GLOBAL AFFECTIVE NETWORK:  
AN ANALYSIS OF PAID ADULT LIVE CAMS

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ABSTRACT

New versions of sexual expressions have been created in the twenty-first century, influenced by the new social structures that have emerged due to shifts in digital interactions, the global order and in advanced capitalism. In this thesis, I analyse such new expressions in a particular context, namely in the production of content in adult live cams. Adult live cams are a pornographic genre that depicts sexual performances that are produced and result from online interactions between global participants in a context of the digital market. Due to its interactive nature, I argue that adult live cams are based on the production of particular identities, which aim at the creation of affective networks through the performance of intimate labour. To analyse these identities, I chose the adult live cam website YPMate as a case study, a website where global Internet users interact to produce content, and where customers return on a regular basis in order to cultivate relationships with the performers. Data were drawn from non-participant observation on YPMate; from YPMate’s website itself, including the performers’ public profiles; and also from two online forums where performers, customers and industry agents exchanged information about adult live cams. The results show that the intimate labour of the adult live cam performers produces flexible identities adapted to the new communication technologies, global sexual desires and capital. These identities create affective networks through the performance of intimate labour, and enable the performer to become a sexed entrepreneur by building intimacy through communality and communication.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:
1. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy;
2. Due acknowledgements have been made in the text to all other material used;
3. The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies, appendices and footnotes.

Signature: _____________________________

[Signature]

[Name]
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INTRODUCTION

ADULT LIVE CAMS: AN OVERVIEW

While browsing the web, it is not unusual for Internet users to encounter a pop-up window with (predominantly) female faces saying that they live nearby and ‘wanna chat’. Luring users to engage with the subject, these pop-ups are advertisements for a genre of interactive pornography called adult live cams, offering users live performances on demand, 24/7, and featuring men and women from all around the world. Most importantly, adult live cams showcase a shift in the way that people produce and consume pornography online; for instance, in the last few decades, media has tended towards more interactive online platforms, enabling users to directly influence and/or create their own pornographic content. Likewise, customers of adult live cams produce content by interacting with performers and negotiating paid performances of sexual acts. This kind of pornography production is based on transactional communication and cooperation between customers and performers, resulting in content that is customised, unpredictable, unscripted, and ephemeral.

These interactions are increasingly taking place among global participants: as they interact, they call upon their identities, desires, and experiences, which become intertwined with the pornographic content produced. The enlargement of the pool of participants to a global scale is a result of the democratisation of media, global market forces, and continued sexualisation of culture and popularisation of pornography. As a consequence, new geographies of online sexual transactions have emerged. On adult live cam sites, commercial transactions are inserted into a larger digital economy where the company who owns the website profits from participants’ interactions: both customers and performers (in)directly pay the company for hosting their experience. While these companies give participants control and freedom over content production, they exert control over its distribution and traffic by altering structures of communication both within and outside the website, especially through marketing strategies. Although the overall genre and most performances of adult live cams aim to achieve sexual arousal, this thesis argues that its main appeal is the interaction that occurs between performers and customers, the emotional engagement and affective networks engendered by
performers’ intimate labour and the particular identities created as a result. These affective networks consist of customers’ personal connections with performers, which can be used as inspiration for future production of content.

This introduction aims to (1) present the subject of this study and outline my primary research questions, (2) discuss the main theoretical framework used and clarify important concepts used in the research landscape, (3) account for the design and methodology of the empirical case study, and (4) provide an overview of the full thesis’s contents and structure.

1.1 The subject of investigation

One important consequence of media access expansion in contemporary post-industrial societies is that people’s social and cultural practices are increasingly extending into a wide variety of digital environments. These online spaces differ from physical spaces in the sense that they restructure the spatial-temporal conditions of social interaction and content production. As such, in these spaces, production of meaning and content are interwoven by users through their online experiences as well as through the capital forces that constitute the interconnected global web. In this context, new identities and networks are (re)created.

This thesis is concerned with the identities and affective networks created during the production and consumption of commercial online pornography, particularly adult live cams. In this genre, a variety of expressive networking practices is exhibited in global cyberspace and regulated by market rules. These networking practices are crucial to content production, since customers have to communicate and interact with performers in order to produce content; as such, these interactions become conflated, where it is not possible to dissociate communication from content production. Moreover, because content is produced through mediated communication, the available media affordances are crucial in shaping content. These mediated interactions can also increasingly be viewed as nodes in a larger social-cultural web that structures the processes of identity formation within a global network. Hence, ideas about gender, age, and nationalities are vectors through which capital is invested and affective relationships are created. Since the adult live cams studied are commercial, this thesis also addresses the related node of
digital economies and the new ways of accruing value from participants’ identities and relationships. Together, the use of new technologies and the formation and commodification of identities in a global sphere constitute pivotal vectors of production in adult live cams, ultimately forging relationships between the various cultural, economic, and affective practices that shape participants’ identities. The goal of this thesis is to critically examine the social relationship dimension of online pornographic productions (particularly adult live web cams) by asking the following research questions:

What types of identities are created in commercial adult live cams? Do they promote affective networks? How are they produced? How do global market forces influence the characteristics of these identities?

My main argument is that adult live cams are based on the production of globally marketable identities through the performance of intimate labour, thereby creating affective networks. By affective networks, I mean an exchange system of human experiences, affects, and identities central to recurrent productive interactions. These networks ‘enable mediated relationships that take a variety of changing, uncertain, and interconnected forms as they feed back each upon the other’ in unpredictable ways (Dean 2010: 22). Adult live cams’ affective networks are built around and through performers’ intimate labour, which is defined as work involving various embodied and affective interactions and based on certain identities, which are subjected to and shaped by global, market, and technological forces. In general, ‘it entails bodily or emotional closeness or personal familiarity, such as sexual intercourse [...] or (and) intimate observation and knowledge of personal information’ (Boris & Parreñas 2010: 2).

This thesis analyses adult live cams as a genre of interactive pornography that involves paid shows by global performers using webcams and text-chats that enable negotiations with customers. These performances and interactions occur via websites that host the virtual encounters. A typical adult live cam website is composed of thousands of video chat rooms, each linked to a different performer whose video is streamed live. A text-chat box is available for potential customers to exchange messages with the
performer in real time. Performers are not limited to having a specific number of ‘guests’, so they can communicate simultaneously with a vast number of users, or, if they so desire, establish a private, one-on-one interaction. Because the site analysed for this thesis is commercial, users have to pay to see performers displaying their bodies and demonstrating sexual acts. Nonetheless, part of what is purchased by customers is the ability to interact and communicate with performers and potentially direct their movements. Despite the variety of possible sexual shows via adult live cams, the eroticism of this interactive pornography both emerges and profits from its unique process of content creation and the personal connections that result.

1.2 Concepts and framework

In this thesis, I adopt a social constructivist and anti-essentialist approach that views knowledge, concepts, and practices as constructed through situated interactions, understanding reality as a dynamic process that needs to be continually reproduced and interpreted by people in everyday life (Berger & Luckmann 1991). Along these lines, practices related to pornography are creations of social actors who are negotiating cultural norms; here, special attention is given to how these practices are being constrained by these norms while also being (re)worked by a specific community interacting online. In the particular case of global adult live cam businesses, these constraints are also based on profit-making imperatives. The use of such a framework is appropriated for the aims of this research, which are focused more on understanding and explaining specific processes taking place in a given context rather than predicting future events. Before I address the methodological considerations and case study design, some key terms used throughout this thesis need to be considered.

First, in the present study, adult live cams are analysed as a form of ‘interactive pornography’: a genre in which participants interact in real time to produce pornographic content in the form of a video stream. This definition is not uncontested, however, especially because adult live cam activities are mostly ambiguous, often blurring the lines ‘between sex as a set of practices and sex as a set of representations’ (Attwood 2010: 6). In early academic studies on interactive pornography, the term was associated with commercial CD-ROMs and DVDs that enabled users to create customised pornographic
content by ‘making the images perform a variety of acts listed in a menu by the simple device of clicking a mouse in response to on-screen questions’ (Maher 2001: 56). As technology developed and webcams started to be used for sexual interactions, some researchers likened them to interactive pornography (Lind 2004: 323; Russell 2006: 36; Jeffreys 2008: 309; Spracklen 2015: 35); while other studies opted to define the phenomenon as cybersex (Waskul 2002; Jones 2008). According to Waskul (2002: 223), early webcams used for the ‘pursuit of profit in the Internet pornography industry’ differ from interactive cybersex, as in the former, customers “’peep’ in on the show” but ‘there is little interactivity and the motives of the performers are at least partially financial’. This distinction, based on commercialisation and degree of interactivity, has been complicated by the emergence of more participatory forms of commercial adult live cams, where shows can now be wholly produced through the encouragement of interaction between performers and customers, rather than passive engagement.

Divergences on how to classify adult live cams are also present in online discussions studied for this research. For instance, most researchers who posted interview calls on the online forum analysed used the term ‘virtual sex workers’ to refer to adult live cam performers. On these posts, most performers agree the term is used because it is an umbrella and political correct way to call a variety of sex entertainment workers. However, some performers are not convinced the term suits adult live cam performers well, and most of them agree with performer Nina (2012) when she voices her concerns:

I think it is offensive to be called a sex worker, because I think we are entrepreneurs. For instance, when I process my videos by editing, watermarking and converting them to a particular extension, and then market them, am I fucking? Or when I learn how to use social media to market myself, or when I learn more technical skills such as how to make GIFS, am I having sex? The sexual part of what I do to earn money accounts for only around 10%.

As stated, Nina’s opposition to the term ‘sex worker’ resides mainly in the fact that the term implies sex as the only and mainly thing being traded on adult live cams. She goes on problematizing the term by questioning if a porn director, the editors and affiliates can be also called sex workers. Such question is important since in adult live cams there is a convergence of all these roles in one figure: the performer, who craft
different ways of managing their identity. Hence, by analysing adult live cams as interactive pornography we are also addressing an important characteristic of the genre: that sexual activities on adult live cams may be seen as a ‘fusion of image and act’ (Kibby & Costello 2001: 359), as interactive possibilities subvert notions of active presentations and passive representation online. According to Kibby and Costello (2001: 354), such fusion is a result of the conflation of producer and consumer roles, as users simultaneously produce and consume their own digital pornographic content.

In this study, the choice to approach adult live cams as interactive pornography is then also informed by researching customers’ accounts and performers’ perceptions of their own activities. While performers associate cybersex with other genres such as virtual games (i.e. Second Life) and tele/cyberdildonics (it is, the technology that allows for remote sex with sex toys connected to the Internet), they tend to identity adult live cams with interactive pornography. For instance, in a discussion about the differences between strip clubs and adult live cams in an online forum, performer Heather (2014) argues that ‘adult live cams are basically interactive porn’. This conceptualisation is corroborated by other performers, who claim that a good description of adult live cam would be live and user-directed pornography (Mary 2013).

However, it is important to acknowledge that performers might choose the term ‘interactive pornography’ because it is less semantically loaded than, for instance, ‘paid cybersex’. It means, by identifying their work as pornography they try to turn away from constructing it as ‘dirty work’ and a ‘deviant occupation’. As seen before in Nina’s collocation, performers rather define themselves as entrepreneurs. This approach is also in accordance with the legal apparatus in countries like the United States of America (where most adult live cam websites are hosted), where in-person solicitation is legally penalised and framed as prostitution, while the technological mediated nature of encounters in adult live cams distances them from prostitution and removes most legal restrictions related to payment for sexual activities (Payne 2004).

Besides performers, specialised media has also shown a tendency to analyse adult live cams as part of the online porn industry. In an interview to online newspaper (Orsini 2011), adult entertainment attorney Michael Fattorosi stated that online pornography faces a crisis due to the great availability of free porn on the Internet. He argues that this crisis did not prevent, however, paid adult live cam websites from
becoming quite popular (hence, locating adult live cams inside the online pornography business). According to him, the reason of such popularity is simple: adult live cams allow live interaction, thus being considered a kind of interactive porn where the customisation of content is its main characteristic. Along the same lines, adult live cam performers often link the customisation of content to the high value of their work. In several topics on the online forum studied, performers urge other performers to charge more, claiming camming is a luxury item, a one-on-one personalised fully interactive porn fantasy fulfilment service.

From customers’ perspective, such customisation is often linked to particular fetishes and a more personal (but not in person) experience. For instance, in a topic on the online forum about the differences between camming and other sex entertainment services such as strip clubs and escorting, most customers say they still prefer ‘in person’ entertainment. However, a customer who prefers camming explains that ‘on Streamate, you can take a performer to the exclusive (chat) and get her to do whatever you want, assuming it does not cross her boundaries’ (Abram 2012). Still according to him, this feature is important because he has his ‘own fetishes that other types of porn do not cater to, and performers on Streamate often are happy to oblige’, so for him adult live cams is like ‘getting to direct their own porn’ (Abram 2012).

Hence, performers claim that customers come to them because they prefer a more personalised experience than porn: their customised performances are seen as personal and unique. Customers also acknowledge that what makes adult live cams distinctive is their interactivity, which results in a ‘more humanized, more personal form of porn’ (John 2014). By the same token, performer Catherine (2014) affirms that adult live cams provide what ‘footages can never provide, what is the most essential aspect of their shows: the personalised human interaction that differentiates’ this kind of pornography from others. Catherine’s account indicates that adult live cams are more than images and representations, as they are also comprised of acts and relations.

To better grasp the meaning of the term interactive pornography, one can analyse its constituent words. First, although the concept of pornography is flexible and varies according to culture and through time, two characteristics are often consistently associated with it: its relation to sexually explicit acts and its mediated nature. In terms of sexual acts, the mere depiction is not sufficient to categorise it as pornographic: sexually
explicit images can exist in a variety of contexts, from artful representations to biological sketches. Hence, the purpose of the depiction has to be taken into account, and in pornography, it is generally the elicitation of sexual arousal (Williams 1991: 4-5). As a depiction, pornography is based on ‘substitute imagery; insofar as painted or carved bodies serve the purposes of the real thing in absentia’ (Gowans 1980: 141). As the representation of something absent, pornography is presented according to codes and ‘underpinned by the affordances and specificities of both media technology and genre’ (Paasonen 2011a: 244). Hence, technological developments impact not only the pornographic content itself, but also on how it is perceived, produced, and consumed. For instance, Tang (1999: 167) points out that pornography was becoming ‘more democratic in print, more real in photography, more private in video’, and online pornography ‘more diverse’, combining ‘media consumption with interpersonal interaction’. Ultimately, people are now directly engaged in mediated exchanges of information, feelings, and meanings that produce the pornography they consume.

In recent decades, developments in information and communication technologies (ICT) have created new channels for users to interact with pornographic content. For instance, early forms of interactive pornography were considered ‘interactive' because they allowed users to choose different stories and scenarios provided by the system; hence, interaction was between users and a system of communication that allowed users to affect the information delivered. More recent advancements in ICTs, however, have enabled user-user interactions with the goal of producing pornographic content. In this sense, interactivity can be perceived as more than a two-way exchange, but rather a relationship in which one utterance becomes a context for another. Along these lines, Rafaeli defines interactivity as ‘an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions' (1988: 111). This is especially relevant within the context of adult live cams, where interactions among users have the potential to create recurrent relationships.

Performers acknowledge the difference between the different kinds of interaction mentioned above, and they believe customers are not only seeking a two-way exchange, because if that was the case, they could visit free websites where ‘performers’ are virtual conversation agents powered by artificial intelligence – usually called chatter-bots.
Performer Antonia (2014) argues that ‘customers fell ‘closer’ when interacting with real adult live cam performers, since they can see them smile back at them, ask them questions or advice, as well as talk dirty: in sum, they can interact in whatever way customers want. Another performer even tried a website with an adult live cam chatter-bot, and explained her experience: ‘I asked the chatter-bot to talk to me, but it kept asking me to talk dirty: we just went around in circles. If I were a horny user, I would have left the chat more frustrated than I was before when I got there’ (Olivia 2014). On the other hand, interaction with real performers is what performer Leah (2014) describes as interacting with ‘living creatures with ideas, preferences and opinions’ that not necessarily coincide with customers’ own: what is not a bad thing’ in her point of view. These ideas, preferences and opinions are often based on customers and performers identities, which are called upon when they interact and serve as basis for their relationships.

Here identity is defined as the sense of who a person is, both in terms of how they identify themselves and how they are identified by others. I consider this process as intersubjective, that is, identity is to be understood as a social phenomenon, produced and interpreted by people through discourse, embodied interaction and other systems of meaning-making. In this sense I start from the premise that ‘an individual's self-consciousness never exists in isolation [...] it always exists in relationship to an “other” or “others” who serve to validate its existence’ (Hall 2004: 51). Hence, although identities give individuals a sense of unity, they are a work-in-progress: they are formed through discursive interactions, negotiated, as well as being sustained and recreated through communication with others. Identities are thus socially constructed as the individual negotiates affiliation with and/or disassociation from particular groups in the process of constructing both their individual and their social self. This discursive perspective is intrinsically related to postmodern accounts of identity as a fragmented, contingent, and sometimes ambivalent entity (Bauman & Vecchi 2004). In this sense, interactive pornography is one of many sites where individuals negotiate and (re)create their identities through an ongoing fluid mediated process.

The identities (re)constructed in interactive pornography are not only enabled by technological resources, but they are also activated in particular contexts and enacted in certain ways. It means, they are interwoven with social and cultural practices in which
individuals are inserted. In the case of adult live cams, this particular context is of a global, post-industrial economy centred on new media. While globalisation stretches transnational social interactions and increase the intensity of exchanges (Held et al 1999), this process of extensification and intensification also is echoed in economic activities. Along these lines, commercial interactive pornography such as adult live cams is also characterised by the extensification of work, that is, the distribution or exportation of work across different spaces/scales and times (Sayer & Walker 1992); and by the intensification of work, as there is an increase in time and/or workload within a given job. In this context, ‘social relations, communication systems, information, and affective networks’ (Hardt & Negri 2001: 258) become central to the business. My argument in this thesis is that adult live cams are part of a global market in which identities are both productive as well as the product that is consumed. Along these lines, performers’ identities aim to create affective networks that facilitate the production and reproduction of content.

1.3 Case study and methodological considerations

In order to answer my research questions and understand the formation of particular identities in sexual affective networks based on adult live cam interactions, I chose the website YPMate as a case study. The initial impression of YPMate’s home page was one of entering a peepshow booth: the black background contrasts with colourful (but static) thumbnail images of performers (Figure 1). Although pornographic categories are displayed on the left and a search box at the top, these portraits fill most of the page, positioned centrally to catch the visitor’s eye.

On their ‘About Us’ page, YPMate is described as a ‘live video chat site, where you can chat with amateur performers or real live porn stars while watching them on webcam’. Further descriptions emphasise that ‘the video chat on YPMate is live – you chat live with the performer and direct the show!’ (YPMate 2015). The website profiles a sizable pool of performers of all kinds, who broadcast from studios or their homes around the world. The number of performers available on the website is not fixed. During this research, in fact, it varied from around 30,000 in 2012 to 60,000 in 2014. Although most were solo performers, there are also couples and group chat rooms.
Due to the number of performers and variety of performance types available, the website offers different search engines; for instance, there is a search box where users can type any term, from performers’ nicknames to specific characteristics and key words. If no exact match can be found, the website suggests the closest alternatives. There is also an advanced search function that enables users to refine their search by including multiple characteristics wanted in a performer in a single search. Users can also select from an extensive list of categories to browse for a performer who caters to particular interests. The categories correlate with mainstream pornographic subgenres, usually divided by: physical characteristics, like blonde and big tits; fetish, with categories such as feet and smoking; and sexual orientation. Both the categories and search engines use the information available in performers’ profiles, such as their age, country, weight, kinky attributes, as well as tags attributed by users.

Upon finding a performer they like, users can click on the person’s thumbnails to be redirected to a chat room, where the performer’s video stream is displayed on the left and a large chat box on the right that displays the conversation, pulling text that the user types into a small box at the bottom of the screen as well as the performer’s replies. Some performers have a microphone set up for audio, so they can talk directly to users. Users can also participate in voice-to-voice and cam-to-cam interactions with performers, but
these options are available only under specific conditions: users must be in a paid, exclusive, one-on-one chat session with the performer. Once in the performer’s guest chat room, users negotiate with performers regarding prices, shows, and the use of media. Users who want to direct a sexual show and/or interact with performers in a more exclusive way have to sign up as members and have their credit card information stored by the website. YPMate does not charge a monthly or recurring membership fee, but once users become members, they can access different kinds of chats for a fee, often per-minute. In YPMate’s words, the website is ‘absolutely free and you only pay if you find something worth explicitly paying for’ (YPMate 2015). The price of chats varies according to modality and performer, but it is always stated before a member clicks to pay for and enter the chat.

The YPMate website was chosen as a case study because of its commercial appeal and popularity, ensured by the vast network to which the website belongs. YPMate is linked to YouPorn, one of the most famous adult tube sites (or, a porn site with an interface similar to the YouTube model, with user-uploaded videos, a system of likes/dislikes, number of views, and comment functionality). As a consequence, most users’ visits to YPMate immediately follow their access of YouPorn. However, YPMate is also a white-label website, meaning that it is not actually operated by the brand owner. In the case of YPMate, the actual live webcam technology offered is originally housed at Streamate.com. The central company, Streamate, handles performer-related issues, payment processing, technology, and other aspects of the business: YPMate merely markets the Streamate website in exchange for 30% of commissions from the money spent by customers.

Streamate, created in 2003, is one of the largest and oldest adult webcam websites that hosts thousands of other white-label websites similar to YPMate, which was founded in 2011. In 2012, rumours appeared that a giant adult-industry corporation called MindGeek had bought Streamate. Although the information cannot be confirmed, these two companies were already working together in a way to connect free and paid sites, adult live cams and adult tube websites, considerably enlarging the network and creating business rings within the larger platform. In 2013, Streamate was ranked at number 21 (and YPMate at 1,000) on a list of the most visited adult websites according to Alexa.
traffic rankings (Alexa 2013). Since then, however, both websites have dropped in this ranking, a fact that may or may not have affected Streamate’s business due to its vast ownership of white-labels, which guarantee great user traffic to this adult webcam platform.

In order to understand adult live cams and answer the proposed research questions, this thesis initially intended to interview performers, agents of the industry, and customers. I invited individuals to take part in interviews by posting an interview call (Appendix 1) and by sending messages to people’s private inboxes on two websites. One of the websites was the online forum gofuckyourself.com, which aims at discussing online adult business; the other was a well-known online forum for adult live cams performers, whose name it will remain undisclosed in order to protect performers’ identities. However, the messages elicited no replies and, thus, no interviews were conducted. The opposition to participating in research seems to be a reaction to alien ‘intrusion’ on the website. Other calls for interviews posted on the performers’ forum were also ignored or regarded with suspicion. The reply of performer Rebecca (2012) to another researcher interview call (not mine) encapsulates the general perception of performers to such requests:

It does not work to be deceptive and spam: spamming in particular does not work if you are trying to interview performers. We are always online and get spammed all the time, and deal with people curious about adult live cams all of the time. Soliciting performers to chitchat with you via Skype and Twitter to help you for no remuneration basically will not produce a large volume of quality results. Be innovative if you want responses.

Rebecca raises a key reason performers do not collaborate with researchers: the lack of financial compensation. Performers rightfully valorise their time and knowledge, and Patricia (2013) is even more emphatic to defend that: ‘I hate people wanting to suck time out of me for personal gain. I hate takers who have nothing to offer. I encounter the "college" people a couple every month asking for help on papers and need interview. No one ever wants to pay’. It is also important to note that, as a result of the increased
number of people researching the topic, performers’ general attitude toward researchers has changed over time: posts from before 2008, for instance, show a greater willingness to cooperate with interviewers, even for free. Moreover, the highly competitive market of adult live cams might also have impacted their perception and value of their time.

