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The Digital Sexual Commerce Landscape

Abstract The diversity of online working practices is reflected in the huge proliferation of online spaces used to facilitate commercial sex. These are broken down, in this chapter, into twelve distinct categories which enable the organisational features of online sex markets to be explored. Platforms and websites adopt varying business models, which in turn impact on how sex workers use and interact with these different spaces. The mapping of online sex work will be problematised based on the difficulties in accurately estimating both the numbers of online sex workers and the extent of the online sex industry. The role of online spaces to facilitate community support and, to some extent, political activism among sex workers is discussed.

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Multi-service adult entertainment platforms • Dating and hook-up
platforms • Customer review forums • Individual sex worker websites
Classified websites • Social media platforms/apps • Sex worker forums
Content delivery platforms

Introduction

The diversity of online working practices is reflected in the huge proliferation of online spaces used to facilitate commercial sex. These are broken down, in this chapter, into twelve distinct categories which enable the organisational features of online sex markets to be explored. Platforms and websites adopt varying business models, which in turn impacts on how sex workers use and interact with these different spaces. The mapping of online sex work will be problematised based on the difficulties in accurately estimating both the numbers of online sex workers and the extent of the online sex industry. The role of online spaces to facilitate community support and, to some extent, political activism among sex workers is discussed. We demonstrate and argue these points using qualitative interview data from 62 sex workers, and survey data from 641 sex workers, along with knowledge gained from observing platforms and interviews with operators of platforms.

Online Sex Work Environments

The diversity in the types of work offered by online sex workers is reflected in the variety of online spaces that are used to provide or facilitate commercial sex transactions. Before discussing in more detail how Internet-based sex workers in the UK use online technology to market and advertise their services, it is first important to set out the nature and scope of the different online sex work environments. During the BtG study, we identified twelve distinct sex work-related online environments - escort directories, webcam platforms, multi-service adult entertainment platforms, dating/hook-up platforms with commercial advertising, dating/hook-up platforms without commercial advertising, customer review forums, agency websites, individual sex worker websites, classified websites, content delivery platforms, social media platforms and sex worker forums. Each of these will be discussed in detail below.

Escort Directories/Advertising Platforms

Escort advertising platforms are third party websites that allow sex workers who offer in-person direct sex work to create profiles to advertise their services. There are escort advertising platforms that are international, carrying adverts from sex workers all over the world; there are others that operate at a national level and others that operate at a more local level. Escort advertising is, by and large, stratified by gender. Some platforms carry adverts from sex workers of all genders with the option for clients to search under specific gender categories whilst other sites focus on particular gender groups with cis-gendered¹ female only spaces, cis-gendered male only spaces and sites targeted specifically at transgender (trans) sex workers. The sites identified in our research that are marketed as spaces for trans sex workers to advertise were predominantly targeted at, and used by, trans women. We did not identify any specialist sites in our research that are used exclusively or especially by trans men.

There are also escort advertising platforms that focus on niche markets, for example, women who identify as BBW (Big Beautiful Women), and those that are used by sex workers of specific racial and ethnic groups. As Amy (43, independent sex worker) says *'there's niche sites for everything, you know. There's sites for black women, sites for large women, sites for small women, sites for older women, younger women, red-haired women, Chinese women ... all sorts of things'*.

Escort advertising platforms adopt a range of different business models. Some operate on a subscription basis where the sex worker pays the platform for hosting any kind of advertisement. The owner of Platform 17 explains:

So the escorts pay to advertise on the website. If you like I'm basically a ... classified ads [site], I just happen to specialise in escort ads. It's the same model. I have a website that's known for escorts, escorts pay to advertise on that site.

Other platforms are free for sex workers to advertise but offer paid upgrades, the so-called freemium business model. In this business

model, it is perfectly possible for sex workers to pay nothing for their advert on the site but there are several paid options, which improve their likelihood of attracting clients. The owner of Platform 44 explained how the upgrades work:

All the directories though are initially free for people to advertise on and they can be free on there all the time, but there are chargeable options and, so for instance ... the chargeable options are, I want to be featured, so there's a charge for that, so there's a monthly charge, depending on how high up you want to be featured on it, and that will make sure, it gives you benefits including front page, you are listed before other escorts in the area that they might be searching at.

None of the sites we identified in our research charged clients to access the site. The owner of Platform 17 explained how, for him, making the site easily accessible to clients was a key business strategy because *'if you start introducing registration or make the process too complicated you are going to lose that business'*. The ease of accessibility on escort advertising platforms opens up a whole new field of free sexual content online that has contributed to the development of 'virtual cruising' as a new leisure activity where viewers look much more frequently than they engage in negotiations or purchases.

Webcam Platforms

Webcam platforms are sites dedicated to the facilitation of webcam shows, and they provide an interface between the webcam models and the customers. As the webcam model performs their show, it is simultaneously streamed via the webcam platform to the customer's device where they can watch it (and pay for it). There is a huge proliferation of webcam sites globally with certain market leaders that dominate the field (Weisman 2015). Like escort advertising platforms, webcam sites also adopt a range of different business models.

Some of the market leading webcam platforms operate on a business model that revolves around 'tips'. In these sites, a model performs their show in a public 'room'² that any customer can log into and watch free of charge. The customer then tips the model throughout the show using tokens that they purchase from the webcam platform. It is common

practice for models to have targets for generating tips that are linked to certain aspects of their shows, for example, they may have a target for taking off items of clothing or linked to the performance of certain sexual acts. The models we spoke to talked about the importance of creativity in webcamming, especially in shows that revolve around tips, where it is crucial to be inventive about what you can offer in exchange for tips. Jane (29, webcam worker) talked about having a tip target for taking her clothes off and went on to describe how she generates other tips, saying, *'you can get them to tip for anything, like I'm doing a fitness kick right now, so I'll have them tip to make me do squats and stuff'*. Cara (19, webcam worker also providing other services) had a similar approach and talked about setting 'topics', which refer to the different performative acts that she can use to generate tips:

So it's free to chat but you can set a topic or sort of things that you want to sell for tokens. Yeah, so I'll set a topic, say, a thousand tokens to do topless or something ... And then you do a striptease or whatever, and then you start a new topic. So that one might be—I don't know. You sort of think up your prices on the day really, I guess, but obviously then you just keep thinking of new ones.

