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True Amateurs: Camgirls or the Fantasy Sideline

Pierre Brasseur and Jean Finez

Introduction

This chapter studies sexcamming, an economic activity whereby individuals sell their charms on the web to an audience of Internet users¹. These individuals – or sex models to use the generic term – pose in front of a webcam chatting live with viewers or giving erotic or pornographic performances in return for payment in tokens. Contact is made between the sex models (called “camgirls” or “camboys”) and their viewing customers on dedicated platforms, serving as intermediaries and charging a commission that generally ranges from 40% to 70% of payments. Sexcamming first emerged in the early 2000s and is today one of the facets of a sweeping game change on the sex markets. The development of the web and, more generally, the boom in the new information and communication technologies have transformed the traditional forms of pornography and sex work in terms of both work organization and sex workers’ living conditions (Bernstein, 2007; Jones, 2015; Sanders et al., 2017).

Although sexcamming is a key line of business in the new sex economy, it remains relatively uncharted territory (Jones, 2015; Henry & Farvid, 2017). In the 2000s, some ground-breaking studies did look into the nascent industry (see, in particular, Knight, 2000; White, 2003; Dobson, 2007; Senft, 2008), but this research and other more recent studies often consider the business from the angle of the feminist “sex wars” controversy. These studies, whether for or against the controversy (Jones, 2016), generally discuss the trade’s coercive or empowering nature (Cruz & Sajo, 2015; Jones, 2016; Henry & Farvid, 2017). Some authors show how sexcamming is an integral part of an international sex economy exploitative of women, namely Filipino, Colombian and Romanian women (Mathews, 2010; Davies, 2013). Others focus on camgirls in rich countries, describing the mechanisms involved in the reproduction of inequalities and gender stereotypes (Dobson, 2007) and colorism (Jones, 2015). Some studies, however, point up the activity’s subversive aspect (Knight, 2000). By considering sexcamming from the angle of identity construction, this research shows how broadcasting erotic shows can give women a

¹ This work is supported by the French National Research Agency in the framework of the “Investissements d’avenir” program (ANR-15-IDEX-02).

way to regain control over their bodies and their sexuality (White, 2003; Senft, 2008; Nayar, 2017).

Although close attention should be paid to the risks and opportunities of sexcamming for women, it is important not to lose sight of the activity's socioeconomic dimension. Like all the new forms of online sex work, sexcamming should be viewed as one of the aspects of platform capitalism run on a workforce – generally flexible, underpaid and feminized (van Doorn, 2017) – competing for work.

This chapter analyzes women's professional engagement in the sexcamming economy. From this point of view, our work echoes the study by Niels van Doorn and Olav Velthuis (2018) on how sex models devise strategies to give meaning to what they do and cope with uncertain market mechanisms. In our case, we study camgirls' professional engagement logics through the lens of *amateurism* (Nayar, 2017). Like the logics described by Brooke Erin Duffy in the world of fashion blogging (Duffy, 2015), the sexcamming economy is based on a "myth". To attract viewers, the sexcamming platforms claim that the sex models are not professionals and that they broadcast shows for fun, from their own homes and in their free time. Our survey reveals, however, that camgirls take their work very seriously. The women interviewed are generally full-time camgirls and sexcamming is their main (or only) source of income.

Unlike most of the other cases in this book, the camgirls' line of work therefore equates less with the marketization of everyday life than with a commodification of *so-called everyday life*, as its clients imagine it to be. In what circumstances do certain women decide to start broadcasting sexual content on the Internet? Once in the business, how do they learn how to meet their clients' expectations? What do they do to make an economic return on their shows and differentiate themselves from the competition? Such are the questions addressed by this chapter.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the research methodology and justifies the framing of the field survey, a stage we feel is key to "defuse" a subject that is a source of so many misconceptions and often the target of sanctimonious analyses. The second section analyses camgirls' entry into sexcamming: entry is the result of a convergence of capture devices (websites that promise easy money for a few hours' work) and a captive audience (women, often young women, with socioeconomic difficulties). As the symbolic cost of entry is high and profits are often low, the women who engage long term in sexcamming are generally those with particular marketable skills who are prepared to put their all into the business. The third section analyses how camgirls collectively monetize sexcamming. Camgirls' success in business depends on their ability to stage amateurism: it is by negating the commercial aspect of the activity that the sex models authenticate the principle of an economic return on it. The fourth and last section discusses individual strategies for earning a living from sexcamming: success depends first on the capacity to produce shows that meet a solvent audience's demand, and second on building a lasting relationship, at a safe distance, with the viewers.

1. Why study French-speaking camgirls?

Our survey focuses on a specific group of players: French-speaking camgirls (generally French and occasionally Belgian or Swiss) who target a male audience.

This narrow framing may come as a surprise to readers considering that sexcamming covers an array of models (generally classed in four categories on the platforms: “women”, “men”, “couples” and “transsexual”, with no gender distinction) and situations (shows for a straight, gay, lesbian audience, etc.). In reality, the sex entrepreneurs’ promise of diversity – with the use of platform framing devices (key words, content filters, etc.) – is misleading. In France, the sexcamming economy is a heteronormative economy (Rubin, 1984) in which women sell sexual services to men. For example, a count of the sex models broadcasting on French platform *Ufancyme*, set up in spring 2017, shows that sexcamming is worked predominantly by women. Of the website’s 470 broadcasters, we counted 438 women (93% of the total), 24 men (5%), six couples (1.5%) and two transsexuals (0.5%).² In addition, an exploratory study based on personal accounts and data collected from the broadcast platforms and Twitter suggests that customers are predominantly men, which is in keeping with the literature on pornography audiences in France (Bozon, 2008).

