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Hustling the Platform:
Capitalist experiments and resistance in the digital sex industry

ABSTRACT

An increasing amount of sex work in the UK is now digitally mediated, as workers and clients identify each other, agree prices and services, undertake security checks and often make payment through various platforms and websites. Existing accounts of 'digital sex work' have been both overly technological deterministic and optimistic, largely invisibilising capital and the new forms of power and control it enables. We argue that the dominant platform for digital sex work in the UK - AdultWork - is reshaping the market in direct sexual services, driving down standards and prices and normalising risky behaviours. We posit that these changes in the sex industry are symptomatic and reflective of wider shifts in labour-capital relations and technology and therefore argue that bringing research on platform work and sex work into closer dialogue is mutually productive. Studies of digital sex work would benefit from critical insights into power and control in platform work, while scholars of 'platform work' -and work and employment more generally- have much to learn from paying attention to the gendered labour of sex workers. In particular, resistance and collective organising amongst sex workers, some of the most marginalised workers in contemporary capitalism, can be suggestive of wider strategies of labour resistance and transformation in platform work and beyond.

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Introduction

> *Uber, the world's largest taxi company owns no vehicles, Facebook the world's most popular media owner creates no content, Alibaba… has no inventory and Airbnb... owns no real estate (Goodwin 2015: no page)*.

AdultWork, the UK's largest platform for sex work owns no brothels and employs no sex workers. The platform attracts upwards of 3.8 million visitors per month and was established in the 1990s, predating the emergence of 'newer' platforms such as Uber, Lyft, MechanicalTurk and Deliveroo. Theorists of digital sex work have largely been optimistic about the possibility of engagement with digital platforms such as Adultwork to improve the conditions of sex work (Jonsson et al. 2014; Pruitt 2005; Bernstein 2007). Yet there has been a 'strange absence of capital' in these accounts of digital sex work, which is also symptomatic of theorisations of platform work more generally (Joyce 2020: 3). Scholars of digital work have shown that coterminous with platforms, come new 'platform management models', which ushers in not only new forms of control, but also new types of contestation and resistance (Moore and Joyce 2019: 930). As attention to these features in digital sex work have been largely elided to date, in this article, we develop an analysis that pays attention to the social relations in which sex workers sell their labour, exposing the new forms of power and control by capital and the ways in which workers resist them.

We argue that AdultWork is reshaping the market in direct sexual services in and beyond the platform, driving down standards and prices and normalising risky behaviours. Attempts to regulate sex work online also have uneven effects, negatively impacting migrant sex workers and increasing the potential for exploitation. This analysis leaves us pessimistic about the possibility for liberation via a simple shift to online work, but we find optimism elsewhere: in sex workers' hacks, hustles and collective resistance and organising. Moreover, we argue that by placing debates about other types of platform work in dialogue with sex work, the degree of novelty in the employment relations of platform work come into question: the core features of platform

work including insecurity, exclusion from social protection and have always been characteristic of sex work and feminised work more generally. As such, we posit theorectically, that researchers of platform work and sex work have much to learn from greater dialogue and politically, that considering resistance and organising amongst sex workers can be indicative of wider strategies of labour resistance and transformation.

Digital sex work and platformisation

There is a wide consensus that 'the internet has reshaped sex work' (Jones 2015: 560). Existing accounts have conceptualised 'online sex work' as including sexual services which are delivered by digitally *and* in person (Jones 2015; Sanders et al. 2018; Rand 2019). We argue that it is necessary to establish a distinction between 'online sex work' on the one hand and 'digitally-mediated direct sex work' (which is delivered inter-corporeally, in place). The latter is a form of embodied 'body work' (Wolkowitz 2002; Hardy 2014) and it is this specific form which is the focus of this article. Scholars of digital platform work in other industries have distinguished between 'online' and 'offline' work, or 'digital' and physical' tasks (Forde et al. 2017; Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn 2019). In sex work, maintaining this distinction is vital for generating critical and precise insights into the nature of sex workers' labour and working experiences, since direct in-person sex work differs in involving significantly greater physical and health risks and risk of criminalisation. For example, the labour process for OnlyFans or 'web-camming', which involves the sale of sexual images or live internet-mediated engagement, differs significantly from providing oral or penetrative sex to another individual in a isolated hotel room or rented flat.