Within websites that operate with this business model, the performers tend to receive a fixed amount of cash per token tipped to them by customers. The platform, however, sells tokens to customers at different bundled rates with a cheaper unit price the more tokens that are purchased. This means it is impossible to ascertain exactly what percentage of the platform's earnings is passed on to the performers.

Other platforms adopt a different business model where customers pay a per-minute rate to watch a show. In this approach, there is a distinction between group and private shows. Group shows are performed to more than one person, and each person watching is paying a per-minute rate. Private shows are performed to just one person. It was most common in our interviews for models to talk about setting different rates for public and private shows, with private shows being priced higher.

Some models described the public room/show as being more of a marketing space than a performance space. Kisses (32, independent sex worker also providing BDSM and webcam services) explains:

...with group mode, you set your own price. So I think I've got mine at £1.10 or something like that, and that's where they come in and you're fully clothed. You could be wearing, like, your lingerie, but you're not meant to be naked or anything like that. And you just talk to them, if they're wanting a cam show, what kind of thing they're into. So they might be vanilla or ... they might be fetish or they might just wanna talk (laughs)... if you wanna do a private show for them, so you wanna get a bit ruder, you can get them into private, which I have my prices private per minute to be in private. So I think it's like £2.20 ... and I'll be in there and I'll then take my clothes off and I will do shows in private mode for the higher price. Whereas in group mode I tend to just chat with them about normal things. (Kisses, 32, independent sex worker also providing BDSM and webcam services)

Rebecca (48, provides phone and instant message services), on the other hand, prefers to use the public room as a performance space and tries to get as many people as possible in the public room because the earning potentials are higher:

...when you're camming you don't really want to do private shows, what you want is a public room. Like not a public room, but a sort of public room where they're paying, full of customers. Because if you're getting for example one pound fifty a minute for everyone that's in the room but if they take you private you're only getting three quid, if you've got ten people in the room you're laughing, you're now on fifteen quid a minute. Yeah, so you basically want to keep it as busy as you can.

Spartan (25, independent sex worker also providing BDSM, massage, webcam and other services), a male sex worker, took a similar approach to Rebecca:

You log onto the software in general and you can disable group mode or private mode. So if you were extremely popular and you knew that you could keep seven people on at one pound forty-nine per minute simultaneously throughout the night, you would disable private because you'd never make the same money from one person.

Each model is responsible for setting their own per-minute rates on the webcam sites, and Spartan noted that *'the standard rule of private is twice*

the price' of public, which was reflected in our interviews. Webcam sites that operate using this business model tend to take a fixed percentage of the model's earnings. The actual percentage taken varies from site to site with Platform 42 taking a 65% share of the income generated by a model whilst Platform 1 takes just 30% for webcamming services on its site. Platform 46 has a tiered payment structure where the more income a model generates the higher their percentage share, with a model at the lowest earnings level taking 30% of the income they generate and those at the highest level taking 60%.

Multi-Service Adult Entertainment Platforms

The third category of online sex work space identified in our research is what we have labelled as 'multi-service adult entertainment platforms'. These are websites that offer a range of different sex work services within the one site. The market leading website in the UK, Platform 1, is an example of a multi-service adult entertainment platform and was used in some way or other by the vast majority of both our interview and survey participants. The following discussion uses Platform 1 as an illustration of this particular type of online space.

Platform 1 offers a range of services including escort advertising and webcamming services. It also connects sex workers offering phone chat and instant message services with clients and allows sex workers to make and upload content (photos and videos) that clients then pay to download. Paris describes the diversity of services that she is able to offer on Platform 1:

Platform 1 is a very big umbrella company because it's not just the camming. I can do phone chat. I can do, I can sell movie clips. I can sell proper twenty-minute clips, which are more like something people buy a DVD, like a porn DVD. I can do specifically IM, which is a type of just text-style chat. That's the one I predominately use the most. A lot of people, myself included, we rely heavily on that. So when Platform 1 goes down, we're all like, oh my god, we can't make no money, and we're all on Twitter having a rant. (Paris, 33, webcam worker also providing BDSM services)

Platform 1 earns income in a number of ways. First, it offers upgrades for additional services available to the escorts (providing direct services) who advertise on the site. For example, it is possible for a sex worker to pay a fee to have their advertisement placed at the top of the list of escorts in their particular area. Another common upgrade on Platform 1 is for the sex worker to pay a small daily fee to have their phone number visible on their profile. Without this upgrade, any communications between the client and sex worker would have to take place within the internal messaging system of the website.

Paying for upgrades on Platform 1 was very common amongst our sample. Ensuring that their profile was displayed prominently and accessible for clients was an important consideration for sex workers given the high number of profiles on the website. Cait described the advantages of paying for an upgrade to be listed on the first page of escorts in her local area:

Because it saves people then trawling through page after page, especially if they are looking for somebody in general, rather than being specific, because obviously I don't fall into a lot of peoples' categories being the type of escort I am, but however, if somebody searches specifically for one thing then my details could come up, the same as, you know, hundreds of others. (Cait, 52, independent sex worker also providing webcam and other services)

Webcamming services on Platform 1 operate on a pay-per-minute basis with the sex worker setting their own rates. In addition to earning revenue through upgrade fees for escort advertising, Platform 1 also takes a percentage of all other monies earned by the sex worker through providing indirect services, such as webcamming, phone chat, instant message and content delivery. This percentage cut is currently around 30%.