Turning now to the justification for the survey’s spatial scope, despite the emergence of an international pornography market driven by the development of the digital economy, we felt it a sounder method to focus solely on French-speaking camgirls for a number of reasons. The first reason is *analytical*: a contained study of a population living in a given geographical, political and cultural era restricts variations in societal context. This is especially important in that the pathways of the people working in sexcamming are largely dependent on the institutions of the country in which they live: legal regulations on sex work, the extent of moral censure of pornography, the population’s standard of living, etc. The restriction of the survey frame is also justified for *empirical* reasons. Despite the possibilities opened up by the new technologies for ease of contact between supply and demand the world over, the sexcamming economy is not a uniform, globalized social universe: the camgirls interviewed generally have French customers, most of the sex models mentioned in the interviews are French-speakers, and so on. This is what *Le Tag Parfait*, an online porn culture magazine, calls a *PCF* for *Paysage de la Cam Française* (French Camming Landscape). Lastly, there are *practical* reasons for concentrating on French-speaking camgirls: ease of contact, gaining respondent trust, perfect command of the interview language, etc.

Our survey material is based mainly on 21 semi-structured interviews with women between 20 and 47 years old (the list of interviews can be found in the chapter’s appendix). These 1-to-3½-hour interviews held between September 2017 and November 2018 were conducted by three interviewers of different sexes (two men and one woman), allowing for a control for gender effects on interviewer/interviewee interactions.³ Drawing on the advances of other research on sexuality (Riandey & Firdion, 1993), stating that “a conversation about sex – even in the form of a scientific

² The count was made on August 6, 2018. Despite the fact that *Ufancyme* is a young website with a low volume of hits (858th place in the SimilarWeb ranking of the most visited websites in France), it is a relevant observation space in which to study sexcamming: many of the camgirls interviewed broadcast on the platform and a growing number of members of the French-speaking camgirl community seem to be migrating to it.

³ We gratefully acknowledge Clémence Mazard, an intern at the Pacte laboratory, for her valuable help with the launch of the field study in the fall of 2017.

interview – is, in itself, a form of sexual interaction” (Devereux, 1967: 107), we sought to keep a distance from respondents by using a video conference system for the interviews (Skype). In a few rare cases where respondents preferred not to reveal their face or voice in order to protect their identity, the interviews were conducted by telephone or instant messaging. As distancing devices, video conferencing and the telephone facilitate the acceptance of interviews by women who might otherwise balk at the physical proximity of interviewers whose socio-demographic profile equates them with potential clients.

The respondents were contacted on the Twitter social network (124 contacts resulting in 20 actual interviews). The use of Twitter proved particularly effective as it is a key medium for the online promotion of this line of work. The first sex models contacted were dubious as to whether our inquiries were in earnest, despite our many precautions to avoid being taken for freeriders in search of free shows. Yet wariness waned as the positive responses, recommendations by other camgirls and new contacts came in, and the positive response rate rose substantially. It is difficult to establish the respondent sample’s representativeness of the population of French-speaking camgirls. We simply do not know how many of them there are, although they must run at least into the thousands. However, although the camgirls had been sexcamming for highly variable lengths of time (two months to 13 years) at the time of the interviews, a number of elements suggest that camgirls with a high level of sexcamming activity are overrepresented: a number sex models approached refused to be interviewed on the basis that they had little experience and considered themselves unqualified to express an opinion.

Alongside the interviews, this study draws on a series of exploratory observations in different digital spaces where the sexcamming economy operates. The first of these are devices employed by sexcamming entrepreneurs to entice the sex models and incentivize them to broadcast on their platforms: advertising, recruitment websites, blogs promoting the activity, etc. Second, the camgirls’ Twitter pages were observed, in particular to understand the self-presentation strategies behind the choice of pseudonym,⁴ profile description, and photos and messages posted. Lastly, public show broadcasting platforms (see Box 1) used by the French-speaking sex models were observed, namely Ufancyme, Cam4 and Chaturbate.

Box 1: Private shows and public shows

The sexcamming economy is based on two forms of paid show. The first are *private shows*: a client who wants an individual interaction with a sex model pays an hourly rate in *tokens*, whose value varies from one platform to the next. During the show, the sex model fulfils the client’s wishes. The second form concerns *public shows*, which are viewed simultaneously by a variable number of Internet users: generally ranging from dozens to hundreds. These shows are performances conditioned by meeting *goals* for a rate of payment set in advance by the sex model: e.g. 20 tokens to take off her bra, 50 to take off her knickers, 100 to start to masturbate, etc. In the public show

⁴ As with the state of play in the other digital spaces, a camgirl’s pseudonym is an identity marker that position and differentiate her (Béliard, 2009). In order to protect their identity, we have changed the screen names of the sex models quoted, but have tried to keep their spirit (format, sound, cultural references, wordplay, etc.).

model, although Internet users can behave as freeriders and enjoy the show free of charge, the show can only be viable if some accept paying for the others.