Overall, scholars of sex work largely understand the internet as enabling improved working conditions including safer work (Jonsson et al. 2014), increased wages (Pruitt 2005), reduced negative encounters with police and the criminal justice system (Cunningham and Kendall 2011; Bernstein 2007) and increasing class mobility (Bernstein 2007). Other studies show how the internet can remove third parties from sex work (Bernstein 2007), increasing the autonomy of sex workers (Scoular et al. 2019), while simultaneously reducing risk (Jones 2015). Yet as Jones (2015) rightly

points out, this literature - has been ‘too optimistic’ and her and others point to the ‘new dangers’ emerging online, including privacy violations, harassment and stalking (Scoular et al. 2019). Moreover, she warns against an emergent techno-determinism in these accounts (Jones 2015) which understands the impact of the internet as acting ‘on’ sex work and sex workers unidirectionally. The erasure of sex workers agency in this regard is somewhat surprising, as sex work and sex workers have been fundamental in shaping the internet. Pornography has been ‘a major promoter of new communication technologies’, some of the earliest software used to verify financial transactions originated in systems for commodifying telephone and internet pornography (Coopersmith 1998: 94) and prostitution markets had already developed online as early as the 1980s (Cunningham and Kendall 2010).

Beyond the sex industry, increasing attention has been paid to the expansion of ‘new’ forms of employment via ‘platforms’, defined most broadly as ‘a set of digital frameworks for social and marketplace interactions’ (Zysman and Kenney 2017: 65). Research on platform work is increasingly expansive, but many of the earlier theorisations were overly ‘celebratory’ and ‘obscure[d] the pivotal role played by labour, thereby avoiding consideration of employment relations and the exploitative working conditions which underpin it’ (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn 2019: 22). It is now clear that platform work is characterised by a lack of regulation and a lack of employment and social protections (Forde et al. 2017; Wood et al. 2019) and this has confounded many scholars in terms of theorising the employment relations within it. Yet in many ways, platform work ‘comprises another category of non-standard work, emulating working practices which are enmeshed within the wider labour market’ (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn 2019: 22). Similarly, while sex work is usually treated as exceptional and excluded from mainstream debates on work and employment, it too is characterised by these features. Indeed, sex work is -and has always been- an archetypal form of insecure, unprotected, informal labour (Hardy and Cruz 2018).

Platforms bring with them new ‘platform management models’ (Moore and Joyce 2019: 930), which include the integration of customer ratings, engagement of labour on a

(often false) self-employed basis, and extraction of commission on every transaction mediated by the platform. Importantly, this form of platform managerialism ushers in not only new forms of control, but also new types of contestation and resistance (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2017; Moore and Joyce 2019). Sex workers -like platform workers- are excluded from regulatory frameworks for collective bargaining (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn 2019) and such exclusion raises questions about possibilities for collective action and resistance (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2017; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). Collective action can be considered 'unlikely' 'given the atomisation and spatial dispersal' characterising labour in both sex work and the platform economy (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020: 36). While platform workers find themselves 'fragmented, isolated… workers, doomed to a downward spiral of individualised, 'dog-eat-dog' competition' (Joyce 2020: 7), this has always been the experience of sex work (Hardy and Cruz 2018). Despite facing these complexities and the additional challenge of criminalisation and stigma, sex workers have long histories of collective organising to improve their conditions of work (Hardy 2010; Hardy and Cruz 2018; Barbagallo and Cruz forthcoming) and platform workers are developing emergent forms of solidarity and collectivisation (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020).

Platforms have been understood by many as 'forming one pole of a triangular relationship' (Forde et al. 2017) between worker, client/customer and platform. However, more convincing analyses bring a closer focus on the role of capital and the labour-capital relationship (Howcroft 2019; Joyce 2020). Simon Joyce (2020) highlights the ways in which capital has interpellated itself in platform work, through the Marxist concept of 'subsumption' in which previously independent labour processes are brought under the direct control of capital, albeit to differing degrees, along a continuum of 'formal' to 'real' subsumption. Through formal subsumption, labour processes remain unchanged, but new relations of domination and subordination are introduced, whereas through processes of real subsumption the labour process is itself transformed (Marx 1976). Joyce (2020: 5) draws attention to the less attended to concept of 'transitional sub-forms' of subsumption, in which labour processes remain unchanged, but capital extracts unpaid labour by supplying 'the conditions of labour', including access to

markets. As he points out, 'the various forms of platform work are mainly located in the transitional sub-forms and formal subsumption areas of this continuum' (Joyce 2020: 5). In so far as independent street-based sex work could be considered a form of sex work that is 'outside' of capitalist relations of production, there is a long history throughout the development of capitalism of brothels and agency owners harnessing and transforming sexual labour in their pursuit of control and profit (Federici 2004). These processes of subsumption and specifically the role of platform within them have, however, largely been erased in the debates on digital sex work. As a rejoinder, in what follows, we argue that it is by gatekeeping the major market for the sale of sexual labour power that Adultwork is able to extract value from sex workers via differentiated processes of subumption.