The fact that a range of different services are available within the one website is, according to Platform 1, one of the keys to its success:

There have always been directories, clipsites, cam sites, phone sex, back page advertising, sex toy stores, online marketplaces but Platform 1 was the first and remains the only website that brings all of these together in

one place. There have been many copycats over the years, some good but without the advertising or marketing savvy to get both sides of the customer base.

The suggestion, in the quote above, that Platform 1 is a market leader in multi-service adult entertainment platforms was absolutely reflected in both our qualitative and quantitative research. This will be outlined in more detail below in our mapping of the UK online sex industry.

Dating and Hook-up Platforms with Commercial Advertising

Dating and hook-up platforms have become an increasingly mainstream feature of social and cultural life (Gardner and Davis 2013). Whilst the primary purpose of dating and hook-up platforms is to facilitate the connection between people for personal relationships and unpaid sexual encounters, some of these platforms have designated commercial advertising space where sex workers can openly advertise their services. The number of dating/hook-up platforms openly allowing escort advertising is, however, relatively small compared to the overall number of these platforms in operation.

The only platforms identified in our research that allowed adult advertising were sites targeted at men who have sex with men. Platform 18 was discussed in our interviews (with male sex workers) as one of the few dating/hook-up sites that permits commercial advertising but Liam (38, provides massage services) suggested that its business model was failing:

I don't think at the moment Platform 18's prices are fair because Platform 18's ... business model has just disintegrated ... it's a hook-up site and it's been taken over by location-based apps. When I first advertised on Platform 18, I would get a hundred views a day. At the moment, when I stopped advertising, my profile was lucky if I got one or two profile views a day ... I honestly believe it's largely down to traffic.

None of the location-based dating/hook-up apps that Liam refers to in his quote permit open advertising for commercial sex, and this is

likely because of the policies put in place to have an app approved for download in the Apple or Google Play app stores. For example, Apple's approval policy states that 'apps that solicit, promote, or encourage criminal or clearly reckless behavior will be rejected'.³ This is obviously a very broad condition but taken together with Apple's prohibition on 'overtly sexual or pornographic material' makes a sex work advertising app virtually impossible. Google Play has an even more explicit policy, and it forbids any apps that 'promote escort services or other services that may be interpreted as providing sexual acts in exchange for compensation'.⁴

There are, however, new generations of sex work advertising apps being developed most notably German-based Peppr and Oh La La. Due to the restrictive policies on the app stores, these new apps are all web-based, which means that they are simply websites that have been optimised for use on a mobile device rather than a 'native app' that is designed for use on a device, i.e. all the apps available on Google Play and the Apple iTunes store.

Oh La La: Blurring the Line Between Sex Work and Dating

Pia Poppenreiter, a digital entrepreneur based in Germany, has launched two of the most innovative sex work advertising apps over the past couple of years. Peppr was launched in 2014 amidst a storm of publicity as it was labelled the 'Tinder for sex workers' (Prigg 2014) and was marketed as 'a mobile app that mimics the dating website model concept to connect prostitutes with prospective clients' (Brazil Bautista 2014). Poppenreiter claims that her inspiration for creating Peppr came from seeing sex workers working on the streets of Berlin:

On a late autumn day in Berlin, I was on my way with a friend to a bar on Oranienburger Strasse. 'It was cold - I had a skirt on myself - and I saw a sex worker on the street. 'I thought, 'It's crazy that there's an app for everything, but not for that. 'Why do they have to stand there in the winter all day?' That thought never left me. (Prigg 2014)

Peppr makes money by charging a 10 EUR fee for each inquiry sent on the app. The clients send an inquiry to the sex worker advertising, and then, they communicate directly to set up the terms of their meeting. The escort keeps 100% of the fee paid for their services. The innovation of Peppr is its use of GPS location-based technology with the customer seeing the profiles of sex workers listed based on their physical distance from each other.

After reportedly running into operational difficulties with Peppr, Poppenreiter regrouped and launched Oh La La in August 2015, which was billed as a service that facilitated ‘paid dating’. Oh La La is marketed very differently from Peppr with a clear intent to distance itself in its promotional material from any reference to escorting and sex work. As one commentator noted, ‘the website is pink and white, not red and black. Everything is cuddly and not at all indecent’ (Lohaus 2015).

Oh La La is currently available in a number of German cities, and a launch in New York City was attempted but at the time of writing appears no longer to be operating there.⁵ The mechanics of Oh La La are quite different from Peppr. Men looking for ‘paid dates’ put out a request on the platform—they will specify the length of the date they are looking for, their requirements for the date and budget. This request remains live on the platform for 21 minutes during which time women can respond. Responding to the date then opens up a private chat between the two parties to discuss the terms in more detail. Women offering paid dates have much more control and privacy as their profiles are not public, and they do not receive any unsolicited messages or enquiries. Women advertising for dates are only visible to potential ‘clients’ once they have responded to a request (Ljunberg 2017).

Dating and Hook-up Platforms Without Commercial Advertising

Whilst Oh La La blurs the line between dating and sex work, it is still very clear that any ‘dates’ arranged on the site include a financial or commercial element. Other dating and hook-up sites, however, have very clear policies prohibiting any kind of advertising for paid sex on

their sites. The presence of such a policy, however, does not mean that commercial sex is never advertised on these platforms. Instead, any commercial advertising that is undertaken is done covertly as Andy (57, independent sex worker also providing massage services) explains:

These websites generally have in their terms and conditions that you can't offer any services for commercial gain. I mean, there's ways round it. You see some adverts it's just got, like, the profile name and pounds signs at the end, and I think it would be understood that that lad wants paying. But if they monitored that, they'd take that down.

