"Webcaming Platforms and Structural Sex Precariousness in the Era of Platform Capitalism"

Pierre Brasseur (Clersé, Lille 1)
Jean Finez (Pacte – Université Grenoble Alpes)
Introduction

- Webcaming – a form of platform capitalism is transforming the sex trade (legal and visible)
- Programatic: in exploration
- Definition: a show activity, organised by platforms (Cam4, LiveJasmin, uFancyme, etc.)
  - On the one hand, we have people offering shows against retribution.
  - On the other spectators, who pay or not, to attend shows.
Why focus on sexcaming?

- Platform that has been the subject of little work, at least outside social science work on gender and sexuality
- Media discourse to demonise what is perceived as a new form of prostitution: moral panic
- Hypothesis: You do not sell a sexual service like other services. Produce unique forms of engagement on these platforms.
Is sexcamming a singular form of labor exploitation?

- A field that lends itself to the observation of forms of precariousness and exploitation of labour in the universe of platform capitalism, and in particular the exploitation of emotions.
- Towards a form of emotional precariousness?
- Two questions
  - Is sexcamming a singular form of labour exploitation?
  - Does sexcamming contribute to the creation of sex precariousness?
Communication plan

- 1. Becoming a camgirl?
- 2. What does it mean to be camgirl?
- 3. Modes of engagement
Methodology:

1.1 The population
- Camgirls/francophone/broadcasting public shows/having a male audience

1.2. Field: observations on the web
- Sexcaming platforms
- Other web spaces (promotional sites, camgirls blogs, Twitter…)

1.3. Interviews with models
- 20 camgirls
- 5 camboys
1. Why do one become a camgirl?

1.1. The entry into the career: a meeting of two events

- A pivotal moment in the life trajectory: entry on the cam often linked to a break in the life trajectory: going out to study, disability, moving, etc.

- A search for money but not only: far from the social vulnerability of street prostitution

- Middle-class sex work: many came girls have higher education.
1. How does one become a camgirl?

1.2. Moving on in the career

○ A financial need: staying on platforms requires a material investment. Implies to stay to make the investment profitable.

○ Loyalty logic on the part of the platforms: the longer you stay, the more you earn. Importance of notices and contests to encourage camgirls to stay on the site.
2. What does it mean to be a camgirl?

- 2.1. A substantial investment…
  - An investment of time and money
  - A physical, psychological and emotional investment

- 2.2. For limited profits
  - Variable income: from 400 to 3,000 euros.
  - Platforms that capture 40 to 70% of revenues
  - A very low hourly rate
3. The ‘motives’ of commitment

**Statement:**
- Sexcamming is a **precarious job**: no contract of employment, weak social protection
- It is **underpaid**: hourly rate equals (more or less) to the minimum wage
- It is a **hard job**: physical, psychological and emotional work
- It is **socially risky**: it has potential consequences on private life (rift with family or friends) and professional careers

*Why do women commit in sexcamming?*
- Hypothesis 1. Because they have no choice
- Hypothesis 2. Because they find good ‘motives’ to carry on.
H1. Because they have no choice

YES
- Sexcamming often follows a break that has economic implications: in a career path (lay-off, resignation, work accident) or trajectory life (break-up).
- Sex platforms impose a balance of power: no contract of employment, oligopolistic market, exclusivity agreement, no bargaining on price
- Workers are isolated (home-based work)

BUT
- Interviewees often have resources: cultural capital, technical skills, sometimes social capital
- They often belong to the middle-class, which echoes with the literature [Hochschild, 1983; Bernstein, 2007]
**H2. Because they find good ‘motives’ to commit.**

Non-monetary compensations encourage the commitment...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrinsic pleasure of the activity</th>
<th>Personal achievement</th>
<th>Vocational activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Amusement</td>
<td>• Social recognition of subjective singularities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sexual satisfaction</td>
<td>• Enlargement of ‘sexual scripts’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• New relationships and friendships</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Artistic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Pro-sex activism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3.1. The denial of sexcamming as a job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HOBBY</th>
<th>IDENTITY BUILDING</th>
<th>VOCATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incentive</strong></td>
<td>Intrinsic pleasure</td>
<td>Personal achievement</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Archetype</strong></td>
<td>Player/Gamer</td>
<td>Liberated women</td>
<td>Artist performer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lived as a work?</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (creative work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Importance of labour compensation</strong></td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1. The denial of sexcamming as a job

*Platform devices shape the denial of sexcamming as a job*

- Currency is *token*
- Platforms organise *lottery*
- Clients ‘*roll the dice*’ to play
- Viewers are *fans* of camgirls

*The denial of work and labour as the valuation process*

- If there is no job, then there is *no exploitation*
- If sexcamming is not a job, it is neither (classical) pornography nor prostitution: it is ’*amateurism*’.
- If sexcamming is amateurism, then camgirls are ’*authentic*’. 

*Cupidon emprix [Dow Schüll, 2012] and affection mercatos [Callon, 2017]*
3.2. The denial of work and labour as valuation process

Hobby

Amateurs

Identity building

Artist performers or pro-sex activists

vocation

Authenticity (freedom)

Economic value

Money

Professional porno actors

Simulation (constraint)

Exploitation (constraint)

Prostitutes
3.3. Sexcaming as an entrepreneurial commitment

A day-to-day entrepreneurial activity

- Coping with the ‘long tail’ business strategy of platforms
- Creating **marketing strategy** with the help of platforms managers and websites advice.
- Invest in **material** (software, hardware, sex toys, clothes…)

**Performatve effects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naturalisation</th>
<th>‘I think I am a deep-down freelance worker’ (PadméLove, ex-waitress)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rational calculation</td>
<td>‘I am reading optimisation books like those of Tim Ferriss. I love stuff like that. When I was on DesirCam platform, I paid off-shore assistants in Madagascar to answer the messages of my clients.’ (Antigone, ex-senior official)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial futures</td>
<td>‘My project is to put money aside and open my franchise: an e-sports bar’ (Deborah Intimity, ex-fast food employee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘With my companion, we will soon launch a platform. We want to be the first partners of camgirls.’ (Sofia Larocca, ex-butcher employee)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

- A contribution to the study of work in platform capitalism
- Literature
  - Sharing economy (amateurism or side job)
  - Uberisation (professionals)
- Sexcamming as a ‘fantasy side job’
  - the myth of amateurism
  - Learning how to perform ‘authenticity’.
Conclusion

- Only a few camgirls accept to be interviewed (circa 1/5)
  - Representativeness of the sample. Contact via Twitter
  - All the interviewees are ‘professionals’. Do non-professional camgirls really exist?
  - What about camgirls that stooped their activity?

- Method: one shot interview
  - Is it possible to really study trajectories commitment to such a method?
  - What about post-rationalisation?
Thank you for your attention