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Managing intimacy: How sex workers negotiate boundaries on webcam platforms

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Abstract

This study examines how online sex workers engage in boundary management in platformized work environments. It does so through the lens of webcam sex platforms, using data derived from 21 qualitative interviews with Dutch online sex workers. Based on our analysis, we argue that three interrelated processes characterize the relation between platformization and sex workers' boundary management. (1) Platformization creates a radical blurring of sex workers' boundaries between public and private selves and commodified and non-commodified intimacy. (2) Performers respond to this blurring and its emotive challenges through boundary management in order to negotiate intimacy between their working and private lives. (3) However, platformization undermines these efforts: increased, dynamic competition limits the degrees of freedom sex workers experience in setting symbolic boundaries.

Keywords

Boundary management, intimacy, platformization, sex work, webcamming

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Introduction

This study examines how sex workers engage in boundary work (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) or boundary management (Clark, 2000; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2019) in platformized work environments. Previous studies (e.g., Barton, 2007; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018; Sanders, 2005) have laid out that offline sex workers develop strategies to set symbolic boundaries in their work to manage occupational challenges. However, in current times, platformization fundamentally alters the conditions in which sex work takes place (e.g., Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018).

Platformization constitutes 'the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms' (Poell et al., 2019: 1). The platformization of sex work offers new opportunities to workers (Hamilton et al., 2022; Henry and Farvid, 2017; Jones, 2020; Swords et al., 2023). At the same time, it comes with new challenges and risks (e.g., Jones, 2020; Stegeman, 2021; Vlase and Preoteasa, 2022). Against this background, the increasing platformization of sex work raises the question of how sex workers deal with these new and often emotional challenges.

We address this question based on 21 qualitative, in-depth interviews with Dutch webcam sex workers identifying as women. Drawing on theoretical insights by Goffman (1959) and Hochschild (1983), we present three entangled processes characterizing the relation between platformization and boundary management. One of the key challenges of platformization is that it increasingly blurs the boundaries between sex workers' work and private life in multiple ways, heightening the need for performers to engage in emotional labor and resulting in an additional emotive burden (*Blurring boundaries*). While this blurring is not unique to sex work (e.g., Clark, 2000; Gregg, 2011; Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al., 2022), we argue that managing this balance is particularly urgent for sex workers because of the stigma involved; it is also challenging to accomplish because of the labor's intimate and emotional character. Sex workers negotiate this challenge through boundary management, which we define as 'a set of cognitions and strategies by which people manage the critical boundaries between their multiple life domains' (Rothbard and Ollier-Malaterre, 2015: 109). Our participants generally seek to segment public and private selves, commodified and non-commodified intimacy, work and leisure space, and free and working time (*Boundary management*). Yet, these endeavors conflict with the highly dynamic and hypercompetitive environment of online platforms (*Limits on boundary management*). Platformization curtails the possibilities of sex workers to engage in boundary work as 'strict' boundaries can result in customers seeking out online competitors with 'looser' boundaries. Before putting forward these findings, we first provide a literature review of (online) sex work, platformization, and its relation to boundary management, and our methodology.

Literature review

Risks and boundary management in (offline) sex work

Sex work comes with a variety of challenges and risks – both physical (e.g., related to violence, harassment, or sexually transmitted diseases; e.g., Weitzer, 2009) and emotional (e.g., alienation or stigmatization; e.g., Benoit et al., 2018). Such emotional risks have steadily come to the forefront as sex work is increasingly directed at providing ostensibly authentic intimacy and fulfilling emotional needs rather than just physical ones (Bernstein, 2007; Colosi, 2022; Pettinger, 2013; Sanders and Hardy, 2014: 130).[1] This emotional dimension related to the provision of seemingly genuine authentic services has been termed the 'girlfriend experience' (Bernstein, 2007; Nelson et al., 2020) or 'bounded authenticity' (Bernstein, 2007: 103).