2. Starting work in sexcamming

How do women become camgirls? Far from being spontaneous, initial contact between sex models and platforms relies on soundly developed capture devices: sexcamming promoters seeking to grow their business create recruitment websites that present the activity in an appealing light. However, these devices can only work if they reach a captive audience. So the first broadcast generally occurs following a life event that disadvantages the life course. For some women with capital they can sell on the sexcamming market, this entry into the business converts into a commitment. These women then take the risk of pursuing a difficult, restrictive and often low-paid job despite the platforms' initial promises.

2.1 Capture devices and captive audiences

As with other sharing economy activities (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017), sexcamming relies on the existence of web platforms to help match supply and demand. Yet this match first requires enough people to be broadcasting shows to attract customers. Part of the sexcamming entrepreneur's job is therefore to capture sex models using ad-hoc devices: recruitment websites that present an idealized image of the business. These websites, despite their individual particularities, present some recurring sales pitches. Firstly, in spite of the reality of sexcamming, they understate the pornographic nature of the business: the websites present demure photos (bare-chested men wearing trousers and women always in underwear) and use vocabulary closer to the glamorous world of modelling than pornography ("become a hostess", "choose a life in modelling", etc.). Secondly, the recruitment websites plug the supposed absence of constraints in sexcamming: freedom of initiative ("decide for yourself what you do in your shows"), flexible hours ("work how you want, when you want") and a job that is fun ("have fun and meet great people all over the world"). Thirdly, they use implausible testimonials to push the particularly lucrative nature of sexcamming ("I doubled my earnings (...) working just five hours a week"). Lastly, they assure women who are interested that it is easy to get into the business and that the commitment is minimum so they have the option to stop broadcasting at any time.

Although recruitment devices are necessary to get camgirls into sexcamming, they are not enough on their own. The women first need to find these websites before they can become sex models. Yet like other pornographic activities, sexcamming is a morally questionable activity, which limits the possibilities of promotion on conventional recruitment websites. Understanding the drivers of working in sexcamming therefore calls first for a grasp of how the women find out about the activity in the first place. Many camgirls interviewed said they first heard about sexcamming from a TV show. Some mentioned TV series, and press articles and reports on the Internet. Some also said that they found out about sexcamming by word of mouth or chatting with friends. Yet according to their personal accounts, aside from the women who were familiar with sex work or promiscuous, the initial contact with the activity generally prompted no more than amusement. It was only months or years later, when faced with a financial problem, that they really looked into it and considered working in the business.

“The first time I heard about sexcamming was in *Desperate Housewives*. That was two years ago, but I’ve actually only been doing it for eight months. I did it thinking back to that TV series because I needed the money. That’s really what it was... In the series, it’s Susan. She films herself doing the housework in her underwear. That’s how I came to think of it. When I really looked into camming, I signed up straight away. That was in March 2017. I didn’t think twice really. At the time, I simply had to earn a living. I lost my job for personal reasons and wound up at the job center. I’d just bought an apartment a few months earlier and was in urgent need of cash. So I signed up straight away. I found out how to cam on the job, like all the other girls I should imagine. It started out as kind of a last resort. But it turned out to be fun, so I stayed.” (Eurydice, 27 years old)

Eurydice’s tale, as a young woman previously in relatively well-paid skilled employment (Master’s degree), is significant. Entry into sexcamming generally coincides with a life event with socioeconomic ramifications. These break points are contributory factors to engaging in sexcamming, whether they are due to an affective event (break-up of a cohabiting couple or leaving home after a family row), a work-related event (an incapacitating occupational injury or dismissal), an education-related event (leaving the education system with inadequate qualifications), or an unfortunate accident in life (a car crash resulting in disability). These breaks and misfortunes can be considered as *turning points* (Hughes, 1971) in disadvantaged life courses. However, it would be oversimplistic to equate them with situations of high socioeconomic insecurity. Whereas some camgirls may well have started broadcasting shows to meet their basic needs (rent an apartment, and clothe and feed themselves decently), others started out to maintain their standard of living or gain financial independence from their partner. In any case, they generally had much more leeway than in the case of the more conventional forms of sex work, particularly street prostitution (Weitzer, 2009). For example, the camgirls interviewed generally said that they weighed up the job against other lines of work available to them: waitress, child minder, specialized educator or check-out clerk. Aware that staging their sexuality on the web is clearly not an inconsequential act (fear of being discovered by friends and family, and repercussions on future career), they give careful consideration to the decision to broadcast.

2.2 Women with marketable assets

The symbolic cost of entry into sexcamming varies from one woman to the next. It depends in particular on the woman’s attitude to sex before starting work in the business. The cost can be relatively low, as is the case, for instance, with women who have an extensive previous sexual repertoire compared to ordinary practices (Bozon, 2008) and those who have specific professional skills due to past experience in a listening job or as a sex worker. Such is the case with Ophelia Shibari, a former peep-show employee who was the victim of a car crash in the early 2000s. Having lost the use of her legs and unable to resume her former job, she then had to face a steady slide in her disability allowance down to just 800 euros at the time of the interview. For Ophelia Shibari, who has to receive daily treatment at home and spend long weeks away in treatment facilities, sexcamming is a godsend: it gives her more flexibility than other jobs and puts to use the skills acquired from her peep-show years in the Netherlands in the late 1990s.