On the other hand, performers often engage in online polls created and posted by researchers; in fact, they not only engage with the poll but also often criticise the way it was made and comment on the results. Despite the usefulness of polls for certain research questions, I chose not to use this method and instead focused on performers’ posted questions and answers on the forum, as discussed below. This decision was based on the fact that polls can not only be very restrictive but also more easily subjected to bias, offering a limited number of questions and answers and creating bias due to the wording of questions and limited response options. Moreover, analysing the unprompted questions and answers performers post on the forums is more revealing of their own perspectives and experiences.

So, although performers do not usually engage in answering specific questions from researchers, in a post on one of the forums, for example, performer Margaret (2008) advised a researcher who was trying to interview performers to use material already available on the website to answer her questions: ‘you will find many different and in-depth answers to these questions by reading through this site. Good luck with your paper and happy reading!’ However, on the forum, researchers are also warned that ‘many people visit the site looking to do research for books, college papers, studies, etc. Feel free to perform some research on the site and use the search function; but be aware that performers do not always welcome the idea of being research subjects. Just a heads up’ (Joan 2009). Hence, following performers’ advice and to work around the lack of interviews, additional data was drawn from public posts on the aforementioned forums.

I acknowledge the sensitivity regarding the ethical use of material1 from online forums and websites, since the Internet is configured as a semi-public environment where users may not intend to have their messages broadcast to a wide audience. However, as described, in the performers’ forum, most of them are aware that a public audience, inclusive of researchers, reads their messages. Moreover, around 2011 performers started

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1 My academic supervisors monitored the research progress in monthly supervisory meetings and via email
creating private groups within the forum, which can only be accessed by verified performers. This indicates that most performers are aware of a public/private division in terms of the readership for their posts. The same applies to areas within the YPMate website, where paid areas are only accessed by members for a fee.

However, it is important to note that the rules of these forums are constantly being revised, and that material that could be accessed during this research might not be accessible in the future. In fact, during this research the divisions of private and public changed in the forum administrated by performers. The most significant change took place after data was collected and the thesis written: performers kept the posts accessible to the public, but advised they were meant for performers only. Hence, the material gathered in what were previously public parts of that website was subjected to further ethical concerns. To address these concerns and due to the sensitivity of the topic, the name of the adult live cams performers’ forum will not be disclosed, and performers’ nicknames were altered in order to preserve their identities. As an additional precautions, when quoting message board content, I have deliberately edited the text for grammar or spelling without altering the meaning, with the intent to make it harder for performers to be tracked down.

Moreover, I would like to emphasise that participants of these forums provide a wealth of insight into adult live cam practices and experiences, as well as glimpses of how they are perceived by others. By analysing their texts, I followed Smith and Attwood (2014:15) advice to not immediately assume that the individuals who make up pornographic workforces are victims or have a false consciousness, but instead I acknowledge performers agency and the ways they work out and negotiate the industry. And in fact, performers and industry agents alike have first-hand insight into the workings of the system; performers, in particular, show great control over their affairs, as they are articulated and inventive in the ways they employ a variety of strategies in order to (re)create their work conditions. Their information exchange is not only crucial to supporting each other, but also a great contribution toward debunking stereotypes related to the nature of adult live cams.

However, it is difficult to do justice to the richness of observations present on these forums: especially given the diversity and participative structure of these spaces.
Here I acknowledge the value of their collective wisdom, as these participants’ critical thinking and knowledge shed light on complex structures from within the interactive pornography genre of adult live web cams. Hence, these data were crucial to grasping a more qualitative perspective, such as specific experiences and feelings regarding interactions on adult live cam websites.

Additional data related to the companies involved in the case study (Mindgeek, YPMate and Streamate) were also taken either from the aforementioned online forums or from the companies’ websites themselves. Since Streamate is the website responsible for administrating YPMate’s business, in this thesis, data related to the business such as performers’ manuals, contracts and advertisement are drawn from the Streamate website. These data were of particular importance in the analysis of the website architectures and business structure. In this sense, I followed Voss’ critics regarding the widespread use of secondary data about the industry (Voss 2015), and tried to gather empirical material to further the wider field of pornography research. Unfortunately, limitations in studying the adult live cam industry are many, the main being the fact that the business is focused on a decentralised global structure where industry agents are widespread over the globe often working isolated in their homes.

In addition, ethnographic non-participant observation was undertaken in the free/public areas of YPMate, to examine interactions between performers and users. I engaged with YPMate and the aforementioned forums from the perspective of a ‘lurker’ (a member of an online community who observes but does not actively participate), rather than as an insider or a community member. This approach was favoured especially because of the particularities of adult live cams: as content is produced in the interaction with performers, participatory observation would have given different analytical insights into the sites discussed, but incur in severe bias. By focusing on openly accessible content, I could mirror the way in which most casual users access this kind of online pornography.

Quantitative data were also collected from the public profile pages of all YPMate performers on the site in 2014 (around 60,000). The aim was to analyse the information available, such as gender, sexual orientation, and locality, and map the demographics of YPMate. It is important to note, however, that the categories I used mirror those
established by the website and chosen by performers according to their personal preference. Comments and tags created by customers were also analysed, because this information helps to reveal how performers are perceived. I gathered these data using Nvivo (Appendix 2). The relatively large sampling, which enables quantitative analysis, aims to solve the problems of focus and representativeness, through the general trends and conventions of the website that begin to appear.

1.4 Contents and structure of the thesis

This thesis is comprised of a review of existing literature on pornography studies, with a special focus on online pornography, as well as an empirical case study that aims to develop answers to the research questions. Each chapter of my thesis will be discussed in this section regarding its content and location within the greater thesis. First, in order to understand the creation of identities in adult live cam, it is necessary to situate these cams in a broader context of cultural and media evolution; thus, chapter one features a study of the literature on porn studies and new media in an effort to introduce the reader to the key ideas and issues that have been developed in relevant fields, each relating to the production and consumption of online pornography. While this review is in no way exhaustive, it provides a perspective on the way online pornography has been framed in academic discussions that will guide the context of my adult live cam analysis. The central argument put forward in this chapter is that new forms of pornography have emerged due to shifts in digital media, global order, and advanced capitalism, and adult live cams are an emblematic case of this new kind of pornography, existing at the intersection of global digital market forces.

Having established the contextual background for my case study and positioning it within a larger research landscape, chapter two analyses how adult live cams’ content is produced through communicative interactions and cooperation among participants. Here I use the website YPMate as my case study to examine how participants discursively negotiate interactions in relation to commoditised virtual spaces and media usage. Moreover, this chapter reinforces the role of communication as a means for production, and demonstrates how communication itself becomes commoditised. To address further the research question focused on identities, I collected global data from performers’
profiles during 2013 and present the results and analysis in chapter three. This analysis addresses the ways in which performers manipulate their identity to accommodate their personal preferences as well as customers’ tastes. Although such identities show little deviance from well-known pornographic representations, they illustrate global market hierarchies and how they influence the creation of identities.

As adult live cams exist within global economic exchanges that impact the creation of participants’ identities, chapter four aims to understand the economic aspects of the business. To do so, the structure of the industry behind YPMate is discussed, emphasising its relationship with both performers and customers. First, the ways in which online companies like YPMate have shifted from content production to content management are discussed. Along these lines, the company’s main activity rests in attracting performers and potential customers to participate on the website. Here, YPMate’s network and marketing mechanisms are analysed to show how particular identities are selected and reinforced in an effort to create an affective network that can be used in further content production.

In chapter five, I analyse performers’ intimate labour, which aims to create personal connections with users so that they become regular customers. These connections are shaped by intensified displays of intimacy — with performers’ personalities playing a central role — and extensification, where adult live cam activities are extended to a greater pool of physically dispersed individuals, easing at the same time both connection and disconnection between them. Finally, in the final remarks I conclude this thesis by summarizing the preceding chapters and discussing the resulting theoretical corollary from a comparative assessment of the outcomes of the YPMate analysis from the perspectives of new media interaction, global identities, and commerce. I close this thesis by making recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER ONE

CONNECTING THROUGH PORNOGRAPHY IN NEW MEDIA

In late modern societies, sexual and affective relationships have generally become increasingly individual centred and reflexive as individuals have gained more control over their lives and social connections. Authors such as Bauman (1998b) have noted the detachment of such relationships from traditional structures such as long-term relational commitments and reproduction. One consequence is that intimate relationships have become ‘democratised’, and their roots are increasingly built on bonds of trust and emotional communication (Giddens 1991). Given the increasingly important role of communication in affective relationships, developments in information and communication technologies have helped to integrate people on a large scale and increase the exchange of information among them. Hence, relationships have also become more electronically mediated, with the Internet playing an important role in the decentralisation and heterogenisation of the participants involved (McNair 2002; Zelizer 2005). This means that, today, larger and more diverse groups of people are interconnected electronically despite being physically distant from one another. Such decentralisation and heterogeneity are also consistent with the need for autonomous, mobile individuals in postmodern economic life (Bernstein 2007:175). The enlargement of the global market of transnational commodity culture has also translated into the increasing commodification and commercialisation of sex and intimacy (Attwood 2009; Bernstein 2007; McNair 2002; Paasonen 2010). In this way, the boundaries between intimacy and commerce are reworked, affecting the meaning of commercial sex in emotional terms (Bernstein 2007:69) as well as economic and sociocultural ones. However, according to Hemmings (2005:550), scholars investigating how sex and intimacy intertwine have tended to emphasise ‘the unexpected, the singular, or indeed the quirky, over the generally applicable, where the latter becomes associated with the pessimism of social determinist perspectives, and the former with the hope of freedom from social constraints’. As such, few scholars have sought to investigate the ‘predictable’ sphere of mainstream sexual exchange in the form of commercial pornography online.
When people engage in visual sexual exchanges online, their images take the form of representations of sexual acts. Although the term is not uncontested and does not denote a fixed category, such representations can be referred to as ‘pornography’: they portray a sexual subject presented in any of a variety of media with the aim of sexual arousal. The development, exchange, and circulation of these sexually explicit materials—the so-called pornosphere (McNair 2002:383)—has accompanied broader cultural changes and spurred new ones. One of the most significant changes relates to developments in information and communication technologies which have not only affected the distribution of pornographic content and allowed easier access to it but also altered the way people produce and consume it. For instance, in the context of new media there has been a dissemination of user-generated pornography along with the emergence of platforms created for this purpose. Some platforms also enable users to interact live with each other to produce content, as is the case with adult live cams. As a result, users can not only ‘act out unscripted roles and personal aesthetics’ (Jacob 2007:46) but also become personally invested in the process of creating and developing interpersonal relationships among themselves. However, the potential and limitations of such pornography both come into question when the online adult industry incorporates such relations into its productive chain by commodifying the production and consumption of interactive pornographic content. Indeed, some of these interactions are organised and take place within websites and networks that belong to companies aiming to make a profit.

As mentioned above, the relations of production and consumption in interactive pornography create interpersonal relationships among users, within which sex and intimacy can potentially intertwine; this is a new paradigm pornography researchers are currently trying to investigate (Attwood 2011:18). My study aims to shed light on this subject by posing and answering new questions regarding the commodification of these new kinds of online personal connections. In this regard, adult live cams present an especially interesting case since the genre collapses image and act (Kibby & Costello 2001), raising several questions regarding their placement on the spectrum of adult entertainment. As a mediated genre involving representations and images of sexual acts, adult live cams share a number of similarities with modern pornography, such as the
medium of distribution. However, the style of production via live communication sets adult live cams apart from other pornographic materials in that personal connections can be formed between performers and customers (Larson 2004). Beyond the sexual aspect, such personal contact leads some performers to claim that their services also include providing counselling along with more intimate, personal experiences, which involve connecting with customers. The complexity involved in defining adult live cams as a genre and an interactive practice clearly reflects the multifaceted nature of this type of pornography, which combines elements from a range of adult entertainment forms to provide a holistic service.

2.1 Transforming connections

A consequence of individualist and reflexive ways of living is that relationships have become more fluid and fragmentary, no longer based on traditional forms that referred to ‘domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation’ (Berlant & Warner 1998:558). As traditional structures cease to be the main stabilisers of relationships, relations become characterised by insecurity, frailty, and disconnection, whereby ‘connections are entered on demand, and can be broken’ just as easily (Bauman 2013:xii). Bauman uses the term ‘liquid love’ to emphasise the fluidity of such relations. Similarly, Giddens (1992) proposed the concept of ‘pure relationships’ to describe relationships in which external criteria have been dissolved. These pure relationships exist solely for themselves, and people’s actions within them are oriented toward achieving personal satisfaction. They are negotiated consensually in the moment among those involved and are sustained through the mutual self-disclosure and appreciation of the participants (Giddens 1992:6). Hence, the dynamics of pure relationships are ‘reflexively organized, in an open fashion, and on a continuous basis’ (Giddens 1991:91). Importantly, Giddens (2013) acknowledges that pure relationships are an ‘ideal type’ and that tradition and consideration for the feelings of others still influence everyday life. While recognising past structures as still extant and influential, Giddens (1991) appears to see pure relationships as potentially emancipatory in a way that can strengthen relationships, assuming the freedom to opt out will lead to more egalitarian relations. In contrast, Bauman (2013) maintains that because of the ease of opting out, intimate
partnerships become more vulnerable. However, such vulnerability is not equal for every person/group; for instance, Bauman argues that the global elite is more emancipated and has more resources for dealing with broken bonds, and can therefore ‘cut their losses’ without major consequences. Thus, Bauman emphasises that freedom of choice and its consequences are not equally distributed in society: people have different resources available to them for coping with the termination of relationships.

Regardless, within this context of fluid relationships, sex and sexuality become central to social relations: freed from the needs of reproduction and pursued for its own sake, sexuality becomes plastic (Giddens 1992:2). According to Giddens, ‘plastic sexuality’ is a state in which notions of sex are centred on the individual and the act itself, rather than whatever else such contact might be able to express. As sexuality disengages from biology and traditional social norms, it becomes more permissive, shaped according to individual needs and desires. In this context, Attwood (2006:80) suggests that sex is increasingly seen as a form of play, and sexual encounters have been reconfigured ‘as a highly individualized form of hedonism, which is pursued through episodic and uncommitted encounters and forms of auto-eroticism’. Further, the separation of sex from traditional structures has made it a vehicle for self-expression and self-actualisation. Accordingly, the expression of plastic sexuality increasingly varies from one person to another, in ways connected to individual identities, which both shape and are shaped by it. Thus, sexuality has increasingly become a matter of identity: it informs who people are and who they wish to be, implying the possibility of greater freedom as individuals and couples increasingly negotiate their identities and relationships. Though increasingly individualised, sexuality has also moved from the private arena into more public spaces, a shift conventionally called the ‘sexualisation of culture’ (McNair 2002). This movement is enhanced by changes in media communication, which have paid increasing attention to sexual behaviours and appearances.

Attwood (2014:xxii) argues that sexualisation and changes in the meanings of sex are likely to accelerate given the increasing number of outlets for sexual expression—especially in terms of media communication. Attwood draws on Plummer’s (1995:137) notion that sexuality has become more dependent on ‘borrowings from the mass media’ and is more likely to occur in or through various media or communication forms. In other
words, these media and communication forms are vectors for the (re)production of pure relationships, as communication has a central role in the success of these relationships. Such a role emerges as a result of the importance of communication in achieving the main goal of pure relationships—namely, intimacy created and sustained through communication and mutual self-disclosure. The popularity of social media, along with its technological affordances, influences the pursuit of pure relationships since it encourages self-disclosure while also allowing a sense of control over communication. Moreover, as Madianou and Miller (2013) suggest, the poly-mediated context of proliferated communication opportunities in social media presents new ways to evoke impressions of pure relationships, especially in a context involving the extensification and geographical dispersion of networks. The shift toward more interactive and reciprocal media reflects the fact that mediated intimacies also entail other moral questions associated with choosing and using media to conduct relationships, - as in the case of infidelity online (Gershon 2010; Madianou & Miller 2013).

Changes in intimacy and interpersonal relationships both follow and are followed by new trends in economic behaviour. With the transition from manufacturing-based economies to service-sector economies, emotional behaviour has become central to economies (Illouz 2007). In advanced capitalist society, modifications in consumption and production have commodified the social patterns of human interaction into object-like relations. According to Zelizer, in commercial exchanges, intimacy becomes a factor in relations that include ‘a set of distinctive understandings and practices that operate within a boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation’ (2005:35). That said, scholarly opinion on this subject is far from unanimous. Given his egalitarian perception of intimacy in pure relationships, Giddens (1992) argues that intimacy transcends economic relations. Other theorists, however, maintain that relations involving intimacy are not necessarily insulated from economics, and the perception of exclusive spheres separating them should be considered false, a myth of ‘hostile spheres’ (Zelizer 2005). Hence, studies of sexuality and commodification, such as Bernstein’s (2007), have argued that while intimacy does not play a central role in every commercial encounter, it is a key
component of many. Bernstein goes further, arguing that this is part of a ‘shift from a relational to a recreational model of sexual behaviour, a reconfiguration of erotic life in which the pursuit of sexual intimacy is not hindered but facilitated by its location in the marketplace’ (2001:397). Likewise, Attwood (2006:13) maintains that, in the context of liquid love and plastic sexuality, the postmodern individual sees sex through a kind of ‘consumer sensibility’. Thus, the commodification of intimacy and sexuality produces its own contradictions and ambiguities.

2.2 Emotion in sex work and erotic performance

The umbrella term ‘sex industry’ can denote several activities, including performances such as strip shows and exotic dancing, escort services, Internet and telephone sex, pornography, massage parlours, and sex shops and peep shows (Weitzer 2009b). In the context of late capitalism, where personal relationships have been reorganised in terms of emotional needs (Giddens 1991), the merging of the personal and the economic has profoundly affected the dynamics of these commercial sexual activities. A substantial body of work has already investigated key aspects such as the relations between types of spaces, labour, forms of self-presentation and relationships, and the evolving working conditions that have emerged in various sex venues (work and entertainment) as a result of developments in regulation, technology, and labour conditions.

First, as a result of the abovementioned changes in late capitalism, sex is increasingly framed as a ‘recreational’ activity, better matching the need for autonomous, mobile individuals in contemporary life (Bauman 2013; Bernstein 2007:175). This new framing has led to the normalisation and growth of the sex industry (Bernstein 2007; Brents et al. 2010; Seidman 1991; Zelizer 2005). With such growth, the number of individuals participating in the sex industry grows as well, especially as the shame previously associated with such participation decreases (Bernstein 2007; Brents & Sanders 2010). In fact, participation in the industry is now more likely to be seen as an act of consumption rather than deviant behaviour (Bernstein 2007:401). Accordingly, as Bernstein (2007:75) argues, a large number of white and relatively class-privileged individuals have entered the sex industry.
Not only has the sex industry expanded but the spatial configurations where it takes place have changed as well. Bernstein (2007) notes that with the gentrification of cities, there has been a decline in streetwalking as a commercial practice and a ‘relocation of sexual labour to indoor venues’, such as licensed saunas, brothels, escort agencies, and private/rented homes (Bernstein 2007:102). This view is corroborated by Sanders (2005), who claims that most sex workers in Britain now work in indoor spaces. The growth of indoor sexual commerce has also affected regulations and work conditions since indoor sex workers usually have more control over their work, such as the ability to set their own prices and select clients, thus decreasing the chances of victimisation (Weitzer 2009b: 3). Moreover, indoor services often cost more, tending to attract clientele from the middle and upper classes (Lever & Dolnick 2000).

With the privatisation of commercial sexual activities, the lines between public and private have become blurred as well since the economic exchanges, which were mainly public in the past, have shifted to the private realm. Further, more private venues are connected with more intimate encounters. In this regard, studies have noted similarities between the sex industry and the traditional service industry, especially in the performance of emotional labour (Brewis & Linstead 2000; Sanders 2005). As in many service professions, strip club dancers perform emotional labour to build and maintain a regular clientele, creating a commodified emotional intimacy (Frank 1998; Egan 2005). Similarly, researchers have found that many indoor sex workers have a clientele who demand more emotional, elaborate, or kinky services (Bernstein 2007; Weitzer 2009b). In other words, intimacy and economy coexist, are interconnected, and mutually facilitate each other in contemporary society (Cabezas 2009; Sanders 2008).

As far as clients are concerned, some aim to purchase something beyond sexual arousal: they seek sexual experience within an authentic and momentary emotional engagement that does not intrude on other aspects of their lives. Moreover, some clients seek the same things they would expect in a relationship but bounded by payment. According to Bernstein (2007:402), these exchanges are characterised by a ‘bounded authenticity’, where authentic intimacy is constrained by time and business exchange.

There is evidence that emotional work is performed in the sex industry as a whole to manage sexual dynamics, workers’ expectations, and workers’ identities in the
workplace (Sanders 2005). Previous research on identity and self-presentation in the workplace has suggested that sex workers performing emotional labour often draw upon multiple identities; this means that part of their emotion-management strategy is their identity work. There are several reasons why they manage their identities in this way: to deal with the stigmatisation of sex work (Sanders 2005), to protect their ‘real’ identities (Barton 2007), or to avoid emotional attachment to long-term customers (Frank 1998).

These identities also serve as marketable characters who can appeal and adapt to the sexual expectations and cultural ideals of clients (Barton 2007). Hence, fabricated identities can also be seen as a calculated strategy for ‘doing gender’ (Tyler & Abbott 1998:435) and manipulating clients’ desires. However, these identities also form the basis for the relationship between client and worker, and can help workers maximise their earnings (Sanders 2005). Although identity work is a strategy used by sex workers, incorporating aspects of their personality into their work identity can also help to create an ‘authentic performance’ that retains clients and achieves the goal of financial gain. Besides, retaining some sense of everyday characteristics might also help prevent alienation in the workplace (Frank 1998:193).

The development of new information technologies has also intensified the privatisation of sexual commercial consumption. Increasingly, many ‘commercial sex industry’ activities that would have previously taken place face to face are now globalised and ‘distanced’ via electronic media. Hence, emotional labour and the creation of intimacy are further complicated by the global traffic of ideas and practices. The Internet, for example, enables different forms of global engagement, with implications for the expression, regulation, and labour conditions of new kinds of intimacy (Penttinen 2007). Moreover, new technologies have enabled the sex industry to expand beyond national boarders, fuelling the growth and diversification of sexual labour.

2.3 Porn studies

Partly because of the resistance to analysing intimacy within markets, commercial pornography has always been linked to sex, and porn studies have only recently begun to explore its connections with intimacy. This new approach is especially relevant in a context where pornography is inserted in online environments, in which it becomes
increasingly interactive. Moreover, the new context where pornography is inserted can be associated with changes in the multiple meanings and constantly shifting boundaries of pornography itself (Hunt 1993:13). Despite the word’s Greek etymology—originally meaning the depiction in writing or images of prostitutes—it does not represent a fixed category and has changed over time. The contingent nature of pornography has led authors such as Kendrick (1987:31) to claim that it is an ‘argument and not a thing’—an argument with manifold and maddening ambivalences. According to Hunt (1993), the modern meaning of the term only developed in the nineteenth century, as the balance between private and public changed and pornography emerged as a distinct concern and genre of representation. One factor that influenced this shift was the emergence of new printing methods, which ‘allowed for the commercial mass production of pornographic texts’ (McNair 2002:212).

However, it was during the second half of the twentieth century that the pornography industry really started to thrive. This was due to key factors such as difficulties enforcing censorship and controlling pornographic material, the impact of the sexual revolution and the evolution of liberal attitudes toward pornography, and technological developments such as VHS. Studies of pornography gained special notoriety during the late 1970s and early 1980s with the so-called sex wars (Duggan 1995). The sex wars were rooted in polarised debates between anti-porn feminists, such as Dworkin (1987) and MacKinnon (1987), and sex-positive feminist groups (Rubin 1984; Willis 1981) who clashed over various issues. Anti-porn feminists oppose(d) pornography on the grounds that it is harmful to women: not only are women exploited in its production but its consumption also reinforces sexist attitudes. Sex-positive feminists, meanwhile, dispute such claims, defending pornography from a free-speech perspective and on the grounds that pornography can also be liberating. Although this debate still influences scholarship, some have tried to distance themselves from the historical labels. As a result, a series of publications emerged in the late 1980s, marking the beginning of a new field of research: porn studies.

