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Beyond the Screen

Unveiling the Layers of Intimacy in Digital Sex Work

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Abstract

This is a study that explores how digital sex workers create intimacy for their customers. It furthers not only the literature regarding sex work but also the research on digitally mediated relationships. I conducted semi-structured interviews with six women who have experience with digital-only sex work. Three of these interviews were also complemented with a body mapping session. The data was analyzed using Forstie's (2017) framework regarding intimacy as well as Hoschild's (2012) theory of emotional labor. The findings show that all four factors, Affect, Mutual action, Knowledge, and Norms, were part of and affected digital sex workers' creation of intimacy. Moreover, to create intimacy all the participants partook in emotional labor, which was both mental and embodied. The sex workers' bodies act as a way to create a convincing performance of intimacy that is supposed to be experienced by the customers as authentic. The participants discussed different ways to cope with the consequences that came with doing emotional labor which culminated in the term emotional currency. Having a lot of emotional currency makes the creation of intimacy both easier and more successful. Intimacy as a phenomenon in digital sex work is therefore linked to the interaction between the sex worker and their customer, but also the individual emotional processes of the sex worker.

Keywords: Sex work, Intimacy, Emotional labor, Embodiment, Online

Popular science summary

This is a study about intimacy and authenticity in digital sex work. The research explores how sex workers create intimacy in a digital setting with a focus on how they use their bodies and their physical environment as part of this. I did interviews with six women, half of them also did body mapping. Body mapping is an interview technique where the interviewee gets to draw a full-body portrait of themselves. The data was then analyzed using Forsie's (2017) framework for intimacy, where she divides intimacy into four building stones, as well as Hoschild's (2012) theory of emotional labor. Emotional labor refers to how workers use their emotions as part of their work, often when providing a service.

The findings show that intimacy is a very big part in digital sex work, strongly affected by the sex workers having the right type of knowledge to create the emotional experience of intimacy for their customers. When they use their knowledge about how their customers want them to be and behave, they do emotional labor. They adjust their emotions to fit the expectations of the customers. Additionally, their bodies become a way to prove that the emotions they perform are real, even if they are part of a performance. The body becomes a means to convince the customers of their performances. Doing this takes a lot of energy. I have suggested the term emotional currency, to describe how the sex workers do different preparations, do different actions or think about past experiences in order to better take on the tasks that come with emotional labor. Emotional currency makes the emotional labor more successful and easier for the sex worker. The actions mentioned above become a way to accumulate emotional currency, which is later spent during work tasks in order to do a performance that is as successful as possible.

Emotional currency does not necessarily make the work into a good, pleasurable or fun experience, but it does make it easier and more successful. Emotional currency makes the emotional labor, that they have to do to create intimacy, better. Intimacy as part of digital sex work is therefore connected to something happening between the sex worker and their customer, but it is also important to see the internal processes in the sex worker that are important steps in the creation of intimacy.

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Introduction

Emotions serve as the threads that weave connections in the social world. They shape the experience of interaction and relationships as well as the social context in which they happen. Emotions, whether subtle or grand, are fundamental to the exchange of intimacy and its influence on how individuals connect. This interplay shapes the backdrop for this research exploration of digital sex work.

Collins (2005) shares an in-depth discussion about the difference between creating emotions through online versus offline interaction. Online interaction is not necessarily seen as conducted in an emotional vacuum by Collins, but that the emotions that emerge from it are less intense and less powerful than those from offline interaction. He writes, “In principle, one could hold a party via conference call, but I have never heard of anyone doing it” (Collins, 2005, 61). He wrote that in 2005, and therefore had a significant advantage in coming to such a conclusion; he had not experienced the pandemic. Being forced to suffice with internet-mediated interaction did not only make the general population more used to it. Another outcome was that it also created more technological advancements that facilitated such interaction. In 2005, you probably could not have a successful party via conference call, but by 2024 we have been there and done that.

Technological advancements have had a transformative impact on multiple realms of social life. Lemma (2017) discuss how sex, love and intimacy are strongly affected and that our traditional ways of exploring these topics in academia must be revisited in the new light of technological innovation. One technological advancement that facilitates a new type of sexual encounter is platform sex work, such as Onlyfans. Launched in 2016, but gained popularity in 2020, Onlyfans is a digital patronage where individuals can financially support a content creator to receive exclusive content (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020; Lippmann, Lawlor & Leistner, 2023). OnlyFans is subscription-based, and customers can access content behind a paywall for a monthly fee that the creator determines (Uttrapong et al., 2022). In addition to what is being offered for the monthly fee, the sex worker can also decide that the customers through extra payments can access more exclusive material such as live shows, private videos or live chatting (Uttrapong et al., 2022). Lemma (2017) argues that Onlyfans facilitates

subscription intimacy, where traditional offline intimacy is exchanged for digital intimacy at a monthly fee.

A broader way to look at this is through Illouz's (2007) theory of late capitalism's commodification of emotions. Services today include not only a commodity, a product or a service but also an emotional expectation. Customers want to be interacted with in a specific way that commodifies the worker's emotions, mood and personality. Situated in research about the commodification of emotions, this study focuses on the emotional service of performing intimacy, which relates to interpersonal closeness, pleasantness, and exclusiveness (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

The following thesis is a case study of six women who have experience with digital sex work and their encounters with digitally mediated intimacy. Sex workers are a highly interesting group to situate research on digital intimacy within due to their expertise in creating intimacy as part of their work. Other than that, sex workers also engage with a diverse range of clients making their competence with the commodification of intimacy broader than if one were to look at other digital relations.

There is a phenomenological angle to the analytical framework where the focus is to explore intimacy as a phenomenon online and how it manifests itself in the offline realm as well. The landscape for intimate interactions has been subject to change and has been shaped by rapid technological advancements. Digital sex workers navigate the complex landscape of blurred boundaries between the physical and the virtual, where a centrality of their creation is a type of intimacy with their customers that transcends the traditional restrictions regarding distance and temporality. Sex work being highly embodied enriches our understanding of intimacy in the digital age by bridging the gap between digital and physical experiences of intimacy. In this thesis, I explore the complexities of intimacy in digital sex work with the following research question;

- How do digital sex workers perform intimacy and authenticity in their work?

The research design for this study is grounded in an ontological perspective that values narratives, knowledge and stories as essential components of social realities and lived experiences. Moreover, my epistemological stance emphasizes that an interactive process, for

example conversations, is the most effective way to explore social realities. Using the plural form, social realities, I highlight how narratives are subjective reconstructions of events, not precise replicas. I reject the positivist understanding of truth as something objective and universal and instead argue for understanding research as a contextual and situational knowledge of different individuals' lived experiences. My perspective is also strongly shaped by acknowledging lived experience as something encompassing both mental and embodied realms.

Following that, another epistemological notion that shapes this research is what I call *embodied research*. Embodiment simply refers to how research should not limit the exploration of the social by disregarding the body. Instead, we should examine how the body influences and becomes influenced by social situations (Natvik, Råheim & Sviland, 2021). An important note is that embodiment as used in this research is not a clarification of a separation between mind and body; rather it is a strong critique of that dichotomy. An embodied practice does not neglect the mind but emphasizes the mind's realization in the body (Strathern and Steward, 2011; Barasalou et al., 2003; Ignatow, 2007). Seeing the body and mind as two separate entities becomes a limitation when exploring social phenomena (Gupta, 2016; Roy, Roy & Janal, 2010; Maj, 2023), primarily when the phenomenon of focus is strongly related to an emotional realm, such as intimacy.

Embodiment is holistically utilized in this study. It has influenced the method of this study, the ethical considerations, and the overall study design. This decision was made due to Csordas's (2002) suggestion that embodiment does not have to be limited solely to theory but can also be a fruitful tool in methodology. An embodied perspective is beneficial for two reasons. Firstly, because sex work is done with the body and therefore has an inherent bodily dimension that should be taken into account in research. Secondly, because the sex work researched in this study is digital, it also allows us to explore the embodied aspects of internet-mediated interaction. Giving space to the body further deepens the understanding of intimacy in digital interaction.

Definition of sex work

In this thesis, the term sex work is used to describe the act of trading erotic services for money, and the actors are described as sex workers. This is, however, not entirely unproblematic, thus necessitating some elaboration.

In a quantitative study, Hansen and Johansson (2022) explore what people think to be the most adequate word to use when describing the trade of sexual services. They compare prostitution, transactional sex and sex work. They find that the word prostitution had strong negative associations, something they argue stems from it being a stigmatized word. Transactional sex was found to be vague and therefore not deemed as most suitable to use. They conclude that sex work was the best word to describe the trade of sexual services.

Reflecting upon why they found that prostitution has a stronger negative connotation than sex work brings us to the most common critique of the term sex workers. A risk with using the term sex work is homogenizing the group in a way that equates, for example, selling physical sex with selling photos of feet online. Both experiences are interesting aspects of social life, but the former is far more exposed to harm. Why people feel strongly towards prostitution then might not be solely because of stigmatization but simply because it can be very harmful. Following this, Harcourt and Donovan (2005) highlight how sex worker is a comprehensive term that needs further definition. They discuss how there are at least 25 different variants of sex work. As a means to make the concept more precise, they differentiate between the direct and the indirect sex industry. Direct sex work refers to including genital contact and indirect sex work does not include genital contact. Day (2023) also describes how sex work is an umbrella term and highlights how there are riskier and safer ways of doing it. They exemplify this by comparing street-sex work with brothel workers, where the latter have more substantial social support and more resources. A risk with using the term sex work is that it homogenizes the plethora of experiences that exist in the market of sexual services.

It is therefore essential to highlight that the term sex worker in this study refers to individuals who sell sexual content in an online-only setting and, hence part of the indirect sex industry. I strongly acknowledge how sex work is an umbrella term and that I do not deduce the different ways of doing sex work to be equal in terms of harm, stigma and ramifications.

Digital sex workers sell a variety of sexual services such as photos, videos, live erotic shows and erotic chatting. Live performances can be for many people simultaneously, for example, a livestream, or only between the creator and one customer, for example, a video call (Jones, 2016). Digital sex work involves synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (delayed) communication between workers and their customers (McCracken & Brooks-Gordon, 2021).

Literature review:

This thesis is situated in the sociology of emotions, specifically focusing on emotions connected to labor by looking at digital sex workers. In the contemporary Swedish context, sex work operates within and is influenced by, the capitalist economic system. Illouz (2007) argues that emotions are part of a consumption culture in late capitalism, meaning emotions have become a marketized commodity. Following this, both Bernstein (2007a) and Lemma (2017) argues that because of commodification, emotions and personal closeness no longer depend upon building a relationship over a long period but can be offered at a price. To further explore this phenomenon of commercialization of emotion and closeness, this research examines the creation of intimacy amongst sex workers as part of their labor.

The marketization of emotions further connects to a demand for authenticity in late capitalism. Authenticity relates to something exclusive, thus making it more desirable than mass-produced commodities that are obtainable for the general population (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). In late capitalism, this applies not only to commodities but also to services, such as those offered in the context of sex work (Carbonero and Garrido, 2018). Authentic experiences in late capitalism are often intended to be experienced by the receiver as spontaneous but are, however, often planned and performed (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Illouz, 2007). The customers' wish for authentic experiences requires the workers to provide a corresponding service. The commercialization is thus not only of emotions but also of specific ways to perform those emotions.

Commodification of intimacy

One theory that explores this phenomenon is Hoschild's theory of emotional labor (1983; 2012). The core of the theory is that service work contains aspects that entails performing adequate emotions and adjusting one's personality to produce the preferred state of mind in others. The goal of this is simply *to do one's job right*. Not enacting the correct emotions will

be experienced by the customers as an inadequate work performance. Wharton (2009) describes how the literature regarding emotional labor is mostly divided into two parts. On the one hand, many scholars study emotional labor as a means to understand organization, social relations and structures that shape different kinds of service work. On the other hand, different scholars use emotional labor to more deeply focus on the exploration of different emotions and workers' management of them in a more general context, not necessarily as connected to specific occupations. I suggest that a benefit of the former approach is that the management of emotions is put in the context of a particular type of work which allows for the analysis to be connected to the different structures that are present. It is also in this approach that this research situates itself as I explore the way sex workers create intimacy as part of their labor.

Many scholars have specifically analyzed sex work using Hochschild's (2012) theory of emotional labor. Sociologists and gender researchers have shown how sex workers perform well at their jobs by controlling their emotions, creating relations as well as being active in the interaction (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Berstein, 2007a; Bernstein, 2007b; Laurdin, 2019). In the context of sex work, it has also been shown to be of great importance that the experiences for the customer of the sex workers emotional labor feels genuine. Based on in-depth interviews with sex workers in Spain, Carbonero & Garrido (2018) conclude that the authenticity of the participants' work is "intentional, planned and marketed" (ibid. p.397). The demand for authenticity results in a process of not just *acting right* during sex work, it is also important to *act genuinely right* so the experience feels authentic for the customer (Berstein, 2007a; Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Holt & Blevins, 2007; Jones, 2016).