“I’d already done it back in 1998. That was in another life, you might say. It was on a set with professional direction for a production company in Amsterdam. I lived there and went to the set every day. A production team managed everything. I was paid by the hour and given hours every day. (...) So when I start camming, I was already familiar with it and, in a way, I’d already done it. Even if it was different. How can I put it... Now, I do it from home. But, if you like, when I started to broadcast, I knew what I was going to be asked to do.” (Ophelia Shibari, 45 years old)

Ophelia Shibari’s case demonstrates one possible pathway into sexcamming, but it is not one that is representative. Only three of the women interviewed worked directly in sex work before they started broadcasting. Although the other camgirls were often strangers to this world, a number of them suggested that they were open to the idea based on their previous sex life and virtually all the camgirls interviewed said they were bisexual. Moreover, a number of camgirls had previously frequented pick-up joints or sex clubs. Others mentioned having a particular body image (weight problem, difficulty accepting their physical appearance, eating disorder, etc.). These women see working in sexcamming as a long learning process in the techniques of the body (Mauss, 1973), generally offset by having other assets that can be put to good use in the business. While some are perfect *digital natives* with a command of particularly useful techniques (communication on social media, website publishing, photoshopping, video editing, etc.), others have education- and career-based management skills. This stands to reason, since many of them had a relatively comfortable childhood or at least their cultural capital is well above average. Two of the camgirls interviewed are even graduates from *grandes écoles*.⁵ From this point of view, the French camgirls interviewed display similarities with the middle- and upper-class white American sex workers studied by sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein (Bernstein, 2007).

2.3 A massive time investment in a relatively low-paid business

Many interviewees spoke about the remarkable and unexpected success of their first shows. They mentioned “beginner’s luck” in explaining the three-figure sums earned while they were trying out broadcasting. The hypothesis could be put that this success owes very little to chance and is rather the result of the promotional strategies of the website managers, who use social media and blogs affiliated with the platforms to spotlight the new sex models they find promising and who, by means of a performative effect, sometimes become so. Likewise, some platforms’ ranking algorithms – veritable “black boxes” about which little is ultimately known – seem to place a premium on new players. These incentives encourage the sex models to invest time in the business, to take it seriously. Yet once the interest in the first broadcasts has passed, it has to be said that disappointment is often considerable. Whereas the failure of subsequent shows is a factor in the withdrawal of many camgirls from the business, it also has the opposite effect among the more motivated girls by prompting an escalation in commitment: in the belief that their low audience figures and poor

⁵ The *grandes écoles* are top French graduate schools with a highly selective admissions procedure, which are generally reserved for children of the upper classes. See Bourdieu (1997).

earnings are due to a lack of commitment on their part, some camgirls decide to increase their time investment – but also their emotional and bodily investment – in the business. It comes as no surprise that sexcamming is the only job worked by virtually all the camgirls interviewed (15 out of 20) and that they generally spend dozens of hours a week on it.

Elizabeth Bernstein, in her study of the apparently improbable engagement of these women in sex labor, explains it as being due to the gendered disparities of postindustrial economic life and the relatively high pay of the sex industry (compared to other service sector jobs (Bernstein, 2007)). From the point of view of pay, however, the case studied by the American sociologist presents a notable difference compared to the case studied here. Although two of the camgirls interviewed state that they earn more than 3,000 euros a month, these pay levels remain rare and most of the girls struggle to earn any more than 1,000 euros.⁶ In addition, these sums correspond to turnover, a not-inconsiderable proportion of which is deducted from those girls who declare their income, as most of them do: the majority of French camgirls have *freelance entrepreneur* status (a scheme designed to simplify unincorporated business establishment and social security contribution formalities) and pay approximately 25% of their earnings in social security contributions. Moreover, as with all entrepreneurial activities, sexcamming incurs outlays: purchasing a good quality webcam, regularly buying new clothes, having numerous sex toys and accessories to hand, etc. Lastly, freelancers do not get paid leave. At the end of the day, considering the services they provide, camgirls' earnings are generally low despite the huge amount of time they put into their work.

To understand the personal investment demanded by sexcamming, we look again at the example of camgirl Ophelia Shibari, who generally spends six to eight hours a day on her work: she logs on in the afternoon after her treatment and ends her camgirl workday at around 10 pm. Her total working week, including the time she spends on the platforms, in chats with customers on Twitter and setting up the room before the broadcast, comes to over 40 hours. Yet she says she earned an average of 800 to 1,200 euros a month in the last quarter, i.e. an hourly rate below the minimum legal wage in France. Similarly, the other camgirls interviewed have hourly earnings that rarely exceed 10 euros an hour. Although sexcamming is an “honorable refuge” (Bourdieu, 1984: 415) for certain middle-class women with disadvantaged life courses, it is not an easy way to make money: the few women who manage to earn hundreds of euros in a few hours, sometimes called “sex millionaires” by the press, are statistical exceptions who perpetuate the myth of easy money and the *self-made woman*. The camgirls who report earnings of more than 3,000 euros a month owe their success primarily to a huge time investment in the business, as shown by the case of Irina Alpha, who says she works up to 70 hours a week.

3. The monetization of amateurism

⁶ The earnings analysis is based on the statements of income made during the interviews. Considering the detailed information that most of the camgirls gave us unprompted, we can make the assumption that these statements are truthful. Of the 20 camgirls interviewed, the only two who declined to speak about their earnings are also those with the longest experience in the business (8 years and 13 years respectively).