In order to successfully deliver this service, sex workers need to mimic or incorporate 'elements characteristic of the romantic discourse' (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018: 388) while the service's monetary and temporary character needs to be disguised (Pettinger, 2013) as authenticity and commerce mutually exclude each other within contemporary cultural schemata (Berg, 2021).[2] For instance, to convince customers that their service is genuine requires that sex workers engage in emotional labor (e.g., Deshotels and Forsyth, 2006; Frank, 2002; Sanders, 2005). Several studies have suggested that the ability to successfully perform this emotional labor hinges on the possession of social, cultural, and sexual capital, which is not equally distributed over social classes (Brasseur and Finez, 2019; Nayar, 2017)[3] and therefore generates economic inequalities among online sex workers. Other studies have pointed at the cost of performing emotional labor: it can be demanding, unpleasant, and jeopardize sex workers' well-being when their personal emotions are subjected to external demands (Deshotels and Forsyth, 2006; Henry and Farvid, 2017; Kong, 2006; Nayar, 2017). Bounded authenticity means, in other words, that the boundaries between commodified and uncommodified intimacy can get blurred for sex workers (Garza, 2022; Kong, 2006).

In order to deal with these ambiguities, several studies have noted that sex workers set symbolic boundaries, which can be defined as the 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space' (Lamont and Mólnar, 2002: 168; see also Nippert-Eng, 1996). For instance, Bernstein argued that to manage the emotional risks of offline sex work, it is necessary to maintain 'a division between public and private selves and of keeping certain sexual practices, aspects of the self, and segments of the body off limits' (Bernstein, 2007: 102). Scholars have likewise found that sex workers ascribe meaning to symbolic boundaries such as the strict usage of condoms in the workplace, refusing tongue kissing, or creating a sex worker persona to keep their private selves separate from their workplace (Barton, 2007; Kong, 2006; Sanders, 2002, 2005; Sanders and Hardy, 2014: 121).

New risks of online sex work

Studies on boundary setting in sex work primarily focus on in-person, offline contexts (e.g., Barton, 2007; Kong, 2006; Sanders, 2005). However, contemporary sex work is

increasingly mediated through the internet – think of webcam sex platforms, where performers broadcast striptease or masturbation shows while interacting with customers in real-time (e.g., Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2020) or subscription platforms like Onlyfans where people can buy access to sex workers' digital content (e.g., Easterbrook-Smith, 2023; Hamilton et al., 2023).

This platformization has profoundly reshaped sex work (Jones, 2015b). For instance, in online sex work, no physical contact takes place, reducing, if not eliminating, the risk of physical abuse, violence, and sexually transmitted diseases. Some of these accounts emphasize that online sex work can, therefore, be pleasurable to performers, suggesting the need for a feminist re-evaluation of sex work (e.g., Bleakley, 2014; Jones, 2016, 2020). Online sex workers also encounter more autonomy, flexibility, and control over working conditions (e.g., Easterbrook-Smith, 2023; Hamilton et al., 2023; Sanders et al., 2016), especially if they no longer need to work for a manager or boss of some sorts. In this vein, sex workers can choose their customers, set their own working times, and even, on many platforms, their own rates (Berg, 2021).

At the same time, platformization creates new risks for sex workers (e.g., Campbell et al., 2019; Easterbrook-Smith, 2023; Stutz et al., 2024). For instance, performances are at risk of getting illegally recorded and posted on pornography websites, depriving performers of income (Theunissen and Favero, 2021). Swords et al. (2023) also underline digital risks related to personal information of sex workers getting shared online, which may lead to, for example, doxing, shadow banning, and stalking. Others have likewise pointed at the stigmatization of online sex workers and potential intrusions of privacy – for example, when a performer does not want their friends or family members to know about their work because of the stigma involved (Campbell et al., 2019; Jones, 2016; Sanders et al., 2016, 2020; Stutz et al., 2024; Vlase and Preoteasa, 2022).

Platforms do provide new affordances to deal with these risks (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2023; Rand and Stegeman, 2023). For instance, performers can 'geoblock' entire regions (Van Doorn and Velthuis, 2018) so that their sex work remains invisible to family, friends, or acquaintances – though the safety often turns out to be false (Theunissen and Favero, 2021; Vlase and Preoteasa, 2022). Many platforms also enable performers to ban customers, for instance, because of their demanding, rude, or intrusive interactions. Furthermore, the platform's terms of service agreement prohibit more 'extreme' forms of sexual performances (Stegeman, 2021). This can protect some sex workers who would otherwise have to deal with requests from customers, which they find unacceptable, but for other workers, it curtails the freedom in enacting their performances (Jones, 2020). Platform restrictions might also not always be directly accessible or clear (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023), and the entanglement of different platforms can make (legal) regulations challenging to navigate (Swords et al., 2023).