Methodology

This article is the product of a participatory research project (PAR) *Unionising Reproductive Workers: Labour Demands, Organising and the Market.* The aim was to develop knowledge in order to facilitate and support activists in implementing and delivering campaigns for unionisation and the decriminalisation of sex work. Sex workers are a 'hard-to-access' group, necessitating somewhat novel approaches to data generation. Scholars and sex worker activists argue for the inclusion of sex workers as active participants and collaborators in sex work research, as the overwhelming amount of research conducted 'on' sex workers yields results that many workers claim does not reflect their realities (Wahab 2003; Van der Meulen 2011). As such, a PAR approach was used, based on the principles collaboration, participation and transformation (Johnson & Martinez Guzman, 2013). Developing this approach meant foregrounding 'dialogue' (Lopez 2011) and 'reflexivity' (Shortall 2011) with the aim to 'produce knowledge and action directly useful to people, and also to empower people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge' (Shortall 2011).

The project emerged through a collaboration between the two authors, who have converged through their work about and within the sex workers rights movement for almost fifteen years. The data was generated using three methods: observation, a

workplace survey and ‘dialogic’ interviews with activists. Participant observation and extensive note taking took place at public events, street demonstrations, and regular campaign and union meetings over two years. A workplace survey of 256 workers was undertaken in stripping venues across the UK. The survey questions were brainstormed by union activists to gather information that would be useful for organising efforts and it was developed to complement a previous study (Sanders and Hardy 2014) in order to capture change over time. Finally, innovative collaborative ‘dialogic’ interviews took place with eight activists who sell sex as cis-women and are leaders in the sex worker rights movement. In contrast to stand-alone one-off interviews, these ‘dialogic interviews’ constituted just one element of ongoing conversations, generating data of significantly greater depth and quality, reflecting time spent organising and building meaningful trust and rapport with the workers involved. The dialogue continued through asking workers to provide critique and reflection on a draft of the written text, enabling workers themselves to check for representativeness of historical events and to deepen the analysis, adding accuracy, detail and nuance. As such, the knowledge produced in this article has been ‘collectively wrought’ (Mohanty 2003), supporting the key principle in the sex worker rights’ movement: ‘nothing about us without us’ (Mac and Smith, 2018).

As sex workers have been both researchers and interlocutors throughout the process, the research has been embedded within the political and industrial strategies that have established Decrim Now, a national decriminalisation campaign and created a new trade union branch, United Sex Workers (USW) of the independent grassroots union, United Voices of the World (UVW). In March 2020, USW organising efforts culminated in the Employment Tribunal decision, *Nowak v Chandler Bars Group Ltd* that concluded that strippers and dancers fall within the definition of “worker” found in various UK labour laws (Barbagallo and Cruz, forthcoming).

Adultwork and the transformation of direct sexual services in the UK

As a 'multi-service adult entertainment platform' Adultwork has a relative monopoly on the digitally-mediated direct sex work market (Cunningham et al., 2017, p.29; Rand

2019). The low start-up costs to join Adultwork (it is free to create a profile) make it an attractive and low-risk point of access to the industry, particularly 'if you don't have any experience of designing your own website… or… money to pay for the hosting' (Diana, 28 years old). Jenna (32 years old) concurred: 'for a lot of people [it's] their only source of business, and for various other reasons they can't use anything else'. A basic search for cis women sex workers on Adultwork returns around 37,000 profiles, 16,000 profiles of cis men sex workers and around 2,500 trans sex workers (accessed 1 July 2020). Despite an estimated a forty percent difference between outward facing and actually active profiles (Cunningham et al. 2017), workers report a huge over-supply of labour on the site: 'it like saturates… girl after girl after girl, and you have these tiny little profile pictures, and then like a hundred pages' (Miranda, 21 years old).