Andy alludes to active enforcement by dating platforms of their bans on commercial advertising. A member of the staff of Platform 45, which is primarily a gay dating site, and explicitly forbids escort advertising, described how their policy is enforced:

We're not really allowing that [escort advertising], so we have to make sure that it doesn't happen, even under the radar and the way we do that, we have, a system that kind of flags certain behaviour, and we have a very, very good user base who is reporting any kind of activity. So that's been kind of, always part of our site that, because you know, since we are operating in many countries with lots of users, we've always used our user base to actually monitor the site ... if there's any kind of activity on the site that's not according to the rules and regulations of our site, there's a function that they can report it to our customer service team and they, like they get rewarded with free membership if the report is valid.

Despite these policies and attempts at enforcement, it was clear from our research that commercial services were advertised on many dating and hook-up platforms, and that covert use of dating sites in this way appeared to be more common amongst male sex workers.

Customer Review Forums

A customer review forum is an online space where customers post messages about their experiences of buying sexual services (normally

in-person) including reviews of individual sex workers that they have visited. Review forums, as well as being a space for customers to share experiences, are also a key marketing space for sex workers. Some forums have escort directories/escort advertising integrated into the platform. Sex workers, at least on some platforms, are also welcome to join the discussion side of the forum and can post messages and interact with clients, which acts as a subtle form of advertising.

Review forums were a significant subject of discussion in our qualitative interviews, primarily with female sex workers. Review forums used by clients of male sex workers are rare although a US-based forum for male sex work does, according to Rab (38, independent sex worker also providing massage services), have a '*growing base, particularly for London escorts*'. Our research highlighted that the UK-based forums used by male clients of cis-female sex workers have quite distinct and diverse online cultures. Eloise (37, independent sex worker providing massage services) explains the differences between forums:

To use sort of industry terminology you get the fluffier sites shall we say where the balance seems to be more in favour of the working girl than it is the client. Then you get the ones that are in the middle where it's quite balanced... Then you get the other end of the extreme where the punter is king. All working girls are lying, thieving, see you next Tuesdays and the punters are perfect. And that seems to be crux of it. Then you get the ones that are quite mixed which is more about having a bit of laugh and a flirt sort of thing. They've all got different tones.

As Eloise's description alludes to there are certain forums where sex workers are welcomed, treated with respect by the customers and harassment and abuse are not tolerated or part of the online culture. On the other hand, there are examples of review forums in which stigmatising, misogynistic posts, effectively the online abuse and harassment of sex workers, is supported and encouraged by the culture of the forum. Platform 40 was raised by our interview participants countless times as an example of this type. Amber (25, independent sex worker also provides BDSM, massage and other services) describes Platform 40 as a '*misogynistic cess pool*', Katy (30, agency-based sex worker) notes that this

site *'doesn't like what they call fluffy reviews, which is where someone's nice'* and Kendall (29, independent sex worker) said that the customers that use this forum *'rip girls apart'*. Racist and anti-migrant posts were also a strong theme identified as frequent on some of these forums.

Whilst these forums exist, it is important to point out that many of the sex workers we interviewed described the clients who are active on forums, especially the more harmful ones, as a substantial minority of clients. Alice (46, independent sex worker providing other services) suggested that the clients who post on forums *'aren't normal clients ... I don't know, they're fucking whore anoraks. They're weird'*, and Katy (30, agency-based sex worker) described these clients as *'a subsection, they're all ... quite culty, or cliquey'*. Also, some noted that amongst forum users were a section of more sympathetic and respectful customers. Our survey with customers showed that whilst browsing on forums was widely practiced only a minority of customers write reviews.

Agency Websites

Agency websites are run and controlled by third party agencies who act as intermediaries between sex workers who provide direct in-person services and their clients. The agencies are responsible for the running of the websites, which are used to advertise different sex workers working for the agency. This means that the sex workers have little involvement in the marketing of themselves online as this is all done by the agency. Whilst agency sex work was not a focus of our research we did interview a small number of sex workers who worked for an agency, one described how the agency takes responsibility for all the online marketing:

So I'm getting some [photos] done at the beginning of December – we have to do that, but then they [the agency] pick them, do the editing, they write our profiles. That's a difficult one. Well it's okay, you know, they're very nice, my profile but their spelling isn't so great and, you know, you can't say to somebody, 'You've spelled that wrong,' because you're relying on them for jobs and no one wants to be told their spelling's no good. (Katy, 30, agency-based sex worker)

Although Katy's complaint over spelling may be minor, her description of the dynamics of agency work, and fear of antagonising the agency, highlights potential challenges for sex workers if they were unhappy with how they were being represented online. On the other hand, having minimal involvement in marketing and client screening is often one of the motivations for sex workers to opt for agency work rather than being independent. Katy talked about switching from independent work to agency work precisely because it was easier and *'you don't have to mess around with, dealing with timewasters and that kind of thing'*.

Individual Sex Worker Websites

This term refers to websites that are used to market individual sex workers who work independently. These websites are created and managed by the sex workers themselves or by web designers/IT specialists on their behalf. Individual websites are most often used by sex workers offering direct sexual services, namely, escorting, erotic massage and BDSM services. In our interviews, none of the people who *only* offered indirect services such as webcamming, phone chat and instant message had their own website. Around 29 per cent ($n = 185$) of those who responded to our survey stated that they had their own website, which suggests that this form of marketing is a substantial element of sex work advertising in the UK. Of the 185 sex workers who had their own website, four of them undertook only webcam work, confirming the propensity for individual websites to be used to market direct services.

Classified Websites

Classified websites are online advertising spaces/forums that allow individuals to post user generated advertisements for a range of goods and services. Some classified sites permit sex work advertising and have dedicated and separate space for these whilst others prohibit it altogether. It is usual business practice for classified sites to impose charges for certain types of ads (the remainder of posts being free), and adult advertising is one of these chargeable services. Allowing open adult advertising and

charging commensurate fees has the potential to generate significant revenue for classifieds platforms. For example, one classified site advised us in an interview that a substantial portion of the site's revenue comes from adult advertising despite their website featuring a range of generic advertising. The fact that other classified sites forbid advertising for commercial sexual services means that sex workers, if they choose to use these sites, must post covertly, under other categories, such as 'health and beauty services' or under the 'personals' section, reflecting more subtle and covert traditional methods observed in the 1970s in newspaper columns, for instance.

