a helpful marketing strategy can also lead to serious harms.

7.4. Online reviews: a double edged sword

The questions in our interviews with sex workers about online reviews provoked a range of strong opinions. A high proportion of interview participants felt that reviews, in a general sense, were important for attracting customers and were a useful marketing tool. Eloise said that having reviews posted online *'gets you more work, simple as that'*, Michael felt that reviews are '*so useful*' and Emma believed that she got '*more work from having good reviews*'.

Important distinctions were, however, drawn among some sex

[5] We created an aggregate category of sex workers who only provided technology mediated indirect services, in this case phone sex chat and camming, for analysis purposes.

workers about where reviews were posted, with certain types of reviews proving useful and others, instead, presenting risks of harm to sex workers. Reviews can be posted on the platforms where commercial sex is advertised or undertaken, like escort advertising platforms, webcam platforms, and multi service adult entertainment platforms. On these platforms reviews are often posted to the sex worker's individual profile page on the website. Another frequently used online space for posting reviews is customer forums. These forums are extremely diverse in terms of the culture fostered on the forum and their level of respect towards sex workers. Forums also vary in terms of the 'right to reply' offered to sex workers with some encouraging sex worker participation and others being more hostile.

It was interesting to note that even sex workers who offered phone chat and instant message services were also reviewed by customers, highlighting the fact that reviews are a feature of every form of internet based sex work:

> So whether it's phone work, whether it's direct messaging, whether it's webcam, escorting, you can still leave the same reviews on there, on my, you know, on my profile …. Yeah. I get reviewed for everything really. I mean it's usually, it's, I would say usually I get reviewed for the phone work and the webcam work, funnily enough, more than the escorting. (Lisa, 42, provides escort, webcam and other services)

This echoes how commercial sex has been subjected to the same market forces and consumption processes as other products, goods and services as noted in the online review culture through TripAdvisor, ebay, Amazon and other central purchasing hubs. The consumer culture which has grown up around the service industry in recent decades, residing in a feedback frenzy which has significant impact on businesses and reputation has been mirrored in commercial sex.

7.4.1. Benefits of reviews

Sex workers spoke about the benefits of reviews being that they helped build a sense of trust among potential clients and help show that the sex worker is genuine. Cait (52, provides escort, webcam and other services) felt that having reviews '*proves that the person is genuine*' and Gemma (28, provides escort and other services), who had a '*couple of hundred*' reviews on Platform 1, felt that they helped *'people see that you're genuine … you're reliable, you're trustworthy and you're good at your job.*' Related to this idea of conveying a sense of trust to potential clients, some sex workers spoke about reviews functioning to alert clients that they were still actively working and available, which was felt to be important given the proliferation, and often transient nature, of online sex work advertising. Simone (36, provides escort and BDSM services) tries to '*generally get a review a year*' because '*it shows that I'm there*'.

Some sex workers attempted to exert control over the reviews they received on escort advertising platforms. To be able to submit a review on Platform 1, for example, the booking with the client must be organised through the site's booking system. A number of sex workers we interviewed preferred to organise all (or the majority) of their bookings outside of the platform's booking system. This meant that they could then request reviews from clients who they knew were satisfied and would leave them positive reviews. If a client agreed to leave a review a booking could then be arranged through the platform to allow him to do so. This was done because of a recognition of the harm that could be caused to a sex workers' business if they receive a bad review.

> I don't take bookings through Platform 1 until you've been to see me and then I will take a booking. And then if you want to give me a ref, you're welcome to. Because once you get a bad ref, it's really hard to take it off. (Sevda, 44, provides escort and BDSM services)

This quote from Sevda highlights the potential damage that can be done to a sex worker's reputation, and business, if they receive a negative review. There were mixed feelings, and experiences, among our sample about the impact of negative reviews. Even though Sevda did take precautions to ensure that she did not receive negative reviews, at least on Platform 1, she was fairly ambivalent about their impact noting that '*some clients are really into refs, especially the middle-class type, but I don't think the people I see are*'.

7.4.2. Dealing with negative reviews

For others, however, negative reviews can have a serious impact on their business and their wellbeing. Anna (23, provides escort and webcam services) shared the fact that, in terms of her webcam work, receiving one negative review from a client for a webcam show meant that side of her business '*completely died*'. For Anna the vast amount of competition in webcamming work meant that this review had a seriously negative impact:

> Yeah, because when I've had bad feedback before, like when I've actually been, like told a guy to basically f-off because he was being rude, like, you know, that was the worst move I ever made because then (laughs), you know, I got a bad, a really bad review. Which then, the first thing that you see when you log on, so when clients look up to find a webcammer, they can see the most recent feedback, you see negative, and there's millions of other girls that will have simply just positives.

Anna's experience of the disastrous impact of a negative review for camming work was not necessarily shared by other cammers in our sample. The importance and impact of reviews/feedback for webcammers varied depending on the specific website that was used to cam. Reviews and feedback are important when camming through Platform 1 as Anna described above. Anne (25, provides webcam services) explained that webcam platforms have different systems for placing model's profiles on the website. Anne noted that in Platform 42 customers '*can rate you after private* [shows] *and leave comments and that actually affects your placement*' whereas on Platform 43 reviews have no impact on placement and she is able to delete reviews on this site if she does not like them. Instead, Platform 43 determines a model's placement on the site (how high they appear in the listings) based on their earning levels calculated by how much income they earn on average per hour.