An increased 'ability to improve safety and screening is a salient theme' (Scoular et al. 2019: 157) in existing literature on digital sex work. Yet as Miranda suggests, this visible labour oversupply impacts on safety practices:

> *You have to like take the phone number and the email, and take it through like Ugly Mugs, search it on social media, ask for proof of address …. which can take like half an hour per client.*

By the time this safety measure had been undertaken, clients would frequently have engaged another worker instead. Previously, client loyalty to agencies or premises reduced the time cost of screening, as it could be undertaken once per agency and premises had the added deterrent of a manager's presence. As such, while digitally mediated sex work enabled greater capacity for screening (Jones 2015; Sanders et al. 2018), independent sex workers working on the platform face pressure not to undertake these practices, leading to a decline in health and safety and worsening working conditions.

Control and value extraction on Adultwork

Adultwork's model reflects other platforms operating in the official economy: sex workers are deemed to be 'independent workers' and fixed costs such as premises are shifted onto individual workers (Forde et al. 2017; Wood et al. 2019). In contrast to other gig economy platforms, in which a set piece rate is paid (Deliveroo) or an algorithm allocates the value of a job (Uber) (Gandini 2019), Adultwork has a highly specified method of value extraction. An internal system of 'credits' operates (one credit = £1), which workers can then convert into sterling by 'cashing them in'. At the point of conversion, Adultwork deducts 30 percent of the value, a fee that Rand (2019: 48) notes is 'exceptionally high'. It is not clear what is the comparator here, since other digital work platforms have been found to charge between 10-30 per cent (Moore and Joyce 2019) or 20-45 per cent (Silberman and Irani 2016). For sex work, 30 percent is standard or even low when compared to other systems of management, for example house fees for stripping venues (average of 30 percent, Sanders and Hardy 2014) or brothels (circa 50 percent).

Sex workers are encouraged by Adultwork to add new content (photos, videos, blog posts) frequently, by being rewarded with increased visibility on the main page (Rand 2019). When clients access workers' content on the platform, the client pays through the platform's credits system (with the attendant 30 per cent deduction if and when worker's cash out their credits). In this way, the site replicates the processes of value extraction deployed by traditional employers in the sex industry who also take a percentage of workers earnings. For in-person bookings, clients pay workers directly and Adultwork does not profit from those transactions. However as Diana outlines, in order to have a 'successful' day with enough in-person bookings, she needs to either pay upfront for credits or generate 10 credits from clients viewing her content, in order to pay for the promotion she needs on be visible on the platform:

> *It's 1.50 for a local search, 5 credits for available today, and you might want a couple more for some featuring or if you want to show your phone number.*

Generating credits therefore requires frequently creating and adding new content in order to appear higher up the algorithm search function to increase the chances of attracting clients. Although Adultwork does not lock sex workers into only using their platform (Rand 2019: 47), it does requires primary content, including images and text, to be exclusive to the site. Workers are increasingly encouraged to upload videos, which attract a higher number of credits, but which require higher financial and labour costs to produce (Nicola, 27 years old). This in turn necessitates a qualitative intensification of work and an extension of the working day. This time spent creating content for the site, learning how to use and navigate the site and the additional requirement for exclusive content also acts as a sunk cost (both material and psychological), making workers even more dependent on the platform and raising the costs of leaving.

In doing so, Adultwork reinforces its monopoly and reproduces its 'network effect' in which cumulative benefits accrue through its dominance (Fuchs 2014; Gawer 2014). This buttresses Adultwork's market power and labour control, which derives from the tendency towards monopolisation of platforms driven by the scale of users (Srnicek 2017) (both workers and clients). Such scale (or what workers have referred to here as over-saturation) makes the site useful for both groups, but once a certain scale has been reached it makes it hard for other platforms to enter the market, reinforcing the 'necessity' of using Adultwork.