One example of the emotional labor that sex workers performs is what is called the girlfriend experience. Nayar (2017) and Weiss (2018) discuss how the girlfriend experience entails a performance from the sex worker of being like the customer's girlfriend: warm, intimate, and caring. Rabbattu, Perdion and Brooks-Gordon (2023) show how a stronger demand for more intimate, and not necessarily sexual, interaction in digital sex work emerged during the pandemic. Customers searched for intimacy and interaction online since there was a lack of it offline due to the restrictions. Digital sex workers, akin to their in-person counterparts, are expected to cultivate intimacy as a fundamental part of their digitally mediated service. What some customers seek out by using digital sex work is *the girlfriend experience*, which is the experience of having an intimate and romantic relationship with the sex worker.

There is, however, a debate regarding emotional labor in sex work. Different studies show contradictory findings. Both Hoang (2010) and Hochschild (1979) show that the demand for authentic performance of intimacy, which uses the sex workers emotional labor, is more prevalent in mid-tier and high-end sectors of sex work. Dissimilarly, Carbonero & Garrido (2018) find that sex workers felt the need to perform intimacy and authenticity regardless of the sector. To complicate things further, Jones (2016) argues that the existing literature might overemphasize all type emotional labor among sex workers. She found in her study that some sex workers had a “direct refusal to engage in emotional labor” (Ibid, 236). This can simply be because sex work is not a homogenous phenomenon and sex workers are not a homogenous group. What can be concluded is that while different sex workers might have vastly varied experiences, in many cases the customer does not only have a sexual expectation but also an emotional one.

Digital Intimacy: Examining the Potential for Intimate Connections through Internet-mediated Interaction

One common emotional realm discussed in the literature regarding sex work is intimacy, a concept that lacks a clear definition as it is highly subjective. Intimacy is generally defined as something related to spending time together, sharing experiences, and self-disclosing personal aspects of life. This entails a level of mutual trust and closeness (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Czyżowska et al., 2019; Sumter, Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

In the specific realm of sex work, intimacy is often considered necessary to perform well as a sex worker (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Constable, 2009; Frank, 2002; Sanders, 2008). Sex workers usually share personal information with their customers to try to add personal depth to their relations and foster an intimate interaction (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Holt & Blevins, 2007; Nayar, 2017; Weiss, 2018). To do well at their emotional labor, sex workers sometimes adjust themselves, their bodies and their performance to the liking of their customers (Weiss, 2018). One example of this is the importance of performing mutual pleasure regardless of the level of actually experienced pleasure (Bernstein, 2007b; Sanders, 2008; Saunders, 2020). The emotional labor of intimacy is thus not only limited to a verbal performance but also an embodied one. Continuing, it is therefore important to explore the intersection of embodied intimacy in a virtual setting.

There is extensive literature on intimacy in digital relations that shows how intimacy can be achieved even when the interaction is digital. In an article from Ross (2005) where he discusses internet-mediated sexuality, however not in a sex work context, he argues that intimacy can happen more rapidly in internet-mediated communications because of its more intense nature due to a lack of social conventions. This is also supported by Jamison (2013) finding that while intimacy strongly benefits from co-presence, it is not a necessity. A good example of this is from Martins' (2014) study about sex work in the online gameworld *Second Life*. He concluded that the sex within the game was experienced as intimate and sexual, with and through the body, even though the participants were in different spaces physically. Intimacy is, therefore, a process of intersubjective closeness, but not necessarily co-presence. Another interesting example is Zappavigna's study from 2023 which explored how individuals who are engaged in creating ASMR videos¹ have a great focus on creating intimacy as part of these videos. This was done by using a soft tone of voice, acting in a caring manner and close-up shots. The creation of intimacy in the receiver was not dependent upon simultaneous interaction. Neither co-presence nor co-temporality should therefore be concluded as key elements in the creation of intimacy. Some studies have in fact shown how intimacy is not dependent upon the interaction between humans at all. A good example of this is Liberati's (2023) conclusion regarding how intimacy can be achieved with strict technology, e.g. an absence of another human, exemplified by people's experiences with romantic chatbots in China and Japan. Contemporary studies on intimacy show that the need for co-presence, co-temporality, and collectivity is fluid in this technological age.

Before delving deeper into the dynamics of intimacy in digital sex work, it becomes essential to examine the broader webs of connection. Starting with a discussion about the morality discourse that have shaped the academic debate regarding sex work, then moving on to the shift from in person sex work to digital sex work and its implications before returning to intimacy in digital sex work.

¹ This is a type of video where the goal is to evoke pleasurable sensorial happenings in the observer by employing various, but often soft and repeated, visual and auditory stimuli.

Understanding Sex Work: Is Sex Work Good or Bad?

What strongly shapes the general academic discourse about sex work is an evaluation approach and trying to conclude whether sex work is something positive or negative. This approach leads to two paradigms in the academic sex work discourse, the empowerment paradigm and the oppression paradigm (Maksimowski, 2012; Jones 2016; Weiss, 2018).

The most common argument from the oppression paradigm is that all sex work is a type of violence that stems from patriarchal structures (Jeffery, 2009; Kotiswaran, 2019). Patriarchal structures have been shown in the different arguments to be the exploitation of sex workers (Coy & Garner, 2010) or a type of sexualization where one's sexuality becomes more important than one's personality (Wesley, 2002). Thusi (2018) embraces the argument that sex work can be structurally harmful but furthers the discussion by posing a critique regarding how a framework like that often is essentialist and reduces women to a singular womankind which often is white coded. She argues that a lack of consideration regarding women's intersecting positionalities reproduces both patriarchal norms and white supremacy. Other scholars take a different stance but remain within the oppression paradigm. Fuentes (2023) and Capous-Desyllas and Goulah-Pabst (2022) argue that sex work is a form of oppression, primarily because of the external societal consequences, such as shame and stigmatization. So some scholars do not argue for sex work as oppression in and of itself but that sex work in a patriarchal society, that stigmatizes sex work, is oppressive.

The empowerment paradigm entails arguments regarding sex work as a form of agency and sexual liberation (Azhar et al, 2020; Olasik, 2018). The main arguments for sex work as empowering are firstly, connected to economic capital and secondly, connected to a feminist mindset amongst the practitioners. The first argument is that the accumulation of capital leads to gaining more agency in a capitalist society (Chrisholm 2019; Corrinne, 2021; Devine et al, 2010; Karandikar et al, 2022; Swendeman, 2015). The second argument is that sex work can act as empowering because it can influence a feminist ideology amongst its practitioners. Studies have shown how sex workers have developed stronger agency through their work to set up boundaries both in their work context (Yingwana, 2018) but also in their personal lives (Benoit et al., 2020). Basnyat (2014), Karandikar et al (2022) and McCloskey et al (2020) show how sex workers discuss their work in terms of being independent and as giving them the ability to take care of themselves and their families. Empowering aspects in the literature

are therefore often connected to agency and independence, both in terms of finances and ideology.

Being reductionist in its nature, this dichotomy of empowerment versus oppression has been the target of criticism for resulting in a loss of valuable nuances in reality (Jones, 2016; Weitzer, 2010) and being overly didactic (Weiss, 2018). Weitzer (2010) proposes an alternative approach to sex work, namely the *polymorphous paradigm* which aims to see different, contrasting and confirming, experiences of both empowerment and harm through an intersectional lens. Kurosawa (2020), even if not using the polymorphous paradigm, comes to similar conclusions. They study Japanese sex workers and analyze their narratives using their emic concept of *Shakai-keiken*, which cannot be translated into English directly but resembles being street smart. *Shakai-keiken* is gained by participating in sex work and is neither good nor bad, but a nuanced characteristic one gains from experiencing a multitude of happenings, reflecting upon them and growing. Similarly, at the core of a polymorphous paradigm lies a view of sex work as neither inherently oppressive nor empowering, but rather as a dynamic experience that transcends the binary notions of good and bad.

Applying a more polymorphous approach, therefore, allows for a better lens to unveil nuances. It is especially suited to unveiling nuances connected to intersectionality. Sex workers cannot be minimized to a homogenous group with all the same experiences. Different systems of oppression alter the experience of being a sex worker (Corrinne, 2021; Yingwana, 2018).

Fruentes (2023), Oliveira (2018) and Steward (2022) conclude that having a body that is structurally downgraded, such as not being white, thin, cis or normatively beautiful, results in more stigma and makes the work both more harmful and difficult. Coombes et al (2022), Chib et al (2022), Miller and Nichols (2012) and Ocha and Earth (2013) show that systematically oppressed characteristics both desexualize the actor as an individual and can result in the fetishization of them as a sex worker. Sex workers' experiences are strongly influenced by social categories and their intersectional position vis-à-vis power structures in society. Social systems of privilege and oppression strongly manifest themselves in the realm of sex work. High-end sex work by a white cis woman is simply a vastly different experience than street sex work by a P.O.C trans woman. It is beneficial to not deem sex work as solely beneficial or harmful, but rather as intertwined experiences of both positive and negative

character due to its connection to social structures and systems of oppression. Sex work is neither oppressive nor empowering in and of itself because sex work is not a static experience that is the same for all. The polymorphous paradigm is therefore utilized in this research as a means to do respectful exploration and further representation of sex workers' narratives and experiences.

The Transition From In-person Sex Work to Digital Sex Work

The use of the Internet is often described as having reshaped sex work (Campbell et al, 2019; Constable, 2009; Jones, 2015). One reason for this argument is that sex work nesting in the virtual resulted in an exponential proliferation. It became easier to become a sex worker and it became easier for customers to obtain sex work, resulting in a wide spread. Another reason why it is described as having reshaped sex work is because the shift to a digital realm strongly affected both the benefits and the risks associated with sex work.

Sex workers' migration into a digital realm has had a positive impact on some of the aspects of sex work. Firstly, it is beneficial in maximizing profits. Secondly, it reduces the risk of physical harm since there is no physical contact or in-person meeting. This furthermore gives greater autonomy over the situation since there are no direct physical threats. Thirdly, it provides more efficient advertisement opportunities (Hamilton, Redmiles & Barakat, 2022; Campbell et al, 2019; Hamilton, Jonsson, Svedin & Hydén, 2014; McCracken & Brooks-Gordon, 2021; Simpson & Smith, 2021). Importantly, sociologist, and well-known sex work researcher, Angela Jones (2016) found in her research on sex workers that when the sex work was performed online the workers reported greater sexual pleasure. Many discussed having an orgasm as an advantage of the job. Jones's analysis is that the greater pleasure might come from the greater control over the situation since it is not performed in person. Her informants discussed taking their time and focusing on themselves. In many ways performing sex work in a digital setting can be seen as more efficient and less harmful than performing it in person.

On the other hand, digital sex work also presents new risks and problems compared to in-person sex work which are thoroughly explained by Hamilton, Redmiles and Barakat (2022). They conducted an interview study with individuals who had performed in-person sex work prior to the pandemic. The most important risk that all their informants discussed

was the risk of losing one's platform by having it deleted, often due to having broken terms of service. Losing one's platform is not simply fixed by creating a new one, since the platform is built up over time creating a fan base that might not find your new account. A second risk is mental health issues and burnout. The workers felt compelled to be online and ready to respond all the time. They found it challenging to take breaks as it seemed like a loss of income. A third consequence of sex work being online was the constant exposure to both others' and their own bodies, which sometimes were edited, thus perpetuating unrealistic beauty norms. A fourth problem was non-consensual public visibility, meaning that their customers sometimes leaked their material onto other sites. Lastly, the physical violence might be lower but the verbal/digital violence still occurred, for example, harassment or unwanted contact. Hamilton, Redmiles and Barakat (2022) are not alone in their conclusion regarding the risks associated with digital sex work, their findings are also concluded by numerous other scholars such as Jones (2016), Campbell et al, (2019), Friend (2023) and Henry & Farvid (2017). The shift to digital sex work presented new ways of being exposed to harmful actions.

The occurrence of digital sex work thus presented both new risks and new benefits. Something that once again highlights not only the difference between different type of sex work but also the interplay of both favorable and non-favorable aspects. The literature regarding digital sex work is, however, also affected by the academic debate regarding online versus offline.