It is interesting in two respects to demonstrate that the time investment is a necessary condition for making a living from sexcamming. It helps demystify the imagined workings of the business and focuses on how camgirls learn to deal with the paradox at the heart of the monetization model. Indeed, the activity's singularity lies in its promise of amateurism perceived as a guarantee of authenticity. The sexcamming economy is hence based on the tricky exercise of conceptually distancing the work from the money. To make their shows pay, the camgirls have to provide the guarantees of amateurism expected by their customers.

3.1 Distancing sex from money to guarantee authenticity

The generic term of *authenticity*, omnipresent in the world of sexcamming, underpins the workings of many social activities. Some tourism anthropologists, for example, have analyzed the commoditization of cultural forms presented as protected from the excesses of capitalist society even though they are "sold by the pound" (Greenwood, 1982). Authenticity also applies to the field of art, and to the assumed disinterested nature of the artist, to the principle of his or her recognition in the field (Bourdieu, 1995). It is also a cornerstone of the sociology of emotion, especially Arlie Hochschild's study on flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983). The sociologist shows that, to gain customer loyalty, flight attendants learn to express emotions perceived as sincere by the passengers. Particularities of fields and approaches aside, these examples demonstrate the ambiguity between the imperative of authenticity and marketization. In each of the examples, the monetization of the products or services depends on the supply players' capacity to shape reality so that it chimes with the customer's perceived universe: that of an activity shielded from self-interested calculation and the primacy of the market.

In the case of sexcamming, the amateurism criterion is the catalyst for the veridicity of the establishment of its recognition as an authentic practice. The Cam4 website hence claims to broadcast sex shows performed by real people ("real people naked and having sex live") and Chaturbate claims to work with "thousands of live amateurs". By pushing the amateur nature of sexcamming, industry players (platform managers, sex models, business promoters, etc.) endow the shows with particular qualities that differentiate them from other forms of sex trade, starting with classic pornography performed by professional actors. The sexcamming market's symbolic construction requires the negation of the economic nature of the activity (Bourdieu, 1995; Jourdain, 2010) and signals of non-professionalism in the narrative, which is precisely what the camgirls do on Twitter, their blogs and the broadcast platforms.

Although there is no unanimously agreed concept of amateurism in the world of sexcamming, the survey makes for an outline of the idealized figure of the amateur camgirl, built mainly on three features. Firstly, the sexcamming amateur is equated with a *passionate commitment*. The amateur is seen as being proud of her taste for sex ("*I love sex*"), staging the pleasure she gets from making the shows ("*It's so good, my darlings!*") and making the playful side of sexcamming the key motive for her commitment.⁷ Secondly, amateurism mirrors a symbolic construction of the practice

⁷ The passages in quotation marks and italics are excerpts from wording used by camgirls in their work. They may be excerpts from profile pages on the platforms, Twitter accounts, blogs or chats with Internet users on the platforms.

as a *sideline*. Far from being a full-time job, sexcamming is portrayed as a side job (Weber, 1989) on which sex models spend a few hours a week to make ends meet. Thirdly, amateurs pride themselves on the *spontaneity of their performance and persona* on display in their shows. Lack of proficiency in the classic pornographic codes is seen here not as a weakness, but as a quality. In other words, it is a guarantee that the shows produced are original.

Despite the fact that the sexcamming economy is based on a classic trade model (sex models are paid to provide a service to meet consumer demand), it circumvents the moral objection to the commodification of the body. The myth of amateurism distances the business from the *forbidden relationship* between sex and economy, thereby forestalling any impressions of sexual exploitation. Yet in reality, this distance is never complete. The boundaries between sexcamming and the other sex trade forms are porous, as shown by porntube entrepreneurs' marketing strategies with their pornographic video broadcast websites based on the YouTube model (Mowlabocus, 2008). These websites have gradually diversified from their initial business model of pornographic videos, and many of them now have a dedicated live amateur show broadcasting space directly integrated into their interface. The porosity of the boundaries can also be seen from the content hosted on the porntubes. Many videos posted on these websites are made by people who do not have the technical resources of the "classic" pornographic industry producers and consequently call themselves amateurs.

3.2 Guarantees of amateurism

Faced with the image of the money aspect, camgirls seek to give Internet users guarantees of the authenticity of their shows. Among the material signs of amateurism, broadcast location occupies a prime place. Broadcasting from home – as all the respondents do – is vital to amateur branding. Putting the domestic environment on show (bedroom, sitting room, and sometimes bathroom or kitchen) in its most natural state also brings the "girl next door" fantasy into play (Mowlabocus, 2008), the neighbor or woman you might pass in the street who chooses to share her private life for fun. Yet it is also worth considering the institutionalization of the amateur brand in the light of the new practices that have fed into the digital spaces in the last two decades. Through this lens, the symbolic positioning of sexcamming appears as part of a broader drive emerging in the early 2000s to blur the boundaries between dilettante and professional practices on the web. Camgirls hence see themselves as "pro-am" (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004) and accordingly appropriate the home-based DIY culture, as shown by the interview with Deborah Seeexmaid, a young woman who decided to start sexcamming to pay her rent in the fall of 2016. Like the other camgirls, Deborah produces her shows herself:

"We're not performers. Well... we are performers, but amateur performers. We're not paid by a company to do it. (...) We're on our own and we do it from home. Porn actors don't shoot their films on their own from their own couch using their own camera. That's not amateur."
(Deborah Seeexmaid, 22 years old)

Typical of the web's alternative work utopias, the camgirl's end-to-end control of the production process here again distances her from classic pornographic cinema with its division of labor and worker subordination. However, the "homemade"

distinction does not begin and end with a criticism of the industrial nature of conventional pornography. DIY is also a powerful vehicle for the horizontalization of relations between camgirl and Internet user.