Declining standards: check list services, review culture and reverse bookings

The infrastructure and governance systems of platforms have 'important consequences for workers, affecting whether they are empowered or exploited' (Choudary 2018: 1). In the case of sex work, activists have emphasised that 'platforms such as AdultWork are major contributors to the decline in workers safer sex standards' (Caradonna, 2019). Workers point to the 'check list' of services, a searchable menu that is highly visible on each worker's Adultwork profile. This includes a number of risky and unsafe practices:

> *Oral sex without a condom is quickly becoming normalised, often with very little extra charged for this service… Vaginal sex without a condom used to be almost non-existent... It is now becoming common. Anal sex... has also become a much more widespread and cheaper practice (Caradonna 2019).*

The ability to search for these services decreases the time costs for clients in identifying workers who offer them and therefore increases the clients negotiating position. Importantly, this 'indicates to new workers and crucially, clients, that risky practices are no longer seen as exceptional' and are devalued to the extent that they have become cheaper and less exclusive (Caradonna 2019). As Miranda emphasises, in a context in which the platform visibly offers 'hundreds' of 'girl after girl' 'it really gives clients the idea of like 'well, if you won't do exactly what I want, I can go to any of the thousands of other girls'. The technological infrastructure of the platform is therefore central to transforming desire, changing the subjectivities of clients through visibilising and increasing the availability of risky and unsafe types of sexual services, which are simultaneously devalued.

Review systems have additionally been instrumental in lowering health and safety standards in the industry. Reviews, now common across platform work (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn 2019), were popularised in the UK sex industry by sites such as PunterNet over two decades ago (Sanders 2008). Both sex workers and other digital workers report an ever increasing amount of time spent online (Joyce 2020), collapsing temporal and spatial boundaries between work and personal life (Dén-Nagy 2014). In sex work, review scores necessitate increased digital availability and contact in order to 'constantly respond to customers to ensure feedback is positive' (Rand 2019: 52). Much of sex work is paid for a specific length of time, with a corresponding set price (for example £150 per hour for a specified service). However, as Jenna points out 'there's so much invisible labour going on behind the scenes. I'd say like if it's five bookings a week, then like 15 hours of admin a week'. Using a relatively conservative estimate of three additional hours of labour needed for marketing, responding to requests and maintaining social media profiles, then the hourly charge rate is only ¼ of the hours that

workers have spent working, making pay closer to £37 an hour. This amount of unpaid labour is part of the reason Miranda stopped doing 'independent' work and moved to a managed brothel:

> *When you're independent you have to just be like always on, so you'd always have your work phone just in case you got a call, and then you might have to drop everything, because that would be like your one call that week.*

The digitalisation of solicitation has also created additional labour for sex workers as clients who are lonely and seeking attention create demand for significant unpaid labour with no financial reward: 'my main concern, when I'm speaking to new clients, isn't really whether they're safe or not, but usually … whether they are a 'time-waster' (Diana). In the immediate sense, 'time wasters' are a drain on potential earnings, but they also have more hidden deleterious effects:

> *When you have fielded ten inquiries and five no shows, you end up taking the booking you were feeling iffy about, because at least they're going to show up. Time-wasters grind down our boundaries until the actual violent clients can get to* us (Miranda).

Ratings and reviews are common and problematic across platform work (Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017; van Doorn, 2017) and often produce racial and gendered discrimination (Slee 2015), but they have specifically dangerous implications in sex work, as they push workers' boundaries and increase exploitation. As Miranda quips, 'review culture is not a fan of people having limits in work'. Expanding on this, she states:

> *I don't think it's possible to be a worker that gets all positive reviews ... unless you're doing services like bareback and stuff, and basically just having no limits and giving the client everything they'd ever asked for.*

Echoing a widely held assumption in the sex worker community, Jenna (32 years old) argues that ‘Adult Work was set up by clients for clients’. This is because ‘clients are not exposed to the same scrutiny and violation to their privacy’ (Tanya); workers have to pay to be prominently featured on site, whereas it remains free for clients to search, contact workers and book; and new settings also allow clients to book without prior discussion, negotiation and agreement with workers.

A further ‘innovation’ that Adultwork developed is the ability for clients to list a ‘reverse booking’. In an inversion of how the sex industry has previously been organised, the client outlines what services he is looking for and importantly, sets a price. Individual workers are then able to ‘bid’ and essentially, are invited to undercut each other:

> *It just gave [clients] way too much power...reverse bookings are the worst thing on the website ever... I just find it really, really repulsive that you get these really entitled guys on there who are like 'I have £50 and I want all of these services' (Miranda).*

This ‘innovation’ by capital transforms and changes the labour process by distributing more power towards clients and away from workers. In contrast to platforms such as Uber, in which the algorithm ‘decides’ the value of the ride or Deliveroo in which workers receive a fixed amount (Gandini 2019), it is the design of the website itself which leads to a downward pressure on prices and health and safety standards, as workers seek to undercut each other, offering more for less. In short, Miranda described this feature as ‘producing a new generation of really revolting scummy clients’. While the platform itself cannot compel workers to participate in these services, they are instead forced to do so by ‘dull economic compulsion’ (Marx 1976).