7.4.3. Risks and harm in reviews

Given Anna's experience with the negative review she was much more conscious in her interactions with webcam clients for fear of provoking another bad review. The risk that clients could use the threat of leaving a negative review to coerce a sex worker into providing a service they did not want to do was also raised by some of our participants. Ruz (27, provides escort services), for example, said *'I wouldn't react very strongly to that client if he's doing something I don't want to … I will be still like, er, aware that the, this guy can go online and, you know, write a really bad review about me and then like it can cut my business, basically.*'

Reviews, even when they are positive, can also have a negative side for sex workers and one recurring theme in our interviews was the risk that reviews can generate false expectations amongst clients. Milena (32, provides escort and BDSM services) notes that the '*reviews are quite descriptive*' and that clients reading these reviews then expect to receive exactly the same service, which does not

take account of the uniqueness of each booking, particularly the client's '*personality, hygiene, attitude*', which dictates exactly what services Milena will offer.

In addition to the risk of damaging a person's business and creating false expectations there is also the potential for reviews, especially on certain customer forums, to escalate into serious forms of abuse and harassment against sex workers. Migrant sex workers, according to some of our participants, are particularly vulnerable to racist and xenophobic abuse on some customer forums. Katy (30, provides escort services through an agency) talked about Platform 40, a customer review forum, and noted that '*Romanian girls get so much shit on there*' and Bethany (20, provides escort services), a migrant sex worker herself, said the same thing about Platform 40 noting that '*there were a good number of people there that were Eastern European that were treated really badly*.'

While Bethany felt that she '*was given quite a nice pass on the migrant thing*' because she wrote good English, she still experienced online harassment from her participation in one of the customer forums that included anonymous emails with '*really horrendous abuse*' and veiled threats of violence. Bethany attributes the harassment she received partly to her assertive nature in challenging things that were said on the forum and for expressing strong opinions and fighting back against critical reviews posted by clients noting that the moderators and clients using Platform 40 '*don't like the idea that, you know, sex workers could be smarter than them*.'

Another concern related to reviews was the potential breaches of privacy that occur when clients leave reviews. It was noted that this could be an accidental breach of privacy, for example, the client gives a little too much detail on the sex worker's location to make the working space identifiable. Maggie (42, provides escort services) had experienced '*indiscreet stuff being posted about my location and property I was in, stuff that would be enough in a small place to identify you*.' Sometimes, also clients will intentionally and maliciously breach privacy as Kate (43, provides escort services) notes when she says '*some of them would spitefully actually just put your address up*'. This raises further issues of the broader threats and harms generated through online mediums, ranging from verbal harassment and defamation to other types of serious crimes as other aspects of the Beyond the Gaze project has reported on [20].

8. Conclusion

The BtG study provides a rich and detailed exploration, not just of how the internet has impacted the sex industry in a wider sense, but how individual sex workers, in their diversity, engage differently with online and digital technologies. Our data demonstrates the importance of digital technologies for sex workers in providing them with greater opportunities to market their services and build their businesses independent of third parties. The opportunities to manage their own business, have more control over their client interactions and work patterns means that digital technologies have somewhat improved the ability to professionalise in sex work. In many ways, digital technologies provide a space where dangers involved in advertising services on the street for instance can be avoided. Risks from both arrest, violence from bystanders or targeted hostility from perpetrators is reduced in an online context. However, as discussed, the nature of anonymous communication aligned with often misogynist and anti-migrant attitudes can pose problems in terms of harm and damage to reputation and business. Where advertising platforms facilitate greater powers in the review process to the customer rather than the provider, online risks will prevail for sex workers.

Our research identifies how internet based sex work helps workers avoid the dangers traditionally associated with street based sex work where risk of arrest, violence from bystanders or targeted hostility from perpetrators is reduced. Nevertheless, sex workers' risk of being subjected to violence has not been eliminated since the industry moved online and the internet presents new risks of harm including online harassment, as we discussed. Even though the internet provides sex workers with increased business opportunities and greater control over their work, it cannot be forgotten that, in many contexts, laws and policies remain in place that criminalise many aspects of sex work and make the adoption of safer working practices difficult (the brothel-keeping laws in the UK which prevent workers operating together is just one such example). While the internet has undoubtedly brought benefits for those sex workers who use it, discussions of online sex work cannot lose sight of the continuing struggles sex workers face, to reform sex work laws and improve their working lives.

We have attempted to offer some response to Jones' [19] call for a less homogenised focus on internet based sex work by exploring not just the benefits of the internet for sex workers through the lens of 'professionalization' but also highlighting some of the risks and harms in online sex work as well as how structural factors, like migration status, may impact on sex workers' experiences online. Further research is, however, required to obtain a deeper and more thorough intersectional perspective on internet based sex work, especially with regard to race, ethnicity and gender diversity.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2017.11.004.

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