Intimacy Across Digital Frontiers

To understand digital sex work, and the academic discourse surrounding it, it is also important to zoom out to understand the discussion regarding the digital realm in and of itself. A commonality in the literature is that online and offline are described as dichotomous (Papacharissi, 2005). The dichotomy entails a unidirectional dependency between the online social world and the offline social world, where the former is dependent upon the latter (Antheunis & Valkenburg & Peter, 2012; Eklund, 2015). This fosters a dynamic where offline interactions become inherently prioritized over online interactions, resulting in a perception that experiences occurring online hold a lesser significance. This creates an especially prominent problem in the field of sex work. Jones (2016) argues that if the online sphere is

not regarded as not a reality then the reality of the sex workers who practice online is diminished.

Scholars have proposed a robust critique towards utilizing a dichotomy perspective regarding the online and offline (Eklund, 2015; Herath & Wittaker, 2023; Kraut et al, 2002; Lieberman, 2020; Mascia-Lees, 2011). Their critique can be concluded as an understanding of the offline and online as intersecting and dependent upon each other. A perspective that complements the embodied epistemology that shapes this research. Rather than seeing it as the real embodied offline and the virtual disembodied online, the realms intersect, interact and complement each other in the holistic lived experience of the individual. The main argument being made here is that what happens online also matters because the happening is a lived experience even if it is internet-mediated. Lived experiences always happen with and through the body (Ignatow, 2007; Natvik, Råheim & Sviland, 2021; Strathern & Steward, 2011; Turner, 2008) I do not aim to equate the body as a vehicle for the mind, rather that the mind and body are intersecting and collaboratively creating humans lived experiences. Following a discussion made by Boelstorff (2011), an argument in this research is that the body may not be neglected when studying virtual interaction. On this matter, sex workers also possess a fruitful source for information because their work so strongly has an embodied realm. Even when they chat with their customers they communicate the sensations of the body. A strict separations of the online and offline realms may cause important experiences to be overlooked.

Embodied Emotional Labor in Digital Sex Work

Numerous studies show the prevalence of emotional labor in sex work (Carbonero & Garrindo, 2018; Deshotels & Forsyth, 2006; Easterbrook-Smith, 2020; Pinsky & Levey, 2015; Sanders, 2008; Singkul, Boonmonkong & Guadamuz, 2019). However, as mentioned before the creation of authentically experienced intimacy is not only connected to mental stages, meaning creation and personal depth but also has an embodied dimension in sex work. How the body informs and shapes the interaction affects how well the authentic intimacy is performed. Embodied emotional labor has been described as how workers use their bodies to achieve a desired effect in others (Thanem & Knights, 2005; Monon & Sariego, 2022). While there is literature regarding sex work that explores this unintentionally, and therefore also

briefly, there is a lack in the literature regarding embodied emotional work as part of sex work. The lack makes itself even more present when the sex work is digital.

This research aims to contribute by furthering the discussion about intimacy as a phenomenon in digital sex work. By doing this, there is two more important implications. Firstly, it aids in sustaining the sociological literature's alignment with the technological advancements in society and secondly, it explores a type of emotional labor, encompassing both verbal and embodied dimensions, which is performed in a way that transcends both temporal and physical distances. This is a study about how digital sex workers create internet-mediated intimacy for their customers and furthermore how they utilize both their physical body and their physical environment to enhance the authenticity in their creation of intimacy.

Theory

The core of the theoretical framework for this research is a framework of what the concept of intimacy entails to foster the phenomenological angle to this study. Clare Forstie (2017) argues that previous scholars who have discussed similar themes make a false analogy when comparing intimacy with other emotions. She suggests that intimacy separates itself from other emotions simply because intimacy is not an emotion. Intimacy is rather a collective process according to Forstie. However, the success or failure of the process of intimacy depends upon emotions. Forstie (2017) presents four factors as part of a framework for exploring intimacy: Norms, Mutual Action, Knowledge and Affect.

Four Factors in Intimacy

The four factors are components of intimacy in social interaction and are furthermore used as analytical tools to deconstruct intimacy as a phenomenon in different contexts. The first element, Norms, is two parts. On the one hand, it relates to social norms regarding what types of intimacy that are socially accepted. On the other hand, it also relates to the fact that intimacy in itself is a socially privileged outcome of the interaction. The second element is Mutual action, which simply refers to people engaging in different types of actions to achieve or avoid intimacy. Affect and Knowledge, which will soon be discussed, both arise and become active in the Mutual Action. The third factor, knowledge, relates to having the correct information to navigate the interaction. The mutual action is dependent upon the actors

having the correct knowledge to engage with or avoid intimacy. As a factor, knowledge is very wide. It can be related to knowledge of oneself, to personal knowledge of the other actors or to more contextual and situated social knowledge. The fourth factor is affect, which is the outcome of when the actors' use of their knowledge to engage in intimacy creation. Affect is a lived experience of emotional sensations and is therefore a vague and fluid experience of something that can not effectively be put into words but nonetheless shapes the situation. It is simply the emotional aspect of intimacy. Durnová & Mohammadi (2021) argue that this fourfolded approach connects structural and interpersonal aspects of creating intimacy. It allows for a way to explore how emotions are felt and performed in both micro and macro analyses.

Forstie's (2017) conceptual framework relates to embodied emotional states, through affect, and group dynamics and situated awareness, through knowledge. These become realized through mutual action, the conduct of individuals to achieve or escape intimate interaction. Lastly, all of the above is shaped by social norms. Exploring intimacy through these four aspects unveils multiple levels of intimacy: personal, collective and structural. What Forstie's (2017) framework lacks, however, regarding the purpose of this thesis is a dimension of intimacy as part of a marketization process. To accompany her framework, Hochschild's theory of emotional labor (1983; 2012) will also be utilized.

Emotional Labor

Emotional labor is a concept from Hochschild (1983; 2012) that refers to an emotional realm of service work. In late capitalism, it is not only the commodities and the physical labor that are being utilized but also the emotional capabilities of the worker. Today customers do not only seek a product or service, but also expect to be treated in a specific way. In Hochschild's original theory, emotional labor is often described as temporary and short-term as part of a service exchange. However, other scholars have highlighted how emotional labor sometimes includes creating and maintaining long-lasting relations (Bartlett, 2001; David, 2008; Stacey, 2011).

Emotional labor is a concept that aids the exploration of how service workers evoke or suppress different emotions in themselves to get a specific emotional outcome in their receiver and, in turn, perform well at their job. Hochschild (2012) calls the emergence of

emotions in the public labor sphere, meaning that it is a form of economic good, the “transmutation of emotional systems” (Ibid, 19).

Hochschild (2012) divides emotional labor into two categories. One refers to agreeing to do a performance of acting out the expected feelings for the customer, a way of doing emotional labor that Hochschild calls surface acting. The workers might show one type of emotion but without changing how they feel internally. The other one, called deep-acting, refers to when the workers do not feel like they are performing and that their emotions are natural. Here the workers internalise the expectations and conform their internal emotions to those. Hochschild argues that emotional labor is a process in which the worker becomes alienated from their own natural, true, and spontaneous emotions as those become transformed into pre-planned, rigid, and performed emotions. Neither the process of surface nor deep acting is favorable for the worker according to Hochschild and can result in burnout or feeling distance to ones own true emotions, among other things.

Scholars have many times shown how sex workers perform emotional labor as part of their work, both surface-acting and deep-acting (Carbonero & Garrindo, 2018; Deshotels & Forsyth, 2006; Easterbrook-Smith, 2020; Sanders, 2008; Singkul, Boonmonkong & Guadamuz, 2019). Emotional labor, especially in sex work, is often related to acting caring, flirty, and romantically interested. Additionally, emotional labor in sex work has also been shown to be related to other emotions such as humor (Sanders, 2004) or aggression and humiliation if part of a BDSM context (Pinsky & Levey, 2015).

Emotional Regulation

Emotional labor has had a great impact on the sociology of work and has therefore been developed by other researchers. One of the developments is that it is combined with Gross's (1998a; 1998b) concept of emotional regulation, which, simply put, is that one receives stimuli from a situation and responds using emotions. In this process, one can regulate when, what and how the emotions are shown (Granday, 2000). One type of regulation is *antecedent-focused emotional regulation* which refers to individuals modifying or adapting a situation, or their perception of it, as a means to regulate their own emotions in their emotional labor. Continuing one way of doing antecedent-focused emotional regulation is called *attentional deployment*, which is thinking about experiences or things that create the preferred emotions. Reliving old experiences is a means to resurface the same emotions again

to be better able to mimic them in the current situation (Granday, 2000). Recent developments of the emotional labor theory have focused on how workers do to regulate their emotions, not just what type of regulations they do.

Embodied Emotional Labor

Scholars have critiqued Hoschild's theory for being overly disembodied. The lack of recognition of the body results in unjust analysis (Thanem & Knights, 2005; Witz, Warhurst & Nickson, 2003). Thanem and Knights (2005) argue that emotional labor is just as much about managing the body as it is about emotions. According to them, the body is a tool to convey emotions through for example facial expressions and body language. Because of this emotional labor as applied in this research is not just about exploring how work environments shape the workers' emotions but also their bodies.

The basis of an embodied analysis is an understanding of the body as central to human experience. Social phenomena always have an aspect of bodily presence (Barasalou et al, 2003; Ignatow, 2007). Natvik, Råheim and Sviland (2021, 225) write that embodiment is how "experiences are told, formed and influenced by the body". To this, I would further like to add that embodiment additionally extends to how the body tells, forms and influences experience. Van Doon (2011) discuss how embodiment relates to more than the body itself and is connected to memory, culture and social context. The process of embodying is therefore important to situate in a specific context.

The primary use of an embodied perspective is to adjust to the common critique of Hoschild's (1983; 2012) theory in its original state, namely that it is overly disembodied. Furthermore, the embodied dimensions of emotional labor fit the research focus of this study and will aid in exploring how digital sex workers use their bodies and physical environment as part of their creation of intimacy and authenticity.

Crafting Connection: Exploring Emotional Labor's Role in Fostering Intimacy

The combination of Hoschild's (2012) theory of emotional labor and Forstie's (2017) framework for intimacy creates a comprehensive toolbox for exploring intimacy as a phenomenon in sex work. The combination aids in understanding intimacy both as a situated happening between the sex workers and their customers but it also highlights how the creation of intimacy is part of the market of sexual services and its structures and demands.

By incorporating both perspectives, this study offers a nuanced examination of the multifaceted nature of intimacy as a creation by digital sex workers.

Method

This research is a case study of six digital-only sex workers and their experience with intimacy as part of their work. The focus lies not primarily on their narratives but on what their narratives can tell us about the phenomenon of intimacy in digitally mediated sex work, making this a case study with a phenomenological analytical approach.

The sampling strategy is purposive since I searched for individuals with a specific quality, namely experience with sex work (Morse, 2007). The purposive sampling is practical since sex workers are a hard-to-reach population. The six participants in this study were found through social media. Firstly, I wrote in different Facebook groups and on my own social media feeds. Facebook groups expanded the scope for potential participants so that the search was not limited solely to my social network. Three participants were recruited using Facebook, one from my social network and two outside of my social network. Secondly, I contacted people whom I found by searching on Instagram, both through hashtags as well as people I know who work with Onlyfans. Three participants were recruited as a result of this approach. All my social media contains at least one picture of me that was open to the participants, something that possibly affected the decision to participate or not. Being a woman could have created a more significant initial trust than if I had been a man. To try and minimize the risk of only reaching the most visible individuals in the population (Dewey & Zheng, 2013), I contacted as many sex workers as I could come across.

The participants in this research all have different relations to digital sex work. The participants are Vanessa, Julia, Emma, Selma, Fiona and Riley. Vanessa who has been active on Onlyfans since 2020, got her following from Instagram where she already had many followers being an influencer in Sweden. Julia is a stripper in Sweden who started her Onlyfans in 2019. Emma is one of the biggest transsexual creators on onlyfans (top 0.24%) after being active for three years. Selma has been a creator on Onlyfans for about two years and reports that she does not have a very big following. Selmas's primary focus regarding her pictures was for them to be aesthetically beautiful, like art. Fiona has been active on Onlyfans for about a year. As opposed to the other interlocutors, she stays anonymous on Onlyfans.

The last participant is Riley, who used to operate on sites other than Onlyfans but is inactive today. In contrast to the others, she does not describe being a digital sex worker as something positive. She looks back at being a sex worker as something that has had harmful consequences. The participants in this study varied in the size of their following, the length of their active period, their evaluation of their experiences, and the ways social structures shape their experiences.

Interviews

The primary method for this project is semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were conducted with all the participants. The interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 70 minutes. Of the six interviews, four were done in person and two online. The four conducted in person took place in the participants' homes at their request. Topics and some follow-up questions were prepared in advance, however, the interview was strongly guided by what the participant wanted to talk about and discuss. All topics were discussed during each interview, but the time spent on each varied. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed by me.