Scoular et al. (2019: 156) have argued that ‘very few [digital sex workers] pay a third party to assist them… other than advertising platforms who are paid to market their work’. It is clear that -whatever it purports to do- AdultWork is not a passive platform for advertising. Instead, the infrastructure of the platform and the cumulative effect of its

features (visible over-saturation of labour, visible and searchable service lists, visible pricing, reverse bookings and review systems) has a wider effect in reconstituting the labour market for sexual services, even amongst independent workers. Additionally, existing scholarship claims that 'the services' provided in digitally mediated direct sex work have not changed (Jones 2015). Clearly, however, the nature of the technology of Adultwork is directly constitutive of the material experience of the direct sale of sex: in terms of the type of services offered, the boundaries that workers are able to assert and the level of financial reward they receive. Far from liberating sex workers from third parties (Bernstein 2007, Bleakley 2014), Adultwork's differentiated forms of subsumption of independent sex work and its monopoly as a digital intermediary has increased its avenues to extract value from sex workers, and has normalised higher risk practices and driven down prices, creating what Miranda refers to as 'a race to the bottom'.

Everyday resistances, hacks and hustles

Fuck Adultwork! (Jenna)

Centring the agency of workers is key to generating fuller understandings of digital sex work as a labour-capital relation (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). This approach enables us to illuminate the various forms of resistance enacted by sex workers, ranging from circumventing Adultwork, to hacks and hustles and collective organising. Here our analysis departs from existing accounts of digital sex work, which have focused on the impact of the internet *on* sex workers, without understanding how sex workers' agency and forms of resistance also reshape the digital platforms that profit from them.

Adultwork's monopoly means that: 'it's always gonna be way more complicated than just like 'fuck this platform, I don't want this platform around any more" [as] .. so many people rely on it' (Jenna). The power of Adultwork is, however, not absolute and workers resist and defy the labour control, discipline and dehumanisation of digital work

in multiple ways. The platform's market dominance simultaneously produces dependence from workers, but also defiance and resentment. For example, just as AdultWork creates its own internal currency market of credits, so too sex workers produce a parallel solidarity economy:

> *I didn't want to use AdultWork anymore and I had a bunch of credits in there... So... I was like 'Does anyone want to buy my credits for like 40 percent?', because I would rather take less money myself, but have the money not go to AdultWork and have the money go to another prostitute (Jenna)*

Workers developed other internal economies to share costs and to provide additional work, for example commissioning photography shoots from other workers and sharing the cost of a hotel room to reduce the cost of content production.

Considerable amounts of time, energy and creativity are deployed in attempts to hustle, hack or otherwise get around the rules and regulations on AdultWork. Miranda explained that rather than paying to increase visibility or new content, 'the usual thing people ... to boost their profile, is to say change one digit in your overnight rate'. To evade exclusivity content rules, workers often touch up, edit or manipulate images, cropping them, adding new filters or colours, so as to be able to recycle and reuse them.

Sex workers also seek to restore the independence and autonomy that is eroded as capital subsumes parts of labour process of sexual work, by engaging in a wider ecology of digital spaces. Workers create their own websites, manage their profiles on various directories and have developed sophisticated marketing tools that utilise mainstream social media platforms in order attract higher rates, engage with clients who make bookings in advance and who book for a longer amount of time. Instagram is rarely used since it 'polices sex workers profile much more heavily than Twitter' (Tanya). Diana 'spend[s] several hours a day on Twitter', mainly because 'Google analytics [shows that it is] one of the main ways to get people to click on my website'.

In addition to using Twitter commercially, it is also used as a space to build collaboration between sex workers. Diana is involved in a retweet group that enables workers to collectively challenge the censorship they experience on social media platforms and 'try to help each other hustle':

> *We'll follow each other and.. occasionally you might want to boost a specific post, like 'I'm doing in-calls on these dates', or 'I'm available for this''... So we would put that on the retweet group... and people will engage either by retweeting or commenting on the photo.*

Twitter is also used to generate solidarity and share information: 'I just either boost things about [sex worker] organisations that I'm involved with and... occasionally complain about other clients or about other workers being shitty' (Diana). Miranda similarly emphasised the use of her sex worker rights activist account on Twitter 'to complain about work, which is good for my mental health'.