Existing studies pay little attention, however, to the emotional challenges of online sex work and how workers handle these. This is remarkable, as several studies show that authenticity and the girlfriend experience continue to be sought after online (e.g., Milrod and Monto, 2023) and utilized by workers (e.g., Easterbrook-Smith, 2023; Ruberg, 2022). For instance, Weiss (2018) concluded that webcam performers seek to create intimacy in their shows by sharing what appears to be private information and frequently accepting

customers' wishes. At the same time, Nayar (2017) highlighted that performers can perceive the provision of the girlfriend experience as exhausting and tiresome. These accounts raise the question of how performers set symbolic boundaries in order to negotiate the difference between commodified and non-commodified intimacy. We answer this question using in-depth interviews with Dutch webcam performers, based on a methodology that we outline in the next section.

Methodology

The overarching aim of this study was an examination of work experiences and views of webcam performers in the Netherlands, with a particular interest in how performers negotiate intimacy in their work life. In doing so, we focus on performers identifying as women. The main reason for our focus is that, even though digitization has resulted in a diversification of sex markets (e.g., Jones, 2020; Stegeman et al., 2023; Van Doorn and Velthuis, 2018), women continue to constitute the vast majority of those active on the main platforms (Jones, 2015a). Participants were required to be 18 years or older and possess Dutch citizenship, as we assumed that these characteristics could affect their sex work experiences (Bernstein, 2007). By including only Dutch performers, we aimed for higher comparability between performers, for example, with regard to Dutch sex work legislation and welfare state support.

Getting access to these performers proved time and work intensive, with relatively low response rates. Given these difficulties, we opted for a convenience sample and based our access strategy on recommendations from sex workers and researchers. We used mainly Twitter (now called X) and Manyvids to recruit participants because they allowed filtering users according to location, language, and appeared particularly popular among performers as a tool for promoting themselves. We sent messages to all performers (145) we could find on Twitter and Manyvids at this stage. This form of recruitment resulted in 16 interviews; four participants were recruited through subsequent snowball sampling and one through the Dutch sex worker's labor union.

The final sample (Table 1) consists of 21 performers who all identified as cis-gender, white and described their customers as predominantly male. The performers had an average age of 34 and different educational backgrounds ranging from high school to university degrees. Most of our participants were active on Dutch camsites. Our sampling strategy will have influenced which performers we reached out to and may have resulted in a bias toward performers promoting themselves on social media platforms.

Recruiting and talking in English did not pose an obstacle during the actual interviews but might have biased the sample towards more highly educated performers. Our participants broadcasted at least three and not more than nine hours per working day. Because of the large variation in working hours, it does not make sense to categorize them as either full- or part-time workers. Nonetheless, we provide an approximate estimation of their working pattern to further clarify the sample composition.

Participants' earnings differed greatly: while some provided for their family with their camming income solely, others earned no more than 'about 80 euros a week' (Suze). Participants engaged in different activities and degrees of nudity in shows, ranging from

Table 1. Sample.

Name	Age	Children	Working pattern	Predominant performing style
Suze	28	No	Part-time next to main occupation	Various[a]
Mia	27	No	Part-time next to studies	BDSM
Sophie	27	Yes	Full-time	Various
Nina	36	No	Full-time	Various
Julia	21	No	Part-time next to studies	BDSM
Vera	43	No	Full-time	Various
Jill	35	No	Full-time	Various
Lola	26	No	Part-times next to studies	Erotic talks
Eline	42	Yes	Part-time next to other part-time occupations	Various
Naomi	34	No	Full-time	BDSM
Lana	44	Yes	Full-time	Various
Lena	27	Yes	Part-time next to other part-time occupations	Various
Anne	26	No	Full-time	Various
Hannah	35	No	Full-time	Various
Olivia	29	No	Part-time next to other main occupation	BDSM
Sara	39	No	Full-time	Various
Iris	54	No	Part-time next to other part-time occupations	Various
Tess	25	No	Part-time next to studies	Various, performs without face
Maria	37	Yes	Full-time	Various
Rosalie	25	Yes	Part-time next to other part-time occupations	Various
Kristina	43	No	Full-time	Various

[a]Various relates to performers engaging in different activities, such as erotic talks, striptease and masturbation shows, role play, and BDSM.

erotic talks, striptease, and masturbation shows to BDSM sessions. The predominant platform mode included pay-per-minute, tips-based, and private appointments.