4. Real sex trade professionals?

Guarantees of amateurism are not enough to secure the camgirls a comfortable income. Economic success for the camgirls depends on their ability to differentiate themselves from their rivals and forge close relationships with their customers.

4.1 Producing singular shows

In general, novice camgirls start out broadcasting with what they have to hand. However, they quickly realize the importance of producing technically proficient shows, as explained by Padmé Lov, a camgirl for eight months at the time of the interview. A former barmaid, Padmé Lov found out about sexcamming from a YouTube documentary and has been broadcasting shows since, occasionally with her partner:

“As soon as I earned the first tokens, I started saving for a new webcam and lighting to attract as many people as I could. (...) On the equipment side, our lighting is good, but we want to buy a green backdrop like some of the pros have. (...) We get our inspiration for the lighting and all that from stuff on YouTube. I’ve really created a Padmé Lov brand out of my color and set design. ’Cos it’s geeky, geeky lighting, and all.” (Padmé Lov, 27 years old)

Although proficiency in technical tools is central to the process of the camgirls becoming more professional, this task is part of a broader online image esthetic-identity construction approach. Camgirls work on singularizing their services to raise their visibility and their own profile (Jourdain, 2010; Karpik, 2010). They build their brand (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975) by staging the cultural references they embrace and creating a distinction between theirs and other services on the market:

“There’s this girl that started camming at around the same time as me. She’s a suicide girl.⁸ (...) She has tattoos. When she started out, she had purple hair. Then it was black and now it’s green, I think. It’s a really distinctive style. (...) And people like it, so it stays. Having something distinctive counts enormously. You have to find your image and take a line of attack. (...). [Mine], I’m still looking. I know I really like dragonflies. It sounds daft, but it’s become a bit of a trademark. When people see a picture of a dragonfly somewhere, they think of me and send me a message. (...) It took me a while to understand that: you have to have a particularity.” (Jade Erotic Dragonfly, 24 years old).

⁸ The term *suicide girl* is a reference to the Californian website, SuicideGirls, set up in 2001, which broadcasts photos and videos of naked young women with tattoos and sometimes piercings. *Suicide girls* are part of the Altporn movement, which promotes the do-it-yourself culture in pornography and identifies with alternative cultures (punk and Goth music, skateboarding, etc.) (Attwood, 2007).

As seen from this account given by Jade Erotic Dragonfly, who had been broadcasting shows for two years at the time of the interview, singularization is a longwinded task. Whether based on erotic skills learned on the job or talents that predate entry to the business, it depends across the board on the ability of the women to understand and meet the clients' expectations. This mainly takes the form of catering to the sexual fantasies of certain viewers, as shown by the interview with Snazzy Ebony, hesitant about some customers' requests:

“There are practices I wasn't aware of, like being asked to use certain objects that would never have occurred to me. Like the heel of a shoe: once, I was asked to use the heel of a shoe as a sex toy.” (Snazzy Ebony, 30 years old)

So working in sexcamming sometimes requires the camgirls to choose between expanding their sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which they could then make pay, and turning down certain customer requests especially where they are physically risky, distasteful or seen as degrading. Although some camgirls work in “extreme” practices, sometimes calling for a command of special codes, as with the BDSM practiced by Oksana Kolero, sexcamming is also based on more conventional sexual scripts. This can be seen from the following for the acrobatic shows performed by Snazzy Ebony, who has installed a pole-dancing pole in her bedroom, and for Kissi Yeeh's erotic storytelling in her pajamas. Whether camgirls merely hint at sex rather than exhibiting it or whether they engage in more esoteric practices (fisting, golden showers, scat, etc.), the success of these shows reveals the complexity of the marketization process and the highly entrepreneurial nature of the business: camgirls, who live as innovators, are quick to try out new practices, inform Internet users that their shows are in the experimental stage and ask for their opinions afterwards.

4.2 Building Intimate Relationships

As with other forms of e-commerce, a screen separates the camgirls from their customers. Although this distancing is not in itself a problem, it does represent a challenge for the camgirls who have to keep up the intensity of their interactions with the Internet users to make sure they keep viewing. This is no mean task since hundreds of viewers might be online at the same time, which restricts the possibilities for inter-individual interactions.