Sex workers have also used the internet to develop their own worker-run sites and platforms to increase their safety and share knowledge. Support and Advice for Escorts (SAAFE) forum was established in 2003, as a result of a collaboration between experienced escort sex workers. A popular board in the forum is 'Warnings & Wasters' in which workers are able to post reports about in-person incidents, persistent time-wasters and phone/text 'pests':

> *One of the best established aspects of SAAFE is people exchanging 'Buddy' services, which is someone to check in with and share client details when doing a booking and reports about dodgy and violent clients (Nicola).*

Diana's involvement in these information sharing hubs, in particular in secret Facebook groups, meant that she was better able to navigate the AdultWork review system. Since workers are disincentivised from giving clients bad reviews in Adultwork, Miranda

discovered secret ‘subtextual codes [used]… to warn other people about clients’ who might be aggressive or problematic (Miranda).

Yet these online community spaces are constantly under threat. The criminalisation of the industry via legislation such as FOSTA-SESTA (Chamberlain 2019) and laws against ‘incitement for the purposes of prostitution’ (Section 52 of the UK Sexual Offences Act 2003) prevent workers from advertising, but also from offering advice to each other, threatening the very communities of safety that sex workers self-organise:

> *With stuff like shadow banning, and Twitter, I feel like our place online is more and more in jeopardy. We're constantly talking about the threat of having safety groups on Facebook shut down, and having all of our reports about clients taken away (Miranda).*

Miranda points out that much like the innovation that pornography initiated on the early internet, sex workers have been early adopters of new technology, who then remove them:

> *Websites - like Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr and basically every anonymised payment processor - build up large platforms partly on the back of sex workers, and then kick sex workers off when they can sustain themselves without them.*

In this way, independent sex workers have provided free labour to major Silicon Valley platforms, and are rewarded by having their accounts deleted or shadow banned when such content becomes commercially risky due to the criminalisation sex work. In preventing sex workers from using these sites to drive customers to their own websites, such regulation by platforms reinforces the power of third parties and intermediaries, including Adultwork, but also more traditional agencies and managed premises. As well as limiting their ability to advertise, these experiences mean that despite the many parallels with other types of digitally-mediated gig work, organising in the sex industry, especially in its digital manifestation, brings specific challenges. The nature of

criminalisation in the UK threatens sex workers' safety by undermining their ability to support each other online and deterring them from reporting instances of harm, all of which reinforces the power of third parties and in particular, the monopoly power and market gatekeeping of Adultwork.

Collective resistance and power

Beyond these 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985), the internet has been an important resource not only for reshaping social relations between workers and clients, but also between workers themselves (Feldman 2014; Scoular et al. 2019). It has facilitated sex workers being able to build solidarity, take action on the streets and participate in political campaigning, enabling workers to communicate more easily on a national and international basis. Crucially it has helped to attract workers to offline community spaces, such as the sex worker breakfast programme that has been running in London since 2011. The interplay between online and offline spaces is important, because:

> *Breakfast acts as a sort of gateway into not only info about the hacks - but also a way that we kind of verify that workers are real and invite them into these online spaces of resistance like retweet groups or screening groups (Miranda).*

In platform work, regardless of industry, workers have great difficulty getting in contact with the people who have the power to make decisions and this undermines workers' ability to negotiate, increasing the power and control that the platform exercises, particularly if facing 'deactivation' (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas 2018; Wood et al. 2019). Similarly, in relation to Adultwork, 'it is impossible to speak to a human if encountering a problem, so you can be 'fired' without notice or any chance to negotiate (Tanya). In 2018, however, SWARM activists finally managed to meet in person with representatives of Adultwork to try and counter some of the platform's deleterious practices. A key issue for the activists was the highly convoluted set of racialised rules and terms and conditions in order for workers to work from the site:

> *First they always ask you to have a piece of paper with the date and your user ID… and also a copy of your passport…. and a picture with a newspaper... Now they ask you to be on a postbox, or on a telephone box, with the newspaper, to prove that you are real.*

As part of the verification process: 'by default, the photo [you provide]… and your passport details are visible' (Selena, 39 years old). Occasionally, workers were not able to remove these in time, giving clients access to many of these photographs which were used systematically to doxx sex workers: as 'there's a forum where clients track new girls' profiles to try and catch that mistake and upload the verification picture' (Miranda). This process has an uneven impact, often effectively excluding migrants from registering with the platform, even when they have the legal right to work in the UK.