Ethical considerations guided all stages of our research. To guarantee their privacy, all names (including sex worker names) were anonymized through pseudonyms, while demographic information was slightly altered. To facilitate participation and express gratitude, we compensated participants with gift cards, as also recommended by the Sex Work Research Hub (Bloomquist, n.d.). We did not experience that the gift card altered rapport with participants and, if anything, seemed to reduce power differentials.

The interviews were solely conducted by the first author. Being a woman interviewer seemed to facilitate rapport: several performers explicitly emphasized that they appreciated being able to talk to and share information with a woman. While the coding of the

interviews was conducted by the first author as well, the research design and theoretical framework were developed by both authors, and the analysis, drawing the findings together with the theoretical framework as well as the writing was conducted jointly.

Interviews took place between October 2018 and May 2019, lasting between one and two and a half hours. Based on the performers' preferences, interviews took place in person (10), via Skype (8), or on the phone (3). With consent, 19 interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to stay close to performers' accounts. For two interviews, written notes served as the basis for the analysis. One participant felt more comfortable being interviewed without a recording device, whereas in another case, the recording device did not work.

After transcription, we conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts and notes guided by Braun and Clarke (2006; Braun et al., 2023). This meant that we first did a close reading of all material, followed by an undirected, line-by-line coding of each interview where open codes were attached. In the successive coding round, researcher-derived codes and overall themes were developed by reading another time through all transcripts and combining codes from the first coding round. These researcher-derived codes focused particularly on the most prevalent and recurring codes and were targeted at a more theoretical interpretation of the data.

Following the identification of overall themes, we adopted a theoretical framework organized around boundary management. Drawing on this framework, over the next three sections, we present our findings in relation to webcam performers' boundary management in platformized work environments. We first begin by outlining how platformization results in a blurring of both private & public selves and commodified & non-commodified intimacy.

Blurring boundaries

Our interviews with webcam performers suggest that platformization impacts the occupational experiences and challenges of sex workers in multiple, interrelated ways. When talking about their work, many performers mentioned the direct, digital risks related to e.g., capping or doxing (e.g., Swords et al., 2023). Other impacts were much more subtle and only emerged indirectly as a result of transformed working conditions and customer demands. We argue that what these risks had in common was that they could be traced back to the intensified blurring of symbolic boundaries: between public and private selves, commodified and uncommodified intimacy, work and leisure space, as well as free and working time.

Digitization has blurred boundaries of time and space for many professions, instigating workers to continue working from home in the evenings or during the weekend (e.g., Gregg, 2011). And yet, our interviews suggest that the blurring of boundaries in platformized environments is rendered specific for sex workers because of the emotional labor and intimacy involved (Jones, 2020: 171; Nayar, 2017). We find that a webcam performance is not just about staging striptease acts, creating a hustle, or hosting an attractive show but almost invariably also involves the creation of some form of affective, emotional service or relation to customers. Moreover, the performance should come

across as 'real' and 'authentic' rather than 'fake' and 'staged', resembling a state prior to commodification, for which emotional labor is required.

Emotional labor, in turn, involves the management of emotions, which can be achieved through surface and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting is, for instance, necessary when performers are not in the mood and have to mimic pleasure, erotic desire, or care for their customers without actually feeling these emotions. Take the orgasm, which many of our participants asserted is frequently faked. As Iris puts it bluntly:

> […] no camgirl gets an orgasm aeh ten, twelve, twenty times a day, that's bullshit. I don't get an orgasm, sometimes. But okay, that's not what they want to hear: 'no, I'm not in the mood.' [...] I am online, so, yeah.

Some said they feign interest in and care for their customers by writing down or actively memorizing personal information and sexual preferences so that they would appear caring during their next encounter by invoking that information. Sara remarked:

> They don't want to have the feeling that they are buying sex. They want the feeling that I am choosing to chat with them because I also like that. And that I also get very aroused by them.

Our participants resort to deep acting when simply mimicking emotions is not convincing, and instead, these emotions need to be 'produced' by actively manipulating their emotional state. The lack of direct physical contact and the perpetual digital mediation put even more emphasis on emotional labor to render online sexual performances authentic, unstaged, intimate, and therefore sought after. However, this ongoing emotional labor comes at a cost: it can compromise the boundary between commodified, public, and uncommodified, private intimacy.