Content Delivery Platforms

The ability to record and sell homemade videos to customers was mentioned by many of the sex workers we interviewed as a valuable source of extra income. Whilst some sex workers upload and sell photos and clips on escort advertising sites, there are also dedicated platforms that host and sell user-generated adult content online. We label these websites as 'content delivery platforms'. The sex worker creates their own content and the site simply hosts this and provides all the necessary technology and financial services for clients to purchase this content. The platform takes a percentage of any sale, and the sex worker is entirely in control of adding or deleting content from their profile on the site.

Jane (29, webcam worker) discussed the pricing systems on these platforms and noted that, whilst they impose a minimum pricing structure, beyond this, individuals are free to set their own prices. She, for example, sells her videos '*at two dollars higher than the minimum*'. The platform Jane described takes forty per cent of any earnings, which she felt was a fair split because '*the traffic that is on this website is fantastic. I have to do no promotion of my own ... and it just trickles in. The site is fantastic, it's worth it, definitely*'. Other sites have less traffic, and Cara (19, webcam worker) described how the site she used to sell content had less traffic, and as a result, she felt, '*you've got to sort of bring your own traffic over*', which she did using social media.

Social Media Platforms/Apps

Our research shows that sex workers engage with social media in a range of diverse ways, and mainly because advertising spaces we have identified in this chapter have a strong social media presence. There were many sex workers in our sample who chose not to engage with social media at all in their working life. The reasons for making this decision almost always revolved around privacy concerns. Amongst the sex workers who did use social media in their work, there were varying degrees of engagement. Some used Twitter simply to communicate information to clients, for example, to keep clients up to date with their availability or to let them know whenever they log onto their webcam and are ready to start work. Others saw social media, especially Twitter use, as a way of building up, as Spartan (25, independent sex worker providing BDSM, webcam, massage and other services) describes '*an online brand*'. Some used Instagram and Snapchat for brand and sales. There was a strong perception amongst social media users that having a presence on social media contributed to building trust amongst clients.

Using Twitter to communicate with other sex workers, instead of, or as well as, clients was another common theme that arose in qualitative interviews. Some sex workers used their friendships with other sex workers on social media as a specific marketing strategy:

I mainly use [Twitter] to engage with other models, cos people absolutely love the engagement between models. Especially when they think that we're all friends. Like my best friend, she's also a cam model, so we really monetise on our friendship. We'll send Tweets together and Snaps together and everyone wants us on cam together, and it never happens, but they just love the fact that we're friends. (Laughs) (Anne, 25, webcam worker)

For others, social media was a way to connect with fellow sex workers but not as a marketing strategy but more for peer support and friendship. Marcus (42, independent sex worker/escort and sexual massage provider), for example, said he finds Twitter '*particularly helpful in net-working with other sex workers*', and Amber (25, independent sex worker

also provides BDSM, massage and other services) thought that Twitter, as an online networking space, is '*really, really good for sex workers*'.

Sex Worker Networking Online: Peer Support and Advocacy

Sex worker-led and peer support, initiatives, organisations and movements have been present in the UK for decades (Lopes 2006; AHRTAG/NSWP 1997). Our research illustrates how online technology has further enabled sex workers to organise, support each other share information about marketing, safety, rights and a wide range of work-related matters. A question Jones (2015) identified as unanswered by research about digital technology and sex work was how the shift to what she referred to as more isolated digitally mediated spaces had impacted on 'the ability of sex workers to forge and maintain social networks with one another' (Jones 2015, p. 559). Our research throws some light on this. Virtual networking with other sex workers and online peer support were key themes emergent from our interview and survey data which found sex workers have used a range of online platforms, social media and other applications to create online communities as vehicles for professional networking and peer support. One of the reasons the Internet was important to sex workers was its role in facilitating access to peer support: 80.7 per cent ($n = 517$) of survey respondents strongly agreed or tended to agree that the Internet gave them access to networks and peer support, and only 3.7 per cent ($n = 24$) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

When survey participants were asked about the main online platforms they used for advice or support, those identified by the highest proportion of respondents were sex worker forums, where information, advice and support is provided by other sex workers (Fig. 2.1).

Identified by 45.7 per cent ($n = 211$) of respondents, Platform 46 was the most utilised: a forum bearing the similar name of a market leading advertising platform for sex workers (Platform 1), but separate from it. Service providers who use Platform 1 can join and share information and advice on a range of sex work-related matters. Proportionately, more transgender and female respondents used this forum 52.9% ($n = 9$) and

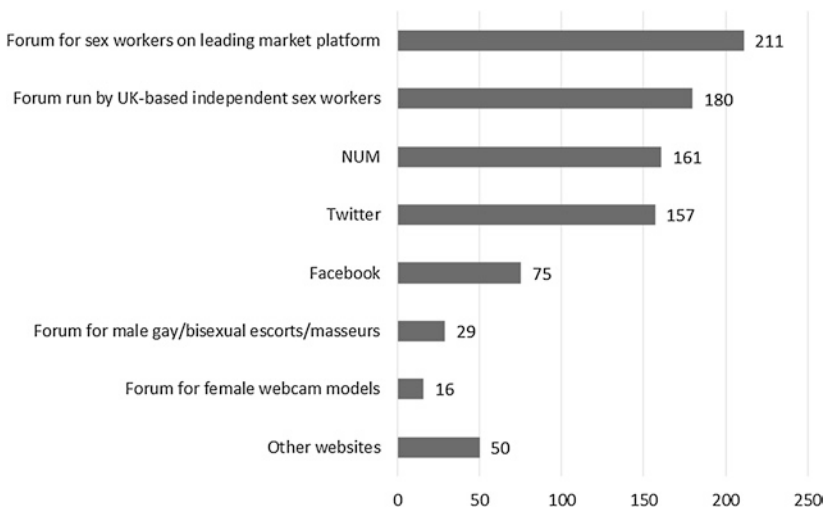


Fig. 2.1 Online spaces sex workers use for support and information

49% ($n = 177$), respectively (making it the most popular online source of advice or support for these two groups), compared to 27.9% ($n = 17$) for male participants, the third most popular source for men. Most of our male respondents used sites specifically for male-to-male sex work in their marketing, and thus were less likely to use Platform 1. Sex workers in interviews who used this forum valued the advice from other sex workers, and this forum was considered particularly useful for resolving technical or other difficulties with the advertising platform. There are several other forums utilised by sex workers for advice about how to make the best use of specific online advertising platforms.