Books like Walter Kendrick’s *The Secret Museum* (1987) and Linda Williams’s *Hard Core* (1999) adopted a new approach to pornography research that distanced itself from previous polarising discussions about pornography’s harmfulness. According to
Williams, the intention was to move beyond the ‘agonizing over sexual politics that characterized an earlier era in the study of pornography’ toward an understanding of the ‘veritable explosion of sexually explicit material’ since ‘still and moving-image pornographies have become fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture’ (1999:1). Today, porn studies scholars usually do not dwell on whether pornography ‘should’ or ‘should not’ exist: they regard it as a given cultural phenomenon and focus on analysing its content (Attwood 2002; Kirkham & Skeggs 1996; Williams 1999:1). In this sense, even the meaning of the word ‘pornography’ has become more aligned with the broader processes of popular culture and is increasingly defined by ‘what people refer to as pornographic in everyday life’ (Williams 1999:32).

In methodological terms, Attwood (2012:6) notes that this new approach aims at more nuanced readings of pornographic texts and images, with early studies emphasising the history of pornography, its textual and generic characteristics, its significance for different groups, and its relation to other media genres. Although this approach to pornography has been productive, Boyle (2006:6) criticises its tendency to emphasise pornographic representations and how bodies are mediated over ‘pornographic action’ and the material practices involved in production. For Boyle, trying to understand pornography divorced from its production, distribution, and consumption practices will only provide a partial account of the phenomenon.

According to Attwood (2011:14), the originality of porn studies is also partly related to its multidisciplinary framework. Researchers in this field have been associated with social sciences and cultural studies and, more recently, new media studies, which focuses on new digital environments, with several works investigating the production of cultural content online. Online environments are usually complex and defy traditional ways of thinking about communication and the production of cultural content. Today, widespread Internet use has contributed to the development of amateur and user-produced pornography, which has diversified pornographic imagery and reinscribed private and public boundaries (Paasonen 2010a). Further, online pornography has become more than an amorphous bundle of sex scenes, as modes of sharing pornographic images are being re-appropriated by users in creative ways (Jacobs 2007). These technologies have played a crucial role in the development of the exchange and circulation of sexually
explicit materials, which in turn have accompanied broader cultural changes and spurred new ones. The most significant change is the increasing presence of sexual themes and materials in the public sphere, as well as their greater availability to the public.

The emergence of pornography as its own field of study reflects a broader cultural shift that has transformed pornography from ‘ob/scene’ to ‘on/scene’. Williams (2004a:3) developed the ‘on/scene’ concept to describe the change by which ‘a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene’. Likewise, McNair (2002) argues that the ‘privatisation’ of the public sphere through the proliferation of sexual discourses is part of a wider set of cultural shifts concerning the ways body and identity are understood and experienced. For McNair, this new way is characterised by a ‘striptease culture’ focused on display, confession, and self-revelation, which is a manifestation of the ‘popular demand for access to and participation in sexual discourse’ (2002:87). The concept of striptease culture is intrinsically related to the idea of ‘confessional culture’ and the desire to uncover ‘truths’ about sexuality, a topic thoroughly analysed by Foucault in The History of Sexuality (1978). Hence, striptease culture can be thought of as the confession of bodies and sexuality to the public eye. As McNair (2002:98) points out, one consequence of striptease culture is the emergence of new forms of public intimacy. This public intimacy highlights the ambivalences resulting from the ways in which boundaries between public and private are reworked: intimacy, traditionally consigned to the private sphere, now assumes public forms. Likewise, as pornography becomes more public, its meaning is also altered, attaining a broader significance ‘as entertainment/infotainment, as therapy, as a hobby, as a life-style good, as an art form’ (Cronin & Davenport 2001:35). With the boundaries between what is and is not pornographic becoming increasingly fluid, there is room to question the basic utility and applicability of the concept (Attwood 2002).

The discussion of pornography’s infiltration into public spaces has gained momentum with new developments in media and the dissemination of pornographic content online. The creation of the World Wide Web and the expansion of broadband capabilities have made pornographic content more accessible and affordable. Moreover, online media in general have played a major role in amplifying the distribution of
pornographic content to a wider range of audiences. Since they reach a mass audience and can be accessed by anyone in the network, online environments such as the Internet can be regarded as public spaces. However, these online spaces are still physically accessed by individuals from physically private locations, and even within cyberspace there are spaces that are considered private according to specific conventions that can vary depending on the people interacting and their degrees of mutual trust. This dual aspect of online spaces led Waskul and Douglas (1996:131) to argue that ‘online interaction is neither public nor private: rather, it is both’. For them, the Internet is ‘publicly - private’—where private subjects are shared with a controlled audience, as well as ‘privately public’, wherein content is shared widely but access to private information is limited. In this way, the Internet blurs traditional boundaries between interpersonal one-to-one models and one-to-all mass communication. Along these lines, Patterson (2004:120) argues that online media have positioned the production and consumption of pornography in a ‘private space within a public environment’.

Until recently, most discussions of online pornography have viewed it as simply increasing and extending the distribution of existing commercial pornography. Now, however, it is understood that new opportunities for sexual production and consumption are becoming increasingly common in online environments. These new opportunities exist within new trends in media based on technological and cultural developments that both enable and encourage users to network and interact, and to create and distribute their own content. The increasing inexpensiveness of do-it-yourself (DIY) technology allows most people to produce pornography if they wish—what Coopersmith (2006:10) terms the ‘democratization of porn’. Such democratisation has played a major role in catapulting the private sexual practices of ordinary people into the (semi-)public realm of the Internet (Barcan 2002). Since in a ‘striptease culture’ users are more inclined to display themselves in pornographic images, new ways of understanding and experiencing the body and identities have emerged (Jones & Mowlabocus 2009). Hence, within new online media cultures, users can produce and distribute their own pornographic content, contributing to the creation of a diverse range of representations of sexual practices. As part of this broader trend, in which media use becomes an interactive ‘creative activity’ (Kitzmann 2004:45), online pornography has become part of a wider repertoire of
interests and interactions that are simultaneously more public and more private than before. Although the uses of online porn are mainly private, the medium also enables new kinds of interactions, intimacies, and exchanges that are social in nature (Lillie 2002; Reading 2005). Moreover, because this pornographic content is produced online with the active participation of users, distinctions between sex as a set of practices and sex as a set of representations are breaking down (Attwood 2011). In this sense, the act of producing content becomes inseparable from the content itself, again raising questions about the basic nature of pornography.

Although mainstream commercial pornography is superficially challenged by alternative pornographies and representations online, Paasonen (2010a: 163) argues that they actually feed back into ‘the imageries of commercial pornography that they seem to subvert’. So, although DIY amateur pornography emerged outside the established industry, it has become ‘a healthy part of the pornography economy’ (Esch & Mayer 2007:104). This occurs as a result of the ongoing commodification of sex and intimacy, and the expansion of popular participation in sexual discourse is often located within commercial media environments. Many companies in the adult industry have assimilated DIY pornography ‘to the extent that it has become a contemporary commercial subgenre’ (O’Toole 1998:181). The industry has also found ways to encourage amateur production while profiting from it; for example, allowing users to identify and field-test new trends helps the industry to avoid incurring research and development expenses. This relation between commercial and amateur production creates a loop since the commodification of the intimate gives common people a platform for self-expression and participation in sexual discourse, answering their desire for confession (McNair 2002).

These changes in the distribution, production, and consumption of pornography online spur new forms of sexual interaction, content creation, and exchange. Moreover, these changes seem significant enough that some scholars argue for the need to detach, to some degree, analyses of digital practices from those characterising pornography in ‘traditional media’ (Jacobs 2007; Dery 2007; Paasonen 2011a). Several contemporary studies on pornography have investigated such changes (Waskul 2004; Ray 2007; Jacobs 2007), with the majority focusing on independent and alternative production by amateurs (Jacobs 2004; Barcan 2002; Messina 2006). In fact, Williams (2014:25) recently
commented that she was struck by how few studies ‘aimed at the mainstream commercial hard-core’ she had privileged in her books. Paasonen (2011b: 418) suggests that the prevalence of studies of amateur/independent pornography is attributable to its more attractive aesthetics, alternative economies, and departures from genre norms and conventions. Mainstream pornography is also neglected because of the polarised and politicised nature of the ‘porn debates’ within the ‘sex wars’, which have divided the discussion, forcing commentators to take up positions either ‘for’ or ‘against’; this continues to influence scholarship today. Echoing Williams’s concerns, Paasonen (2011b:418) warns that overlooking commercial porn and its role in the development of the Internet risks voluntary blindness regarding the important features of online economies and popular practices alike.

2.4 Producing pornography online

The ways in which people consume and produce pornography online are shaped not only by their broad social contexts but also by the available tools and the specific online cultures surrounding those tools. In this sense, some types of online pornography look different now from how it looked in its early stages decades ago, mostly because of broader developments in media. The fairly recent field of new media studies has aimed to understand these developments, especially concerning the tools, systems, practices, and routines that have evolved from the convergence of computer technology, telecommunications, and traditional media. One way to understand changes in media is to analyse how modes affect communication and social relationships as affordances and constraints (Kress 2003). First, a mode is defined as ‘that material resource which is used in recognizably stable ways as a means of articulating discourse’ and types of (inter)action (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001:5, 21). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001), different modes work to structure and constrain meaning-making practices and construct participants’ orientations toward reality and each other. However, these modal affordances should always be correlated with their social settings and the user relationships. As Zammuto et al. (2007:753) explain by analogy, ‘It makes limited sense to talk about a door handle without discussing the people opening the open doors’. This relational approach to affordances is useful because it focuses on the interaction between
technology and user (Gaver 1991) and avoids the pitfall of technological determinism. In this sense, the Internet provides unique affordances to users—affordances that allow for practices that extend users’ capacity to act as empowered cultural agents in materially significant ways. For instance, in the last few decades, new affordances in Web platforms have facilitated a much more interactive user experience, giving users tools to become both consumers and producers of cultural content (Jenkins 2006a).²

Jenkins (2006a) analyses these changes under the blanket term ‘convergence culture’, which comprises the technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes resulting from the intersection of media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence online. For Jenkins, convergence culture is the result of the lowered production and distribution costs of media coupled with the expanded range of distribution channels available in digitised media environments, aided by the increasing oligopolisation of media and communication industries under corporate convergence strategies. Hence, for Jenkins, convergence represents a paradigm shift where content flows ‘across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture’ (Jenkins 2006a:243). However, as Lehman-Wilzig and Cohen-Avigdor (2004) point out, the shift toward convergence culture does not constitute a total departure from traditional media. Rather, there is also convergence in terms of media since, for example, the Internet has almost universally modified or absorbed older media, while technologies have converged with digitalisation, bringing together and concentrating means of communication through multimedia devices (Pavlik 1996; Negroponte 1995). Such media convergence, combined with the emergence of ‘participatory culture’ in online communication, is changing and blurring the roles of both content producers and consumer audiences.

According to Jenkins (2006a), so-called participatory culture is characterised by users taking a more active role, whereby they can potentially break free of a passive position, actively seek new information, and make connections across a wide range of

² Interestingly enough, authors like Johnson (1996) and Perdue (2002) suggest that it is pornography which largely drives technology, since pornography can sustain new media forms until significant revenue can be generated from non-pornographic content (Maddison 2004).
cultural content. ‘The term participatory culture’, Jenkins (2006a:3) notes, ‘contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers occupying separate roles, we might see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understand’. In this sense, participatory culture creates new ways for users to interact with media content and media producers, and to interact among themselves. This culture is enabled by the affordances of digital media, whose origins can be traced to early online environments such as bulletin board systems (BBS) and Usenet, where ‘content was [also] generated by the people, for the people’ (Baym 2011:384). The difference lies in the fact that new Internet platforms have added new technical affordances that further the goals of participatory culture.

Linking participatory culture to new technologies, Jenkins et al. (2009:8) state that ‘participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways’. Moreover, the ‘audience’ also participates in decision-making activities that revolve around media, thereby influencing corporate media businesses (Jenkins 2006a). This new culture allows audiences to become increasingly involved in the creation and dissemination of meaning, which has challenged traditional top-down models of communication and information distribution. Jenkins (2006a), Livingstone (1999), and Cover (2006) identified two principal axes of empowerment in the emergent social media mode of production: content creation and content distribution.

In this context, content is increasingly created by users themselves and is thus called ‘user-generated content’ (UGC). Since users increasingly consume content created by themselves or other users, participatory culture is characterised by a blurring of distinctions, particularly between professional and amateur and between producer and consumer (Jenkins 2006a). New concepts have been created to designate these hybrids: professional amateurs have been referred to as ‘pro-ams’ (Leadbeater & Miller 2004) while the term ‘prosumer’ has been used to characterise the dual role of users as both producers and consumers of media (Bruns 2008). Users can produce content individually or in collaboration with other users or professional media producers. Bruns (2008:88), for
example, mentions the website Newassignments, where a form of ‘open-sourcing’ journalism enables professionals and amateurs to cooperate in the production of content neither could manage alone.

Although UGC existed before the appearance of new media, online social networks are rapidly advancing new forms of UGC creation and sharing. These include blogs, podcasts, wikis (Wikipedia), and video- and image-sharing sites (e.g. YouTube and Flickr). Moreover, these new forms are opening up possibilities for participation beyond a few media-savvy aficionados toward increasingly globalised networks (Boyd & Ellison 2007; Livingstone 2008). Via convergence, UGC is also inserted in a broader, networked market where it can potentially redefine media consumers as drivers of wealth production and innovative creativity. Given the importance of such network extensification, scholars such as Napoli (2008) argue that the most significant reconfiguration of power between media producers and consumers is less about UGC and more about the enhanced capacity of users to distribute content. Along these lines, the impact of new media production is bound up with the shift from a one-to-many relationship between sender as producer and receiver as consumer to a many-to-many dynamic in the circulation of media content.

Given the importance of individual users as media outlets in new media, scholars have noted that the process of convergence also spurs a contrary movement of divergence. Jenkins (2006a) recognises such movement as part of the broader development of digitalisation. ‘Divergence’ in this context refers to the proliferation of fragmented, niche-oriented, fluid, and individuated media (Fagerjord 2003; Liestøl 2007; Manovich 2001). Customised, interactive content appeals to individuals who want to consume content they find personally meaningful. Furthermore, additional applications focused on individualisation have been introduced: users are allowed their frame or area of influence, giving rise to the notion of ‘platform for content’ (Grinnell 2009:580). As a result of customised media, attention has shifted from access to information to access to people—to those who create or are the subjects of information. According to Grinnell (2009), these individualised modes drive attention toward the self and create a narcissistic mode where both seeing and being seen became not only possible but also desirable. This phenomenon is intrinsically associated with the confessional culture mentioned earlier,
where intimate revelations are encouraged and individuals willingly expose their private affairs. Consequently, the focus on users’ unique individuality fosters empathy and intimacy with one’s audience (Sayre & King 2010), generating new regimes of intimacy and truth (Schwarz 2011). At the same time, situations previously defined as intimate are increasingly scrutinised by a global, anonymous audience.

As part of the emergence of new media and its participatory culture, independent and alternative pornographic varieties have emerged within a DIY form of production. Adult websites with static content such as thumbnail galleries now compete with social-networking-based sites where users are encouraged to interact by uploading and commenting on content (as well as being part of the content-production process) (Arvidsson 2007; Mowlabocus 2010). Jacobs (2007) notes that many indie and alternative porn (alt-porn) websites facilitate interaction between performers and users, and often encourage visitors to become part of the production process as well. Hence, some varieties of online pornography have become not only user-generated but also co-constructed products. This focus on communication and participation generates possibilities for identification and intimacy that extend beyond the realm of sexual arousal.

It is important to note that although these websites give users tools to participate, many engage with new media in more passive ways as ‘lurkers’ and some do not participate at all. In terms of distribution, the development of gift-economy-based sharing systems—such as camgirls’ wish lists (Bocij 2004) or the exchange of pornographic photos (Jacobs 2007)—and the rise of porn ‘tube’ sites (sites based on a YouTube-style platform) have presented new challenges to traditional models of commercial pornography (Attwood 2012). In summary, convergence culture has helped to expand both the scale and variety of amateur pornographic practices while giving the sexual practices of ordinary people public visibility online (Barcan 2002).

Paasonen (2010a: 427) notes that some scholars have discussed adult websites with the characteristics outlined above under the rubric of ‘netporn’, which refers to ‘alternative body type tolerance and amorphous queer sexuality, interesting art works and the writerly blogosphere, visions of grotesque sex and warpunk activism’ (Pasquinelli et al. 2007:2). Paasonen (2010a: 427) further notes that some scholars use the term netporn
to designate those ‘exchanges and networked experiences specific to the Internet that resist the commodity logic of the pornographic industry’. Either way, Paasonen (2010a: 427) argues that the netporn designation creates a dichotomy between it and mainstream commercial pornography, highlighting the tendency of new media scholars to focus on the novel and the ‘potentially avant-garde while attending less to that deemed commercial or predictable’. Echoing Paasonen, Williams (2014:26) suggests that netporn studies have been favoured since ‘heterosexual pornographies, although far and away the most numerous, were not popular objects of study in this period of the flourishing of queer studies’.

To work around binary divisions and emphasise instead the blurred lines between these categories, other scholars focus on ‘Porn 2.0’, which alludes to Web 2.0, a buzzword created to describe the shift toward websites emphasising user-generated content (Mowlabocus 2010; Tyson et al. 2013). Porn 2.0 emphasises the breakdown of the division between consumption and participation, authority and amateurism. It contrasts first-wave Internet pornography, which focused largely on publishing content, with a second wave involving platforms that enable user production. That is, Porn 2.0 is related to the collaborative production of pornography (Jacobs 2004) and the democratisation of production and consumption. However, it also encompasses commercial pornographies and the reproduction of mainstream representations within the context of new media.

2.5 Producers of online porn

New digital media can help to decentralise content production and distribution, as individual users and all types of organisations become media outlets with the potential to reach global crowds. Information and content effortlessly cross borders, reconfiguring notions of time and space. Moreover, prosumers have increased in number and become more diverse as a result of the diffusion of personal computers, the Internet, and access to other means of producing and distributing media content. Jenkins (2006b: 155) uses the concept of ‘global convergence’—described as the multidirectional flow of media content around the world, which leads to cultural hybridity—to explore globalisation in the context of new media. According to Ulf Hannerz (1990:237), such movement is ‘marked
by an organization of diversity rather than by a replication of uniformity. The world has become one network of social relationships and between its different regions there is a flow of meanings as well as of people and goods’.

For Jenkins (2006b), two main forces contribute to global convergence dynamics: first, corporate convergence guarantees the flow of media content across different platforms and national borders; second, the grassroots convergence of digitally empowered users plays a role in shaping the production, distribution, and reception of media content. Through such dynamics, global convergence profoundly affects mobility and identity, not only by distributing more varied and less standard identity representations but also by enabling expressions of agency, identity exploration, and self-development among media users. Two key factors that affect identities in a convergence context are central to this thesis: one is the fact that users themselves become media outlets, producing content and distributing it to a mass global audience, bringing their own identities and personae into play; the other concerns the manipulation of identities in an online environment where users can re-present themselves.

The popularisation of the Internet and ordinary users’ increased access to media production and distribution raise the issue of users’ actual identities (Mirrlees 2013:235). When analysing identities in traditional media, research often focuses on representation—that is, how identities are portrayed and how audiences interpret those portrayals (Kellner 2003). Here, the word ‘representation’ implies that people’s identities are being reinterpreted and presented by media to others and to themselves. These analyses usually emphasise the role of such representations in the ongoing development of people’s identities, as people reproduce or reject models of behaviour and attitudes depicted in media (Gauntlett 2008). Moreover, in traditional top-down mass communication there is a tendency toward the (re)production of ‘mass identities’. According to Relph (1976), a mass identity is a consensus identity presented more or less ready-made by mass media. Mass identities are based not only on symbols and meanings but also on stereotypes and prejudice, and they tend to undermine individual experiences, erasing internal differences and inequalities (Lewis 1991). Whereas mass identities are common in top-down mass communication, in a context where users produce their own content they can potentially generate a mosaic of mini-‘niche’ affirmative cultures. For
instance, according to Plummer (1995:137), with the development of new media there has been a movement toward ‘participant stories’, which tend to contain a plurality of voices directed toward ‘different taste cultures and [are] told within groups which are less and less homogenous’. This explosion of marginalised identities has the potential to produce a blossoming of new niche identities, which can grow at the expense of national identity as new media and political contexts proliferate (Louw 2005:133). Along these lines, Castells (2011) argues that new forms of global identity can emerge as a result of the global networking of participants with niche identities based on a pluralist cosmopolitanism.

However, new media not only contributes to the circulation of myriad identities but also offers new tools for self-presentation and identity management. According to Laurel (2013), participatory culture is also considered an interactive dynamic as people can participate as agents within a representational context. Theorists such as Donna Haraway and Teubner (1991) and Sherry Turkle (1999) argue that there is a fundamental break in identity processes associated with online interactions, as identities online become fragmented, fluid, and ultimately freer. Since online communication is mediated, there is a disconnect between representation and a user’s physical presence, which offers new possibilities for users to manipulate their own identities. For instance, the disembodiment of some online environments allows users to transcend bodily identities and interact with the world as somebody else. This is an important process since in most societies gender, ethnicity, and other social identities can become obstacles in interactions with the world. Hence, cyberspace allows users to free themselves from those obstacles by choosing their identities. How users employ these tools to present themselves is a subject of much debate, with some studies finding high degrees of identity manipulation (Myers 1987; Reid 1991; Turkle 1995). Others, meanwhile, suggest that the process is not so common (Parks & Roberts 1998) and that anonymity, with its reduction of social risk, may allow people to be more honest and take greater risks in their self-disclosures than they would offline (McKenna & Bargh 2000; Bargh et al. 2002). In general, identity manipulation depends on the environment and the purpose of the interaction in question. For instance, other studies of online identities (Blascovich 2002; Slater & Steed 2002; Jakobsson 2002) have found differences depending on
whether users engaged in long- or short-term relations and whether there was an expectation of offline encounter.

Several authors working in the field of sexuality and media culture (Attwood 2013, 2006; McNair 2002; Plummer 2003) have discussed the democratic potential of the Internet with regard to sexual identity. While the Internet has been important for the proliferation of mass-produced pornographic representations, it has also provided access to alternative spaces that allow individuals to control their own sexual stories and representations. For instance, in their analysis of ‘interactive sex entertainment’ in CU-SeeMe video conferencing, Kibby and Costello (2001) argue that this software enables individuals to express their own sexual identities, which can involve diverse desires and cultural meanings. For instance, the authors argue that in CU-SeeMe, female sexuality and desires are addressed and publicly expressed in the interactions. In another study, Lehman (2007) suggested that participatory adult websites like Voyeurweb (a free site featuring amateur user photos and videos) open the sexual representation of users’ bodies to a wider variety of ages, ethnicities, body types, and physical features than found in previous forms of pornography. This potential to question mainstream representations derives from the fact that on these websites users not only present themselves to the world but also engage in a process of altering their representations (Lehman 2007:110). In this way, these sites transform the pornographic spectacle into a sexuality experience by ordinary people with whom one can identify and interact. This is especially important for people whose identities previously lacked a means of sexual representation, making it difficult for them to reach outside their immediate intimate circles.

Since new forms of participatory online pornography enable users to represent themselves, such pornography has the potential to spur an unprecedented visibility of sexual subcultures with diverse sexual preferences, niches, and tastes. Regarding netporn, Jacobs (2007:176) suggests that this kind of pornography allows users to play with representation in a space with ‘fluctuating regulations as it matches and connects people who live in geographically and mentally different sites, linguistic zones, and dispersed locations, with clashing values and incompatible sexual orientations’. Hence, users’ engagement with global pornography constitutes a site for potentially undisciplined engagement with representations of diverse identities. Thus, as Woida (2009) points out,
it is necessary to ask whether these moments of encounter between sexual cultures ultimately serve to undermine or reinforce users’ understanding of global subjects. When reinforcement and subversion both occur at different times, it is important to understand how these processes intersect. Authors such as Neely (2011) have noted that the social opportunities afforded by new media and celebrated by many scholars—such as new forms of visibility, self-representation, and prosumer participation—often mask the market logic in which participants are inserted.