During the interviews, I applied a *person-centered approach*, as suggested by Skinner (2012). The person-centered approach involves putting much effort into creating a safe and open environment for the interviewees. The most important aspect is that the approach is non-judgmental. This makes it a fruitful methodological tool when studying groups that are reluctant to talk to researchers, such as sex workers. The person-centered approach focuses on discussing a topic until the researcher clearly understands it. For me, this was also about them telling me how their narratives are situated in a broader social context. For Emma, this related to how sex work was altered by the fact that she was transsexual. Selma discussed it in relation to economic class. Both Fiona and Vanessa's narratives were influenced by thoughts about body image. Encouraging the participants to deeply discuss topics outside of just the sexual aspects of sex work helped me better grasp the intersecting social positions that shape their narratives.

Aiming to create a non-judgmental environment and openness fostered a situation where the participants could talk freely. The first step in this direction was starting the interviews with an open and honest discussion with each participant. I began the basics of ethical considerations in research but then moved on to more interhuman aspects. We discussed how

they would feel if I said something that felt uncomfortable to them and how we could approach that as a team if it occurred. I assured them that I would welcome feedback. We also discussed the importance of them feeling in control of the interview. In these discussions, we touched upon topics like passing on questions, passing on topics, reframing questions, adding questions, questioning me and the research, and so on. In this research, a person-centered approach relates to more than just verbal interaction. I also employed an embodied dimension to create a secure environment, I was mindful of how my body language affected the situation and what theirs could tell me about their experience of the situation.

A person-centered approach, as applied in this research, also involves the participant having a pleasant experience. All the participants and I discussed non-related things before, during, and after the interviews. It was vital for me that the interview did not feel like a chore but rather like a guided hang-out session. I shared similar experiences or stories of my own during the process so that the interviewees could get a sense of me as a person. I did not want to come off as a detached and cold researcher.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the coding process began after all the data had been collected. This decision was made beforehand to aid in immersion in the data. To remain mindful of my own influence regarding the coding process (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012; Ngoma & Adebisi, 2023), I decided to have all the data at the starting point of coding so that I would not favor the first few transcripts when searching for themes.

The coding process for the thematic analysis was influenced by Braun and Clark's (2012, 2013, 2019) multiple-step method. Which begins with reading and re-reading the transcripts, moving on to initial open coding, then combining those codes to create groups of codes and lastly, seeing relations between different groups of codes and creating themes from that. The last step is to create a thematic map to base the analysis upon. The coding was both semantic and latent (Braun & Clark, 2006). My decision to do thematic analysis is due to its flexible nature when analyzing data and using it to convey both similarities and differences (Santos, Pinheiro & Rijo, 2023), making it a suitable method for data on lived experiences. The analysis is shaped by abductive reasoning, where I was attuned to previous research as well as the intimacy framework from Forstie (2017). Still, I actively engaged in remaining open to unexpected findings (Detering & Waters, 2018).

Body Mapping: Giving Space to Non-verbal Narratives

Body mapping was also conducted to complement the semi-structured interviews and as a means to not privilege solely the voice as a means to share narratives (Bangoli, 2009). Body mapping is a creative interview technique where the participant draws, paints and decorates a life-size outline of their body. This can be done with color, symbols and words among other things (Collings, Wright & Spencer, 2022; Gubriunm et al, 2016; Solomon, 2002). The life-size drawing thus represents the individual in their context regarding a specific theme (Skop, 2016). The drawing process is guided by the interviewer and complemented by a discussion of the drawings afterward (Zaman, Mustaque, &Chowdhury, 1998).

Body mapping was used to further employ the embodied approach that characterizes this research since it encourages an awareness of one's body and embodied experiences (De Jager, Tewson & Ludlow, 2016; Skop, 2016). It is also a beneficial tool in exploring individuals' experience with their external world (Blakesee and Blakesee, 2008), which in this research is crucial to understand the connection between the online and offline processes in the creation of intimacy. Body mapping acted as a means to decrease the power imbalance and to give the participants a more active role in the interview situation (Aroussi et al., 2023; De Jager, Tewson & Ludlow 2016; Huss et al, 2015; Parsons & Boydell, 2012; Skop, 2016) and furthermore as means to deepen my understanding of their narratives (Harper, 2002, Skop, 2016; Weber, 2008). Body maps represent how the individual interacts with the social world and how meanings, behaviors, and interactions are conducted through, with and because of the body (Erickson, 2014). The benefit of body mapping “lies in the centrality of the body itself as a tool for meaning-making” (Collings, Wright & Spencer, 2022, 880), creating a different type of depth in their narratives. Body mapping blends the mind, the body and the context, creating a holistic and embodied method.

Half of the participants in this study conducted face-to-face individual body mapping sessions ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. This was followed up by a presentation of their body map and the in-depth semi-structured interview where the body maps were incorporated more thoroughly. While it would have been preferable to conduct the body mapping session and the interview at two different instances, this felt like requesting too much time from the participants. All the participants were offered to conduct the body mapping and the interviews in my apartment but all decided they wanted to meet at their homes. This could have brought a sense of safety that benefited the interviews since a suitable space is essential

for body mapping (Collings, Wright & Spencer, 2022). I assembled various pens and paints in different colors that I brought with me to facilitate creative freedom.

I had prepared several questions to assist their imagination. In actuality, however, it was more of an ongoing conversation between the participants and me that guided the body mapping session. This highlights the aspects of co-construction that this method emphasizes. The women independently decided what to paint, but it emerged from a discussion we were having together. I said a painting probe to which they often responded with a story. We then talked about that story/experience/narrative and the conversation ended with me usually summarizing what they told me and asked if they wanted to represent something from that story on their body map and if so, how. The option to not paint anything from their stories was also highlighted. When doing this with Emma, I asked her how she decides what type of videos to do. She told me it is all about what she feels like doing that day or if she has received any requests. She continued telling me how she loves to dress up and showed me different accessories, dresses and lingerie. The various outfits create different moods in videos, so she told me when she wore what. I asked her how to represent this and she painted lightning, makeup and some plants to represent her tattoos. She did not paint any specific clothing, because what she wears constantly changes. Here it was not only important for her narrative what was present on the body map, but also what was left out from the drawing. To not lose essences like this in their stories, I wrote memos after each session to maintain the individual narrative as the participant intended it (Collings, Wright & Spencer, 2022).

Even though body mapping is often seen as an enjoyable method, a limitation of this is that not everybody feels confident when approached with the task of drawing (Aroussi et al., 2023; McCorquodale & Deluca, 2020; De Jager, Tewson & Ludlow, 2016). Some of the participants in this study were initially reluctant but became more confident as time went on and as they understood the activity better. However, the fact that some people might feel unwilling to paint and draw could result in another limitation. Namely, this method could create a bias in the sample where people who felt anxious about drawing declined participation (De Jager, Tewson & Ludlow, 2016). To account for this, all participants were allowed to choose between a “normal interview” and a body mapping interview, resulting in three choosing the former and three the latter.

While coding the body maps, I implemented the strategy proposed by Skog (2016), where the initial step was to thoroughly look at the drawings as you would when revisiting transcripts. I then created codes regarding the visual impact and the similarities and differences that are later compared and combined into overarching themes. The last step was to look at the drawings and the codes through an intersectional lens. This meant that I did not only look at their body maps but also saw their body maps in the context of them and their social positions, combining their story and their paintings.

Ethical Considerations

This study considered and met all ethical requirements. A particular focus was applied to harm reduction and consent.

Informed consent is at the core of ethical considerations, however, people might have an understanding of academic research or the specific project that is not entirely accurate when they agree to participate. To account for this risk, consent was not seen as something singular and static. Continuous consent, which means that consent is sought after multiple times during the interview process, was used during this research (Nunkoosing, 2005; Rischard & Schwartz, 2002; Sixtenssons, 2021). This way of eliciting consent was initially described to the participants and furthermore applied during the process. However, continuous consent is somewhat problematic as it can reinforce pressure on the participants. So, continued consent was implemented in this study as verbal but also embodied (non-verbal) to address that risk. I used non-verbal cues as well as my intuition to explore if the participant's consent was still present during the totality of the interview process (Cowburn, 2005; Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Richard & Schwartz, 2002). Consent was considered during all stages of this research and was not limited to only before the interviews.

The question regarding consent becomes even more difficult concerning the body maps. It is essential to discuss the implementation of confidentiality and anonymity if personal cues are used in the creation of the drawing (Gastaldo et al., 2018). I did not want to hinder their creative freedom in this process and their right to use personal traits to create their portraits, which they did, and because of that I have decided not to include pictures of the body maps in this thesis.

This being a case study means that the sample is small in regard to the total population. Generalization is not a good measure for qualitative research. The small sample size does, however, have implications for confidentiality. A bigger sample is always more confidential. To the best of my abilities, this was managed by using pseudonyms, not using personal information, not uploading any personal data to the cloud, and deleting the recordings.

Participating in an in-depth interview regarding a sensitive topic, in this case sexual activity, can be experienced as distressing (Gibson, Benson & Brand 2012). Clarke (2006), Biddle et al, (2013) and Lakeman et al (2013) all suggest that there is a therapeutic element to being interviewed. Something that highlights how subjects about sensitive topics can benefit both the researcher and the participant. However, this is not an unproblematic view. Both Corbin and Morse (2003) and Dyregrov (2004) strongly criticize this since researchers do not have the expertise needed for therapy. I am neither a therapist nor have that kind of expertise. Therefore, I had prepared numbers for Swedish helplines if that were to be needed, although it never was.

An essential aspect of ethics is power relations. Body mapping is one way to compensate for the inherent power relation between the interviewer and interviewee. Another way to compensate for this was the previously mentioned in-depth discussion before every interview. As a way of giving something back to the participants, I brought a pastry or lunch to the in-person interviews. This was, however, only discussed on the day of the interview so that this would not influence or put pressure on their choice to participate. However, the biggest question regarding power relations is how to adjust the research to fit that sex workers are a vulnerable group.

Sex workers are often defined as marginalized or oppressed (Barwulor et al., 2021; Comte, 2014; Hammond and Kingston, 2014) This has also been evident within academia, where sex workers' narratives and statements have not been taken seriously (Dewey & Zheng, 2013). This makes them a vulnerable group, which is something that has to be taken into account. Vulnerable groups are especially susceptible to harm or exploitation. However, Lange, Rogers and Dodds (2013) argue that the first obligation of the researcher is not to emphasize the vulnerability of their participants excessively. Following this, Suen (2015: 731) further argues that a strict focus on vulnerability when studying socially marginalized groups is even “ethically and academically unjust” because it invalidates their agency to share their

narratives. At the beginning of this project, I was convinced of and worried about their vulnerability. As mentioned above, all interviews started with a discussion to account for power imbalance and all those conversations had great results. Two participants expressed how it felt good to be “taken seriously” during those discussions. During the conversation with Emma, I told her it was vital for me that she felt like she had control, to which she responded by rolling her eyes and saying “Yeah. Duh!” implying that it was self-evident to her that she was in control. We shared a good discussion about victimization and how she felt like she was not a victim. However, Riley discussed how she felt as a victim and how that notion was an important part of her narrative. An important step in this research was an understanding that an implicit view of a group as vulnerable is not a harm-reduction technique in and of itself (Suen, 2015). Harm reduction extends above inherent victimization in order to respectfully partake and represent narratives from people with different stories.

In this research, harm reduction extends to involve an embodied presence during all stages of research to adapt to the current needs of the situation. This includes consistently considering questions like ‘Does this feel good for me?’ and ‘Does this feel good for the participant.’ Additionally, during the coding and writing process, ‘Does this representation feel good.’ While the concept of “feeling good” may appear vague and informal, stepping outside of academic vocabulary norms makes it more straightforward. When something feels good it signifies a sense of ease in one’s gut feeling. It is an absence of shame and bad conscience. When something feels good it is transparent, respectful and consensual. I used my embodied presence and intuition to help me navigate the ethical considerations by using the concept of “feeling good” regarding interaction and representation.

To unveil the camouflaged and assumed aspects in the data (Skilbrei and Spanger, 2017), I did not only explore the data in depth but also my positionality to what they were telling me and how I interpreted their stories. To engage in as much self-reflection as possible, I wrote in my diary, I partook in sex work discussions online and I talked to people about this subject to be faced with different perspectives. When engaging with the participants, I actively listened to their stories to not only capture their narratives but also the meaning attached to them. I also did not try to conceal my wonders and the surprises, it was important for me to remain honest, and I believe this helped me gain trust - I did not act as if I was the expert on this when they are the experts on their own experiences. The participants rigorously guided me through their experiences.