Another impact of platformization on sex work is that it blurs the boundaries between work and leisure time. The issue is not just that no fixed working hours exist for webcam workers. In fact, this flexibility is widely appreciated even though it also goes along with a lack of fixed income. But for many performers, work does not stop the moment the webcam is turned off. In line with Rand and Stegeman's (2023) findings, several of our participants engage in ongoing off-cam interactions through text messages. The (free) exchange of these text messages serves to retain customers by mimicking genuine interest or friendship ties. Nina explains:

> […] I answer some free [messages]. That's also important maybe to say to, to new girls, use that site and try to reply also on the free ones, because the ones who do pay, see that you replied to them also when it's free.

This blurring casts novel challenges for performers: in the absence of a clear time frame, working hours can expand infinitely, whilst the building of intimate and seemingly authentic relationships is no longer restricted through monetary boundaries either (Bernstein, 2007), as the expectation is that (some) text messages are sent for free.

The distinction between working space and private space is likewise put under strain by platformization. All our participants work from home – in most cases their bed- or living room. They do so because they do not have an alternative but also because they think that broadcasting from their home appears, again, more intimate, authentic, and less commercial. It gives customers a seemingly unfiltered insight into the performer's private backstage (Goffman, 1959). Lola explains:

> People like to see like a bed because it's more intimate. […] I always used to do it from the couch but then yeah, these beds, I got a lot of compliments because they think they're in bed with you instead of on the couch. […] I just sit on the bed like this, on the edge. It feels more like being at home with me. So, it's more at ease and more informal.

Staging this informality requires hard work and a careful arrangement of private furniture, props, and other properties. Moreover, it means that spaces like the bedroom, which are considered private and intimate, stand at risk of losing those meanings. This blurring illustrates once again the conflation between private and public sphere in online sex work, fueled by customer demand for seemingly authentic sexual services.

Boundary management

Our participants express appreciation for the flexibility that working from home offers, without a boss, and at hours of their own choosing, and some talk about finding pleasure in their work. At the same time, they also see the ferocious blurring of boundaries that platform-based sex work entails as a risky intrusion into their private lives and selves. They respond by engaging in various forms of boundary management, which, we argue, are directed at the reinstallation of morally charged societal divisions, such as those between public and private space, work space and home, intimacy and commerce, or leisure and work time.

Public versus private selves

One of the simplest and most common techniques to do so is the enactment of an online persona during their shows, including the use of a performer name (see also Stutz et al., 2024). This technique, which is also used by offline sex workers, serves to separate their private from their public selves. As Naomi puts it:

> I, I'm a different person. I'm not really Naomi obviously. So, Naomi is somebody I aeh made up in my mind and aeh, yeah. She's not me, but she, I can act her really well and aeh, yeah.

Usually, these online personas are not just crafted in a way that is attractive to customers, for example, because of the persona's younger age or more daring sexual preferences. They should also be distinct from the performer's actual identity, for example, in occupation, residence, or personality. Online personas make it easier for performers to do their job, in particular when it comes to emotional labor. For example, as

it is a performer's online persona who tells a customer that she loves him and not the performer herself, a symbolic boundary between (non-)commodified intimacy is maintained. What's more, this symbolic distinction serves as a protective shield against some customers' slurs and insults that performers repeatedly face in their work. Vera explains:

> When it comes to stuff like [online harassment], I think I am too down to earth to actually let that get to me because those clients don't know me. They know Vera, but they don't know me.

However, enacting the persona may be energy-consuming and emotionally draining in itself. Especially when trust has been cultivated with specific customers, a performer may decide to reveal more of her authentic self and private life. Sophie describes:

> With real, really special customers, I got like 20 of them, I will tell them I have a son. So I don't have to put on the whole theater 'I'm so sexy', blablabla. They know I'm just at school with my son, and I think that is important because I cannot keep the circus going […].

On the one hand, this loosening of boundaries is indicative of the emotional toll it takes to permanently engage in role-playing vis-à-vis customers (Hochschild, 1983). On the other hand, the willingness to relax boundaries reflects a performer's judgment of a customer: is he 'genuinely kind'; does he care for her well-being? While boundary management enables performers to commodify and incentivize intimacy online, it demands ongoing effort, sophisticated relational work, perseverance, and creativity in the individualized platform environment. This process, in turn, requires the possession of emotional capital, which, like other forms of capital, is highly unequally distributed (Cottingham, 2016).

Separating space and time

Spatial arrangements constitute a second way to re-establish boundaries (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2019). To prevent the disclosure of details about their private home, performers carefully organize the room they broadcast from, select a camera viewpoint that reveals parts of this room they feel comfortable with, and keep specific objects out of view. To convey the experience of intimacy and authenticity while at the same time protecting their private life, some even build a second staged bedroom.