2.6 Online porn market(ing)

While more people are now engaged in the production and consumption of content online, it is important to note that the ‘democratisation of media’ has also created a new participatory gap. This means that many have been excluded, mainly because they lack the means—whether in terms of skills or materials, such as computers—to fully participate in this media sphere (Slater 1991; Zimmermann 1995). Moreover, despite its democratising features, the process of convergence culture is still influenced in many ways by market logic and large corporations. In other words, while there is a bottom-up movement of grassroots content production, a top-down corporate-driven process still exists. Hence, Andrejevic (2004:2) sees users’ self-expression in terms of identity as a form of surveillance that places people under constant scrutiny and generates market value. Similarly, Turner (2010) argues that the shift toward participatory culture is driven by economic calculations and not some broad mission to empower the public.

Participatory culture depends on imbrications of market capital and sociocultural capital such that people ‘draw on obligations through their social networks as a resource just as they do their material resources’ (Malaby 2006:146). According to Jenkins (2006a), a shift toward more inclusive production processes makes perfect sense for media companies since they can use the increasingly participatory nature of media use to foster consumer loyalty and generate low-cost content. It is no wonder, then, that media industries are searching for ways to work in concert with convergence culture by taking advantage of its media conglomeration, its multiple ways of selling content to consumers, and the loyalty created by online communities (Jenkins 2006a: 243). This is especially important for the pornography industry at a time when marketplace fragmentation and
file sharing threaten the old ways of doing business. According to Jenkins (2006a), there are three distinct kinds of economic interests at play in promoting participatory culture: national or regional producers who want to circulate their products globally to expand their revenue streams; multinational conglomerates who define their production and distribution in global terms and seek to identify potentially valuable content they can push into as many markets as possible; and niche distributors who search for distinctive content as a means of attracting upscale consumers and differentiating themselves from what already exists in the market. These three interests are not exclusive and can work in tandem, as in the case of adult live cams.

In terms of content production, participatory culture and producers in particular are not dissociated from labour logic. This is because user activity is very much a resource to be monetised and accumulated as capital by new media corporations and the owners of social networking sites (Herman 2013:40). Value-generating media consumers occupy the core of creative-industry discourse, especially as they become prosumers and their role in generating content is no longer merely a peripheral activity (Arvidsson 2008; Banks & Humphreys 2008). Often adopting a political economy perspective, such critiques express concern about the prospect of media companies adopting user-created content strategies to extract economic value without recognising their accountability to the users who produce the content. Terranova’s (2000) work is often cited to support the claim that user-created content and related social networking activities may amount to a form of free labour that media companies unfairly exploit. For other scholars, the more positive and optimistic accounts of user-created content may overlook the power and ownership relationships that structure these co-creative relationships in the context of global capitalism. This means that aside from the production of content and monetary compensation for it, the issue of user-generated production can be framed in terms of content distribution and intellectual property (Hesmondhalgh 2010).

It is important to note that labour in a digital economy cannot be seen as a simple adaptation of capitalist logic to online environments. This is because it involves a complex type of labour relation that is widespread in late capitalist societies, where labour can be voluntarily given, enjoyed, and exploited at the same time (Terranova 2000:36). In the mass media mode of communication and production, consumers seek
pleasure and meaning in media commodities whose material parameters as artefacts are fixed. On the other hand, global capitalism and the digital economy profit from the differentiation of specific resources, markets, regions, and nations, consolidating divergent movements. Moreover, the digital economy centres on not only the commodification of user-generated content but also the affective networks in which content circulates and thus accrues value. It is this affective dimension of online cultural production and socialisation that links the question of immaterial labour to issues concerning intimacy and pornography. According to Arvidsson (2007:672),

Internet porn thus shows how an emerging productive power—a media enhanced capacity to imagine and relate, which is itself a consequence of the particular sociological and technological features of the information society—can be subsumed under capital as a source of surplus value. In short, the productivity of the public rested on its particular ability to fantasise, and likewise construct virtual alternatives to the actual.

Moreover, convergence has also spurred the conglomeration of media companies seeking to extend their reach, their profitability, and their hold over consumers. They aim to do this by distributing and marketing their products and brands across multiple channels, creating larger revenues and more effective and thorough access to consumers. Thus, in terms of content flow, most user-generated spaces are harnessed by commercial operators. Even in a global convergence context, major transnational corporations tend to dominate the means of transmission, creating structural inequalities in globalised communication networks and ensuring the dominance of specific cultural norms and products. Indeed, with the extent of their control over the flow of users, companies can profit from user traffic, which becomes a commodity. It is a peculiar commodity, however, since it is made up of users who are simultaneously consumers, products, and advertising targets. Mainstream media companies are now returning to self-representation and demand-led media through both user-generated and user-defined content.

Hence, the question faced by companies in a convergence context is the one established by Coté and Pybus (2007:94)—that of balance between ‘coordination and
command that seeks “surplus power”; or radically new collective possibilities’ based on community- and user-generated applications. From a business perspective, control is not necessarily bad since the most profitable community is one that is economically managed rather than left alone, where the owner controls ‘competition in favour of an oligopolistic structure that would offer some user choice but at prices above a competitive equilibrium’ (Noam 2007:108). On the other hand, with dynamic new trends emerging by the minute, rigid control might cause a company to ‘miss the train’. Moreover, it is more convenient for companies to let the creative and affective dynamic of participatory culture flow and focus on re-articulating it into profit.

This tension between media industries’ strategies to encourage user participation and users’ active involvement in the production and consumption of media commodities (Hay & Couldry 2011) exists in the online adult industry as well. Websites that host user-generated pornography—such as tube sites and adult live cams—have achieved great popularity, ranking among the most visited sites in the category. However, such websites have also encountered various legal issues, especially concerning digital content copyright, trade media, and affiliate partnership advertising. For instance, one major concern is that most content uploaded by users to tube sites such as YouPorn is actually copyrighted adult-industry material, not user-generated content.

Previous studies of the online adult industry have analysed it largely in terms of business and technology development, focusing on how mainstream commercial pornography affects users’ understanding of the Web as a medium and its potential to publish, track, and orient users’ movements, and to generate profit (Lane 2001; Perdue 2002). Such studies have not, however, explored how convergence and participation affect the industry and the production/consumption of content. Meanwhile, research that has focused on the meanings of user-generated pornography has tended to emphasise the creation of alternative economies in non-mainstream websites (Attwood 2007; Pasquinelli et al. 2007; Magnet 2007; Waskul 2004). Thus, recent studies of user-generated pornography have focused on alternative economies, and the category of mainstream commercial hetero-porn has only been evoked as a point of comparison that connotes things that are obvious, uninteresting, immobile, and already known, not
requiring further investigation (Paasonen 2011b:7). In this sense, studies of commercial pornography can perhaps be seen as posing few analytical and intellectual challenges.

2.7 Webcams

The shift toward digital media has influenced how pornography is produced, distributed, and consumed, creating new genres, each with its own specificities and particularities. Among the various popular online pornography genres, the adult live cam has established itself as a profitable business in the industry. Commercial adult live cams spur a unique global economy since performers and customers from all around the world interact to produce unique live webcam shows. Companies mediate these interactions by providing the interface for performers to work from home and directing user traffic to their webcam chat rooms, attracted via a vast marketing strategy over a network of adult websites. In return, companies take a share of the performers’ total earnings from customers. Since adult live cam content is user-generated, it provides a paradigmatic case for a digital economy increasingly centred on appropriating creative labour; this occurs in the form of commodified communication, and also around affective networks, since the users are also ‘active, emotionally engaged and socially networked’ (Jenkins 2006a: 20).

Generally speaking, adult live cams are a form of real-time, computer-mediated erotic experience entailing ‘active, interactive, and creative communication with others through typed text, live digital video, sometimes spoken voice (by use of computer microphones), or some combination thereof’ (Waskul 2006:365). Hence, users do not merely chat with each other but also watch and orchestrate unique webcam shows. The broadcasted content is unstructured since it is produced live through users’ interactions. Because it is live, the content is rather ephemeral and often unscripted, while metadata is available in the form of user-generated tags and comments. Despite the fact that performers have profiles and professional names that are visible in their stream, adult live cams usually connect complete strangers who are globally dispersed: participants generally know one another only through a self-chosen screen name. While intimate sexual desires are expressed, participants rarely share personal identifying information.

Commercial websites that offer adult live cams charge users a fee, split in some proportion between the site and the performer. These paid adult live-cam websites
usually allow for individual performers to be selected and viewed from a menu featuring a plurality of categories. A large part of the appeal of paid adult live cams lies in the fact that not only are sexual performances ‘fun to watch’ but there is also an element of ‘reality porn’, ‘in that you can tell the model exactly what you want them to do’ (Luv Lickn Clit 2012). Moreover, adult live-cam users can connect with performers on an emotional level and actually build long-term relationships through the chat rooms. Hence, adult live cams are considered more personal than other kinds of online pornography, such as pre-recorded videos.

A growing body of literature has investigated webcams using various approaches. Some authors have emphasised the cam genre’s alignment with social space since it broadcasts what the public generally considers private (Knight 2000; Bailey 2009). This is exemplified by Jacobs (2004), who draws attention to how the borders between everyday places (home/local) and other spaces (virtual/global) dissolve when one navigates the Internet. Jacobs identifies the web as an ambivalent space that has open possibilities but is also regulated by global corporations and governments—a space where ‘individuals negotiate complex social and ethical codes’ (2004:73). Another point concerns the ways and reasons why some participants engage with live cams, exposing aspects of their private lives to a public audience; such questions are often framed in terms of users’ agency. According to Knight (2000), women who broadcast live web streams of their daily activities for mass entertainment (camgirls) have control over what is seen by the audience, thereby constructing their own image. Such control complicates notions of the male gaze and spectatorship since it renders the gendered gaze ineffective (Senft 2008; White 2003; Magnet 2007). White (2003), meanwhile, suggests that the webcam acts much more like a mirror: early camgirls neither saw nor interacted (much) with their audiences but instead watched their own performances on their computer screens. Hence, these performances were not necessarily directed toward a specific audience or exterior gaze; rather, they had the potential to be performed according to camgirls’ own desires and aesthetics.

The abovementioned studies focused on free non-adult webcam sites, and in that context camgirls had little or no incentive to do what their audiences asked them to do. However, some camgirls seeking popularity and/or gifts from their fans started changing
their ‘shows’ to please their audience and generate more traffic to their chat rooms. Following the same logic, adult live-cam performers who want to attract paying customers tend to adapt their image and performances to potential customers’ desires. Hence, these performers usually watch their own performances on the screen while also interacting with customers and responding to their feedback, trying to meet both aesthetic ideals. For instance, on the topic of ‘watching themselves’, paid adult live-cam performer Alana (2013) said she learns a lot from watching how she comes across to customers; however, watching herself is more about pleasing herself, and in doing so she becomes happier and more confident, and has more fun. While performers’ video streams were not analysed in this thesis due to ethical concerns, in chapter 4 I discuss how performers negotiate their own and potential customers’ desires in terms of identities.

For Kitzmann (2004:45), webcam footage is also an ‘individual creative activity’ in which people interact with images rather than passively consume them. This sense of participation and closeness has generated notions of authenticity and realism related to these images; this has also been a subject of investigation by several scholars. For instance, Knight relates the genre’s authenticity to the physical space from which it is broadcast—generally, the home—which lends ‘an air of “peeping tom” authenticity’ to the genre (Knight 2000:23). Bolter and Grusin (1999) suggest that homemade performances give the webcam genre a ‘raw’ amateur aesthetic, which is boosted by the low-resolution quality of video streamed using ‘amateurish’ equipment. Similarly, Patterson (2004:113) notes that the relationship between the grainy webcam images of early devices and the ‘real’ is ‘enhanced by their similarity to the image sequences obtained from video surveillance cameras, which have a similar claim to liveness’. This sense of authenticity and realness perceived by webcam users creates another phenomenon: the belief that participants are getting to know each other and that intimacy comes with familiarity (Kibby & Costello 2001). Early camgirls like Ana Voog (in Knight 2000) also highlighted the relation between webcams and intimacy, considering it ‘intimate in a different way’, maybe because one feels close ‘to those with whom we communicate online, but are physically distanced from through servers and wires’ (Knight 2000:22).
Despite the increasing interest in webcams in recent decades, there are still relatively few studies on the subject, especially extensive ones that try to address and unite all the abovementioned specificities. One exception is Senft’s (2008) ethnographic study of camgirls, which brings to bear questions such as the gaze, how camgirls negotiate notions of ‘the personal as political’, and the impact of notions such as micro-celebrity and self-branding on women’s online identity formation. All previous works on webcams provide important insights into non-commercial webcams. However, authors such as Voss (2002:90) have pointed out that agency does not change the fact that some camgirls are still up ‘for purchase’. In light of such observations, theorists have more broadly started to investigate how camgirls engage in various informal economies, with an emphasis on gift exchange, which supplements commodity exchange by serving as a mechanism of social cohesion rather than economic utility or profit (Jacobs 2004). Nonetheless, Paasonen (2011b: 3) notes that in the early 2000s, due to general scholarly hesitance, so-called mainstream commercial hetero-porn was one of the most understudied areas of Internet research: money and sex are usually considered dirty subjects, even worse when combined (see Huber 1999). Although studies such as Kibby and Costello (2001) have briefly considered the development of intimacy through adult live cams, thus far research has not investigated how intimacy through webcams influences identity formation in the context of global sexual interactions in mainstream commercial websites (as opposed to amateurs cams).

Other gaps in the literature also remain to be filled. For instance, aside from studies such as Jacobs (2004), which highlight the shift toward the decentralisation and heterogeneity of pornography, as more varied producers and consumers participate in creating globalised markets for pornography and sex, ‘the providers and consumers of online sex services have not been systematically identified, nor have the individual consequences for participants in the online sex business’ (Doring 2010:175). Moreover, previous studies of webcams have tended to outline and re-enact the binaries of agency/structure as mutually exclusive.

Therefore, despite the amount of literature on the subject, there is a dearth of literature regarding how performers’ agency and industry structure might not simply cancel each other but instead work in concert, forming a loop of mutual influence. This
means the industry is interested in giving performers a high degree of agency so they can not only produce customised content and cater to an infinite number of customers but also manage their own business and regulate the market. Such freedom has the potential to maximise profits for both performers and the industry. Examples of performers’ agency are provided in this thesis, including the ways they manage their identities and how they set prices. However, the industry still imposes limits that allow businesses to be profitable and part of the bigger sex industry. Such limits include rules on nudity, website architecture, and ownership of created content. As discussed later, such a structure is one of the reasons performers give for why they work for a website instead of opening their own business.

The present research fills these gaps and is thus significant for understanding the new and highly substantial role of online relationships and the reconfiguration of the online adult industry. Likewise, this research benefits the community in that it contextualises pornographic practices and thus makes it possible to reveal potential shifts in the patterns of media and technology use, as well as shifts in human interaction and intimacy in the global context. It aims to provide an in-depth understanding of performers’ live-cam experiences as opposed to assuming an understanding of their perspectives and experiences. This study reflects on their experiences in the process of producing pornography while also locating them within the global networks of commerce.

In the next chapter, I consider the production of content through communication in adult live cams using a specific website chosen as a case study: YPMate.com. Specifically, the cam spaces (rooms) and media available for interaction on the website are investigated in terms of affordances and constraints. On YPMate, performers and users transition between public and private spaces, enabling the use of different media. These differences affect the types of interactions between participants and consequently the content produced. Transitions from one space to another, and from one mode of communication to another, are negotiated in a process where interaction is transformed in terms of both the mode of production and the product itself. Focusing on these negotiations aims to not only understand the practices of this community of users but also grasp what users seek and what they value in patronising adult live cams and interacting
with performers. Moreover, the centrality of communication for content production directly affects the types of identities formed by adult live cam interactions.
CHAPTER TWO

PRODUCTIVE INTERACTIONS

The production of adult live-cam content occurs in a context of participatory culture where the roles of producer and consumer are conflated. Hence, adult live-cam production differs from the traditional method in which companies hire, direct, and film actors engaging in sexually explicit behaviour to produce materials for distribution to consumers. In the traditional case, the consumer focus is on the final content rather than the process of production itself. Through adult live cams, however, performers and customers interact on the screen to create customised pornographic content that is broadcast live across the Internet. Since the setup is live and usually not recorded, the content is ephemeral, and the customer’s emphasis is on the process of production—that is, the communicative interaction. In this sense, the appeal of this type of interactive pornography relates not only to users’ level of control over the action taking place on the screen but also to their sense of participation in the production and the ease of access to performers (Senft 2008:81). Communicative interaction is not only the mode of production but also an experimental process containing feelings and expectations, which become part of the content and the purchased commodity. The ambivalent aspect of adult live cams in terms of content and process relates to the duality of being both image and act (Kibby & Costello 2001), blurring distinctions between sex as a set of representations and sex as a set of practices (Attwood 2010:6).

In this chapter, the YPMate website is used as a case study to analyse the production of content through adult live cams. Here, emphasis is given to different modes that affect communicative interaction. These modes are ‘socially and culturally resource[s] for making meaning’ where ‘image, writing, layout, speech, moving images are examples of different modes’ (Bezemer & Kress 2008:171). The consideration of modes is important because pornographic content is coupled not only with fantasies and desires but also with the resources that enable its consumption (Patterson 2004). This analysis follows the framework of media affordances, according to which technologies both shape and are shaped by ‘the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them’ (Hutchby 2001:444). In this sense, it is important to understand the
practices and negotiations of access to different chat rooms and media available through adult live cams. The aim is to shed light on how participants employ different modes to negotiate performances and the effect these modes have on participants’ social interactions. Negotiation is a key part of the experience since, in the postmodern context where adult live cams are situated, people are encouraged ‘to build up a life of their own’, and relationships are ‘worked out, negotiated, arranged and justified in all the details of how, what, why or why not’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995:5–6). In the case of YPMate, negotiations are not only influenced by the employment of available technological modes but also circumscribed by formal and informal rules intended to delimit access to the commodified aspects of this type of pornography. Thus, the analysis here will show the interconnection in the commodification of communicative interactions on adult live cams.

Below, I will begin by introducing interactive pornography. I will then suggest the importance of communication in the production of content in interactive pornographies such as adult live cams, where information and communication technologies play a crucial role. To address this role, I elucidate how different modes for producing interactive pornography online—such as text-based and visual modes—influence the production of content. To do so, I briefly introduce the theory of affordance in media. Next, I discuss these interactions in the specific context of webcams. After establishing the theoretical foundation and presenting precedent works on the subject, I will analyse how interactions take place on YPMate. The subsequent sections address different chat rooms on the website and their corresponding peculiarities, divided into two main groups: free and paid chats. The analysis focuses in particular on negotiations regarding the modes and spaces available in particular chat rooms on the website. It will be shown that the modes and spaces are intrinsically connected between themselves and with the commodified aspects of webcams.

3.1 Interactive pornography

The production of content in interactive pornography is based on communication, which is a specific form of interaction that involves information exchange. In this sense, informational content has increasingly relied on a production process that requires users
to manage information, make decisions, and use communication technologies. As a consequence, users have become more active since they are now agents in the coordination of different production tasks. There are, however, different forms of communication and interaction that significantly alter the content produced. For example, early forms of interactive pornography were based on communication between users and machines while contemporary forms are based on user–user interaction.

The first forms of interactive pornography gained popularity in the 1990s in the form of DVDs and videogame CD-ROMs with titles such as *Sex Vixen* and *Virtual Valerie*. One of the first analyses of interaction and digital pornography is Linda Williams’s (1999:310) classic work *Hard Core*, in which she considers the differences between moving-image pornography and interactive pornography. Analysing the popular interactive pornography of the time, Williams argued that it did not involve ‘exchange or communication between self and others’ (1999:312) but ‘interacting with non-present, virtual sex objects’ (313). Moreover, in this type of pornography, users could only interact with the interface by choosing from limited, scripted actions encoded by the company.

Despite the appeal of ‘feeling less passive’, early interactive pornography lacked ‘a strong and long-lasting game-playing experience’ and was considered less ‘emotionally satisfying’ (O’Toole 1998:291). The subsequent popularisation of virtual environments filled these gaps. In such spaces, people would congregate and interact in a ‘two-way and constantly evolving’ (O’Toole 1998:292) creative process. With the Internet, interactive pornography enabled the production of content by and for users in an open-ended process, thereby being fundamentally based on inter-subjective interactions. This means that as interactive pornography shifts to the production and reproduction of communication between users, it also creates its most important content: subjectivities. According to Cavanaugh (1999:5), ‘The relocation of social interaction in the online environment’ spurs a ‘tension between intensification of control over the territories of the self and its dissolution’. While the intensification of control can be related to the manipulation of identity online, dissolution can be attributed to a movement of extensification where ‘aspects of identity and self-claims may be appropriated by others’
as users ‘lose control over the dissemination of the self’ they created (Cavanaugh 1999:5).

As Internet users gain increasing access to the means of content production and distribution, they can not only have direct input on the kinds of content created but also simultaneously produce and consume their own content. As the roles of producers and consumers are conflated, users become ‘prosumers’. Hence, prosumers are integrated into not only the production of content but also the organisation of production; they are responsible for managing the process and thus become ‘active subjects’. As active subjects, prosumers shape their actions of production according to their interests and judgment. In this process of content production, ‘To express oneself, one has to speak, communicate, cooperate and so forth’ (Lazzarato 1996:135). This means that communication is essential for the production of content since it is necessary for users to interact and cooperate with each other.

Not only is communication necessary for content production but also it also becomes part of the content and thus acquires value. Moreover, as will be seen throughout this thesis, communication exists not only in the production of cultural content but also in marketing and consumer-feedback mechanisms such as tags. This means that communication is enmeshed in the commodity, which becomes the ‘result of a creative process that involves both the producer and the consumer’ (Lazzarato 1996:142). Since content exists only through the communicative interaction between participants, they must cooperate and communicate to produce it. In this sense, the production of content is based not only on users’ communication but also on their ability to produce ‘sociality’. Such sociality consists of social relations or a sense of belonging—a connection—that did not exist before the interactions.

In adult live cams, part of the performer’s work is to maintain and moderate communicative situations. To do so, performers create informal rules that give them certain control over communication. In this sense, the cooperative aspects of adult live cams are not ‘imposed or organized from the outside’ but ‘completely immanent to the labouring activity itself’ (Hardt & Negri 2001:294). Such organisation is especially important since with adult live cams there are different modes that can alter the
production of content. Hence, since content is based on processes of communication and cooperation, the modes that allow both to happen are crucially important.

3.2 Affordances

In adult live cams, not only is content production intrinsically related to communication but it also ‘continually creates and modifies the forms and conditions of communication, which in turn acts as the interface that negotiates the relationship between production and consumption’ (Lazzarato 1996:143). It is in this sense that technological affordances and the negotiation of their use are crucial to the production of content. As Fuchs (2011:127) argues, the ‘features of contemporary society that mediate human cognition, communication and co-operation’ are important in the analysis of content. For this reason, I will briefly analyse different affordances and their effects on communication.

In early online environments, technological limitations meant that interactions occurred mainly through text. Users conjured images and sensations through words, usually by responding to others’ performances. In this context, interactive pornography was mainly textual, and according to Slater (1998:13), it was ‘like being inside an interactively written pornographic novel’. In general, textual modes tend to generate specific types of interactions, especially in terms of their effects on users’ identity formation. As Waskul puts it (2003:42), users have to ‘write themselves into existence’. This conclusion is applicable because these environments often enable anonymity and face management. To use Goffman’s terms, text-based environments can limit the scope of what is ‘given off’, or what is unintentionally presented of oneself (1978). Departing from this observation, authors such as Walther and Tidwell argue that in such environments, individuals can present a more likable self than what is perhaps apparent in face-to-face situations, spurring intense relationships described as ‘hyperpersonal’ (Tidwell & Walther 2002; Walther 1996). These hyperpersonal relations can be excessively personal since they are based on selective self-presentation and representation, far removed from environmental reality.