Workers sought to address the verification processes and specific technical design aspects of the platform that worked against sex workers safety. Bianca (27 years old) describes how the two AdultWork representatives, dressed in suits, were 'very interested in appearing nice and friendly. But also were very good at manipulating the situation and not giving straight answers'. When challenged on the way in which the company used the verification process to racially profile workers and stop migrants registering, Adultwork claimed that they were unaware of these issues:

> *They said that they didn't realise that this was a feature that had been misfiring or incorrectly showing the photos. They also claimed they didn't have any particular policy around migrants, it was just based on everybody having to be British in order to have access, just because it reduces the risk of trafficking (Bianca).*

The meeting proved to be disappointing. The verification processes remained unchanged and the lack of leverage that workers have to collectively organise around the working conditions on AdultWork became clear. The interface on the site has not changed significantly since its design in the 1990s and many workers struggle to navigate and use it efficiently. Despite the representatives' claim to be 'very interested

in working with us to make the platform more sex worker positive' (Bianca), the AdultWork representatives categorically rejected making it more user friendly for workers, 'because they had to make sure that the clients could use it and the clients preferred this old school interface' (Bianca). Overall, they were resistant to making any changes suggested by the workers: 'they were really arrogant that they were the only big player in the market and so they didn't need to do anything to it' (Selena).

Nevertheless, Adultwork's monopoly is now being challenged through more traditional, collective organisation and as individual workers inevitably become more tech-savvy, building their own platforms which are growing in size (Selena), and using platforms such as Twitter to direct business to their own websites and platforms. Since stigma is a key challenge in organising sex workers (Hardy and Cruz 2018) the internet has been vital in facilitating communication, not least due to enabling anonymous engagement for people who wish to participate in activism but maintain privacy (Scoular et al. 2019). Last, but not least, sex workers are forming unions and workers' cooperatives (Hemery, 2020), drawing more workers into their struggle and beginning to win legal cases and union recognition, offering a more hopeful horizon for struggles in and beyond digital sex work (Hall, 2019; Barbagallo and Cruz forthcoming).

Conclusion

AdultWork, the dominant platform marketplace for sexual labour in the UK, along with its attendant practices such as review systems predate many of the 'novel' labour platforms by at least two decades. Apparent 'transformations' in the world of work relating to platformization and the associated growth in self-employment have been hailed by commentators as leading to an unrecognisable future of work. Yet examining platform work in a digitalised sex industry shows more continuity than change with regard to direct in-person sex work. Morever, it is clear that in fact, other forms of work - including platform work in other industries- may increasingly be adopting the employment relations and labour conditions of sex work. Many established practices in the industry have prefigured the 'new' forms of work in the platform economy, including

the visible over-saturation of labour, visible and searchable service lists, visible pricing, and review systems.

Much like other platforms, Adultwork is neither a static nor neutral technology on which sex workers simply advertise their services, it is instead an economic actor within capitalist relations of production. By gatekeeping the major market for the sale of sexual labour power that Adultwork is able to extract value from sex workers via a transitional sub-form of subsumption. Digitally-mediated sex work may have reduced the reliance of some sex workers on traditional intermediaries (including agency and brothel owners), but it has enabled new ones to emerge and expand with new forms of control and market-making in the sex industry. Moreover, the governance of the Adultwork has actively redistributed power away from workers towards clients and reshaped the market in direct sexual services even beyond the platform. This has contributed to the intensification and extension of the working day, the lowering of standards and prices and the normalisation of risky behaviours for 'unmanaged' independent sex workers.

Contesting the labour-capital social relations of sex work has always been complex, due to both the isolated and stigmatised nature of the work and workers' criminalisation. Workers' inability to effectively communicate with the owners of the key platform complicates this further. Yet workers have developed everyday forms of resistance by retaining their revenues, redistributing them collectively and building alternative platforms. Since capital has a long history of experimentation in forms of labour control and value extraction in the sex industry and as employment conditions in the labour market more broadly come to reflect those of sex work, sex workers' resistance is a fertile terrain from which to draw both theoretical and political lessons. Future research on platform work and non-standard forms of employment more generally, would be enriched by closer dialogue with accounts of the growing collectivisation of sex workers, which offer the potential for understanding labour dissent, conflicts and power from the very margins of the labour market.

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