Camgirls use different techniques to ensure the longevity of their relationship with customers who could otherwise “take their business elsewhere”. Some camgirls, for example, set up polls on their Twitter account giving Internet users the chance to vote on their future hair color or the theme of the next show. These polls reveal the customers' expectations and are an inexpensive way of getting their input. The relationship is also built on the technological development of connected objects, especially connected sex toys that vibrate “to order”, i.e. when the customers pay. The success of this technico-economic innovation is based on a particular form of closer interaction: Internet users can remotely touch the camgirls, giving them the impression that they can give the girls pleasure. Where the technologies lend a feel of intimacy to interactions involving hundreds of viewers, the value of the services also depends largely on their personalization. Part of the camgirls' work therefore consists in engaging in customized relations with clients. In this respect, having a social media account like Twitter helps retain loyalty:

“Well, I’m on Twitter and I try to post photos on a regular basis and answer my private messages. Actually, I don’t reply to everyone because, sometimes, I get quite a large number of messages. But as far as my clients are concerned, I do make the effort to answer them and chat with them. And then, sometimes I’ll make a commercial gesture. For example, recently, I had a customer who gave me a present. So I offered him a show on Skype and gave him ten minutes for free to thank him for the gift. Sometimes, I also send signed photos. So there you go, I try to show them that it’s also a two-way thing between us. I’m grateful, basically...” (Bluealux, 24 years old)

Far from being mere consumers of sexual services, sexcamming customers are therefore also people looking for an intimate connection, who need to talk and to be heard. This explains the non-sexual conversations between Internet users and camgirls at the beginning or end of shows. Some of these chats revolve around shared interests such as video games (most of the camgirls interviewed are keen players), music and films. Other conversations concern the camgirls more directly, such as when they discuss their ambitions with Internet users, who in turn lend an attentive ear. And other chats discuss everyday concerns, as seen from a conversation between camgirl Erinyll and a few Internet users who give her tips at the end of one of her shows on how to polish her parquet flooring scratched by her sofa legs.⁹

This DIY advice may well appear to be trivial, but it shows how clients can get involved in the camgirls’ daily lives. The interviews point up more generally the involvement of some Internet users who put their (sometimes professional) skills to use to help camgirls prepare and promote their shows: assistance with photoshopping photos for a blog, advice on buying broadcasting equipment, etc. These helping hands essentially constitute an “altruistic” set-up, similar to that which could be found in a real-life couple, and once again help erase the commercial aspect of the relationship. Similarly, when Internet users give presents to camgirls they are “fans” of (mainly on an Amazon wish list where a gift can be ordered without revealing the sex model’s address), the gesture shows how the relationship can stray from the market context (Zelizer, 2005).

4.3 Relational ambiguities and mismanaged transactions

Contrary to popular belief, the relationship between camgirls and their spectators is not necessarily fake or simulated. The interviews reveal feelings of attachment driven mainly by being in online communities such as those created by multi-player video games. Some clients share so many moments with the girls in other digital spaces than sexcamming that they end up being seen as “*fellow gamers*” or even “*online friends*”.

Yet although the camgirls are careful to keep their customers close enough to ensure their loyalty, but at a sufficient distance to prevent them from getting too emotionally involved, interactions sometimes take an unexpected turn. Such is the case, for example, when regular viewers start using the language of love in their interactions with the camgirls. The girls then face an internal struggle with a difficult

⁹ Excerpt from a show broadcast by *Erinyll*, 27 years old, on the Cam4 platform, July 2017.

decision to make. On the one hand, this emotional dependence, generally in the form of requesting regularly scheduled private shows and giving presents and cash donations, substantially boosts their income and can sometimes even double it. On the other hand, it is morally hard to accept seeing a fan publicly express his feelings and spend money like water, particularly when the fan's behavior impacts on a person's private life. This was precisely the situation described by one of the best-paid camgirls of our interviewees: one of her regular customers, himself in a steady relationship, spent up to thousands of euros a month on the platform.

Although the camgirls often make the point in the interviews that sexcamming involves consenting, responsible adults, such set phrases barely conceal the emotional strain of the job as reported by Sexypussy, in the business for a year and a half at the time of the interview:

“You very quickly run into emotional dependence from some of the viewers. And if you're not equipped for it, if you can't step back, it can be emotionally draining. You have to be able to set limits; set limits with people who are themselves the potential big spenders. So the question becomes: where do I set the limits? Limits are important for your psychological survival. If it's really your job, if you really depend on it, are you going to risk someone no longer coming to your room and spending loads of money on you? Are you going to risk stopping answering him? And if you play a character that has nothing to do with your own personality, can you play her with as much depth and as often as the person wants you to? Personally, that's something I don't do. I don't exactly want to put life and soul into it, you know...” (Sexypussy, 26 years old)

The fact that only two interviewees said they allow their customers to say “I love you” points to the difficulty of separating private and market spheres and the risks of losing out on the transaction. And for good reason, since it is not just the spectators who suffer from ambiguous feelings. Camgirls themselves sometimes end up getting involved and finding they have feelings for a customer. A number of the interviewees said they had felt attracted to a client at some point in their career.

“- Camgirl: Basically, I made the mistake of falling into a certain form of intimacy with some. We communicate on Twitter, Snapchat, Skype. It took up a lot, and I mean a lot, of space in my life. So at the end of the day, feelings... Well, you get the picture, yeah...

- Interviewer: I'm not sure I understand.

- Camgirl: Feelings of friendship got a bit muddled up with the client relationship.

- Interviewer: Is it more than friendship sometimes?

- Camgirl: It's not love either, you know. I'm really laidback as a person, so people tend warm to me. And, at times, it isn't easy. Yes, I see them as friends, but you know... Maybe they don't see it the same way. You just don't know.

- Interviewer: Do you mean ...