A number of sex worker-led forums have been established by sex workers in the UK which aim to facilitate peer information sharing and support. Sex workers can register, read threads that relate to issues they are interested in, post a request for advice or send personal messages to specific members. The second online platform most identified for advice by 39 per cent ($n = 180$) of respondents was one of the longest established sex worker forums. Platform 47, a website (with a range of information for escorts) and a forum established over a decade ago by UK-based independent sex workers, has a range of boards including a 'Q&A' area where members can seek advice on any sex work-related topic, a popular

‘Warnings and Wasters’ section, a ‘Find a Buddy’ board and one for more light-hearted sex work-related discussions. This was the second most popular source of support identified by women in our survey with 45.7 per cent ($n = 165$) noting use, while only 6.6 per cent ($n = 4$) of men and 11.8 per cent ($n = 2$) of transgender respondents identified this. Whilst open to sex workers of all gender identities, this was not as popular for transgender and male respondents, being perceived as a forum historically for female sex workers, with other forum options targeted at male sex workers.

In 2010, Platform 48 was established as a forum specifically for UK-based gay and bisexual male escorts and masseurs who work with male clients. It aims to provide an online space where male escorts and masseurs can discuss a wide range of matters related to their sex work—6.3 per cent ($n = 29$) of participants were using this for advice and support. Amongst male respondent, over a third (39.3 per cent, $n = 24$) used it, and it was the most popular form of support for male sex workers in our survey. Forums play an important role in fulfilling the advice and support needs of a considerable section of sex workers.

The key reasons why sex workers used forums included for practical information and advice on a wide range of work-related matters (from advice on webcams, lighting, hotels to use for bookings to the law), a sense of connection and community, to reduce physical and social isolation (especially for those who were lone working and/or not out about their sex work) and to let off steam, sharing frustrations and light-hearted moments with colleagues and for some friendship. The safety benefits of engaging with forums were a key reason for participation (see Chap. 4). Forums were identified as particularly useful for ‘newbies’—people new to sex work—or those considering working in the sector, for whom they could be a rich source of information and advice from people with experience of the sector. Male sex workers using Platform 48 valued its specific focus on male escorting and massage service providers, which meant their concerns were central. The forums people used were shaped by the sex work job they performed and gender identity; some forums have been developed specifically for certain sectors or were perceived to be for certain groups of sex workers. In survey open response data and interviews, respondents pointed to a range of forums utilised, which were specifically for erotic dancers, webcammers (e.g. Platform 49

used by a small section, 3.5 per cent ($n = 16$) of female webcammers), BDSM providers and other specialist jobs which provided information and support from others in the same sex work job.

Amongst our interview participants, the extent to which sex workers utilised sex worker forums was variable, with three main categories: non participants, occasional participants who dipped into such forums and frequent participants who logged on more regularly and tended to be more active participants. Reasons for non use varied: Some people felt they had adequate knowledge borne out of their own experience of sex work, some were concerned engagement could compromise privacy and anonymity, others were deterred by what they perceived as etiquette, tensions and conflicts that could be encountered within forums. Some participants were aware of forums but had not used them but would if they needed support, and others preferred to access information and support via other means including smaller online groups and personal networks of sex workers.

Sex workers in our research used social media not only for marketing and communication with clients but also for professional networking and support. In our survey, 34 per cent ($n = 157$) said they used Twitter and 16.2 per cent ($n = 75$) used Facebook for advice and support. Twitter was the fourth most popular source overall for support and Facebook the fifth overall. Whilst numbers of respondents were small, amongst intersex and non-binary respondents 76.9 per cent ($n = 10$) identified Facebook and 61.5 per cent ($n = 8$) identified Twitter, making these social media platforms the first and second ranked sources of support for this cohort. For transgender respondents, Twitter was ranked second and Facebook was ranked third as a source of support. Social media and free messaging apps such as WhatsApp have been embraced by a section of sex workers to create several private peer support and networking groups. These groups and the diversity of networks have received less attention in research. In our study, some of these had a large membership and geographical reach, and others were smaller and localised or were formed by small groups of close colleagues or friends working in the sector.

I'm in touch with two girls. One I met via Twitter. I'm in touch with her daily. And another girl who used to work in a flat I used to work in ... we're in contact through Twitter now. I give her a lot of help ...

There is peer support going on. (Slapper, 60, independent, webcammer, dominatrix)

I'm very active on a Facebook group ... I'm one of the admin people... Platform 56 ... There's 520 members. (Michael, 57, independent)

I have a strong WhatsApp groups of other sex workers who are my main support. (Female survey respondent, 25–34, Webcamming, phone sex work, adult film industry/porn, modelling (glamour/erotic), BDSM)

Whatever the size of these networks and their scope for members, they are important sources of information, peer support, solidarity and community that reduce isolation and provide safety benefits. Indeed, many of the benefits identified for sex worker forum use were the same reasons given for use of networks formed around social media platforms:

I am actually part of a private Facebook group which kind of developed from Twitter. We're like a secret group ... there's about a hundred and thirty people ... although people do put warnings in, it's more of like a support group ... like a solidarity thing. So I don't tend to use the boards so much now. (Amber, 25, independent sex worker also provides massage, BDSM and other services)