As a way not to homogenize the group, the sample ranges over multiple social categories, such as CIS-women, trans-women, big, medium and small creators as well as different body shapes and individuals who are both for and against sex work. It is important to note that this does not mean that the one or two participants in one social category are intended to represent the entire category. The reason is instead to engage with narratives from multiple social positions. This benefits the study's engagement with the field as well as future research possibilities. The difference in the sample is not ideal, there will always be some lack of representation.

Moving on from the ethical consideration, I now turn to the empirical findings of this study. The following sections will present, as well as analyze, the collected data, shedding light on not only the lived experiences of the sex workers but also upon the phenomenon of intimacy in digital sex work.

Findings

Intimacy and the possible ways to enhance its authenticity are the focus of this research. The following section describes the participant's experience with the creation of intimacy. Starting at the center and a discussion about intimacy as part of the sex work interaction, the focus then zooms out to understand the creation of intimacy in the broader web of social dynamics. Using the interplay of boundaries, expectations and emotions, this section shows an exploration of how intimacy in sex work is highly dependent upon the internal processes of the sex worker, which, in turn, are influenced by the dynamics that arise in their interaction with their customers.

Crafting Intimacy: The Role of Faked Authentic Attraction

Supporting the findings from earlier studies (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Constable, 2009; Frank, 2002; Sanders, 2008), the participants in this study also showed how the creation of intimacy was at the junction of their craft. The motivation to create intimacy was simply that it was part of the demand and expectations from the customers. When Riley, who worked outside of onlyfans, described what her sex work involved for her, she started with the sexual aspects. After we had talked about that for a while, however, she took a break and then said

that her customers did actually not always want sexual content. Some wanted “more innocent things, like me telling them about my day or recording a little video greeting for them.” Her customers also talked to her about private things, for example, what they did for work or about their children. I asked Riley if she felt as if her customers created a bond with her and she answered, “Yes but I think that was like the whole thing. I also wanted them to believe that I cared about them even though I didn’t so much ... that’s what they wanted, the real relation.” Riley was not singular in this experience; intimacy is a significant factor in everyone’s work because it is what the customers sought after besides the sexual experiences. Emma explained, similarly, that the aspect of intimacy is what the customers are searching for when they use interactive digital sex work and not other types of porn sites. Emma told me that prior to starting posting on Onlyfans, she used to send a lot of sexual content for free to people she talked to. She described that after a while she got the epiphany that she could earn money from them instead and therefore went to Onlyfans. At the beginning of her career, she worked every day and had personal contact with a large number of people. I wondered why so many people paid large sums of money to be able to see her sexual content and chat with her, and she explained:

Why would you go to Onlyfans when pornhub is a thing? The thing is that it is not only porn, you are paying to have some sort of relationship with the creator ... What I am selling is the relationship with me. You can find a hot girl online but can you talk to her? Chat with her? Can you have a live show with her? Can you masturbate with her? Those things you can’t. With Onlyfans, you can get a relationship out of it.

One way to unveil the demand for intimacy is to look at communication patterns. Selma, Julia and Fiona did not only talk to their customers through Onlyfans, but some of their costumes paid extra so that they could also communicate with them on other social media such as Snapchat. When I asked the women why their customers wanted to have contact outside of Onlyfans they all discussed how it was related to feeling more like a real relation. Fiona talked frequently with her customers on Snapchat rather than on Onlyfans. She told me how her job as a sex worker is something that is more of a lifestyle than work for her and how she works all days of the week. When I asked her why she had contact with them both on Onlyfans but also on other channels, she explained:

In the beginning, I was very much like ‘Why do you want to have me on Snapchat, is it like some hidden agenda’. But the way I understand it, it is like much more psychological because then it feels more like I am their date or girlfriend for real.

Getting private Snapchat, that is not like communication on some big porn-site. And that's why there are so many that pay me pretty good to be able to have me only on Snapchat... and on Snapchat it is not always that they want the nude content. They want a good morning, good night, how was work. They want the relationship.

However, simply a relationship is not always enough, for it to truly matter the relationship needs to be experienced by the customers as unique and special. When I asked Vanessa what she thought was the most important aspect for her customers during the videos or chats she said "that they feel like they are special." Vanessa has a large number of followers on Instagram, she also posts YouTube videos and has a podcast. Because of this, the wish to be special might be stronger among her clientele since her customers might be fans outside of sex work. However, the essence of her narrative was found in all the other participants' stories as well, their customers want to feel special. Wanting to be special relates to being able to obtain services that others cannot. This highlights the customers' wishes to experience services that are custom-made and unique for them. The demand is for more authentic experiences with the sex workers.

The sex workers, however, do not often see their customers as especially unique or more meaningful than others. Vanessa told me about a few times when customers had written her a message about how they had not been active on her site for a while and asked if she had missed them. She said, "And then I just like, oops, I forgot that you existed." She laughed a bit and then said "But I don't tell them that, I always say something like, 'ooh yes, I have, so fun that you are back.'" It is important for Vanessa to perform an intimacy that is planned by her to be experienced as authentic for her customers. To do this, one has to be mindful of how one interacts with the customers. Vanessa sometimes sends a video to all her customers but writes a message that implies that it is specifically sent to just the receiver. She does this because "it is important that they feel special and that I care about them specifically." This shows that intimacy in and of itself is not described as enough. It is also important with authenticity.

A good performance of certain behaviors or emotions in the context of sex work convinces the audience that it is not a performance at all. This preplanned authenticity was performed in multiple different ways. It contains a verbal dimension relating to how you speak, what kind of words you use (both in talking and writing) and what kind of responses you give. It has an embodied dimension connected to how you move, how you perform pleasure and how you use your body to convey emotions. An example of an embodied way to fake authenticity is to

drink excessive amounts of water to be able to fake squirting. Lastly, it also has a material dimension, such as what type of props you use, for example, using lube to seem more genuinely aroused. The women planned their performances of intimacy so they would be experienced as authentic for the customer.

I will exemplify the importance of authenticity in intimacy through two stories from the women. The first one shows the importance of making the fake real and the second is an example of when the fake authenticity failed.

The first story, regarding making the fake as real as possible, comes from Emma's interview. Emma told me she loved incorporating fantasy and cosplay into her content. She showed me beautiful dresses, elf ears and various sexual toys. Her collection of props was impressive, she had a clear interest in building a scenario in her content using different types of items. In the middle of this she also told me about something called cumplay. Being a transwoman, she did a lot of content where she used fake sperm, lube that is supposed to look like sperm. She uses it both to fake orgasms and ejaculation. When she does it to fake ejaculation she dilutes the cum lube with water and clear lube because “when you are on hormones, it is not as white and not as thick, so like this it looks more real,” she said. She discussed how the fact that she was trans was a part of her branding and therefore she also had to make the fake ejaculation more realistic to her transsexual body to make things more authentic for her viewers.

The second story, about getting caught faking reality, was told by Vanessa. She told me about how she sometimes “cringes” (meaning she gets embarrassed but in a joking way) over herself after she has done a video. To cope with this, she jokes with herself and sometimes makes a funny face at the end of her videos, which is a part that she later edits out. Vanessa is a very humorous woman. We laughed a lot during our interview as we constantly joked with each other. This is Vanessa's way of life, she wants to have fun, so she creates it. This act of “cringing” is therefore not self-deprecating or negative, it is rather an inside joke with herself. One time, however, she forgot to edit it out and mistakenly uploaded a striptease video that ended with her making a disgusted face. Some people commented on this, so she lied and said her dog did something that made her do the face. She took down the video. When I asked her why she lied about it and took the video down she said, “It felt stupid to let people buy the video where I made a face and it felt like the mask dropped a little there.” Using “the mask dropped” strongly indicates how Vanessa’s attempt to perform authenticity failed when she mistakenly communicated outside of the specific script that she wrote for her performance.

It was also important for the participants to express how some parts of their work are them acting in compliance with themselves. When describing their own experience of their work, realness and genuineness were often used to cope with the fact that many aspects of their work are a performance of different roles, emotions and behaviors. All participants highlighted how not everything is an act, that some behaviors, emotions or communication are them being themselves and not performing a specific role.

Shifting from Individual Conduct to Dyad Interaction

An aspect of sex work that often receives less attention in research is the process by which sex workers receive feedback. Feedback as a factor is not only important for the sex worker to know if her content is successful or not. It is also what shifts digital sex work from being an individual creating content for somebody else into an interactive process. When the customer gives feedback it becomes more of a collective experience for the sex worker. When Fiona discusses doing live shows, she deems the interaction as essential. As mentioned before, Fiona values the interpersonal connection with her customers. For her, it is important that there is some level of mutual admiration between her and her customers. A lack of interaction from the customer can also become an obstacle in digital sex work since it makes the work harder for some. She explained it like the following,

Sometimes there is one who just sits there and doesn't write anything and doesn't answer my questions. Then I can be like "Hello, are you still there" and that feels weird. If I ask something I want to get a chat answer so that I get some sort of connection.

Feedback helps the sex worker in their creation of both sexual and intimate experiences. Feedback is, however, described as a source that could evoke both positive and negative feelings. It can be something fun that motivates them but can also be a pressure. Fiona discusses the dual nature of feedback like this,

If you get positive feedback, then you feel like 'this is fun, I feel appreciated', you get like a motivational force to continue. But if I get negative feedback, then I personally can feel a bit of pressure. Or more like 'Oh shit I have to do better from now on, I do not want to lose my fans and my good customers'. I get stressed and feel like I have to do better.

The main finding here is that feedback is what makes the situation interactive, which furthermore creates social dynamics between the sex worker and their customers. On the one

hand, a consequence of the social dynamics is boundaries within the dyad. Guidelines regarding what is accepted behavior and what is not are being clarified. As will soon be discussed, the creation of intimacy in sex work is dependent upon, and restricted by, these boundaries. Prior to that, however, it is important to discuss how the interactive elements in digital sex work also becomes a source of motivation due to how it can trigger the emergence of different emotional states in the sex worker.

Sex Work as a Source for Emotions

Doing sex work triggers different emotions. Selma describes how she gets very excited to see the pictures after they are taken and when she sits down to edit them, she can feel “lyrical.” Selma’s main focus is to create beautiful images. Nudity is a means to create her art. If she is satisfied with her photos after a photoshoot she gets eager to upload them to her page. Selma is very proud of her work. Similar to Selma, Julia is also very proud of her work. She describes how pride is one of the most substantial feelings from the job. Another vital characteristic that Julia both possesses and values is kindness. Julia strongly values kindness both in herself and in others, following that she talks about emotions from her work in terms of a motivational force. When it goes well with her work, and she gets kind feedback, she wants to do more of it and give back to her customers. When I asked her why feedback was important to her, she said,

It gives me like energy. It is just like an artist who wants applause. If the audience is totally quiet then you lose some of that energy ‘Ahaa, they don’t like my new song’, it is the same thing here. You want an audience that, regardless if they are one or 50, you want to get a response on what you are doing.

Vanessa talked similarly about this feeling after a job that was done well. She told me that she is a bit shy and introverted, but after having done her work and being very social, she could feel “a very big kick from it” if it went well. However, if she felt like the content she produced was not up to her usual standards, she said, “Then I can just put my phone down and think fuck it and do it tomorrow.”

Feelings that can emerge from the situation are not limited to only positive ones. The negative emotions that may occur can also be related to work performance and feedback. The women did discuss how the work takes a lot of energy and time. They all felt pressured to produce good content. Putting a lot of pride in a good work performance, Fiona told me that

if she were to have two bad days at work, that entailed not selling as much or when her customers were not interacting with her to the same extent, then she would “undoubtedly be in a bad mood.” The emergence of negative feelings was, as mentioned before, most prominent in Riley's narrative, she discussed how sex work gave her a lot of problems with her sexuality, self-image and general mental health. She described how she now sees the sex work she did as a way to self-harm. When she felt sad, she did sex work to get in a better mood, gain validation or take her mind off of things but did not realize then and there that it was the sex work that caused the initial mental health problems.

A significant discovery is that the emergence of various emotions does not merely arise as a reaction to stimuli. Simply logging into Onlyfans did not trigger the emotions, rather they evolved as part of a process. Selma told me about her limits in her work, that she does not do penetrative sexual acts on camera. Having firm boundaries and sticking to them was important for her, both in the context of sex work but also in her general life. She did, however, additionally tell me how testing the limits of these boundaries could be exciting. One of the stories she told me on this topic is an excellent example of how the emergence of emotions in sex work is not a reaction to stimuli but rather part of a process.