> I got an extra room where I cam. I tell people it's my bedroom, but it is my cam room. They think I sleep there. They want to know it's real, they want to know it's your life, and they want to see into your life [...]. (Sophie)

Sophie conveys the impression that customers can observe her in her private backstage, making her erotic activities and the pleasure she communicates on cam appear unscripted. But in fact, for Sophie herself, to put it in Goffmanian (1959) terms, the

bedroom serves as a public front stage, which allows her to keep the private backstage. As such, the platformization of sex work puts further pressure on the intersection of the digital and material realms (Vlase and Preoteasa, 2022).

Likewise, to allow themselves to be entirely 'off-work' for at least part of the day, some participants define specific moments of the day in which they respond to the ongoing stream of messages from customers. Others categorically reserve 'offline' interactions for 'real' intimacy. As Lola explains:

> I'm always clear that it's [she is referring to the relationship with customers] online and that they shouldn't get hopes to yeah to get more. But as long as it's online, of course I want to be your girlfriend, of course […].

However, not all customers accept this. For instance, Maria recounts how one customer unexpectedly showed up in person at her private home:

> I was coming home and he was putting aeh, aeh, some aeh cream on my windows and write things, and I was coming back home with my kids. […] so there are really risks, there are people that if you don't tell them aeh on time to back off, they can come too close to you and I think that's aeh, aeh, a fine boundary […].

The incident was particularly difficult for Maria as the unexpected appearance of the customer made it difficult to keep her work hidden from her children. It resulted, to put it again in Goffmanian (1959) terms, in a painful context collapse, where two life spheres or audiences (children and customers) that the performer wants to keep separate get mixed up.

We noticed this desire for audience segregation particularly among participants with parental duties. They want to separate work from private time and space vigorously because they see their sex work as fundamentally distinct from their role as parents. Moreover, they are afraid that the stigmatization of sex work will negatively affect their children:

> I'm not ashamed for myself, but other people will treat you differently because of what you do, and I don't like that for him [Lena's son] to get judged by the, by my job. (Lena)

Therefore, performers develop strategies to strictly keep their children backstage, hidden from customers – sometimes even before they are born. Tess, for instance, recounts how she took a break from broadcasting during pregnancy – which, of course, goes along with a lack of income:

> So, I was like 2 years aehm, away from the webcam because I was pregnant, and I didn't wanna go on cam while being pregnant. I didn't wanna put my kids like, even they were in my belly, I didn't want people to see like oh, she is pregnant.

Once the children are born, performers don't tell their customers and make up reasons why they cannot be online when they must take care of parental duties. One participant told us how she prepares video content in advance in case her children get sick. Eline, who

has a daughter who knows about her sex work, recounts how she never cams when her daughter is at home. Consequently, she does not have fixed performance schedules, even though these are understood by our participants as boosting earnings.

Limits on boundary management

While performers, in theory, have a rich repertoire of boundary management tools to address the platform-induced emotional challenges of their work, in practice, their degrees of freedom are limited because of another impact of platformization. Like in many other industries, platforms frantically speed up competition among online sex workers. They do so, among others, by algorithmically ranking and categorizing the (sometimes thousands of) thumbnails of performers or by a refined system of quantified scores (Caminhas, 2023; Jokubauskaité et al., 2023; Stegeman et al., 2023; Velthuis and Van Doorn, 2020).

This hypercompetitive environment means that performers always need to assess the impact of setting boundaries on their earning capacity, transforming it into an ongoing and challenging activity. Because there is market value to showing more intimacy to customers, both emotionally and physically, performers experience pressure to move or cross previously set boundaries. As Sara puts it:

> There are challenges all the times. The customers will ask you to do things, and you're like hm, should I do it or not? You are always questioned. Your boundaries get tested all the time.

Even boundaries that have become stable over time can be subjected to change due to critical incidents that urge performers to loosen or restrict them. Take the case of Rosalie, who used to provide customers with insights into her private life by revealing that she has children. This is why she changed her mind:

> And then [a customer] aeh told me like, yeah, I get very shy if I see a baby, baby's back on the camera and aehm, can you put your kids like breastfeeding aeh in front of the cam. I was really disgusted, I, I was so mad at him. […] So, I really felt disgusted by that, that he saw me, that I told him about my, about my personal [life] a little bit, because I trusted him. […] And then he started to trust me I guess, and he asked me this kind of stuff, and I really got mad. And so then I told myself I'm not gonna tell anyone about my kids anymore.