Social media facilitated networks provide free information, advice and support from peers, which is easily and rapidly accessible. For some, these spaces provided a more personalised support than a larger forum:

There's about three-hundred of us, ... the sex work support Facebook group is pretty much the main crux of it..., a lot of people report feeling isolated but I don't really, because I have this kind of immediate access to hundreds of people that are in the same situation... I have a question just shoot it off and get a response in a bit ... you also get a lot of support that feels a lot more personal because you tend to know them rather than kind of anonymous user names on a forum. (Bethany, 20, Independent)

Our research has taken place at a time when significant numbers of sex workers are using social media for peer support, and our findings illustrate how, for many sex workers, the use of social media for online sex

worker networking is now an important aspect of communication and virtual community building for sex workers. An independent escort described social media platforms as ‘*online water coolers*’ for sex workers; this description is apt for these and other sex worker online spaces, which offer a place where a group of workers can come together share concerns about work and socialise.

Activism Online

Jones (2015) posited that despite the political benefits for sex workers of the Internet, social research has not explored the role online technology has played in sex work activism. Ray (2007) identified activism as part of the online shift for sex workers, with the speed and reach of the Internet allowing ‘*collaborations ... to happen in a powerful way, sex worker activism online has not just been about chatting and emailing, but about real coalition building*’ (p. 66). Our research suggests that for sex workers in the UK, online spaces have provided a platform for campaigns for sex worker rights and for challenging UK government policies, media/cultural misrepresentations and stereotypes of sex workers.

Only a minority of participants in our research identified themselves as being involved in sex worker rights groups as activists but there was a larger group who took an interest in sex worker rights issues and sex work policy developments. They accessed news, followed social media accounts, websites or blogs of particular sex worker rights advocacy groups or individual sex workers. Heather used Twitter ‘*to keep up to date with activism... I have a Facebook account now ... to read and see what other sex workers are posting about*’ (Heather, 31, independent escort). This ability of sex workers to engage with sex worker rights issues and debates via online technology meant that they can stay informed about rights-based issues and feel connected to a wider activist community. Digital technology has the advantage of enabling sex workers who are spread throughout the UK to follow activism and sex worker rights issues, and for those who are not out about their sex work, or who wish not to be identified, to be politically informed with relative anonymity.

Minichiello et al. (2015, p. 8) observed that *'the Internet has strengthened efforts to coordinate the political activity of sex workers nationally and internationally'*. Those in our research who identified as involved in sex worker activism flagged the importance of online communication for activism. Online technology is central for the day-to-day functioning and organising of sex worker rights organisations in the UK, much activism is online and organising can be carried out via both public and private groups on social media and a range of platforms can be used to communicate their messages. All key sex worker rights organisations⁶ in the UK, during our research, had a relatively strong online and social media presence, with websites, Twitter and Facebook accounts, and some utilising Instagram, Tumblr and other applications. Social media platforms have created myriad possibilities for organising amongst sex worker groups and organisations. They enable organisations to communicate with members and allies (getting information, e-newsletters, blogs out to followers and the general public quickly), to host and share resources, fundraise and promote campaigns, activities and events.

During Beyond the Gaze, there were several high-profile UK-based campaigners who utilised online platforms, social media and blogging to raise awareness about sex worker rights issues and the campaigns they were involved with. Laura Lee⁷, who was challenging through the high courts in Northern Ireland the law that made it a crime to pay for sexual services, used online crowdfunding to support her challenge and social media was utilised to raise awareness about her concerns with the law and its impact on the safety and rights of sex workers. Charlotte-Rose a sex worker and campaigner, with 19700 Twitter followers and her own radio show, has utilised social media and online radio to promote sex worker rights, for example, promoting campaigns opposing the Audio Visual Media Services Regulations which banned the depiction of a range of acts, for example, the face sitting⁸ protest outside the House of Commons. Blogging (Feldman 2014) and in our research vlogging (video blogging) were used to create a voice for sex workers and a space for activism, challenging whorephobic and stereotypical images and discourses. Blogs provide a space for sex workers' perspectives and when her fetish, queer porn website 'Dreams of Spanking'

was taken down and investigated by the Authority for Television on Demand, Pandora Blake blogged and vlogged about the case and continues to campaign as a spokesperson for Backlash.⁹ There are several platforms sex workers have used for online video content in advocacy, for example, in 2016 Juno Mac a sex worker activist filmed a TED talk '*The laws that sex workers really want*'¹⁰ and at the time of writing, this had over 1,760,000 views, demonstrating the extensive reach online activism can have.

Providing a space where sex workers can take control of their own cultural representation is another way online technology has been used by sex workers in the UK. A range of sex worker-led cultural and arts initiatives, which provide a vehicle for sex workers' voices and challenge stigma and stereotypes, now utilise online and digital technology as an integral element of their marketing and awareness raising. For example, the Sex Workers Opera (SWO),¹¹ '*a multidisciplinary show created and performed by sex workers and friends*', utilised social media and online technology as an integral part of its development, marketing and advocacy work, and productions have been supported partially by online crowdfunding.

Online spaces are being utilised creatively by sex workers as a vehicle for advocacy and activism around sex worker rights, a tool for individual and collective voices.

Mapping the UK Online Sex Industry

Given the proliferation and transient nature of online advertising for sex work, it is impossible to provide a reliable quantitative mapping of online sex work in the UK, or indeed anywhere. Mapping populations of sex workers is notoriously difficult and challenging (Cusick et al. 2009), and this is no different in online environments. There are also valid questions to be asked about the use and value of population size estimates of sex workers and what purpose these serve (Global Network of Sex Work Projects 2015; WHO et al. 2013). The police, for example, have very different motivations for mapping the online sex industry from, say, health projects or sex worker support services. Police

motivation for mapping the online industry may be a conduit to conducting enforcement action against online sex workers. One strategic police lead suggested:

...basically I think essentially what a number of the forces are doing at the minute is they're just trying to map what is sex work like in their areas because we don't know, you know. And the tactics we use – that we've used to tackle sex working historically, you know, have driven it underground.