I got a request from a follower, they wanted me to spit on my boobs and spank myself and I was so unsure. Should I do it or was it like over my limit? So I was like ok I'll try first. So I put on some music that made me feel sexy and relaxed and then I did it. And when I edited to movies I really felt 'fuck this is so sexy' and when I sent them I was so excited about it. I was really hoping that the other person would like it because I really liked it. And the person was so happy about them ... When people ask if I do customs I actually use that as an example of what I can do now.

This way of talking about developing different emotional states was very common. Many of the participants used a process narrative when talking about it, as if it was something that emerged from the situation rather than existed just before. One example of this is when Fiona and I spoke about live masturbation shows. She described these as something fun and energy-inducing, but it is not always like that from the beginning. She said, “Sometimes it is hard to like start the first sentence, like how do I start this. But as soon as you start all of that just disappears and you are just so in it.” Whether that is a live stream where the customers are present or a photo/videoshoot where the customers are kept in mind as the receivers of the products, they influence the process. Gaining different emotional states does not work as a reaction to stimuli but rather a process that is situated in the social dynamics that occur.

The emergence of emotions acts as a motivational force. The participants wanted to recreate the feelings of having done a good job and manage the risks associated with doing a bad job. A successfully done task is related to norms regarding what is considered good and bad work performance. In digital sex work, these norms and structures manifest themselves in the boundaries that exist between the sex worker and her customers. This furthermore has implications for the creation of intimacy.

Boundaries In Action: Assessing the Landscape for Intimacy

Boundaries are an important part of the dynamics that arise in the dyad, or the group, that shape the sex work situation. The boundaries could be from the sex workers towards the customers. One example is how almost all participants in this study had rules for how the customers were allowed to behave, the most frequent being acting respectfully. The rules could also be from the customers towards the sex workers. One example of this is an expectation on the sex workers to be active in their content creation on their site and to answer messages. Another example is an expectation of the sex workers' beauty. They felt a need to be as attractive as possible in their content. Boundaries are not universal, but some are, however, more common than others.

If the woman had a specific brand or niche connected to their role as a sex worker, then it was often a source of some distinct boundaries. Emma whose brand was her being a blond, Swedish, naturally attractive trans woman, discussed how the expectations of her were evident. However, also having a great sense of self and being very self-assured, Emma told me how she does not let those expectations affect her if it is something she wants to do. She discussed the physical boundaries that she felt like this,

I need to be blond. It is just one of those things, I think it could have hurt [my brand not to be blonde]. I did think about not being it for a while but then I noticed that it would have hurt my brand far too much. I need to stay blonde. And I can't do SRS [gender-affirming surgery]... It would have also hurt my brand.

Not everybody had this type of branding, but if they did the expectations and boundaries that they had to navigate in their work were shaped by that. This could be related to gender, a personal theme to their account, a body type, or just the type of content that is usually uploaded to their sites.

One of the most interesting boundaries for the focus on intimacy in this research was that some customers, not all however, expected exclusivity from the women. Four of the participants explicitly described how they would not tell their customers if they had a partner. All participants discussed how they would make their customers think they were extra special. Riley, who operated outside of platform-mediated sites, would not even tell her customers that she had other customers. Julia gave a good example of how this materializes as a boundary in a story about incorporating her husband into her content. Here, she broke the boundary of exclusivity and, as a result, got sanctioned by her followers.

You know, I have noticed, not everybody, but there are some people on Onlyfans who do not like when I write like ‘my man’ or ‘my boyfriend’. They want me to be single. So, then I have to like think about who it is that I am writing to, what I am writing and like think back. I notice it like when I upload a video and write ‘hot sex with my man’, I might get like ten likes. And then I do another video and write ‘hot sex in car’ and then I get so many more likes. I think it is because that I did not write that it was with my man.

Julia and I continued the conversation about her customers not wanting to know about her husband. She described how this exclusivity boundary also affected her preparations and her performance of authenticity. She told me how she used lube to make it seem as if she was aroused before doing a live cam show, as if the thought of doing the live show for that specific customer had made her so. She said she did this because “in reality, I am not horny, but that should preferably not be noticed by them.” When I asked her why that was important, she answered,

I think that they want me to think that they are attractive, that I want to show myself just to him. I think he wants me to like be turned on by him, that there is something between us, like he has done a good job.

While exclusivity as a boundary once again highlights the demand for authentic intimacy, the other boundaries also play a role in fostering intimacy, even if they do so in a much more covert manner. Following the boundaries, regardless of what the boundary relates to, strengthens the dyads's perception of right and wrong. The boundaries can be seen as the landscape of how emotions can emerge from sex work for the sex workers. Following the boundaries is one of the essential elements that need to be fulfilled to create intimacy and furthermore perform well at their job, which, in turn, can catalyze different positive emotional states. This also works the other way around. Not following the boundaries will result in a more challenging time to create intimacy and, therefore, a worse work performance, which, in

turn, will catalyze negative emotional states. The boundaries need to be followed before the creation of intimacy can take place, not necessarily because the creation of intimacy utilizes all the elements in the boundaries but rather because not following the boundaries offsets the entire interaction.

Preparations: A Means to Navigate Expectations

As a means to comply with all the boundaries, the women partook in various preparations. In the embodied dimension, to adhere to physical expectations such as beauty, the preparations were most often described as taking a shower, shaving, putting makeup on, fixing their hair, and choosing what to wear, similar to other sex workers around the world. The environment was also of great importance. The women altered the environment by putting up the camera at the right angle, choosing what type of lighting to have and where to be. This was present in Vanessa, Rileys and Emma's bodymaps as well. All of them highlighted makeup, clothes, and good lighting to enhance their looks before creating content. The expectations were not only on the women's bodies but also on their mood, their emotions and how they communicate. The participants spoke about how they were expected to be in a specific mood. When describing what that mood entailed they often used words like “happy”, “horny”, “interested” and “attracted to them”. The preparations are a way to make sure you adhere to the mental and physical expectations of the customers.

The preparations additionally also had a function for mental processes in the sex workers themselves. What will become clearer in the last section of the results is how all the performances described above, of different emotions, intimacy, authenticity, exclusivity, attraction and so on, are dependent upon a specific mindset in the women. They used the preparations and things around them to make themselves get into this specific, right mindset.

Exploring Mindsets: Insights into the Internal Processes of Sexworking

Having a state of mind that subjectively feels good to you as a sex worker can aid in the performance of sex work. The right mindset was often described as being in a good mood, focused and feeling positive. A good mindset would make the practices easy and enjoyable, whereas a wrong mindset would make the tasks harder and affect the end product. The right mindset was often obtained by adjusting the physical situation they were in to their liking, engaging with positive feedback or thinking about other past experiences that have gone well. Reliving old successful work tasks was described as helping their confidence and therefore aid in acquiring the right mindset. The ritualistic process of preparing; showering, putting on make up,

choosing lingerie could also aid in the immersification in the right mindset. Emma explained it like this when we talked about her great interest in makeup and clothes “If I think I look good that helps of course. The mood is like I feel good because I look good.” When talking to Vanessa regarding how one does a good job at sex work, she said,

For me, it is to be in a good mood and focused on what I do. Not having a lot of other stuff around me that interrupts or stresses me out because then I am not doing a good job.

Her most common content was her striptease videos, where she showed herself in special lingerie. Vanessa is very fashionable and when she drew her bodymap the first thing she drew was a pair of hot-pink lace underwear. Sometimes, she also receives requests to do content that requires her to alter her appearance and performance. I asked her if she felt as if some of these roles were hard to get into. She answered, “It is easy, very easy most often. If you are in the right mood, otherwise everything is hard”. The mindset is the backbone of being able to do different types of performances. This view on having *the right mindset* was very common.

The right mindset is hard to define since what one experiences as right is strongly subjective. It is connected to the individual's personal history. Vanessa shared a description of the importance of a good mood mindset for her, which is a good example of how it is connected to personal history and subjectivity.

To me, it is important to be satisfied with my body. I have had problems with my body and food... Had really big problems with my body and appearance. Then it is like, if I have a bad day about that then it is really hard. I can't like film myself if I have a bad day with my appearance, so I have to have a good day because of that. And like, if I am going to try to be sexy and strip or something then you have to have a little smile and like some expression so you don't look empty.

The right mindset helps with conveying the expected emotions, for example happiness, attraction, sexiness, and so on. When Vanessa says “So you don't look empty” she is referring to a lack of these emotions. The customers will not be satisfied if the correct emotions are not being displayed.

The right mindset does not ensure a positive experience with sex work. What the right mindset entails is a specific state of mind that gives the sex worker the ability to do the performance that

is expected of her. Riley was strongly negative towards all kinds of sex work. She had very bad experiences with it, however, she also stated that having the right mindset helped her to do a good job. She said, “I could feel sometimes that I felt sexy and I felt cute and such. Actually. And then it became better also, better videos, better contact”. The right mindset acts as a glue to aid all other factors in aligning as intended in order to perform well at their creation of intimacy.

The importance lies not in what the right mindset entails, which varies from person to person, but rather in how it is achieved and what is achieved through it. The right mindset is a tool. To understand this process further, we need to see this process in a conceptual framework.

Analysis

Digital sex workers carefully craft intimacy for their customers as part of their work. The intimacy has to, however, be experienced as authentic to be successful for the customers. A successful performance of intimacy is dependent upon the emotional labor of the sex worker. The creation of intimacy is both a mental process but it is also realized through the sex workers bodies. A part of the craft to create intimacy is following the boundaries that arise between the sex worker and their customer by adjusting the way they talk, how they move, what they do, and how they prepare. The boundaries can be seen as gatekeepers to intimacy, failure to adhere to the boundaries renders the possibility of intimacy creation smaller. When the boundaries are satisfied, the process of creating intimacy can be initiated.

To be able to adhere to the aspects that shape intimacy in sex work, the women utilized a specific “right” mindset. A clear definition of the right mindset is highly subjective and therefore not necessary in this research. What is important is how the right mindset is achieved and what it aids in achieving. The right mindset can come from firstly, physical and psychological preparations undertaken by sex workers, secondly, from looking at positive feedback or thirdly, reliving prior successful experiences to cultivate a suitable mood before engaging with their customers. Doing this results in what I will call emotional currency. Emotional currency is not a theoretical concept, it is simply an etic adaptation and wording for an emic experience found in the data. The right mindset translates into emotional currency when they do certain aspects of their work.

The use of currency is a metaphorical parallel to the role of money as a facilitator of access to help and conveniences in everyday life. Emotional currency is, however, not a matter of life

or death, like money can be in a capitalist society. Rather, emotional currency is like money in the sense of buying fast-track tickets to a roller coaster. You could still ride the rollercoaster by waiting in line, but having the money to obtain fast-track tickets makes it easier and probably more fun. Emotional currency enables sex workers access to the mental states necessary to follow the expectations of the customers and perform the necessary factors of intimacy, or in other words, perform emotional labor. From this, I further conclude that when the creation of intimacy is part of a transaction, or possibly simply part of an expectation, the workers utilize emotional currency to help them navigate the landscape of intimacy.

The benefit of separating the finding into two concepts is that it highlights the different processes connected to it. The term “the right mindset” is well suited when exploring how it is achieved, as used in the result section. However, when exploring what it achieves, the term “emotional currency” helps unveil the internal transactional realm that will soon be discussed. Most importantly emotional currency better conveys the idea that it is something universal, in comparison to the right mindset which is intensely subjective. Emotional currency is the product of the right mindset that is more similar for all, it makes it easier for the sex workers to do better performance. Emotional currency facilitates the emotional labor of the sex workers. Before delving further into the application of emotional labor, intimacy as a phenomenon in sex work will be deconstructed using Forstie’s (2017) framework.

Norms

As Forstie (2017) highlights, intimacy is shaped by the fact that it is a favorable outcome of interaction. Following this, the participants in this study all discussed how the expectation of intimacy was frequent. The sex workers described how their work does not only relate to sexual dimensions but also emotional and interactive realms that take a lot of energy and focus from the women. Significant aspects of their work pertain to the creation of intimacy, as it is often expected by customers.

Another aspect is how society shapes the kind of intimacy that is accepted. Because sex work is stigmatized, the intimacy emerging from it also becomes taboo. However, because intimacy is a socially favorable outcome of interaction, enacting intimacy might be a method to offset the stigma associated with sex work for both the sex workers and the customers. One

can find this in customers who wish to communicate on platforms outside of Onlyfans. Fiona's comment "Getting private Snapchat, that is not like communication on some big pornsite" indicates how the customers view the contact outside of pornsites as something positive simply because it is not on a pornsite. Having an intimate interaction can be a way to cope with the moral questions regarding sex work.