We found that among our participants, especially vulnerable to competitive pressures, are those in financial need, for example, because camming constitutes their prime source of income or because they need to provide for their children. These performers may be more inclined to shift their boundaries if customers are willing to pay extra (see also Barton, 2007; Wesely, 2003). They may also be more inclined to engage in activities that they find unpleasurable or interact with less likable customers, which therefore requires more emotional labor:

> Sometimes I, I'm, I'm not kidding you, sometimes I'll be gagging [choking because of disgust], I'll be [imitates choking sounds]. You know, like, oh my god this is going so far.

> […] I just, you know, sometimes it's really nasty, but then I just focus on the money […]. (Julia)

> Yeah and then you have a couple of favorites, and then you have a couple [of customers] that you don't really like, but you keep them because they pay the bills [laughs]. You can't, you can't be too picky. (Hannah)

Performers permanently need to assess whether more emotional labor and relaxing boundaries are worth the extra money that can be expected. In making these assessments, they are largely on their own. For example, even though platforms provide official guidelines (Stegeman, 2021), customers might nevertheless ask for banned practices. This puts performers into a difficult position. Eline recounts:

> You know, I have a lot of men who come in my room and want me to play their mother. And I always say I will never, for example, I always say, I never play aeh blood-relatives or family members. But I can be your stepmother […], or maybe I can play a niece, but only if she is also not really family. And I always play a person that is 18 years or older. Because sometimes they ask for younger and I say no, I am not doing that because that aehm, how you say, then it makes me feel bad.

Performers who seek to survive on camming income solely describe the need to be particularly strict when it comes to demarcating customers from friends. After all, transforming a commodified into an uncommodified relationship would result in a loss of income. In contrast, performers who do not depend on camming financially emphasize that they perform whenever they are in the right mood, as they would otherwise not enjoy or experience pleasure in their shows. They are also more discerning when it comes to the customers they (repeatedly) want to engage with and can afford to occasionally dissolve symbolic boundaries between their work and private life. For instance, they may allow a work relationship with a particularly sympathetic customer to transform into a regular friendship.

Discussion

This study has asked how, why, and where webcam sex performers erect (symbolic) boundaries in their platformized work environment. Enriching the understanding of platformized sex work with the notion of boundary management enables us to explore what sex workers do when key social categories for organizing and making sense of lives in contemporary societies, such as public versus private, workplace versus home, and commerce versus intimacy, get confounded. We find that they respond by engaging in subtle but meaningful forms of cultural work directed at restoring symbolic boundaries.

Building on Hochschild's (1983) and Goffman's (1959) work, we investigated how digitization and platformization impact emotional labor as well as the division between a worker's front- and private backstage. We argue that in the case of sex work, digital mediation creates new demands for emotional labor as clients increasingly seek authentic

relational and sexual experiences; this coincides with a partial collapse of boundaries between front and back stage, which in turn prompt ongoing efforts by sex workers to re-install these boundaries in order to safeguard a healthy work environment as much as possible. While our study demonstrates that notions of symbolic boundaries and boundary management are useful for studying sex work generally, we suggest that these are rendered even more urgent by platformization. With the ongoing rise of digital technologies and platformization in sex work (e.g., Jones, 2020), we hope to illustrate the viability of boundary management as a concept to make sense of the conflation and reinstallation of social categories in current times.

This research contributes to studies of sex work by showing the changing nature of risk in online settings. Working online entails a physical boundary that can, for instance, protect sex workers against violence or sexual diseases. At the same time, it makes other boundaries, for example, between work and private space or commodified and (un) commodified intimacy, more porous. Because performers have to provide a seemingly genuine, authentic, and intimate experience mediated by the online realm, their work requires extensive emotional labor to offer (elements of) the girlfriend experience. In addition, without denying that offline sex workers frequently face strong competition, platformization transforms local into global competition and turns it into hyper-competition by means of algorithms, rankings, and performance metrics, the workings of which often remain obscure to the workers affected by them (Jokubauskaité et al., 2023; Swords et al., 2023; Velthuis and Van Doorn, 2020). This, in turn, complicates and destabilizes the setting of boundaries in an unprecedented way.