The abovementioned characteristics of textual modes indicate that they have specific potentials and constraints for making meaning, which are usually analysed as
‘affordances’. Affordances are the constraints and possibilities for making meaning offered by the available modes (Hampel 2006). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001), different modes work to structure and constrain meaning-making practices and construct participants’ orientations toward reality and toward one another. The specific functions of affordances, however, are only determined in conjunction with users’ employment of the tools available in situated interactions. From this intersection emerges a ‘tension between the mediational means as provided in the sociocultural setting and the unique contextualized use of these means in carrying out particular concrete actions’ (Wertsch 1994:205). The complexity of affordances increases with the development of technologies and the emergence of multimodal spaces. This increase is attributable to the integrated functioning of different modes, in which meanings created together are more than the sum of meanings created separately (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996). Hence, modes are not exclusive and can coexist in multimodal spaces.

With advances in technology and the development of the Internet in terms of codes and connection speed, images became more easily shared and accessed. The shift from essentially textual modes of communication to modes involving images brought about changes in relationships among users. Two characteristics of this shift are particularly important for this study: the notion of embodiment and the logic of space. First, whereas the body is ‘semiotically enselfed’ in words in text-based modes (Waskul 2002), the self is ‘embodied in moving images’ in such visual environments as webcam chat rooms; that is, ‘participants embody themselves in the images that represent them’ (Waskul 2002:215). Another characteristic in terms of space is that technology removes barriers to interaction, making distant communication possible, as sender and receiver do not have to be in the same place or even the same time zone. However, perceptions of space and time differ according to the modes of communication employed. For instance, Kress (2003:1–2) notes that while the written word operates within the logic of time, orienting readers toward causality, image-based communication operates within the logic of space, orienting viewers toward more spatial analytical perspectives. Scholars have focused on the degree to which the available modes either contribute to or inhibit the sense of ‘social presence’ (Short et al. 1976). Jones (2005) argues that for any interaction to occur successfully in webcam chat rooms, the users involved must communicate
continually and mutually monitor attention toward each other to maintain a sense of co-presence.

User perceptions of space and time are also inserted in a bigger picture where online environments and their use have reconfigured notions of public and private. New types of association and communication have appeared between interpersonal and mass communication, giving rise to a mosaic of modes where public and private spaces interconnect and overlap. Thus, in most online contexts, private–public boundaries are often blurred (Bromseth 2002; Sveningsson 2009). An example is the case of amateur non-pornographic webcams, where people broadcast images of private places (usually their bedrooms) to a mass audience in a public space (the Internet). Andrejevic (2004:193) uses the term ‘public privacy’ to describe webcasters’ effortless or imperceptible mobility between the private domestic space and the public virtual space. Moreover, notions of private and public play an important role in the (absence of) interactions in webcam chat rooms.

In her study of camgirls, Senft notes that viewers who expect one-on-one interaction with camgirls learn that, for instance, ‘asking a camgirl to wave for them is the quickest way to get told off’ (2008:62). In general, studies of camgirls indicate that these girls establish rules to regulate viewers’ behaviours, including restrictions on nudity and viewers’ requests/demands for specific acts. To enforce these rules, camgirls can ban users or employ verbal criticism and sarcasm (White 2003:15–16). According to Knight (2000), these rules aim to empower camgirls and give them control over their own representations and over what can be seen by others. However, Senft (2008:62) also suggests that such boundaries are established by cam operators because, although camgirls seem willing to share a space with viewers, acknowledging such would erase a boundary that many camgirls are unwilling to relinquish.

Hence, camgirls establish rules also to create boundaries between what is public and private, and this division can be approached as a matter of accessibility. A space might be viewed as public if it is publicly accessible, yet interactions that occur within that space may be deemed private by the participants. Hence, private/public divisions online can involve a more ‘gradual differentiation’ (Ben-Ze’ev 2003:453). In terms of nudity, camgirls’ restrictions coincide with the traditional perspective that sex and nudity
are private. However, as discussed in chapter 1, pornography has experienced a shift in terms of the public–private divide, and scholars have noted a ‘pornification’ movement in the public sphere, where ‘sex has, in effect, become so very public a matter’ (Williams 2004b: 166). This shift has influenced the way webcam chat rooms are presented.

Current webcam chat rooms belong to this reversed flow where what was considered private is now found in public spaces (Voss 2002; Knight 2000). Given the ever-present demand for sexual acts on webcams, websites using webcams for sex entertainment proliferated on the Web. In this area, most scholarship on the use of webcams for sex entertainment has focused on amateur pornography, which refers to content produced by people engaged in adult live cams without pay. These studies suggest that interactions in this context are based on the reciprocity rule of ‘you can watch me if I can watch you’ (Waskul 2002:53). However, Waskul (2002) emphasises that although reciprocity might be the norm, the sexual exchange is rarely egalitarian in practice: women—especially those considered attractive—wield more power because there are fewer of them, spurring competition among other participants, who are mostly men. From a different approach, Jones (2008) notes that in amateur adult webcams, the reciprocity rule is open to negotiation among users, which can create unbalanced relations in terms of access to different modes. Moreover, importantly, Jones (2008) shows how particular social actions made possible through different modes are not merely a matter of the modes themselves but also of how modes are introduced in an ongoing flow of interaction. Furthermore, Jacobs (2004) claims that in the context of amateur webcams, negotiations among participants increase emotional investment in the content produced; this investment creates ties and a sense of community among participants.

Meanwhile, few studies have investigated paid adult live cams, and even those that consider the commercial aspect (Attwood 2010:88; Senft 2008) tend to emphasise non-mainstream websites and alternative economies. The website investigated in this thesis is a form of commercial webcam that replaces the reciprocity of acts with a formal market economy. This type of website is not new; the first commercial webcam shows appeared in the mid-1990s, with a company called Virtual Dreams offering ‘SexShow live’, a service that offered users access to eight different live sex shows (Lane
Since the shows were not exclusive, there was limited interaction between performers and customers; dozens or hundreds of people would watch a single show at a time, in what could be called a digital peep show. In contrast, with contemporary adult live cams, such as those analysed in this chapter, users have an extensive range of performers and show formats to choose from, ranging from group shows similar to those of the 1990s to private shows with one-on-one interaction. These different shows usually take place in different online environments, each enabling different media usage, thus leading to different kinds of interactions. The shift from one space to another and the use of media are negotiated between participants.

These negotiations and spaces are discussed in the sections that follow. The analysis shows how pornography has changed, possibly to adapt to a context where free pornography is abundantly available online. As an interactive type of pornography, the popularity of adult live cams relies on aspects beyond the moving image—aspects related to the experience of producing its movement: ‘the value of the interaction is not so much the product itself but the mode of production’ (Reyman 2010:151). Moreover, interactions depend on communication among participants, which in turn is commodified according to different rules. In the following, I introduce the modal affordances available on YPMate in the spaces where interactions are possible.

### 3.3 Webcams—YPMate case

Adult live cams usually offer users a myriad of tools, which allow them to directly produce their own content through interactions with performers. On YPMate, these interactions take place in a variety of chat rooms, each with specific affordances that influence participants’ interactions and the content produced. To begin with, the layout of the rooms is presented differently to performers and users. From the user’s perspective, all rooms look roughly the same; the changes are more in terms of performers’ behaviours and images, as well as the media enabled for interacting with them. The user’s view of the rooms is shown in Figure 2; users are shown a performer’s video stream and profile, a chat area, and thumbnails of similar models.

The focus is on the performers, and information about them is given in their profile and live image. The performers’ overexposure gives them little control over what
they ‘give off’ (Goffman 1978), corresponding to the requirements of a striptease culture. Moreover, while the body displayed in the video stream connects with the profile information, the performer’s face in particular connects her self with her body, given that the face is the most identifiable part of a person. In his study of adult amateur webcams, Waskul (2002:216) argues that users keep their identity detached from the body by not showing their faces to preserve ‘the integrity and dignity of the self’ and their ‘privacy’. With paid adult live cams, however, the performer’s identity is crucial to the genre as it serves to create a sense of ‘knowing’ and familiarity with users; it renders the interaction personal. As performer Sandra (2014) notes, ‘Performers seldom make a lot of money without showing their faces. It might happen, but most who do not show their faces tend to be lower earners’. For performers, although offering a close-up of their faces looking directly into the camera involves more risk, it also creates a greater sense of intimacy—a sense of connection.

![User’s view of performer’s room](image)

*Figure 2 User’s view of performer’s room*

Meanwhile, users mainly establish their presence by interacting with performers in a text-based chat platform. Apart from their nickname, which they can change at will, users’ identities remain anonymous; all that is known about them is what they reveal, writing themselves into existence. Hence, the image and text forms of interaction between users and performers are asymmetrical. This asymmetry in modal affordances
can be explained in terms of technological limitations: it might not be viable to have many cameras connected in one room. I would argue, however, that such asymmetry has the purpose of inciting a sort of hyperpersonal relation. The anonymity and more controllable text-based system favours users’ self-disclosure and can enhance feelings of intimacy and presence—that is, users can express their inner desires without much constraint or risk (McLellan 1996; Walther & Parks 2002). At the same time, performers’ overexposure serves as a personal reference with which users can connect. Hence, this asymmetry on YPMate aims to encourage a unilateral connection between users and performers, as the former experience not only an easy means to express themselves in a hyperpersonal context but also a connection with identifiable performers. Since this system affords users a host of communicative advantages over adult amateur webcam chat rooms, it can invoke an intensification of users’ perceptions in terms of hyperpersonality.

![Figure 3 Performer’s dashboard](image)

Unlike the user’s screen, the performer’s screen is focused on users’ texts (Figure 3) and is divided into three windows: free chat, which shows visitors and non-logged-in members; guest chat, comprising logged-in members with credit card information stored on the website; and paid chat, a section for members who are currently paying for a show.

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3 Party chats are also shown in the guest chat area.
Performers can enable and disable chat rooms at will, according to the interactions they want to spur. Ultimately, this room division is based on users’ likelihood of spending money on the website, which also influences the performers’ behaviour toward them. Additionally, the separation between paid and free rooms also shapes public and private access to the performer’s streaming video. Although the performer’s stream is public, website policy forbids nudity and sexual acts in free/public chats. In terms of interactions, the division between public/free and private/paid is more fluid, regulated mainly by performers. Performer Janet (2013) says that ‘most customers on webcam sites do not want videos and pictures; they want live interaction’. Hence, interaction is often treated as nudity—that is, as a commodity. Another performer puts it this way: users are not on YPMate ‘to buy content but to form a connection with a performer’ (Angela 2013).

Another important factor that shapes interactions—and consequently the content produced—is the number of users participating and how they participate. Group dynamics tend to produce mainstream ‘vanilla’ shows whereas one-on-one interactions result in personalised fetish performances. In the sections that follow, I identify and analyse the rooms available on YPMate, beginning with free rooms then moving on to paid rooms. I emphasise the dynamics these rooms instigate to illustrate the core appeal of adult live cams—namely, communicative interactions and customers’ connections with performers.

Investigating how different chats actually shape adult live-cam performances was not possible beyond studying performers’ accounts. This lack of visual/textual analysis of such performances partly relates to Boyle’s observation that studies of representation have been overdone (2006). Further, this absence stems from two main issues: the nature of adult live cams themselves and ethical concerns regarding paying to get access to particular areas of the website. First, adult live-cam performances occur through the interaction between performer and customer, making it difficult to observe such performances without participating in them. Moreover, as discussed in this chapter, the areas on the website where performances take place are accessed through payment—and this was not authorised by the ethics review board.
3.4 Free rooms

Free rooms are characterised by free access to a performer’s video stream, which is public to any visitor to the YPMate site. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, most webcasters broadcast from their domestic space to an online public space in the context of public privacy. Given this dynamic, anyone can access the performers’ stream, including minors. Hence, YPMate forbids below-the-belt nudity in free rooms, especially since nudity on adult live cams is read as sexual. This policy is based on social norms that regulate the naked body in public and private spaces. It corresponds to an understanding of the body as ‘protected by stringent rules and filled with profound meaning to the individual, to those who may see it, and to the larger culture’ while access to it ‘means power and privilege and therefore connotes specific rights and responsibilities’ (Waskul 2002:221). In addition, the context in which the naked body is presented is crucial to how it is interpreted. According to the website’s policy, nudity is relegated to not only private spaces but also approved commercialised ones to avoid compromising the structure of social control and to make the activity profitable. Hence, social norms that maintain the ‘sacred’ sexual body as an object of ultimate value are translated into commodification of the same on YPMate.

Regarding textual interactions, public–private division in free chats is not determined by website rules: performers and users can exchange private and public messages. Given the asymmetry in affordances explained earlier, performers can also use audio and video to interact with users, whereas users are restricted to the text-based mode. Although the asymmetry could lead to a deeper sense of connection for users in relation to the performers, interactions in free chats are limited. For the performers, interaction is also a commodity, and so users should pay for it. Thus, performers regulate the amount of interaction according to market logic, limiting it to negotiations that lead to paid rooms. While performers entice users to come to private/paid areas, users try to convince performers to perform the private in public. Below, I discuss these dynamics within the three available modalities of non-paid chat rooms: free, guest, and party chat rooms.
### 3.4.1 Free chat

When users first arrive at the website and before they log in, they appear to performers in a ‘free chat’ window. In this room, users and performers seem to share a public space while the performer’s image is streamed for free to everyone. Users who arrive are also invited to interact, as suggested by an automatic message in the chat: ‘Type in the box to ask about my show’. Despite this invitation and the fact that a performer can choose to acknowledge a new user’s presence, actual interaction in free chat rooms is often minimal or null. Most performers opt to ignore the free chat window or disable it because they are not interested in trying to convert visitors into paying customers. They generally perceive visitors as ‘lurkers’ who are unlikely to pay for a show.

Another reason why they do not interact is the fact that attention is scarce and a commodity on YPMate, as attested by performer Helen (2012): ‘I can only divide my attention up to a limit. If users want interaction, then they need to sign up. But if you cannot be bothered to sign up, why should I interact with you?’ Disabling free chat also has other technical advantages, such as improving the speed of streaming, which allows paying customers to enjoy better video quality. When interaction does take place in free chat rooms, it can be compared to interactions with a bot: performers will spam users with auto-messages asking them to sign up to the website. Such auto-messages are often along the lines of, ‘Hi! I would love to chat with you! Just sign up and add a credit card to your account so we can chat and you can take me to “private”!’ (Sandra 2014). Resorting to short formulaic sentences is an easy way to manage multiple interactions and save time.

Performers’ behaviours toward these users indicate that interaction is an important part of adult live cams and also a commodity. Users who do not log in, and hence do not have their credit card information stored in the website’s database, are less likely to get responses from performers. Although some users might enjoy visual contemplation and will lurk in free chat, others might feel frustrated and try to break the ‘more static process of Internet looking’ (White 2006:10) by signing up to the website. Users who decide to sign up are redirected to a page where they have to enter a valid e-mail, nickname, first name, and surname, as well the country from where they are accessing the website. They
are also required to provide credit card information so the website can verify their age, though the site clarifies that they will not be charged unless they enter a clearly marked paid area. The act of signing up to the website has implications that favour more interactive relations.

3.4.2 Guest chat

Once a user becomes a member, interaction is more likely to occur. Members with stored credit card information appear to performers in the ‘guest chat’ area. Generally, members expect to go through a ‘get to know each other’ process with performers in this chat and to negotiate paid shows. However, members often try to bring the private/paid aspect into this public/free space by manipulating performers into showing their naked body or interacting with them for free. Performers, for their part, try to attract members to paid private rooms, enticing them by flashing their bodies, dancing, or showcasing their personalities.

Most interactions take place in the chat area, where members and performers exchange private and public messages. In this chat, members cannot see who else is present in the room or what they are writing; they only see the performer’s public chat. Regarding different types of chats, performer Beth (2011) notes that the guest chat layout creates a more personal environment: ‘I prefer guest chat for several reasons. First, I like it because members cannot see each other’s chat, what I think makes interactions more personal’. Moreover, the personal experience can be enhanced if performers reply to members individually in private messages, a strategy that can generate more paid shows: ‘I notice that sending private messages seems to get me more paid private shows’ (Beth 2011). Thus, although guest rooms are free and public, the possibility of having one-on-one text-based exchanges, combined with the fact that members are unaware of others in the room, can cause members to feel like they are sharing a private space with the performers.

However, the performer’s stream is still public, and image-level interactions are limited. Members would still have to pay to see performers act and perform in a particular way. Meanwhile, the fact that members can see a performer’s video stream can produce a disconnection between image and text: members can see performers typing
responses to other users without seeing them or the text. Another option in guest chat rooms is for performers to interact with all members in public, answering to their questions openly in the chat or using the audio feature. In this case, since members cannot see other members’ messages, a very disconnected conversation might take place, as one performer jokingly illustrates:

Mary: Yes, I have lots of high heels.
Customer X: Why are you talking about heels?
Mary: Because somebody asked about it. If I do fisting? No, but I’ll do four fingers.
Customer Y: Are you saying you would fist with high heels?
Mary: No. That was another question. Yes, I do have red pumps.
Customer W: I do not care if you fist. (Mary 2011)

First, this conversation demonstrates why private messages are preferred over public ones: they give members a cohesive line of conversation without interruptions. Moreover, in the example, it is noteworthy that members do not necessarily share the same fetishes and can feel annoyed or repulsed by others’ fetishes. Since only performers’ messages are shown, performers risk being overexposed by answering questions publicly. Hence, private messages allow members and performers to talk freely about their fetishes and desires in a cohesive, uninterrupted way. Meanwhile, since members cannot see who else is in the room or their messages, performers can use public chat to their advantage by pretending to be busy or creating public conversations members can engage in. As Karen (2014) suggests, ‘If you’re in guest chat, you can create conversations to look busier than you are and kill time. If users think it is an interesting conversation, they might engage in conversation’. Thus, performers strategically consider the use of private or public messages according to the context and the desired results.

The conversation shown above also illustrates the main use of guest chat rooms: to negotiate performances so members only pay for the sexual/interactive part of the show. Members usually inquire about a performer’s expertise and boundaries, or request
to see the performer’s body under the pretence of later entering a paid area. These negotiations expose a tension regarding how much should be given for free in guest chat rooms. For instance, negotiation per se is a form of interaction, and members strategically persuade performers to describe their shows, trying to turn negotiation into a free sex chat. For example, regarding how much performers should ‘give’ members for free, performer Janice (2012) explains that she has several rules: ‘I won’t talk to you after the fourth question. If you want more attention, you will have to take me to a paid private room. I won’t answer sexual questions in free chat, because I know you are most likely masturbating to that for free’. For these reasons, a performer, in her public blog, suggests that performers should give users some attention and be polite but also ‘give as little as humanly possible to people who are unlikely to ever buy anything’ (Kristi 2012). Since most of the relevant information is already available on their profile, performers believe they should be paid even when they are entertaining members with their brains, not their bodies.

As for showing their bodies in free chats, however, performers’ opinions diverge. Some take this opportunity to ‘educate’ members by asking for tips for a ‘flash’ or ‘dance’, ‘provided [they] are aware that they have to pay something; […] these men have to learn to PAY!’ (Mary 2012). Although guest chat rooms are free, members have the option to give performers tips, which are called ‘gold’ on YPMate. According to performers, the aim is to educate more than profit since performers receive 35% of whatever customers pay, which often amounts to only few cents. As mentioned before, on amateur adult webcams, reciprocity is required for interaction to take place (Kibby & Costello 2001; Jones 2005). In general, lurking is not allowed; for participants to see others, they need to show themselves. Such a condition is necessary to create a sense of trust in the community. With paid adult cams, however, the dynamic of ‘show me yours, I’ll show you mine’ (Jones 2005) is replaced by the commercial logic of showing oneself in exchange for money (tips). This scheme helps members to considerably decrease the risk of being rejected.

Other performers are strictly against it, however, and alert others not to fall for tricks. Performer Karen (2014) argues that the “‘show me what I want and I’ll take you to a paid private room” guys are always lying. They are just trying to jerk off for free’. A
number of performers point out that sexual images are available for free online and that interaction is what sets adult live cams apart from other types of pornography. As such, they do not mind showing their bodies for free since doing so can work in their favour by attracting more traffic, thus increasing the possibility of getting paid shows. However, most performers agree that ‘when it comes to specific demands, I say to them that if they want to direct me in free chat, they have to tip’ (Carolyn 2012). Indeed, as Jones (2005:79) points out in his analysis of amateur adult webcams, the act of requesting or demanding something can position the speaker as powerful and the one who is ‘required’ to do something as subordinate. YPMate performers get around this issue by charging members for any request they make or denying it completely. The website’s manual (Streamate 2013) endorses such exchange, affirming that if members make a special request (such as posing in free chat or providing extra attention in a paid show), performers should ask for tips before doing what was asked. Aside from that, performers have the final word regarding requests, even if the member paid before asking. Performers might also grant a request for free to satisfy members and gain regular customers.

3.4.3 Party chats

In June 2011, YPMate introduced a new chat area called ‘party chat’, where members can interact amongst themselves. This type of room seems to attract more people, partially because a performer’s profile becomes ‘more notable when it has party chat written all over it. It also seems like more fun and inviting’ (Michelle 2011). The large number of members in a party chat can make it difficult for performers to manage private messages; hence, conversations tend to occur in public, with performers often using audio to interact. Moreover, in party chat rooms, members can see everyone in the room, as well as their messages. Given these characteristics, negotiations on party chat are mainly public and incite competitive interactions among users. One performer describes party chat dynamics as follows:

I have noticed in party chat that I can get a group chatting all together, and I enjoy this. I can keep full conversations because I can address members as a
group rather than individually, which saves a lot of introductions (hi, how are you, etc.); members can either join the conversation or leave: there is no special one-on-one treatment for them in free chat. And this is really how it should be. These men should always pay for individual attention, and they are kind of forced to do so now in party chat. (Donna 2011)

This not only emphasises the importance of personal interaction as a special commodity but also highlights the fact that interaction dynamics change considerably in party chats. In acknowledging the presence of others, members exert social pressure on each other, which can occur against or in favour of performers. For example, some fans will help promote or protect performers, as described by Sharon (2011): ‘I undeniably get a lot more guys trying to help (the white knights) by yelling at the morons, which I appreciate. I also have lot of these guys helping me out with other things, like encouraging other people to join paid gold shows’. However, the group environment also incites members to write abusive or provocative messages, aiming to cause disruption. As Donna (2011) notes, ‘For some reason, party chats seem to attract more morons to my room. As if they were waiting for an opportunity to publicly insult me and call me names. It is like once they are able to chat with a group, they think “Oh my god, now everyone can hear what an X (insert insult here) she is in my precious opinion!”'.

In the first scenario, members seem focused on the performer, aiming to gain approval. In other rooms, performers have to ‘hustle’ and seek the approval of potential customers; in group situations, however, the onus is on users, who have to conduct themselves in a way that will earn approval from performers as well as their peers. In the context of multiple public interactions, there is stiffer competition for the performer’s attention, and any interaction is highly dependent on concurrent interactions. In the second scenario, however, where members try to bash performers, they seem to seek approval from other members who might share their views. Either way, members want to feel good about themselves, or superior, through these interactions, albeit at the performer’s expense. In dealing with such members, Kimberly (2007) says performers should learn not to believe them and remember that it is not personal: ‘they have to make other people feel bad in order to feel good about themselves’.
The social pressure factor is also observed in relation to sexual topics and negotiations. Given the lack of privacy, members are more likely to ‘tone down their weird and freak requests in party chats because they are embarrassed to disclose them in front of an audience of other men’ (Donna 2011). This situation is ideal for performers because ‘then members have to pay me in private chat rooms to tell me about their naughty fetish rather than saying it in my free chat’ (Donna 2011). If members are exhibitionist types and try to talk about their fetishes anyway, ‘other members will shout at them or tell them they are messed up’ (Sharon 2011). This peer-shaming technique is a way of punishing unacceptable behaviour and is based on members’ need for validation from others (Heaven & Virgen 2001). As a result of social pressure and peer shaming, negotiations in party chat rooms tend to conform to mainstream scripts, as is also seen in paid group shows.