One method that could be used to map the online sex industry is simply to count the number of sex worker profiles/adverts on certain sites. This, however, will never provide a complete and accurate picture of the true extent of online sex work because:

- The number of sex worker profiles/adverts online does not necessarily translate into the number of sex workers actively working.
- Many of the adverts/profiles may be out of date and no longer active yet still appearing online.
- Some sex workers may have multiple profiles (e.g. for advertising different types of services) on the same platform and are highly likely to have profiles/adverts on multiple different sites.

From our sex worker survey responses, we were able to ascertain that the average (mean) number of sites used for advertising by each individual sex worker was three with only 32.8 per cent ($n = 210$) of respondents using just one advertising source. The potential for double or triple counting is therefore significantly high.

Another difficulty in assessing the extent of the online sex industry in the UK is the diversity and proliferation, as well as the internationalisation, of all adult platforms. This makes it impossible for us to provide an accurate estimation of the number of discrete websites and platforms used for commercial sex online. As well as websites that have national and international reach, there are also highly diversified local sites covering towns or regions in the UK. Furthermore, some platforms are widely known and used whilst others are more peripheral with

limited reach and use. Whilst we did conduct our own searches to identify key sex work-related websites, and the data from our participants provided insight on the most widely used sites, we make no attempt to estimate the precise number of sex work-related platforms that are used by people operating in the UK. If we did make an estimate, we would be offering data that would be immediately out of date given the fluid and fragile nature of the sex markets online. We are very aware that in describing the online sex markets that any slight change in the law in any relevant jurisdiction could have significant effects on how advertising is organised online and the very presence of online sex work.

One major finding, however, that is obvious from both our qualitative and quantitative data is the importance of a handful of key market leading websites in the field of online commercial sex in the UK, especially for sex workers providing direct services. There is one particular market leading website that was identified as an advertising source by 93 per cent ($n = 436$) of the female sex workers who responded to our survey. Charlotte (35, independent sex worker providing BDSM and other services) described Platform 1 as having '*the monopoly*', and Kendall (29, independent sex worker) felt it was '*the Facebook of an escort directory*'. It was very common in interviews to hear some version of these comments from female sex workers:

The biggest directory in England though is Platform 1, which is – without a double Platform 1 is the busiest. (Amber, 25, independent sex worker also provides massage, BDSM and other services)

Essentially, I don't think I would get any bookings if I didn't advertise on [Platform 1] ... I can't not advertise there, I feel everyone comes from there really. (Bethany, 20, independent)

Whilst Platform 1 is an advertising platform for all genders, our research shows that male sex workers, marketing themselves to other men, are more likely to use male specific escort directories than Platform 1. There was a clear market leading male escort advertising site identified in our research with 77 per cent ($n = 95$) of the male sex workers who responded to our survey indicating that they used this site. The use of Platform 1 amongst male sex workers was much less (33 per cent;

$n = 41$) but still represented a popular website for men according to the BtG survey results.

The numbers of trans-identified respondents to our survey were so low that we are unable to draw any conclusions from the survey results on advertising sources for transgender sex workers. In our qualitative interviews, however, the transgender women we interviewed identified Platform 1 again as their main advertising source. Specialist websites for transgender women were also used but there were mixed views on how successful these were. Victoria (19, independent sex worker) said that she used Platform 25, a specialist site for transgender women and that *'lots of people go there looking for transgender people'* whilst Dawn (49, independent sex worker) felt that the same website was *'very poor, both in response ratio and also quality of people'* and that when she gets enquiries from this site *'nine out of ten are absolute timewasters'*. We did not identify any site in our research that was marketed at transgender men and did not have any transgender men participants, in the interviews, so are unable to comment on the marketing practices of this group of sex workers.

Conclusion

The Internet has had an extraordinary and transformative impact on the sex industry globally, which is reflected in changes seen in the UK context. The Internet has transformed not only what services sex workers offer to their clients and how they offer them but has also created new opportunities for sex workers to connect and interact with each other in safe and anonymous ways. This has all been made possible because of the highly diversified range of online spaces that facilitate, or are connected to, commercial sex services. Despite this diversification and proliferation of online spaces, our research has shown that most commercial sex transactions in the UK are concentrated in a handful of market leading platforms. Reliance on the Internet for work is now widespread not only amongst those who provide their services in an online environment but also for independent indoor escorts who are often dependent on the Internet as a primary source of marketing and advertising.

Notes

1. We use the term cis-gendered to refer to people whose gender identity corresponds with the gender they were assigned at birth.
2. The webpage within the webcam platform that hosts the model's live stream is called their 'room'. When clients join the room, they can see the show and can communicate with the model through typing messages, which appears on a comment thread.
3. <https://developer.apple.com/app-store/review/guidelines/#legal>. Accessed 29th August 2017.
4. <https://play.google.com/about/restricted-content/>. Accessed 29th August 2017.
5. There is no information in the public domain about the reasons why the launch in NYC was unsuccessful. The legal context in NYC is obviously very different from Germany with commercial sex, in any form, a criminal offence.
6. SCOT-PEP, Sex Workers Alliance Ireland (which covers Northern Ireland as well as the Republic of Ireland) Sex Workers Advocacy and Rights Movement, English Collective of Prostitutes and x:talk.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/apr/02/northern-ireland-sex-worker-overtake-ban-hiring-escorts>. Accessed 1st June 2017.
8. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/ive-organised-a-mass-face-sitting-protest-outside-parliament-because-im-not-willing-to-give-up-my-9918757.html>. Accessed 1st June 2017.
9. <http://pandorablake.com/blog>. Accessed 1st June 2017.
10. https://www.ted.com/talks/juno_mac_the_laws_that_sex_workers_really_want. Accessed 1st June 2017.
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