Another contribution to the sex work literature is to show the intricate and highly context-dependent way in which boundaries are managed. The challenges of setting boundaries in the stigmatized and highly competitive platform environment play out differently among our participants. Even in a group of performers as homogenous as the one we studied, we find diverse experiences: For instance, if performers rely on webcamming for their livelihoods, they often feel pressured to loosen their boundaries to secure their income. This means that they are more likely to engage in online sexual exchanges, which they find unpleasant. When some scholars (e.g., Bleakley, 2014; Jones, 2016) claim that performers can experience pleasure at work and emphasize the empowering potential of webcam work, our data suggest that this hinges, among others, on financial circumstances.

The fact that boundaries between work and private life get blurred in contemporary societies is, of course, far from new. A rich literature, starting with the seminal work by Nippert-Eng (1996) and Clark (2000) has examined how these boundaries do (in the case of 'segmentation strategies') or do not (in the case of 'integration strategies') get managed. Our study contributes two key findings to this field: first of all, boundary management has traditionally focused on work-life balance. While the distinctions between work and leisure time and work and private space were important to our participants, their concerns in managing boundaries go beyond these distinctions. More importantly, boundary management served to protect their own integrity and intimacy by creating distinctions between their private and public selves and between commodified and non-commodified intimacy.

This relates to our second contribution: our analysis sheds light on pervasive dynamics that are transforming the workplace more generally in many societies of late. Camming exemplifies such dynamics, including the shift towards online work environments, an increased blending of private and work life fueled by digital technologies, and a quest for authenticity in service work in particular (e.g., Gregg, 2011; Illouz, 2012; Nippert-Eng, 1996). At the same time, our study suggests that the way in which boundaries get managed by workers depends, among others, on the extent to which their work is experienced as intimate – an aspect that has received little attention in studies so far. This centrality of intimacy poses a particularly pressing issue, given that boundaries between professional, work, and intimate, private spheres are becoming increasingly blurred (Gregg, 2011: 2). The intimate as well as the stigmatized character of sex work means that there is more at stake in boundary management. It is one thing if employees zoom in for business meetings from their bedrooms because they have no better place in their homes. It is quite another if that bedroom is the key stage in which work – sexual work, for that matter – takes place. Against this background, we hope to have demonstrated that examining platformized sex work sheds new light on boundary management in other work settings in which intimacy, emotional labor, and stigma are important (e.g., Holla, 2016; Illouz, 2007; Mears, 2020).

Conclusion

In this study, we have shown how webcam performers engage in various forms of boundary management to create solid distinctions between their work and private life. It is at the intersection of platformization, intimacy, and stigmatization that performers' boundary setting is distinct from boundary management in other professions. Online settings provide new opportunities for performers to mimic the intimacy and authenticity that customers desire. At the same time, performing online comes with new risks, while separating work and private is at once rendered more difficult and more urgent.

Managing these challenges is a highly individualized endeavor: We find that the responsibility of boundary management rests primarily on the shoulders of individual sex workers. The learning process they go through seems flush with unpleasant and/or harmful experiences. Of course, this does not mean that there is no mutual support within the camming community (e.g., Hardy and Barbagallo, 2021). Several performers mentioned webcam colleagues or friends, with whom they talk about challenges and discuss work strategies, and emphasized the importance of these. And yet, many of them felt alone in dealing with these issues in their daily work life; which is also what motivated some of them to participate in this study and to share their experiences. Structural features of webcam work, including its highly flexible, individualized nature and its stigma, prevent the easy sharing or addressing of such issues. Online sex workers receive little support from other parties in guaranteeing their safety, well-being, and income but must individually develop strategies to protect their private lives, family, and identities. Support for dealing with these risks, for instance, by advocacy or professional associations, is therefore an urgent issue.

In further examining sex work through the lens of boundary management, both online and offline, one of the most urgent questions to address is how this notion informs diverse

experiences between sex workers. After all, this study focused on a highly specific, relatively privileged sample: Dutch, white, cisgender performers identifying as women (Jones, 2015a). Other groups, such as black, male, and/or transgender performers or performers working from peripheral countries in the global sex industry, are likely to negotiate boundaries in different ways.

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Notes

1. Constable (2009: 50) defines intimacy as 'social relationships that are – or give the impression of being – physically and/or emotionally close, personal, sexually intimate, private, caring, or loving'.
2. Likewise, Berg (2017) has demonstrated that consumers of pornography desire authentic performances, a demand which has come to be internalized by porn workers as well.
3. On the demand for authenticity as part of class struggle in the porn industry, see Berg (2021).

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