Apart from being a group chat, the party room is the only room where private tip-based ‘gold shows’ are available. Gold shows will be explained in the next section, but here it is important to emphasise that party chat rooms intended for gold shows do not involve much negotiation. Members know beforehand the price and content of the show: a description of what performers will do is displayed at the top of the chat, along with the length and target fee of the show. The function of this type of party chat is to attract members and entice them to contribute to the performer’s goal. The show only starts after performers reach their goal. Thus, a group chat environment is necessary to compel members to collaborate toward the target price. Those who tip can watch the show.

Here, the polarised dynamic of members hindering or helping performers is replicated. Although the show’s rules are established ahead of time by the performer, members might ignore the show’s topic and tip the performer, asking her to do something else. Performers say that such members are not ‘team players’ but are selfish and inconsiderate, using their money to assert power. In Carol’s words, ‘The one thing the person who tips is doing is to say, “Look at me folks, I have a shitload of gold”’ (2012). Meanwhile, performers praise members who tip toward the show’s goal and encourage other members to tip as well. Additionally, big tippers indirectly compel other members to tip well so they will not feel inferior. Hence, performers have described gold shows as a ‘cock-measuring contest in public’, where the standard of measurement is money.
In discussing the modalities of free chat available on YPMate, this section showed that free chat rooms are marked not only by a public–private division related to webcam images—particularly performers’ nudity—but also by negotiations in terms of interactions, which are regulated by performers at their own discretion according to the economies of interaction and communication. Further, apart from the formal and informal rules, rooms’ configurations influence the interactions taking place, especially regarding group and private dynamics. No matter how they are done, negotiations are central to free public chats, and once members and performers reach an agreement, they can move on to paid rooms.

In paid rooms, full nudity and sexual acts are allowed, but the content of the show is completely up to the members and performers. The manual (Streamate 2013) also emphasises that performers are in full control and are never obligated to do anything against their will or outside their comfort zone. In general, performances vary from ‘vanilla shows’, which consist of stripping and masturbation, to fetish ones, including BDSM and role-play. Moreover, although nudity is expected, shows do not necessarily include it, and they can be as simple as talking with members about upcoming vacations, for instance; the range of possibilities is endless. Performer Shirley (2012) suggests that, where nudity and masturbation are expected, doing something more sets a performer apart; performing thus requires creativity, skill, and thinking outside the box.

3.5 Paid rooms

YPMate offers three types of paid shows: gold, premium, and exclusive. Gold shows are tip based while premium and exclusive shows are pay-per-minute shows. Unlike the free chat rooms, performers’ video streams are only accessible to those who pay for them. Hence, privacy is determined in terms of limited access as well as the display of nudity. Paid chat rooms can also be divided into group and exclusive one-on-one shows. In the former, interaction is limited to a minimum and the focus is on the performer’s image: the naked body and sexual acts. Moreover, in this type of show, the content is often not unique and tends to assume mainstream forms of ‘vanilla’ shows. Performers cannot cater to individual desires when interacting with a variety of members with different tastes. In this sense, members can have access to performers’ paid private
rooms without having more personal interactions with them. Moreover, the number of participants also influences the media available, as performers tend to enable confidential phone and cam-to-cam interaction only for those who pay for exclusive shows. Meanwhile, one-on-one interactions in exclusive rooms can spur more intimate relations based on individuals’ desires and fetishes. Exclusive rooms are also the only rooms where members can expose themselves by negotiating with performers for cam-to-cam interaction. Hence, they can present themselves and their desires not only through text but also visually. Below, I will discuss the three available modalities of paid chat rooms.

3.5.1 Gold and premium shows: Group-paid shows

Gold shows are relatively new to the website, introduced only in 2011 along with party chats. Gold shows are mainly group shows where members pay up front to join in. In the room topic, performers describe the show they are willing to perform, including how long it will last, and then set a target amount of money to be achieved and a minimum buy-in price for each member. For instance, a performer can aim to collect USD$200 in the next 20 minutes with minimum buys of 10 Golds per member to perform deep throat with a dildo for 10 minutes. Once performers reach their target fee, all members who contributed will be able to watch the show, and other members can join in after the show has started. This type of show resembles a peep show, as performers stipulate in advance what they are going to do, and members pay up front to join in and watch it. Hence, interactions are limited during the show, although as discussed in the previous section, they are intense in the party chat leading to it. Given the lack of interaction during the show, gold show dynamics are more focused on the performer’s body than her personality: ‘I am partially guilty since in gold shows, I try to sell the sexual part more than my personality’ (Sarah 2011). A number of performers see this type of show as an advertisement, a teaser to show how the performers look and what they can do in private. Along these lines, Ruth (2011) states that gold shows have helped her ‘turn more men into regular customers’. Thus, although these shows cannot be considered interactive, they serve to encourage members to take performers to private chat rooms.
YPMate also offers a pay-per-minute group show called ‘premium’. Premium shows usually start with a single member, and later, incomers join in, even without having participated in previous negotiations. Nonetheless, most members enter premium rooms simply to peek at what performers are showing. They only stay for a brief moment, as the website does not charge them for the first 30 seconds of any show. Performers resent these so-called peepers because they can be disruptive, and they are obviously taking advantage of a rule. As a countermeasure, performers may increase premium rates to the maximum. This way, if a member stays 31 seconds, he or she has to pay for the full minute, which can cost up to USD$15: ‘I am very happy when peepers remain one second too long and have to pay USD$9 to see nada. It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside’ (Laura 2013). Increasing rates is also a strategy employed by performers who would rather deal with one-on-one interactions, as they believe it can be easier to create a connection and gain more regulars. However, other performers prefer charging less to attract more members, as all members who enter a show pay the same per-minute rate. In terms of interactions, performers either focus on the original member who took them to premium or adopt a mainstream routine to cater to potential incomers. Most performers opt for the latter, and interaction is often at a minimum as performers stick to shows considered vanilla (e.g. stripping and masturbation) and to predetermined routines: ‘I basically do the exact same thing every time’ (Deborah 2012). Performers adopt this strategy not only because it is difficult to accommodate different customers’ tastes but also to avoid being caught by peepers while doing something considered taboo.

In sum, group shows seem to cater to members who do not have a specific fetish. Moreover, the recent introduction of gold shows in the website can be a response to the excess of interactivity of the genre. As such, the need to be creative and to interact to produce content might spur the opposite effect: members may prefer interacting for free in the chats and watching sexual live shows pre-established by performers than create their own. This preference could indicate a certain degree of inter-passivity, analysed in early webcams by Patterson (2004), in which members remain passive even in the presence of potential interactivity. However, inter-passivity assumes the transfer of activity or emotion onto another being, and although performers do ‘act’ for the customers, their action has a response, as customers also act for the performers: both
participants reproduce in their bodies the pleasure given, a process further explained in chapter 5 as a form of self-interaction. Meanwhile, gold shows are an answer to the demand for cheaper shows where the costs are lower because they are divided amongst all participants. As a consequence, the performers’ attention and interaction are also divided, creating a group environment where everybody interacts with one another. Along these lines, performer Jessica (2012) described the difference between group and exclusive shows as follows: ‘If you want my undivided attention, you have to take me to ‘exclusive’, if not you have to share me with everyone else’. Hence, a prominent characteristic of group shows is that they are aimed to please a mass audience and are not a customised experience. If members are after a more customised, one-on-one interaction with performers, they can opt for another type of chat room, ‘exclusive’, analysed in the section below.

3.5.2 Exclusive and cam-to-cam

In exclusive chat rooms, members pay a per-minute rate to have one-on-one interactions with performers. Since customers have the performer’s full attention and can direct the show, the website (Streamate 2013) suggests that rates should be set higher, although performers have the freedom to choose their own prices. Moreover, some performers also point out that they charge more for exclusives, because in this chat room customers tend to be overly demanding. As a result, performers acknowledge that one-on-one interactions can be tiring:

I charge a high fee for exclusive chat rooms, and some men pay for it. The long exclusive shows may be lucrative, but they are also exhausting: try keep going with deep penetration, twenty minutes of anal penetration, or some random, long and complicated fantasy. I would rather just do a standard ‘vanilla’ show. (Mary 2013)

On the other hand, exclusive rooms are also believed to facilitate a connection with members, which in turn can convert them into regular customers. Hence, some
performers set lower rates not only because they need to devote attention to only one member at a time but also because one-on-one interaction makes it easier to create a personal connection, which can be explored in future interactions. For instance, as performers interact with one customer at a time, they can employ strategies that enhance the connection, such as screaming the customer’s name during the show, which directly connects the images on the screen with the person watching them. Moreover, the personal connection between performers and customers is intensified by the media available in this room: performers usually enable phone calls and cam-to-cam sessions, whereby customers can both see and be seen.

Moving from a free or group chat room with a mass-entertainment dynamic to a private room with the possibility of a two-way cam show is part of the appeal of adult live cams. As one performer put it, she ‘would much rather pay USD$6/minute for individualized attention to get precisely what I want than pay USD$6 flat for no attention and something I could get for free from a tube-like site’ (Cynthia 2012). Along these lines, a person from the industry described exclusive interactions as being more intimate:

The ‘relationship’ is more intimate and ‘real’. […] To be honest, the performers who can ‘entertain’ on this level are generally more intelligent than those who ‘just don’t get it’ and type, ‘three rubles for tits’. It’s a helluva way to retain a whale\textsuperscript{4}, too. There are also fetishes and kinks the guy might have that he can’t bring out in an open public room because he might find it embarrassing or think people will flame him on it, or that he can’t get at home with the wife. (Karl 2011)

Again, the explanation above refers to relationships created between customers and performers—a point that distinguishes adult live cams from other types of pornography as they go beyond the representation of naked bodies and sexual acts. A related point mentioned in Karl’s account is that exclusive rooms are ideal for those customers who are looking to express specific fetishes. Customers may have a script in their heads with the fetishes they want represented by performers: ‘most of my customers

\textsuperscript{4} A whale is a regular customer with plenty of money—that is, a ‘big fish’.
have very specific fetishes, so I do much better with paid exclusive rooms’ (Angela 2011). Performers believe that exclusive shows are ideal because they enable the creation of a bond with customers. First, they create a bond of trust, as customers believe performers will not use any information they provide against them. Second, customers feel accepted and understood when even their most unusual fetish is granted. Hence, customers who pay for exclusive shows are more likely to become ‘regulars’ and thus become stable sources of income for performers.

As mentioned earlier, the interactions in exclusive shows are also enhanced because performers make additional features available to members, such as confidential phone lines and cam-to-cam interaction. Confidential phone lines allow members to call performers during paid sessions while keeping their phone numbers private: an operator connects both users to keep the numbers secret. Most performers avoid this feature since it has technological glitches that might disrupt the flow of the show or reveal performers’ personal information. For instance, performers are urged not to leave their real name on voicemail because customers can hear it if the confidential phone connection does not go through (Brenda 2012). Moreover, using the confidential phone line can lead to awkward situations, such as long silences or miscommunication; as Nancy (2014) expresses, ‘I find it difficult to hear people and sometimes hard to understand their accents’. The difficulties of communicating and connecting with international participants will be covered in the next chapter, but here it is important to note how such issues influence the selection of media to be used. Customers also associate phone calls with a level of proximity with performers that does not exist, as seen in the examples below:

People tend to think that once you are on the phone, you are all friends now, so you can start asking personal questions and whatnot. (Melissa 2014)

I do not like using the phone because of the experiences I have had with it; men would call hoping to connect with me, thus leaving me their phone numbers (I assume, so I could call them?) and instantly leaving before I could get paid anything. (Lisa 2014)
All these perceived inconveniences can also work in the performer’s favour: glitches can make shows last longer, as customers have to repeat themselves more often. Moreover, a back-and-forth conversation can become intimate, ‘and before you notice it, the guy is attached to you’ (Dorothy 2014). Hence, a number of performers say the feature can ‘add a lot to the experience, if you really connect with’ them (Brenda 2014). Jones (2008), moreover, observed a link between videoconferences with audio chat and more intimate, personal connections. According to him, few participants used audio in amateur webcams because of technical issues and because ‘the addition of the dimension of voice made the interaction “too personal” and “kill[ed] the fantasy”’ (2008:468). Indeed, Jones found that text-based communication allowed participants to focus more fully on the visual performance. Different from the amateur website Jones studied, with YPMate’s paid webcams, the visual is not necessarily the most important aspect. Hence, performers might prefer to use voice in order to make customers focus on the ‘personal’ side of their interactions.

Another feature that can be used in exclusive shows is ‘cam-to-cam’ interaction, which allows members to send performers video streams. More intimate interactions occur in cam-to-cam sessions since ‘it is in intimate and/or nurturing relations that we are encouraged not just to look but also to show’ (Grotz in Cover 2003). The use of the cam-to-cam feature, however, has to be negotiated: while only customers can request a cam-to-cam session, performers decide whether to accept or decline. When the request is accepted, performer and customer can see each other as well as their own video stream on the screen. Performers’ opinions about this modality vary: some do not mind watching a customer’s video stream while others completely ignore it. There are also performers who simply do not like to watch customers, and even when they accept a cam-to-cam session, they cover the customer’s stream or sit far away from the screen so they cannot see the images. If, as Waskul (2002:216) argues, a body without a face is a body without a self—it is ‘just another body’—then some performers prefer to interact with a ‘de-selfed’ body since the customer’s image can be too ‘intimate’ for them.

One advantage of watching clients is that it can give performers feedback so they can gauge their shows; for example, a customer’s stream can give performers an idea of what turns the customer on or off. Engaging customers in conversation becomes easier
for performers; they can comment on customers’ looks and actions, and thereby provide a more customised experience. With such information, performers can make the show last longer and thus profit more since they are paid by the minute. However, the appropriate amount of interaction in cam-to-cam sessions can be difficult to determine. Too much interaction, such as stares or comments, can make customers self-conscious and uneasy, causing them to leave the room. The cam-to-cam experience not only becomes personal for customers but can also humanise interactions for performers: ‘It helps me feel like I’m not just a robot’ obeying commands such as ‘get naked, show the ass, play with the tits, fiddle the lady parts, grab a toy; and then the guy exits the room, I rinse and repeat’ (Sandra 2012). The cam-to-cam feature gives performers ‘an image to connect with the words on their screen’, which may make them ‘feel more comfortable’ since they can ‘be more interactive’, ‘mak[ing] it feel like we [performers and customers] are together’. Meanwhile, other performers ‘like watching someone else because they get bored of watching themselves’. These affirmations show how a degree of reciprocity might change performers’ perceptions of interactions given the change in the affordance asymmetry, where the performer’s stream is always public and customers are only typed words. By showing themselves, customers become embodied.

Most customers who request cam-to-cam sessions are interested in an inversion of roles: they also want to perform, to be seen. They might actively engage in the performance of their own fetish, which some performers find entertaining. As Cheryl (2012) notes, ‘The only times I have enjoyed a cam-to-cam show is when the guy is doing something crazy or funny’. Apart from fetishes, the most common customer performance is what Kibby and Costello (2001) call the ‘crotch cam’: the close-up display of genitals, resulting from of a lack of erotic posture in men who associate being ‘sexy’ with showing genitalia. Such customers show only a tight zoom (‘mercilessly slamming away at his cock’) by strategically placing their cams at a low angle where the camera fisheye is most flattering. Such an angle makes the penis look larger and the belly smaller—jokingly called ‘Myspace angle for dicks’ by performers. When performers encounter a crotch cam, they roll their eyes in boredom because they consider it mundane. Yet, crotch cams are not only expected but preferred compared to other types of overly intimate interactions. For instance, performers feel uncomfortable when
customers want to ‘please’ them ‘by framing their faces with the cam and starting to lick an imaginary pussy in front of their face’ (Cassandra 2012), or ‘by insisting on putting on any kind of cam show’ for performers. They acknowledge customers’ willingness to interact and try to turn performers on with what they consider sexy. However, giving a visual aid to ‘orgasm in their mutual, frantic masturbations’ is considered a total failure by performers as the customers look rather funny: ‘these men who mime things make me laugh!’ (Mary 2012). As performers argue, cunnilingus is a two-person activity that does not work if one is invisible.

At the other end of the spectrum, some customers only show their faces and barely interact, which performers consider creepy: ‘the only guy I have seen who looked unpleasant [looked that way] because he had a crazy look on his face’ (Katherine 2012). These customers usually refrain from interaction and ‘just sit there completely dressed watching without saying or doing anything. For me, that is worse than not seeing them!’ (Susan 2012). In addition, showing only their faces without giving any clues about what they are doing below the frame diminishes performers’ confidence, making them question the quality of their shows. The fact that performers dislike customers’ efforts to stimulate them but are uncomfortable when customers do not show they are stimulated highlights a separation in terms of the aims of their shows: they aim to please, not be pleased. The ideal situation for performers would be to see both face and penis to know there is a person on the other side, not ‘just a cock without personality’.

However, having both their faces and genitals in the same frame on the screen is risky for customers: their faces give away their identities, whereas their genitals show them in what is considered an intimate moment. As mentioned earlier, the face occupies an important role in connecting the self with the body, being the most identifiable feature of one’s body and self (Waskul 2002:116). Hence, participants in adult live cams do not want to expose their faces simultaneously with their naked bodies (Jones 2008). There is also the issue of screenshots being taken of customers and used to blackmail them. Performers have similar concerns and do not like to show their own faces while performing certain sexual acts. Not that they hide them, but when customers insist on seeing their faces, it makes them wonder whether customers are recording the show, or it makes them feel paranoid about being ‘found out’. Most of the time, however, customers
make such requests because they want to see performers’ expressions, as the face and eyes reveal how much the performers are into what is going on.

For the reasons explained above, exclusive chat rooms tend to be the most expensive of all types since they offer customers the production of customised content. Hence, performers consider exclusive shows a luxury service, especially compared to gold shows. Here, again, performer Agnes draws a comparison with food: gold shows are like fast-food, and hence cheap and readily available to anyone at anytime; whereas exclusive shows are like a restaurant meal - such as filet mignon - that is, an indulgence (2013). Along these lines, performer Rita (2013) says that ‘while a quality steakhouse might have fewer customers, it makes a better product’, and she would rather be steak. Exclusive chats enable performers to create a connection with customers and convert them into regulars.

**Conclusion**

As social relationships and content in the new production and consumption processes under informational capitalism are based on communication, they are shaped by the available communicative modes. Further, participants’ interactions are shaped by the contextual uses of such modes, aiming at particular results (Wertsch 1994:205). In this sense, the ways different modes affect social actions and relationships depend on how they are deployed strategically in relation to an ongoing flow of interactions. Moreover, in a commercial context such as YPMate, each mode of communication acquires its value based on the value of its cultural and informational content. As a consequence, performers become specific labouring subjects who communicate to produce value, modifying and adapting their strategies through interaction; this continual interactivity characterises the content production of adult live cams. However, as a pornographic genre, adult live cams thrive on sexual acts. In this cultural context, the website’s policies regarding nudity create divisions in terms of public–private and free–paid spaces. The context in which the naked body is presented is crucial to how it will be interpreted: website policy relegates nudity to approved commercialised spaces to avoid compromising the structure of social control and to make the activity profitable. Moreover, by confining nudity to private/paid spaces, YPMate commodifies not only naked bodies but also privacy and sexual intimacy related to such images (see chapter 5).
However, the public–private division is related not only to the displayed images in terms of nudity and the potential audience but also, more directly, to the number of people directly participating in the interactions.

Hence, apart from paid/private and free/public, chat rooms can also be divided into those that enable group and individual shows. These chat rooms differ considerably in terms of the content produced. In group shows, interactions are limited to a minimum, leading to shows more focused on the body and catering to mainstream pornographic scripts considered ‘vanilla’. Customers can access performers’ private rooms and naked bodies without further interaction and with little potential to create a personal connection. Meanwhile, one-on-one shows tend to be customised and personal, spurring intimate relations based on individuals’ tastes and fetishes. Since the customer has the performer’s undivided attention, interactions are often intense. Moreover, in these chat rooms, other media are enabled, such as confidential phone lines and cam-to-cam interactions. Customers who opt for these chat rooms are regarded as looking for a more personal type of interaction that goes beyond sexual command over performers. Hence, these sexual transactions involve a monetisation of interactivity and commodification of the interpersonal.

Along these lines, on the YPMate website, the flow of interaction is permeated by negotiations informed by formal and informal rules. These rules and negotiations facilitate the commodification of levels of interaction and communication channels. As seen in the analyses of different chat rooms on the YPMate website, each communication channel has its price. In fact, the website creates different online environments with different types of media access that shape communication in order to commodify it. In addition, performers also establish their own rules; they understand that communication is also part of the content and has its value. Despite such rules, the fact that content is produced through communication makes production more flexible. The YPMate website also enables a variety of chat rooms to achieve such flexibility and cater to any kind of production. For instance, if one does not wish to communicate, there are shows such as Gold Show available that involve minimal interaction. In this sense, there are also chat rooms on adult live cams for ‘massified’ content. So, even in a context where customers are no longer expected to passively consume mass-produced products, they can do so if
they wish. Even when customers are not directly integrated into the production of content, they are still integrated by choosing and giving meaning to the consumption of specific content.

On the other hand, since communication channels acquire value according to the value of their content, more private forms of interaction are higher priced. This indicates that what is being sold through adult live cams is a form of personal connection, which can be drawn in future interactions. This is reinforced by the asymmetry in terms of the modes enabled. This asymmetry is important because it determines identification on a personal level between performers and customers. For instance, the display of performers’ video streams and profiles publicly exposes their identities and creates a self to which users can relate. Hence, performers’ bodies are invested in ‘selfhood’, in contrast to amateur adult live cams where the participants try to detach their identities from their body; after all, ‘body without a face is a body without a self: it is “just another body”’ (Waskul 2002:216). Moreover, the centrality of performers’ video streams creates a more personal environment. However, apart from cam-to-cam sessions and confidential phone line connections, the user’s representation is text-based and mostly anonymous, which gives users great control over what they reveal. Moreover, text-based, mostly anonymous interaction decreases the user’s risk of being outed or rejected. In contrast, in amateur webcams, negotiations are influenced by the high risk of being rejected, as participants might terminate a conversation based on the other participant’s image (video/photo) or description (Jones 2005). This initial uneven distribution of affordances encourages customers to interact in a hyperpersonal way, while also interacting with ‘en-selfed’ bodies, as interacting with a body without a face is ‘not much different from having sex with any other object’ (Waskul 2004:53). In this sense, YPMate’s design—the formal and informal rules on the website and the employment of media—point to a structure that values and encourages social relations.
CHAPTER THREE
MARKETED SOCIAL IDENTITIES

The last chapter presented the production of adult live-cam content in terms of communication among participants. By analysing the different modes through which interactions occur, it was observed how they are commodified according to particular rules. Moreover, such commodification indicates that what is produced and has value in adult live cams goes beyond images: it is a social relation, a personal connection with performers. This idea is reinforced by the fact that websites’ asymmetrical affordances also encourage customers to feel attached to performers. Beyond modes of communication, to understand content in adult live cams it is also necessary to analyse the broader sociocultural environment where these communications and relationships take place. In the case of adult live cams, such interactions are deterritorialised, as participants from all around the world interact in this online environment. Consequently, it is necessary to consider that the production of content in adult live cams is inserted in a context of global practices, where communicative participants might not constitute a homogeneous category.

On adult live cams, thousands of ordinary-looking people are recruited to play innumerable fantasy roles. YPMate has around sixty thousand performers, with several hundred online at any given time. The website promotes itself as having ‘performers of almost every type imaginable!’ and invites users to ‘browse models by sex, age, looks and kinks. View gals, guys, couples and specialty fetish shows’ (YPMate 2015). The same type of promotion is used by all webcam websites in the network YPMate belongs to, reinforcing the marketing around one of the main attractions of adult live cams. This chapter will address performers’ social identities and the way they are ‘worked on’. Judith Donath (1999:56) suggests that new technologies produce new ways of establishing and/or hiding identities online—strategies employed depending on the goals of the individuals comprising the community. Along these lines, this chapter tries to unveil the processes of making, presenting, and consuming identities within the global geography of YPMate. Moreover, it tries to understand how and why specific identities are encouraged or devalued on YPMate, especially in relation to categories such as
gender, sexuality, age, and locality. The main thesis of this chapter is that much of the identity work performed on adult live cams is invested in the construction of a mass and common identity. To analyse the process of this identity work, I examine YPMate performers’ profiles as well as forum discussions related to strategies employed when producing profiles.