- Camgirl: I've already had clients who avoided coming to see me because they too found they had feelings for me. It's not my fault, you know..." (Maya Erynys, 40 years old)

These situations often occurred at the start of their career when the girls were single and were not in a steady relationship or were in the midst of a break-up. Sometimes, when the feelings were reciprocated, they say they took the plunge, i.e. met the actual person. Although far from commonplace, these tales point to the potentially performative nature of the myth of amateurism. By the interviewees' accounts, these relationships often turned out to be disappointing if not psychologically damaging, some even seeing them as practically professional misconduct, which they put down to their inexperience. Yet the fact is that these pathways help fuel the image of *the girl next door* and thereby the principle of making an economic return on the activity.

Conclusion

Although sexcamming is one of the facets of the development of a new digital sex economy, this booming business is still relatively uncharted territory. By analyzing the drivers for camgirls' engagement in the business and tracing the steps of their professional learning curves, our research offers socioeconomic insights to usefully supplement the studies that consider sexcamming from its political, cultural and identity angles (Dobson, 2007; Senft, 2008; Jones, 2016; Nayar, 2017, etc.). In addition to forming part of the literature on sex work (Weitzer, 2009), this chapter contributes to the debates on platform labor (van Doorn, 2017) and on the marketization of the domestic universe.

The particular nature of the business is such that working in sexcamming brings intimacy into play: we examine the business entry conditions to show that the first step on the road to entry is the result of a complex convergence of capture devices and a captive audience. Although some camgirls express the pleasure they derive from the job (Jones, 2016), the interviews suggest that the main reason for engagement is economic and that making a living from sexcamming demands a considerable investment (physical, temporal and emotional).

The chapter also looks into the learning processes and systems of use of previously acquired skills on which their business is based. Our case study is interesting in that it shows that it is the negation of the market aspect that guarantees the possibility of marketizing the services on offer. The camgirls' engagement dynamic therefore takes shape in their collective distancing of themselves from classic forms of pornography. As in other cases analyzed in this book, but particularly strikingly here, the commercial aspect is kept at a distance: it is the separation of money and sex that guarantees the authenticity of the service on offer. By broadcasting from home, presenting the activity as a sideline and, more generally, taking advantage of the grey area between professional and domestic spaces, camgirls take part in spreading a myth of amateurism.

Far from being spontaneous, camgirls' practices and narratives are considered, controlled and improved over time. The only limits to their individual differentiation strategies are their own inventiveness and their willingness to meet the expectations

of Internet users to keep them on board. Although intimate relationships with customers are profitable for the camgirls, they are also often a moral and emotional strain in the long run. Being a hardened professional means learning to keep relations at a good distance, in keeping with the established “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1979). This raises the point of the existence of mismanaged transactions, which become too emotionally involved and can ultimately cost more dearly in psychological terms than they make in monetary terms.

This, together with the question of engagement, begs the question as to the conditions that lead camgirls to leave the world of sexcamming. Do they leave the platforms when new job opportunities crop up? Are these exit logics driven, like the engagement dynamics, by breaks in the life course? Our methodology does not extend to a capacity to investigate the exit phenomena (Ebaugh, 1988). However, future research drawing on interviews with former camgirls will surely be able to provide some answers to the question of professional withdrawal from the web platforms.

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Appendix

Table 1.1 List of interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Time in sexcamming *	Monthly remuneration from sexcamming**	Additional paid work***
Deborah Seeexmaid	22	1-2 years	≥ €2,000	No
Snazzy Ebony	30	6-12 months	€500-€1,000	No
Jade Erotic Dragonfly	24	2-5 years	€500-€1,000	No
Azur Diletante	33	2-5 years	≤ €500	Community Manager
Eurydice	27	6-12 months	€1,000-€1,500	No
Padmé Lov	27	6-12 months	€500-€1,000	No
Aurora Pallas	20	2-5 years	≥ €2,000	No
Maya Erynys	40	2-5 years	N/A	No
Oksana Kolero	24	≥ 5 years	≥ €2,000	No
Emma Monterey	23	2-5 years	≥ €2,000	No
Sisi	30	1-2 years	≥ €2,000	No
Bluealux	24	6-12 months	≤ €500	Employed on a stud farm
Kissi Yeeh	29	≤ 6 months	€1,500-€2,000	No
Octavie Traviata	42	≥ 5 years	Refrained from answering (probably ≥ €2,000)	No
Petit trésor	24	≤ 6 months	€500-€1,000	No
Chenoa	47	≥ 5 years	Refrained from answering (probably ≥ €2,000)	No
SexyPussy	26	6-12 months	€1,000-€1,500	Waitress (casual work)
Pepeer Zahra	30	1-2 years	€500-€1,000	Employed in the hotel trade in the summer
nat006	33	1-2 years	≤ €500	Chain store employee
Ophelia Shibari	45	≤ 6 months	€1,000-€1,500	No

* The time in sexcamming expresses the time between the date of the first broadcast and the date of the interview.

** The remuneration data are to be considered with caution. Firstly, income from sexcamming is likely to vary a great deal from one month to the next. Secondly, the figures are estimates based on heterogeneous and sometimes inaccurate information: payments made by the platforms in the last month, annual income calculated as a monthly average, calculation based on the number of hours spent broadcasting over the month and average hourly remuneration estimated by the camgirl, etc.

*** This criterion denotes all paid non-pornographic work effective at the time of the interview.