Mutual Action

As found in the narratives of the sex workers, the customers are not strongly involved in the creation of intimacy. They ask for it and receive it, but the sex worker is the one creating it. Some of the customers do engage in sharing personal aspects of their lives or want to know personal things about the women which of course also affects the experienced level of intimacy. In the bigger picture, however, the responsibility for creating intimacy lies upon the sex worker. However, there is still mutual action through the feedback from the customers. An argument in this thesis is that digital sex work should not be seen as individual conduct but rather as collective happening.

Digital sex work does not occur in two different vacuums divided between the sender and the receiver but as an ongoing process of negotiation. The customers are often clear about what they think of the content, whether they like it or if something does not meet their expectations. If they buy custom content, they are often very clear with their instructions and whether they are satisfied or not. The sex worker together with their customer creates the framework for their interaction. This means creating structures of boundaries, expectations, level of personal depth, and so on. The actions of the sex workers are not isolated but expected, evaluated and, if it is done correctly, endorsed.

What this research shows is how the mutual action between the sex workers and their customers results in the emergence of different emotions in the sex workers, which, in turn, acts as motivation for the sex workers. Depending on whether the sex workers are successful or not in their navigation of expectations and boundaries, their customers become satisfied or dissatisfied which catalyzes different emotional states in the sex worker. The participants in this study partly used successful past experiences when they wanted to achieve the right mindset before a work task. The emotional currency, that the sex workers use as part of their emotional labor when creating intimacy, is therefore partly grounded in the mutual action.

Knowledge

Knowledge simply refers to what the group knows to be able to navigate the interaction to arrive at intimacy. Forstie (2017) differentiates between micro and macro intimacy. In this case, it is micro intimacy and therefore refers to knowledge within the dyad or group.

However, the interaction does not occur in a vacuum and more structural, macro, knowledge of intimacy also shapes the interaction between the sex worker and their customers. The physical boundaries regarding beauty or a specific body type are informed by structural beauty norms and the exclusivity boundary is informed by norms regarding monogamy.

To create intimacy, however, it is very important for the sex workers to correctly navigate the specific interaction. They do this by following and embodying the correct knowledge. The knowledge was presented as self-evident implying that it is something they learn by doing. It was not discussed explicitly but rather discussed as something stemming from experience and engaging with the feedback they get. The women learn how their customers like them to look and act through their feedback. Both in terms of written feedback and by looking at engagement with the content (how many bought it or liked it among other things). Mentally and physically utilizing their knowledge in practice becomes the foundation for intimacy creation.

Sex work entails the accumulation and employment of an abundance of knowledge. To limit the scope of this discussion I will focus on three aspects; creating a personal depth, being sexy and exclusivity.

A big part of digital sex work knowledge is to know how to create a personal depth in the interaction. Sex workers are expected to listen to and engage with the personal aspects, and personal knowledge, of their customers. Additionally, they are also expected to reciprocate this and allow access to a personal dimension in themselves. Their professional creation of intimacy also requires a portion of personal intimacy. The sex workers are required to learn how to do this type of interaction, acting intimate is a learned behavior. The participants have learned that they have to perform emotional labor, and allow for a personal depth, as part of their work.

The second aspect of knowledge is knowing how to be *sexy*. All the women had different ways of doing *sexiness* to make their clientele satisfied. A big part of being *sexy* was also being comfortable and authentic, this means that sometimes the performance of *sexiness* often took a few tries. Fiona and Selma both talked about how they practiced before doing live shows or doing custom content multiple times to get it just right. Knowing how to be *sexy* also entails preparing their bodies with shaving, makeup and clothes. As well as using the proper lighting and camera angles. Being *sexy* is not only an embodied knowledge of how to act but also entails practical knowledge of how to create *sexiness*.

The relationship between *sexiness* and intimacy varied. In some stories, they were separated, but without the performance of *sexiness*, the intimacy would not have an arena to operate upon. However, in other cases, they were interconnected. One example of this is how Julia prepared her body with lube to make it seem like she was aroused before the live show started. That indicates to the customer that she has a personal interest in him, making it an intimate situation, at the same time that it is in sexual territory. She used lube, and her body, to make her emotional labor seem more authentic to the customer. In digital sex work, the emotional labor is not only shown through the mood but the emotional labor also imposes itself upon the body of the sex worker. Being *sexy* entails practical knowledge such as lighting, angles and makeup but it also entails embodied knowledge on how to move, speak and act *sexy*. The narratives about knowing how to be *sexy* are good examples of how the emotional labor the sex workers have to do to create intimacy is both embodied and verbal.

The last knowledge to be discussed is knowing to perform exclusivity and how to make the customer feel extra special. All the participants had different ways of doing this. From what words they used when they spoke to them, how they framed the messages they sent out with their content, how they used props and so on. The findings of this research confirm Bartlett's (2001), David's (2008) and Stacey's (2011) discussions about how emotional labor is not only temporal but also relates to creating long-term relationships with customers. Some of the participants told me how they had customers who felt like they were in an exclusive relationship together. Something that strongly shows how emotional labor in digital sex work also relates to creating and maintaining relationships. Learning that the customers want to be special affects almost all aspects of their work. To be able to create intimacy, which is what many of their customers are seeking, they also need to know how to perform exclusivity. Without it, the creation of intimacy becomes experienced as non-authentic for the customer

and therefore not as good. Exclusivity becomes a norm in digital sex work and the sex workers adapt to this.

Affect

Affect relates to the emotional dimensions of intimacy, something that Forstie (2017) describes as vague and semi-unconscious. Emotions are hard to describe because they are a lived embodied experience and non-verbal. The sex work situation pertains to a multitude of these processes, however, the actions related to affect can be divided into two dimensions. There is Affect-inducing behavior and Affect-amplifying behavior.

Starting with the latter, the sex workers utilize their environment to favor affect. They shape the environment that can be seen in their content to create a sensual intimate atmosphere or use a specific type of lighting that is supposed to highlight their beauty. The environment acts as affect amplifying. Just the environment cannot create the affect but it can help the affect-inducing behaviors to become more strongly felt.

Affect-inducing behaviors are related to how they use their personality and their bodies. The most prominent way is through emotional labor, where sex workers are expected to perform the right emotions, be happy to see their customers, engage in personal conversations with them, miss them if they do not have contact with them, and behave like all their customers are extra special. All of these aspects shape the customer's experience of affect. The sex workers use their body language to make themselves seem attracted to their customer. The story about using lube to make it seem like they were aroused before the call started indicates that the emotional labor to create affect not only takes place in the interaction but also before as part of the preparations.

Affect-inducing behaviors are strongly related to how the participants prepared their bodies to better create affect in their customers. An important aspect is how these actions must be convincing and authentic. One example is how Emma diluted her fake sperm with clear lube and water to make it more convincing that it was her own thus also making the interaction more intimate. The bodies played an important part in the creation of affect and especially in terms of endorsing the authenticity of the performance. Even though the interaction is performed online, there is a clear embodied dimension to affect-inducing actions. Embodied

emotional labor is not only restricted to the interaction itself, but also influence the preparations for the intimacy creation.

Using Forsties' (2017) framework allows for an examination of intimacy as a phenomenon in digital sex work. The phenomenon is shaped by the fact that it is something that customers seek out and expect from the sex worker, leading to its normalization. The creation of intimacy uses the actions of both the sex worker and the customer. While the sex workers primarily cultivate intimacy, however, the outcome of said performance which is understood from the customers' feedback plays a part in motivating the sex workers to create intimacy. Digital sex workers utilize a wide range of knowledge, spanning from mental to embodied expertise, to create intimacy. To be able to initiate the process of intimacy creation they have to adhere to other expectations and boundaries from their customers beforehand. The emotional aspects of intimacy, affect, are created by body language, performing emotions and different preparations. Both the application of their knowledge and the genesis of affect lies in the sex workers' ability to conduct emotional labor.

Emotional Labor of Intimacy Creation

Since intimacy is a favorable outcome of interaction, it also shaped the institutionalization of emotional labor in digital sex work. The sex workers' narratives are filled with stories about how acting a certain way, using the body in a certain manner or showing correct emotions are important parts of their work. Some customers seek intimacy, as discussed by all the participants in this study, which makes emotional labor an inherent part of the work.

To create intimacy the sex workers need to perform emotional labor, whether surface or deep acting, to adhere to the expectations and, in turn, perform well at their job. The knowledge that sex workers operate from does not only pertain to what the sex workers adjust to in order to create intimacy it also becomes the structure for how to perform their emotional labor. The sex workers more often partook in surface acting regarding adhering to the knowledge regarding what type of behavior is accepted by the customer. A good example is Riley's comment about how she interacted with some of her customers; "Yes but I think that was like the whole thing. I also wanted them to believe that I cared about them even though I didn't so much ... that's what they wanted, the real relation." Riley's emotional labor is surface acting as she is aware that she is adjusting her emotions to fit the interaction.

The women's discussions about how they sometimes were acting in compliance with themselves, and not only performing a role indicates how they had contrasting feelings regarding their emotional labor and how they did not view it as something solely positive. Hoschild (2012) suggests that emotional labor can be alienating from one's true feelings. While the participants in this study did not discuss that explicitly their narratives included indications that it could be a possibility. It was important to them that they remain true to themselves in some aspects of their work.

There were indications that the emotional labor shifted into more deep-acting after seeing that the work goes well or getting favorable feedback, or in other words, after the emergence of positive emotions within the sex workers. The drive to perform the tasks in an emotionally suitable manner, then sometimes stems from the internal processes of the sex worker. This can be found in Fiona's quote "If you get positive feedback, then you feel like 'this is fun, I feel appreciated,' you get like a motivational force to continue." After having done a good performance, the sex workers often discussed adhering to the boundaries, structures and expectations as more strongly coming from within themselves. The emotional labor in digital sex work is thus both surface and deep acting, where deep acting more often occurs as a consequence of the positive emotions emerged from already having performed well at their job.

The emotional labor is furthermore strongly related to the sex workers' utilization of their bodies and their physical environment. The performance needs to feel authentic for the customers according to the sex workers. Vanessa's comment about how she "dropped the mask" when she happened to include her making a weird face at the end of a striptease video is a good example. Here her body language exposed the fact that the emotions she aimed to create in the customers were not part of her present emotional state. How the body moves becomes a way to testify that the emotions one performs are true, even if they are not.

Intimacy as a phenomenon in digital sex work is therefore strongly connected to emotional labor. Intimacy is commodified, planned and performed as part of the emotional labor that the participants in this study do. They use both their voice, their body and their environment to create the correct landscape upon which intimacy can flourish.

Emotional Currency: A Circular Transaction

In all the women's narratives, their emotional currency was used to have the energy to create this landscape for intimacy. Performing authentic intimacy, and thus also doing emotional labor, is tiring and takes a lot of work. Therefore, it needs to be motivated in order to be conducted well. Whether the emotional currency comes from past experiences that have gone well or from present acts to elevate their mood, it aids the sex workers in adhering to the different aspects of intimacy. What sex workers use is *antecedent-focused emotional regulation* as part of their emotional labor. They adjust the situation so it is as favorable for them to operate within as possible. They do this through different preparations, adjusting their physical appearance and the environment they are in, which can be seen as small rituals for triggering their right mindset. As mentioned above, they also trigger their right mindset by reliving old successful experiences, meaning that they apply *attentional deployment*. Reminiscing about a situation before that went well aided in the immersion into the right mindset because it made the participants feel happy, proud and excited. The *antecedent-focused emotional regulation*, that the *attentional deployment* is part of, is a way the sex workers get into the right mindset which then becomes emotional currency when they are presented with work tasks.