On YPMate, users who are looking for a certain type of performer can enter any keyword into the search box to find performers by their descriptions; alternatively, users can browse the expansive list of categories offered on the website. Both systems are created based on information performers give about themselves; when registering on the website, each performer is required to fill in a public profile, choosing from given options. Since the profile is public, details of performers’ identities can be accessed prior to interactions; such information is influenced by and influences how they relate to members. Moreover, performers can alter their profile at will, according to their goals; for instance, they might want to attract a specific kind of traffic or spur a particular type of interaction with members. In this sense, performers’ identity work is an interactional and ongoing endeavour. Here, I argue that performers’ identities are worked on, and they emerge through a long interactional process, taking into account that there is always someone for/with whom the performance is created. Other pieces of information, such as tags and comments created by users, also inform and (help) construct performers’ identities.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of questions of globalisation, which are particularly relevant in a context where content is produced through communication. Then, I introduce the concept of identity work in order to establish a framework to analyse how YPMate performers present and manipulate their identities. In the subsequent sections, the concept is applied to analyses of YPMate performers’ data taken from the website. First, I consider the realms of gender and sexuality to show how YPMate performers reproduce in their identity work mainstream pornography categories and notions thereof. Next, I consider age-related categories as evidence that performers also adjust their identities according to their own personal preferences. For instance, they might adopt a specific cam-age to spur a particular interaction with customers or to best suit their personality. I also analyse ‘ethnicity’ as a category presented by the website,
which is intertwined with notions of ‘class’. Finally, mapping performers’ localities and investigating their strategies for changing their displayed location, the results reveal that performers’ identity work also aims to establish long-term bonds with customers. I finish the chapter by analysing customer-created performers’ tags, which indicate a subjective approach to performers’ identity and a certain degree of customisation according to taste.

4.1 Finding common ground in global communication

As discussed in the last chapter, content production is increasingly based on communication. As a consequence, such production is immediately collective ‘and exist[s] primarily and only in the form of networks and flows’ (Lazzarato 1996:137). Along these lines, content produced in digital media is not constrained by physical walls, like factory production, but flows among users. These flows allow users to reach beyond their immediate personal environments and become active members of global collectives. Hence, another characteristic of the new digital context is that interaction and communication spread through new circuits of collaboration that stretch across nations and continents.

Wellman (2001:11) argues that individuals’ engagement in constructing social identities through media is significantly facilitated by ‘the combination of intense local and extensive global interaction’. Likewise, Jenkins et al. (2009) argue that interplay exists between global and local dimensions in new media practices; such interplay often revolves around fluid ‘affinity spaces’ that bind users together through ordinary aspects of collective identity. Hence, globalisation offers the possibility that, while remaining different, users can discover commonalities that enable them to communicate and act together (Hardt & Negri 2005:xiv).

For Hardt and Negri (2005:148), the ‘common’ is that upon which content production is based, the manner in which it takes place, and its end result. As the production of content is based on cooperation and communication, a common ground is both presupposition and result. There can be no cooperation without an existing commonality, and the result of cooperative production is the creation of a new commonality. Similarly, communication cannot take place without a common basis, and the result of communication is a new common expression. In other words,
‘communication, collaboration and cooperation are not only based on the common but they in turn produce the common in an expanding spiral relationship’ (Hardt & Negri 2005: xv). According to Hardt and Negri (2005), this commonality includes the many singular conditions of each participant in terms of local situations and lived experiences. In this sense, the world’s socioeconomic divisions complicate communication and social relations themselves. For instance, as networked commons proceed based on social communicative capacities, communication, along with the language that accompanies it, can become a crucial point of struggle in the insertion into the productive system of the information age. Below, these struggles are analysed in terms of performers’ identity work.

4.2 Working out identities online

This introductory section provides a brief overview of scholarship related to identity, with a special focus on online identities, identity work, and the formation of hierarchies in the context of online sexual transactions and online pornography. In this chapter, I use the notion of ‘social identity’ to refer to a person’s self-concept based on his or her perceived membership in social groups (Hogg & Vaughan 2002). An individual’s sense of belonging, however, is not only a matter of self-identification (Calvert 2002) but also of social comparison; that is, belonging depends on one’s perception of the qualities that characterise and differentiate a group from others (other groups, out-group people, society at large) in a continuum between sameness and differentiation (Bosma et al. 1994). In this sense, social identities are, in principle, shared among members of a group. The process through which identities are constructed is conventionally called ‘identity work’ (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). This process of identity construction generally involves an element of choice and intentionality, as identities are negotiated or worked out through interactions within the social situations of everyday life. The process of identity work, hence, is highly dependent on the social contexts in which it takes place and the tools people have available in these situations with which to construct their identities. Drawing from postmodern notions, this process of identity formation is seen as ongoing, open-ended, and flexible, resulting in fragmented and multiple identities.
Sherry Turkle (1995:18) has proposed that ‘technology is bringing a set of ideas associated with postmodernism’, and in this way, technology constitutes ‘another element that had contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity’ (178). Her argument is based on the fact that in online environments, users have different means of expressing and exposing identity as compared to face-to-face interactions. These different possibilities are mainly due to the mediated and often disembodied nature of online interaction. Disembodiment gives users a certain degree of control over their self-disclosure, as they are detached from their physical body and the identities defined by it. In this sense, users are able to construct identities and manage the impressions others have of them more easily online. For instance, asserting a specific identity can be merely a matter of editing one’s information in public online profiles.

These notions of online identity were formulated mostly in early studies on the subject, which focused on identity construction in anonymous, disembodied, text-based environments, such as MUDs (multi-user dungeons), chat rooms, and bulletin boards. One example is Turkle’s (1995) influential study of MUD players, where she showed how such people explored a side of themselves online that remained in the background or even taboo in offline relations. Another seminal study, Reid’s (1991) analysis of Internet relay chat (IRC) users, was among the first to describe online gender-swapping (presenting as a person of the opposite gender). In terms of text-based cybersex chat rooms, somewhat more recent works like Waskul (2003) demonstrate that users often associate themselves with self-selected labels aiming to convey crafted meanings, choosing identities with meanings that conform to idealised cultural expectations. Studying chats in a North American context, Waskul uses the example of bra size and how supposedly female users would tend to exaggerate it to be perceived as more attractive. In that sense, Waskul suggests that ‘when the body is transformed into a discursive performance without necessary commitment to the physically real, performances become ideal—a reflection of that which is culturally and socially defined as appropriate and desirable’ (2003:88). In other words, in a context where everyone has the power to be beautiful, users construct stigma-free appearances to compete for potential partners on a level playing field with others (Reid 1994).
What to say, however, about other spaces where users can also adopt images in the form of avatars, photos, or video streams? Nakamura (2002) remarks that the shift from mostly text-based virtual communities to graphics-based ones has had a tremendous effect on how identity is performed and constructed—especially because it challenges and changes notions of anonymity. In her research on MUDs, where users can create visual representations of their identities through avatars, Nakamura (2013) argues that social prejudices, especially those related to race, are still carried into online spaces. Elsewhere, Biever (2006) shows that the use of conventions involving stereotypically gendered bodies is also characteristic of forms of online sexual play using avatars. In the case of online contexts where users’ actual bodies are present, such as webcams, Waskul (2004:15) suggests that the creation of identity seems to be ‘as free and restricted as in everyday life’. Taken together, these studies indicate that although online identities have the potential to subvert preconceived notions, in some contexts they still tend to reflect offline structures, because users tend to manipulate their identities to be perceived by others in a specific way, emphasising the relationship between community, technology, and identity (Amaral & Monteiro 2002; Jäkälä & Berki 2004). This link with community is important, because users who make up an online community actively interpret, evaluate, and react to others’ online self-presentation and presence.

However, as most online environments are open to a global public, it is hard to know for sure who one’s audience is in a given case: ‘people never know who all the readers of their messages are’ (Baym 1994:145). Accordingly, users tend to adopt an online identity acceptable to a mass audience, and their ‘individual concreteness dissolves in favour of the fluid, the homogeneous and the universal’ (Nguyen & Jon 1996:104). As a result, instead of being a haven from prejudicial treatment, the Internet can allow users to hide their differences and particularities in order to avoid negative reactions from others; thus, stigmatised differences can remain unproblematised (Dell 2008) as identities become homogenised. This form of identity work is intrinsically connected with offline identities and the structures constituting, supporting, expressing, and transmitting them—including the reproduction of offline identity structures of gender, sexuality, and race in online spaces (Kolko et al. 2003; Consalvo 2003; Nakamura 2013). As such, it is unsurprising that studies suggest that when users tailor their identities, they are more
likely to project a new identity conforming to social norms, constructing self-enactments and body performances that conform to culturally prescribed standards of beauty or sexiness, reproduce rather than subvert conventions, and support hierarchies of gender, age, and embodiment (Waskul et al. 2000; Slater 1998).

These conventions and hierarchies are established according to the communities and contexts in which users are inserted. In any given context, there are identities that are perceived as more desirable. In the case of adult live cams, the ‘context’ in this sense is that of sexual transactions within a global market. According to Rubin (1984), the most desirable sexual identities usually follow a specific hierarchy: at the top, as the most accepted form, is heterosexual monogamous coupling, while below it are, among others, queer desire, masturbation, desire aided by pornography or sex toys, desire for partners from different generations, and desire expressed or fulfilled via commercial sex. According to Rubin, this variety of sexual desires relegated to positions below the top is discriminated against, based on righteous moralising discourses. In her own words,

Hierarchies of sexual value—religious, psychiatric, and popular—function in much the same way as do ideological systems of racism, ethnocentrism, and religious chauvinism. They rationalize the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble. (Rubin 1984:280)

Studies of text-based sexual interactions have reinforced the idea that these identities tend to ‘conform to and reinforce mainstream cultural expectations’ (Lynch 2013:153), as male users broadcast virility and female users sexual attractiveness. When visual cues are added, as in amateur webcams, participants tend to assign themselves online identities that are often self-objectifying—as expressed; for example, in their nicknames and the way they project their bodies (Jones 2008; Waskul 2004). Along these lines, according to Waskul (2004), the identity work of webcam participants is more likely to promote or reinforce cultural norms—to reproduce conventional gendered heteronormative scripts—than to offer alternatives. In terms of pornography specifically, these observations largely hold true: it, too, tends to be based on, and to reinforce, such identity categories and hierarchies.
According to Paasonen (2010b), mainstream heterosexual pornography relies on divisions based on identity categories often tied to hierarchies and relations of control. Further, when pornography is involved in online commercial transactions, the market provides new resources for the development of sexual identities and arenas for presenting those identities. For instance, O’Toole (1998:285) emphasised that ‘it would be nice to think that the views of the users could influence the style of the commercial, hard-core product. A new connectivity could find pornography becoming more responsive to what users favour’. O’Toole further noted that user-oriented pornography could be the basis of an increasingly departmentalised and niche-oriented pornography, as it would reflect myriad tastes. The new connectivity O’Toole envisioned is available today through adult live cams, where performers are highly responsive to users’ desires, even when it comes to the performers’ identity work.

On YPMate, performers can choose their own identity, although only by checking boxes on a pre-existing list established by the website. In her analysis of MUDs, White (2003) argued that the process of checking boxes serves to categorise, order, and shape the individual’s self-conception; that is, it forces individuals to fit into and self-represent specific identities. On the other hand, performers’ identities can also be perceived as fluid within these limits, in that they can be changed at will. Such fluidity gives performers the ability to adapt to users’ demands, showing evidence of a hierarchy of desire. Moreover, the pornographic categories displayed on the first page of the website are created according to performers’ identities. Such categories are used to guide users through the otherwise unmanageable mass of performers. They are not exclusive but cumulative since performers can be advertised in more than one, allowing them to be marketed to different audiences and increasing their visibility. For instance, a performer can be placed simultaneously in the categories ‘Asian’, ‘anal’, ‘housewife’, and ‘blonde’; hence, it is very likely that there is an intersectionality of power structures regarding these multiple identities. When YPMate performers join the website or change their profiles, categories can be created or erased to accommodate new tendencies; the site aims to continuously account for performer diversity while also trying to organise and create power dynamics that are obviously divisional.
Moreover, a YPMate performer’s identity is built through multiple modes: cues are given in text-based formats—as through nicknames, chat messages, and profiles—as well as through image and audio, such as display pictures and video streams. Textual and image modes actually work in concert here since, for example, text-based narratives function as a framework through which performers’ images are looked at. This process can be understood as follows: first, performers self-assess their identities when they fill out their profiles by selecting pre-set options provided by the website, which means their identities are partially constructed through textual discourse. A remark is necessary here: the options come with no guidelines about their meaning, and performers are expected to already know the conventions of each category. The same goes for members, who often search for performers using the search function and categorisation system available on the website, both reliant on performers’ profiles. As a result of this way of searching according to categories and keywords, users compare the information on performers’ profiles with their images and audio. Hence, performers’ images as sources of identity are also read against the identities presented in the profiles. This means performers’ images are framed in relation to expectations created by their profiles, and their bodies are looked at through the categories stipulated by the website. The ways users perceive performers’ identities through these frames are reflected in the tags they create for performers, freely applying keywords to direct or warn other users who are looking for something specific.

Having defined my framework, I will next discuss how identities are presented on YPMate. In the following sections, I examine data gathered from performers’ public profiles to understand the process of identity work on the website. As discussed above, the multimodal aspect of adult livecams justifies the method of analysis and the data examined in this chapter since text seems to be an important constituent of identity on YPMate. White (2003:19–23) has already highlighted the ways (sexual) objects themselves affect what participants see. Similarly, regarding webcams, categories and profiles serve to frame and guide how users should see performers. My analysis focuses on performers’ gender/sexuality, age, locality, and ethnicity since these are often considered some of the primary categories to which people are assigned in face-to-face communication (Brewer & Lui 1989). An example of the importance of such categories
is the fact that in text-based chats, users often start conversations by asking other participants for their age, sex, and location (a/s/l) (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam 2003). My analysis will show that most identities on YPMate are similar to those presented in mainstream pornography, but they are also crafted according to performers’ preferences and target long-term interactions with customers.

4.3 Gender and sexuality

In this section, I will analyse performers’ gender and sexual preferences, as displayed in their profiles, in order to understand the factors that influence their identity work in the adult live-cam context. The aim is to show the different levels of identity manipulation anchored in performers’ orientation/identity and in their practices/performances. Moreover, this section also explores the goals of such identity work, which are mainly based on members’ and performers’ preferences.

4.3.1 Orientation/identities

The gendered body is one of the first markers presented in pornography; this is suggested on the first page of YPMate, where there is a division between ‘girls’ and ‘guys’ cams. Analysing YPMate’s performer data (Figure 4), we can see that the division between girl and guy cams is a result of the predominance of performers in those two categories: the majority of the performers identify as female, followed by males, and then male–female couples last.

These figures appear to correspond to the actual self-identification of performers since there are no accounts of them practicing gender swapping. That is because the performer’s image—centrally, the (naked) body—is an important component of adult live cams; and as in most traditional pornography, notions of gender here seem based on biological perceptions, anchored in and fixed on the performers’ genitalia. Although this point is not discussed here in detail, it is important to note that the website category ‘trans male to female’ is an exception to this rule, since performers in this category appear in the section for girls’ cams, independently of their genitals.
The data on performers’ gender can be compared to the findings of previous studies on amateur webcams. Senft (2008) highlighted the predominance of women in non-adult amateur webcams while Waskul’s (2004) research on amateur adult webcams estimated that men outnumbered women. Waskul (2002) also observed that this shortage of women on free adult live cams empowered them, as they could reject multiple suitors when deciding whom to display their bodies to. In contrast, paid webcams seem to be an equilibrium market point, where women perform commercialised sexual content, and money mediates the supply and demand factors between genres.

![Figure 4 YPMate performers by gender](chart.png)

Although it is impossible to provide an accurate breakdown of YPMate customers by gender, the predominance of female performers can be associated with a demand for females, while male performers are often overlooked. An indication that YPMate user traffic is mainly composed of heterosexual males is found in performers’ reports, which always refer to customers in masculine terms: ‘heaps of guys would like to go to exclusive chat, but the website is not letting anybody in’ (Cindy 2011). A consequence of this demographic fact is that male performers receive less traffic than female performers, as Esther (2011) recounts: ‘users’ traffic is slower in the male category, and their earnings might vary dramatically’. It is generally acknowledged that in mainstream pornography, content is predominantly aimed at male heterosexual consumers (McNair 2002:43), since they are significantly more likely to view pornography (Lo & Wei 2002:6; Walsh 1999:779); women make up only around 10% to 20% of consumers (McKee et al. 2008:27).
As a result, the content of mainstream pornography is usually directed toward heterosexual male satisfaction and toward the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey 1975). The male-gaze concept was first employed to describe asymmetrical gender power in films. At the core of the male gaze theory is the assertion that heterosexual men are usually the producers and consumers of movie images, and, as a result, they objectify and frame women’s images according to their desires. Here, sexual objectification means perceiving individuals merely as objects for sexual pleasure, defining them by their body parts rather than their personality.

However, research on the gaze and webcams in general (non-adult and amateur alike) has noted that webcasters have the power to frame their own images and reveal to the gaze only what they want (Senft 2008). For instance, White (2003) points out that in webcams the male gaze is destabilised as women achieve power over the production of their own image. On YPMate, performers are active agents who produce their own images by employing various technologies. While early webcams had a restricted image resolution and low frame rate, performers today use HD webcams and wireless devices that allow them to frame their images from a distance, as well as change the angles and colours.

A primary example of the ways performers exert control over their images is found in their use of background colours and lighting to change their skin tone. According to most performers, lighting can cover up flaws and make them look far better than in person. Combined with certain background colours and colours of clothing, lighting can make tanned skin look more tan and fair skin less ‘washed out’. A performer’s control over the image goes beyond the image itself and can change the customer’s perception of a performance. Performer Angela (2011), for example, describes how to fake penetration using a different angle:

First, the basic penetration can be faked by pointing the webcam directly to the dildo, holding it with your first in the middle and just packing like you are penetrating, but in fact just do it in the air. By using this angle, customers will not be able to see the whole length. If you are on your knees and riding the dildo, you can just lay it behind you.
The abovementioned studies on webcams and the male gaze have focused on the ongoing processes of negotiation in a user-generated context, but they have rarely explored it in relation to traditional notions of markets and exchanges. According to Gill (2011:258), in a market context, the male gaze is internalised and shifted into a ‘self-policing narcissistic gaze’, as women have agency but are compelled to exert it to become a particular self, which resembles ‘the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography’. Gill goes on to say this self-transformation is linked to a neoliberal injunction ‘to render one’s life knowable and meaningful’ (2007:260). On YPMate, performers’ self-transformation is intrinsically related to market logic, as they aim to attract user traffic and convert it into paying traffic.

However, the male-gaze concept is based on the problematic assumption that there is a monolithic and heteronormative male category. Attwood further acknowledges the naivety of presupposing one mass of consumer, be it male or female: ‘sexually explicit media takes on a range of meanings; different decodings and uses are reported and consumers display both critically distanced and highly engaged audience behaviour’ (Attwood 2007:5). In the case of adult live cams, it is possible to assume that customers are mostly varied and dispersed geographically. While a great number of performers try to cater to a monolithic and homogenous male category, performers who diverge from the curve seem to succeed. This is especially true in the adult live-cam context where customisation and fetishisation are among the appeals of the genre. Besides, in adult live cams, customers also consider performers’ personalities (especially when trying to connect with them, as discussed in the previous chapter), which shows that they might go beyond the objectification presumed in the male gaze.

While the notion of the male gaze cannot be applied literally to adult live cams, the notion of male traffic permeates the performer’s imagery. According to Beth (2011), male performers’ traffic is mainly composed of gay men: ‘guys’ cams paying customers are mainly going to be gay guys and most of them are going to ask performers to fuck their asses or at the very least suck a dildo!’ In this sense, male traffic seems to be also predominant in guys’ cams, which are, however, putatively directed at a different sexual preference.
4.3.2 Practices/performances

Beyond the image, the identity of adult live-cam performers is also forged according to their performances. In this case, such identities are no longer anchored in body/image but in performers’ acts and discourses (since acts are usually performed solo or just verbally suggested). A clear example is the performer’s sexuality.

To cater to the sexual preferences of gay men, male performers tend to adopt a sexual identity that will allow them to practice such acts. Figure 5 shows that two-thirds of male performers identify as gay or bisexual; performer Amber (2011) trenchantly comments: ‘although a male performer is straight, I think he should list himself as homosexual? Or at least bisexual?’ This comment shows that male performers represent their sexual preferences on their profiles according to member/market demand, resonating with theories of ‘gay-for-pay’ (Escoffier 2003; Moorman 2010), where straight male pornography performers do gay pornography because it is more profitable.

![Figure 5 YP Mate male performers’ expressed sexual preference](image)

Manipulating (the presentation of) sexual preferences is possible because they are not fixed according to performers’ image, but are related to the ‘act’ part of camming—that is, to sexual acts: one is what one does. In the case of male performers, to choose in their profiles the sexual preference of bisexual or gay is associated with willingness to perform particular kinds of acts, in particular anal sex (usually with toys, as less frequently with other men): ‘assuming a male performer is going to get mostly male
customers, they will want to see anal performances. If the male performer is getting mostly female customers, it probably will not be an issue’ (Rose 2011).

Female performers’ sexual preference is also influenced by members’ desires, but in different ways. Although YPmate displays on the first page a ‘lesbian’ category, the majority of performers (around 66%) declare themselves as bisexual, while only 0.4% says they are gay (Figure 6). These data are consistent with the existence of a pornographic ideal wherein female sexuality is perceived as open, fluid, and oscillating (Williams 1992:253). On YPmate, this phenomenon also produces gay-for-pay performers, as described by Megan (2010): ‘I had a girl come to my chat-room and she was being truly nice. But as soon as she read my profile, she got very grouchy over the fact that it said I was straight!’ In another example, Sue (2012) describes how male customers still want to re-enact the fluid sexuality fantasy even with straight performers: ‘My profile says I am straight but not only do I get the “what kind of dick you like, baby?” all night, I am also frequently asked if I have girl on girl fantasies, if I have ever had experiences with girls, etc’. Sue’s narrative shows that performers’ declared sexual preference can definitely alter their interactions with customers, as also illustrated by a gay woman performer who says it is easy to tell when she is lying about her sexuality when ‘I try to say what I want in a guy, haha. I prefer talking about what I like about women’ (Carla 2012). Carla’s account shows how performers refuse to assert themselves as lesbians since it would serve to stabilise their identities, which would go against the pornographic ideal. In her case, instead of gay-for-pay, we can talk about ‘straight-for-pay’, where gay female performers are pressured by market demand to adopt an ambiguous sexuality that usually caters to heterosexual men. Hence, the predominance of self-identified bisexuals seems to be a way to conform to and depict a fluid, hypertrophied, and insatiable sexuality (Kangasvuoto 2007). Performers declare themselves bisexual in order to cater to the widest possible range of members: ‘Silly woman! All female performers are bisexual, even if they are not, they are!’ (Melinda 2010). Along these lines, market logic also erases members’ gender or sexuality in the eyes of performers: ‘I could not imagine declining money from anyone. […] [My] work is not to be attracted to someone. My work here is to be attractive to everyone’ (Tamara 2013). This observation aligns with studies of sex work, such as Perkins and Lovejoy
(2007:136), where sex workers ‘treat prostitution as “work” and not as an expression of their sexuality or sexual desires’.