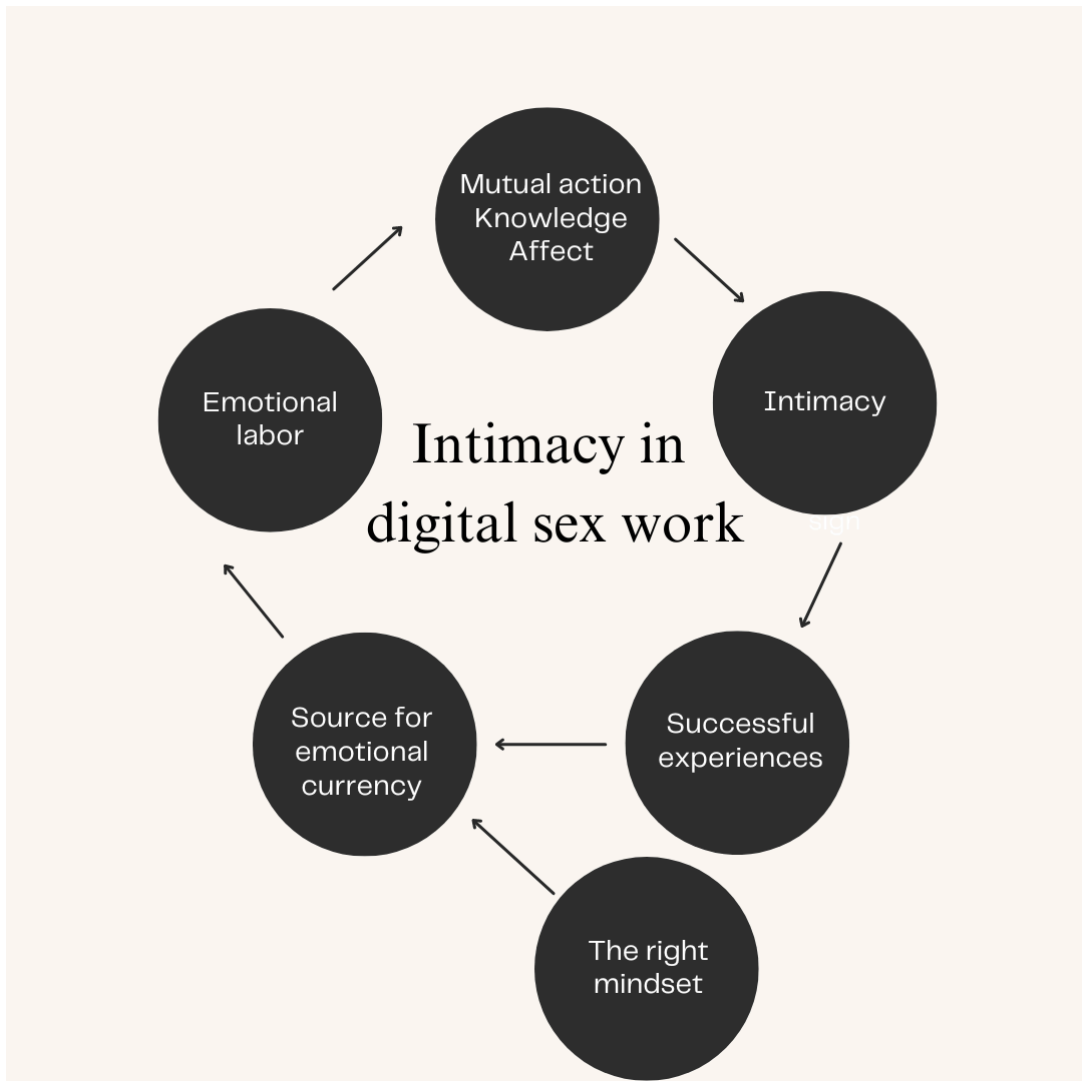
The argument in this thesis is that while emotional labor can be employed to create intimacy in probably any state of mind, having high emotional currency was described as making this process easier, more fun, and giving better results. This is especially prominent concerning the factor of knowledge regarding adhering to the customers' boundaries. The knowledge is used to create a landscape upon which the emotional process of affect in the customer can thrive. Employing and embodying the knowledge is, however, a lot of work. Some, like Vanessa, described that if she does not have enough emotional currency for the task she is taking on, she does not do it. This indicates the importance of emotional currency when doing work that uses the workers' emotional labor. Emotional currency does not make everything about sex work positive and fun but it does make the tasks easier as well as more successful. Like Riley said, when she had enough emotional currency to take on the task to create intimacy it “became better also, better videos, better contact.”

Emotional currency also acts as a favorable due to the commodification of intimacy in terms of economic capital. Intimacy acts as a way to make the interaction more meaningful and

valuable for the customer. The interaction becomes more valuable because intimacy is seen as something private, authentic and not something obtainable for all. Having enough emotional currency to perform the emotional labor for creating authentic intimacy well makes the experience better for the customer which therefore entails a monetary dimension. Customers are ready to pay more to get an authentic intimate performance. Having a lot of emotional currency becomes linked to the accumulation of capital. The process of gaining emotional currency, therefore also becomes economically motivated.

A part of Hoschild's (2012) discussion is that emotional labor has negative consequences on the workers such as burnout. Burnout is a risk in digital sex work as well due to sex workers feeling that they constantly have to work which results in significant pressure (Hamilton, Redmiles and Barakat; 2022). The participants in this study, when discussing aspects of using emotional currency did so as a means to make the work more successful and easier. They discussed emotional currency as a safeguard, without it the task of performing emotional labor can be emotionally and energy draining. The participants used their emotional currency to cope with the difficulties of performing emotional labor.

Emotional currency therefore has a transactional use. Digital sex workers perform actions or relive past experiences that put them in the right mindset which then later translates into emotional currency during work tasks. They use their emotional currency to have energy to adhere to the knowledge of how they should act as well as to do actions that create affect in their customers. In other words, they use their emotional currency to be able to carry out a suitable level of emotional labor. The emotional labor could be carried out without it, however, emotional currency acts as a shield against draining aspects of doing emotional labor, such as feeling alienated from one's own feelings (Hochschild, 2012). Doing this results in two outcomes. On the one hand, they have completed their tasks and performed well at their jobs which results in money. On the other hand, because of the success of their performance, it also creates another source to draw more emotional currency from. Whether that is reliving the happening or because they have made a customer satisfied who now might come back with more requests, more positive feedback and more mutual action. Thus, in turn, creating more means to perform well at their emotional labor in other situations. The interplay between intimacy, emotional labor and emotional currency is circular.



This study finds, through researching digital sex work, that when intimacy is commercialized and therefore realized through emotional labor, it is a process that entails time, energy and knowledge on how to navigate the interaction correctly. The sex workers knew of the expectations on them and did different actions relating to emotional labor to live up to those expectations. In Hoschild's (2012) original theory, she argues that emotional labor can alienate the actor from one's true feelings. While the participants in this study did discuss how they could feel similarly, they did not express it as strongly as the reflections from Hoschild (2012). This could be because they engaged in triggering their right mindset and accumulation of emotional currency. The participants discussed how they then during work, almost like a transaction, traded in this emotional currency as a way to more easily, and successfully, do the task they were presented with. Emotional currency was found in this study to be a way to cope with having to perform emotional labor when creating intimacy,

primarily regarding utilizing and embodying the correct knowledge in order to create affect. Intimacy as a phenomenon in sex work is strongly connected to the internal emotional processes of the sex worker. These processes are, in turn, both mental and embodied. Intimacy in sex work is therefore not a phenomenon that can be seen as restricted to solely something that happens in the interaction between the sex worker and their customers but it is also grounded in the individual processes of the sex workers.

Conclusion:

This research explores digital sex workers' experience with performing intimacy and how they create authenticity in their performances using themselves and their external environment. The intimacy that is studied is digitally mediated, which results in an exploration of ways of doing intimacy that transcends the restrictions of co-presence and co-temporality.

A grand focus has been on what I have called embodied research. This includes a methodology that does not disregard non-verbal storytelling or the body's contribution to lived experiences and an ethics that uses embodied intuition and not solely verbal communication. The data comes from semi-structured interviews with six participants, as well as body mapping with half of them. The analytical framework incorporates a phenomenological perspective, aiming to study the creation of intimacy as a digital phenomenon and its manifestations in the offline realm as well.

The creation of an intimate experience for the customers in digital sex work is a complex process that involves various practices. Propelling off of Forsie's (2017) framework for intimacy, this research concludes how all four factors in her model are part of the interaction between digital sex workers and their customers. The creation of intimacy is shaped by Norms, requires Mutual Action from both parties, uses specific Knowledge to correctly navigate the interaction as well as includes a clear dimension of embodied emotions through Affect. Continuing and building on Hoschild's theory (2012), in order to fulfill these factors, primarily knowledge and affect, they engage in emotional labor to establish emotional bonds in their interactions by adjusting how they talk, act and embody different emotions.

To create intimacy the sex workers talk about personal topics with their customers, communicate with their customers outside of the platform for the sexual services, performed exclusivity, create personal relations and on top of this, also enact a level of authenticity in all their performances. Additionally, their emotional labor was not only restricted in the interaction with their customers, it also influenced their preparations. They prepare the environment, lighting, and camera angles before creating content to create an intimate atmosphere. They prepare themselves, both mentally and physically, to be able to perform intimacy. They use makeup, fix their hair, put on specific types of clothing, shave, and train among other things to get their body and their appearance correct. Digital intimacy, therefore, has clear manifestations in the offline realm as well, primarily through these preparations that the sex workers do. Using the concept from Forsties (2017) framework, their physical bodies acted as affect-inducing and their physical environment as affect-amplifying. Additionally, their bodies also become a way to prove that the performance of intimacy is authentic, even if it might not be. The participants' bodies acted as a way to convince their customers that their performances were not performances at all. Doing this also adhered to the expectations, and boundaries, of their customers. Not living up to their expectations becomes a transgression of the boundaries between the sex worker and their customers. All the boundaries had to be satisfied prior to creating intimacy, not adhering to the boundaries simply off-sets the interaction because it breaks the norms.

The most important finding from this research is however, that because the intimacy in sex work is commodified and therefore part of an expectation from the customer, rather than a spontaneous consequence of interaction, they utilize something I have called the right mindset. What it is, is highly subjective, changeable and abstract and therefore does not need, nor could get, a fixed definition. What is of importance is rather how it is achieved and what it achieves. The participants got into the right mindset by reliving old memories of successful work performances, meaning that they do *attentional deployment*, or they use different preparations, adjust their environment or engage with positive feedback. Therefore, their emotional regulation is *antecedent-focused*, meaning that they adjust the situation to suit their performances of different emotions better. What the right mindset achieves is something I have called emotional currency.

Emotional currency is part of a metaphorical transaction, where the sex workers accumulate emotional currency and later trade it in during work tasks as a means to overcome the

obstacles that come with their emotional labor. Those obstacles can be that the work takes a lot of energy, uses personal aspects of the sex worker or as Hosiold (2012) suggests can be emotionally alienating. The concept of emotional currency is not something that makes sex work a solely positive or beneficial experience, what it is meant to show is the participants strategies for doing emotional labor to create intimacy. Having high emotional currency simply makes the work performance easier to do and more successful. Emotional currency is furthermore part of a loop, where having it makes the performances more successful, which, in turn, results in new sources from which emotional currency can be drawn.

By acknowledging intimacy as a phenomenon as well as an expectation in a capitalist market of sexual services, we gain valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of intimacy creation in online sex work. Intimacy happens in the interaction between the sex worker and their customers because of the sex workers' emotional labor. Their emotional labor, both verbal and embodied, is performed in a way to enhance the authenticity in their performances of intimacy. However, intimacy as a phenomenon in digital sex work is also strongly connected to the sex workers' individual accumulation, and expenditure, of emotional currency. Without these emotional processes in the sex worker, the phenomenon of intimacy in digital sex work would not be the same. High emotional currency makes intimacy, or rather the emotional labor it requires, easier to do. When the sex workers have much of emotional currency to, metaphorically, trade in, the emotional labor becomes motivated by themselves because it is so strongly related to a good work performance. The intimacy that is created in the online realm is strongly dependent upon actions in the offline realm, both physical actions from and upon the sex worker but also internal emotional processes within the sex worker.

The implications of this work are that it continues the study of sex workers and their experiences. It also furthers the exploration of digital interaction and more specifically intimacy from internet-mediated interaction. For future research, it would be beneficial to continue to study commodified intimacy and see how other sectors also fulfill the four criteria from Forstie's (2017) model. This would aid in the sociological understanding of intimacy as a process of social structures, actions and emotions rather than as an emotions in and of itself. Additionally, it would also be interesting to explore if the workers in those sectors also use a specific mindset, or emotional currency, to be able to create intimacy. It could be beneficial to delve deeper into the usage of emotional currency amongst workers to examine whether the usage of emotional currency stems from the level of personal depth the creation of intimacy

requires or because it is part of a broader, general, framework of emotional labor that benefits from an emotionally charged worker.

This research highlights the importance of not reducing the complex industry of digital sex work solely to its sexual transaction, but to also highlight the emotional transactions that occur; both in the interaction between the sex workers and their clients and internally within the sex workers themselves. In essence, the interplay between emotional labor, intimacy creation and the use of emotional currency show the complexities within the realm of sex work. By acknowledging these dynamics, we not only gain insights into the experience of sex workers but also reflect on the broader structures that shape intimacy and emotional labor in the digital age. By embracing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of intimacy in digital sex work, we move towards a more empathetic and respectful discourse surrounding sex work. A discourse that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of this type of labor, beyond its sexual surface.

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