![Figure 6 YPMate Female performers and sexuality](image)

Such sexual flexibility is possible because, like male performers, most female performers perform solo shows. Hence, their sexuality is not connected to specific acts, and assessing oneself as bisexual is a kind of mental game and promotional tactic, not an actual practice. For instance, in another comment, it is suggested that customers also play with their sexuality on YPMate to match the lesbian fantasy: ‘I have had “girls” give me tips in my chat and take me to paid shows, but I could not confirm if they were indeed girls because there was never any cam-to-cam session. Maybe it was a guy jerking off on lesbian role-play’ (Tamara 2013). As Williams (1992:406) has noted, this kind of ‘lesbian number’ has often been presented for males in straight pornography, such that it is ‘contained and consumed by masculine heterosexual frames’. These elements show the conventions of ‘pornonormativity’, a concept developed by Slater (1998) to address the repetition of hetero-porn conventions in online environments, such as Internet relay chat (IRC). According to Slater (1998:99), pornonormativity describes the way online images are ‘organized and policed according to the conventions of offline mainstream (heterosexual) pornography’. This can also be understood as a visual expression of ‘heteroflexibility’, whereby sex between women is coded as a fashionable add-on to heterosexuality (Wilkinson 1996; Diamond 2005; Gill 2007).

In summary, the data related to gender and sexual preference show that identity work on adult live cams is related to both image and act. In a context where online
performers are embodied, gender seems static and anchored in body image, while sexual preferences, in contrast, are more fluid in relation to both sexual practices and marketing aimed at specific fantasies. The differentiation of gender and sexual identities also determines the respective degrees of identity work enabled by them: market pressure determines the degree to which people of different genders can participate in the market and make a profit, while sexuality is more flexible but also often adapted to conform to market demands. I further noted that the choice of sexual preference by male performers comes with the expectation that they will take part in certain kinds of shows or acts. These findings provide important insights into the structures that constrain performers’ identities and the reproduction of these structures in cam work through the influence of customers’ desires. The next section will focus on how performers create identities related to their age.

4.4 How old is your personality?

When filling in their profiles and choosing their online identities, performers are influenced by more than their own body image and by customers’ demands. In some identity categories, performers have more freedom to assert their identities and can do so in terms of personal preferences. One example is the age-related categories analysed in this section. Performers’ personal preferences in terms of age are mainly related to the types of interaction a given identity spurs, as well as how performers feel about presenting themselves in a particular way.

The relevance of age in the adult webcam genre can be observed immediately on the first page of YPMate: not only do performers’ thumbnails display their age at the bottom of the photos but age-related categories are also available for both genders. In the section for girls’ cams, age-related categories are divided into ‘teens+18’, with performers 18 to 19 years old; ‘co-eds’, a term referring to college girls who are usually in the range of 20 to 30; ‘mature’, with performers aged 30 to 50; and ‘granny’, consisting of performers older than 50. In the guys’ section, the age division has a different nomenclature and range: ‘frat boy’, which includes those aged 20 to 30; ‘daddy’, which refers to performers typically 30 and over; and ‘mature’, which includes males over 40. These categories refer to a pre-existing taxonomy in the general
mainstream pornographic vernacular, whose function is to make performers’ subjectivities comprehensible and legible via these age brackets (Paasonen et al 2007: 70).

Existing research recognises the important role played by age-related categories in the consumption of pornography online (Vannier et al. 2014). For instance, Ogas and Gaddam (2011) found that one in six searches for sexual material included an age-related adjective, with two main age groups in evidence: teens and women in their 40s or 50s. These results match those observed in the most recent statistics for the website Pornhub (Pornhub 2015), which shows ‘teen’ as the second most searched term on the website, while ‘step mom’ occupy the third position, and ‘MILF’ and ‘mom’ the fifth and sixth positions, respectively. Regarding webcams, Waskul (2004) points out that some amateur webcam environments are built on age stereotypes, particularly that of an elder mistress with her boy-toy.

The prevalence of these age-related categories may be attributed to the fact that pornography depicting young adults in their twenties is considered standard; thus, users do not need to specifically search for them. Indeed, in a study of the stars of commercially released pornographic films, Millward (2013) found that the average age of women when they got into pornography was 22 years old, while the average debut age for men was 24. However, it is also important to emphasise that MILF—an acronym for ‘mother/mom/mum I’d like to fuck’—is an exponentially growing segment of the sex industry. Introduced to the broader public in the 1999 movie American Pie, the MILF category is thus a product of US popular culture. Mature adult performers have benefitted not only from a surprising extension of their careers but also from the rise of a new desire for bodies that are alternatives to ‘hot teens’ or ‘barely legal’ performers. The MILF represents sexual experience, active desire, and sex with no strings attached, although the term is sometimes hard to pin down in terms of its connotations.

An analysis of performers’ cam age (presented age) on YPMate reveals that the majority, independent of gender, fall into the 20–30 range (Figure 7). A possible straightforward explanation for these data is that these performers really are in their twenties, which would be supported by previous data, as cited above (Millward 2013). However, this overlooks the possible role of identity fluidity in webcams as performers
manipulate their online ages to address the demand for younger performers, attempting to avoid certain types of interaction and performances while also conforming to their personal perceptions of their ages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 20</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 20 to 30</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 30 to 40</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 40 to 50</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 50 to 60</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 60 to 70</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 and more</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Figure 7 YPMate performers by age**

As the performers’ accounts show, performers adapt their cam age according to market demand, the same as with their stated sexual preference. It is a common perception that customers use the search function to narrow performers according to age: ‘I really do not want to miss out on men who search by age, so I decided to say I was younger’ (Marcia 2011). As this statement suggests, customers tend to prefer young performers, and altering one’s age is perceived to directly influence the amount of user traffic to one’s room, which can then affect one’s earnings: ‘users tend to search for performers who are younger. I certainly noticed a decline in my bookings once I changed from the 18–25 years bracket to the 26–30 one. I changed it back and bookings went up again’ (Sharon 2011).

As a consequence of age manipulation, the number of performers in their twenties is artificially magnified, which in turn creates fierce competition in this age bracket and makes it harder for performers to stand out. Thus, to avoid getting lost in the mass, some performers consider adopting an age that does not fall into the twenties bracket: ‘I prefer being in a smaller age group with less performers - say, with one hundred performers - for the guys to sort through’ (Vera 2011). In this respect, some performers might even adopt the inverse strategy of saying they are older than their actual age: ‘I can swear one girl on Streamate claims to be older than she is (either that or she just has amazing genetics or work)’ (Lydia 2011).
Another advantage of adopting an older cam age is the ability to cater to customers who have an interest in ‘cougar’ or ‘MILF’ material: ‘I might start saying I am over 35 years old so I can have the MILF market’ (Georgia 2011). Generally, the term MILF is associated with women aged 40 to 50, regardless of whether they actually have children. Such a connection with older women has its origins in the age-play dynamic of older women with younger lovers. The term came from teenage boys fantasising about their friends’ moms; thus, to qualify as a MILF by those standards, one would have to be ‘old enough to pass as the mother of someone who is, in turn, old enough to have friends who want to fuck you’ (Alicia 2012). Hence, some customers relate it to a specific age bracket that can be played by performers: ‘Do young customers search for the term MILF, or do they search for 30-year-old performers? Because some guys just assume both things are the same. And MILF is such a popular term that it could be used to get more traffic’ (Anna 2012).

Hence, although most performers change their age to fall into a ‘young age bracket’, customers have a growing interest in other brackets. This market tension reveals a division between homogenised mainstream commercial pornography—mostly represented by younger performers—and niche categories, many of them related to older age groups. Along these lines, Vares (2009:505) notes that images of ‘sexy oldies’ of both genders are increasingly visible in the media due to a ‘cultural scientific shift in which lifelong sexual function has become a primary component of achieving successful ageing in general’. At the same time, a wider range of images of children in the media that before seemed innocent has become increasingly prone to being denounced as child pornography (Attwood 2014:5).

However, MILF can also be used to describe any woman who has given birth, regardless of age, and who is still sexually attractive. Since the term is so popular, even teen-mother performers associate themselves with it. Hence, on YPMate, the claim of being a ‘fresh’ MILF in one’s twenties could be correlated to the phenomenon of teen moms and also to the ascension of other categories, such as pregnant women, to the mainstream. Performers who claim to belong to this category tend to refer to motherhood and the family, as in the example below:
I am only 21 but I have two children. My customers know I am a mother and they love it. They call me MILF all the time. And I get more money saying I am a mother too. I think my customers like knowing I have kids because it shows them there is more to me than just being a performer to them. (Tarah 2012)

As seen above, market demand is an important factor performers take into consideration when setting their cam age. However, they also consider the kinds of interactions and performances to which specific age categories may be found conducive. According to Russo (2002:92), pornography capitalises on age hierarchies based on gendered values and sexual dynamics of power and powerlessness. In this sense, young women are seen as the most sexually enticing and attractive erotic objects for adult men’s consumption, because they are portrayed as more vulnerable. Therefore, despite customers’ preference for young women, performers tend not to choose any age under 20, as some customers might consider younger performers inexperienced and/or try to take advantage of them because of their age: ‘I prefer to look older, since customers think they can take advantage of younger performers’ (Nora 2011). Along these lines, being in the teen category might attract customers who the performers regard as undesirable: ‘First, I said I was a nineteen-year-old college baby. At the time, I was twenty-six. Some people believed it, but I noticed I was getting a bunch of perverts, and I was not prepared for that, so I raised my age some years (Nina 2011). On the other hand, belonging to the teen category can also repel some customers and raise criticism. Margie (2011) gives an example of how customers censured her for being too young to be on an adult live cam: ‘I am eighteen years old and I have just started camming. However, I say to people that I am twenty. I do so only because in my first week of camming I heard from so many folks, “You are way too young to be working here”, or, “My underage daughter is almost your age”. Besides, YPMate puts specific constraints on teen performers regarding the legality of their activities: ‘I did not keep it at a lower age because I wanted to be able to drink on cam without trouble’ (Olga 2011). The above reports show how expectations related to age categories influence interactions between performers and users, and hence play an important role in performers’ identity work.
Conversely, some performers refrain from adopting an older age because it might make them feel older: ‘In fact, I hate it when I get a 20-year-old guy with a cougar fetish in a private show. I think I should not care because I am making money; however, I just want to yell, “I am not much older than you!”’ (Cassandra 2011). Hence, although performers usually adapt to meet market demands or to avoid or reinforce a certain type of customer interaction, they often consider the need to adopt an age that conforms to their (real) personality and (online) persona as a stronger factor:

I listed myself as a 24-year-old because that’s what I thought would get me customers. Then I realised it did not fit my personality; hence, I decided to put my age as older than I was to attract a MILF market. However, not one person believed I was that old, so I thought, fuck it, I am using my real age. (Erika 2011)

Thus, not all indicated ages are manipulated since some performers believe that asserting their true age can work in their favour. Performer Violet (2011) explains her process for establishing a cam age as follows: when she changed to a younger age, people started saying she had too much cellulite for a teen; changing back to her actual age made her body acceptable and even caused it to be seen as more attractive—as ‘well kept’ for her age. In this sense, keeping his or her real age can also help a performer to avoid feeling worn out: ‘when everything is taken into consideration, the more comfortable you are with yourself, you will feel better and it will come across on the webcam’ (Natasha 2012). Misrepresenting one’s age can also create other complications with regular long-term customers; for instance, they might feel betrayed by such deception: ‘I believe men would prefer a realistic over a made-up age any day’ (Sandy 2011). There is also the possibility of being ‘caught’ by regulars, especially if they follow performers over the years, as performers tend to keep their profile ages unaltered once they find an age that works for them. In this context, being truthful might make regular customers ‘feel special, as it makes them think they are more important to you, since you are not lying to them’ (Olga 2011).
Thus, performers seem to play with their age within a range affected by market factors, since their identity depends greatly on how their age is perceived:

I am 28 now, and my real age is displayed on my profile: I get both men who are very excited by how ‘young’ I am and those who are excited about how ‘old’ I am. Guys have assumed I was lying in both directions—that I was really only 19 (yay) and that I was in fact 35 (fucker). I have had guys say that they want my innocent teen look and guys tell me I am a sexy MILF. (Mary 2012)

In addition, since age perception is fluid and constructed in the perceptions of both customers and performers, age is also presented in shows in another way: as age playing. For example, for categories evoking parenthood (such as ‘MILF’ or ‘daddy’), it is irrelevant whether the performers actually have children. What counts most is not parenthood, (real) age, or any other characteristic but the fact that the customer seeks a model to fulfil a fantasy. Although such flexibility is limited by the image—since an 18-year-old ‘MILF’ or an elderly ‘frat boy’ might run the risk of being seen as absurd—these limits seem quite flexible. One example is the case of customers who want to be treated as toddlers and wear diapers:

In a MILF fantasy of a younger guy sexing an older woman, it does not matter if the guy is currently in his forties and the woman is 32. He is living again in his head a time when he was 14 and he lusted after his friend’s mother—who was in her middle or late thirties and bore a remarkable resemblance to you. (Angie 2012)

This section reviewed the key aspects of age choice among performers on YPMate: market demand, interactions, prospective interactions, and personal choice. The results provide important insights into the process of negotiation and the fluidity of performers’ online identities, which in turn are closely related to their aim of connecting with customers. By this token, the strategy of choosing an age that is more marketable has the downside of creating a homogenous group of performers in terms of self-declared
age categories. Moreover, establishing a cam age that is considered more marketable can go against performers’ desire to be comfortable with and closer to their (cam) personality. This situation highlights a tension between the fluidity of self-expression and market constraints. The section that follows moves on to consider another important aspect of identity that performers play with: geography, as represented in particular by the location they broadcast from.

4.5 Geography of understanding

As shown above regarding various identity categories, performers’ identity work is heavily influenced by the composition of site traffic. For instance, partly because this traffic seems to be (male-) gendered and mainly heterosexual, female performers who claim to be bisexual are prevalent on YPMate. However, another characteristic of adult live-cam traffic that influences performers’ identity work is that it is composed of a mass audience in an expanded global public/private sphere. As a consequence, performers tailor their identities to global demand, and although categories for nationality (national identity) are absent on YPMate, performers are categorised according to their present locality.

In what follows, I will argue that performers on YPMate manipulate locality to meet customer demands. Such manipulation spurs new geographies on the website, creating, for example, a division between ‘local’ performers—a category composed especially of Americans but also extendable to all native English speakers—and ‘foreigners’ (the rest of the world). Moreover, I will discuss customers’ preferences in terms of not only physical proximity but also shared cultural background, factors that are considered important for creating a sense of connection. The aim is to show that such preferences go beyond their manifestations in mainstream pornography; they are intrinsically tied to interactive pornography, taking into consideration not only its capacity to open new means of communication and interaction with performers but also the possibility of creating interpersonal relationships throughout time.

In his analysis of identity in cyberspace, Lipton (1996:343) argues that the construction of self is not circumscribed to local communities; instead, the range of potential interactions online becomes infinite, with ‘so many “others”, so many unique
identities to choose from’. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in this theme, especially with the movement enabled by globalisation. According to the collected data, YPMate performers are located in at least 130 different countries spread over the world. Despite this diversity, Figure 8 shows that the majority say they are in the United States (57%), followed by Colombia (11%) and Romania (5.6%). The predominance of American-based performers might be explained by the fact that the ‘US continues to dominate pornography production and distribution in general’ (Paasonen 2011b:434). It might also have to do with easier access to tools such as computers and the Internet, America’s especially open culture regarding pornography, or even the greater ease of signing up to YPMate using English-language documents. However, an analysis of performers’ accounts suggests that the most likely reason for US predominance is that performers’ displayed country locations do not necessarily reflect their actual physical positions on the globe. Performers can self-assert their locations: ‘Although I do not live in the United States, I have my display country set to the US, even though my ISP is definitely not US’ (Jodi 2013). Moreover, performers can also block users in specific regions from accessing their video stream; that is, they become invisible to specific members depending on their location. As a result of these two strategies employed by performers, the online geography of YPMate is fluid, and it is conditioned by market demand, as shown below.

Figure 8 YPMate performers by country
One tactic performers use to change their ‘online location’ employs a feature on the YPMate website called ‘geographic restriction’. Geo-restriction makes it possible for performers to exclude users from a specific ‘zone’, restricting their access to rooms and blocking them from seeing the performer’s profile. As one performer explains, it works ‘like DVD zones, where a person cannot see US movies if they are in Europe because they are in a different zone’ (Amelia 2012). The blocked areas can be countries, cities, or US states (this only applies if one is based in the US); such geo-restrictions can be edited or removed at one’s discretion. Geo-restriction limits performers’ exposure to certain users for the sake of privacy. First, it removes a performer’s presence from public areas; it makes the performer invisible to searchers and on the site generally for non-logged-in members. It disallows any advertising, main-paging, or additional exposure of the performer’s profile. If a performer uses geo-restriction, only members whose credit card information is stored can see that performer on YPMate; this considerably reduces traffic to that performer’s room. Second, among logged-in members, only those outside the blocked areas can see the performer on the website. Geo-blocking does have some limitations: it does not properly block mobile users, it does not account for those using proxies and VPNs, and it does not efficiently remove performers from white-label websites. All things considered, most performers ‘do not think the geo-block worthwhile. I certainly do not think that it is worth the loss in money’ (Mary 2012). This assessment accords with the discussion in the previous chapter, as performers aim to sell their time to customers to be spent in private rooms. The problems with geo-blocking seem to affect more performers from the US, because they actually live in the US and have no interest in changing their displayed locality. Other performers, instead of using geo-restriction, prefer to simply change their location altogether. Performers can change their display country in a variety of ways: they can do it themselves by altering it in their profile, they can contact support and request the change, or they can use a virtual private network (VPN) to alter their computer’s IP (which indicates its location). In addition, if they work for a studio (see chapter 4) they might automatically be assigned an American location regardless of their real location: ‘there are numerous Eastern Europe studio performers right now who somehow have the US as their displayed country’ (Rose 2013). Although this can spur new geographies online, there are limitations: the possibility of changing
their display country depends on where the performers actually are (or, if they work for a studio, where the studio is located). For instance, when altering their display country in their profiles, performers have to choose a new country from a limited list given by the website. As Rose (2013) explains, ‘If you are in the United States, you can choose between United States, Canada, Australia, Puerto Rico, Ireland, and United Kingdom’. Moreover, YPMate support can deny the request, and using a VPN service can slow down the Internet connection to the point that the performer’s stream will not work.

These limited options can be seen as ‘a way to prevent all performers from saying they are in the US’ (Jodi 2013). Hence, it creates a division for foreign performers in terms of not being from the US: ‘Obviously it is no one’s fault I am a foreigner; I am content and proud of who I am. But I just wish I could have the same opportunities as other performers or have a website in my own country where I could work on’ (Olivia 2013). Why does being located in the US seem so valuable? First, performers change their display country to the US because they believe that most of the traffic on YPMate is US based and that American customers tend to search for performers from their own country: ‘It seems like guys from the US, most of the time, tend to overlook performers from other countries’ (Sandra 2012). One explanation concerns the facility of communicating in one’s own language; as seen in the previous chapter, interaction is key to the production of cam content, and communication plays an important role in interaction. For instance, English is important for expressing and receiving requests: ‘If I were a customer and I was in a private room with a performer who does not understand what I want, or there is no connection, I would run away’ (Julie 2013). It is not just about understanding each other, however—it is also about showcasing the performer’s personality: ‘Some performers do not speak English at all, which makes them look stupid. They are not stupid; they have personalities just like anyone else, but they just cannot express themselves and their personalities’ (Julie 2013). The notion of a commodified personality is a key point in adult webcams, which is further explored in chapter 5.

Even if performers communicate fluently but with an accent, some customers will reject them: ‘Customers who were so much into me—they were having good fun in private shows, cam-to-cam and all—they were very happy with my shows. And suddenly
I open my mouth to speak and they disappear—all gone, and why? Just because of my foreign accent’ (Olivia 2013). This customer reaction can be explained by the fact that different accents signal that performers do not share the same background as customers: ‘So if customers on Streamate hear a performer talking with an accent, they usually think that they just do not share the same values and views; they do not have the same favourite music, for example. They have nothing in common and basically nothing to talk about’ (Julie 2013). The preference for people with the same background is also attested by American performers when using foreign websites: ‘It is the same situation for those performers who are in the United States and work on AdultWork, a UK-based website. The UK performers generally do way better than the others. I love that site and wish I did better, but the UK customers are mostly going to want to cam with performers from the UK, it seems. I guess these customers feel they can relate to somebody who grew up [with] and knows their culture’ (Beth 2013). Pornhub’s (2015) stats also show how people do search for specific nationalities, and usually viewers from a given country tend to search for pornography from their own country. For instance, in India the most common search word is ‘Indian’; in Germany, the most common search word is ‘German’. However, according to these stats, such searches for the same nationality are only dominant in countries where English is not the official language; in the US, the UK, and Australia, the most commonly searched term is ‘lesbian’. Hence, there is a difference in this regard between non-interactive and interactive pornography: pre-recorded pornography is already mostly ‘pre-aimed’ at English-speakers, while in interactive pornography the content is yet to be produced.

Regardless, the fact that performers talk about nationalities shows that adult live cams are not merely about ‘communicating’ but also sharing the meaning and cultural valences behind an interaction. As performer Sandra (2013) conjectures, ‘Maybe customers like to spend money on women who are in their same country because it gives them something to relate with and/or more of a chance with the girl?’ Here, proximity also plays a role in the sense that adult live cams often explicitly or implicitly sell the notion of the ‘girl next door’, co-opted from the amateur pornography genre. In summary, fluency in English is important not only for the flow of interaction and communication but also for the creation of bonds based on shared cultural backgrounds, reaffirming that
customers seek something more than the performer’s image. According to performers, customers usually learn from experience that with performers who cannot speak English ‘there was no personal connection during private shows, and/or the performer does not respond to requests, and so on’ (Julie 2013).

4.6 Ethnicity and race

In the previous section, I discussed how some YPMate customers and performers associate locality and speaking accents with ethnic background; hence, these characteristics could be considered markers of ethnicity. However, YPMate also has an ‘ethnicity’ category, which is displayed on performers’ profiles. Performers must choose their ethnicity based on predetermined classifications such as Asian, Hispanic, or Ebony. These categories suggest that ethnicity on YPMate is intertwined with race, which means the website constructs ethnicity according to characteristics based on physical attributes; this likely stems from the fact that performers’ images are central to the genre.

Contrary to the idea that notions of race should be weaker in online spaces (Poster 1998), there has been a revival of discussions in this area, especially regarding online interactions where visual cues are available, as with avatars and videoconferencing. For instance, Nakamura (2002) explored how race occurs in the middle ground between a text-based and visually charged Internet. She suggests that in contrast to the homogenising claims of techno-utopianism, the Internet has become a visually signifying space where differences between races are intensified, reiterated, and challenged by users. In her view, this proliferation of differences is associated with the fact that capital is the main driver of the Internet, which does not have a broad mission to empower the public or create a global village in which all users are equal. On YPMate, this capital-driven force seems to both polarise and intertwine notions of race, ethnicity, and class. As shown in Figure 9, white performers are predominant and are poised to have more success in the business (as a consequence, a great number of black performers quit the business).
Figure 9 YPMate performers by ethnicity

Most performers on YPMate identify as white, which can also be associated with the data presented in previous sections showing predominantly Anglo-centric social and sexual identities. The homogeneity of performers in terms of race contrasts with studies that point to ‘otherness’ as being eroticised and commodified in sexual transaction markets (Nagel 2003). Most of those studies characterise experiences of the ‘other’, provided by (sexual) tourism encounters, as satisfying a desire to fix the boundaries of identity (which might or might not be hierarchical, based on the familiar contours of racial power relations) or to exploit/explore them for recreational purposes. For instance, in her study of sex tourism in Sosua, Dominican Republic, Brennan (2004) suggests that the relations between clients and providers are asymmetrical by nature since they are inserted in a globalised economy. She also focuses on the struggle to capitalise on differences, and one way of doing so is through the ‘performance of love’ (Brennan 2004) (discussed here as intimate labour in chapter 5). The predominance of white performers on YPMate, however, reinforces the idea that what is commodified on adult live cams is that which connects performers and customers, which tends to be their commonness.

This sense of commonality, however, has to be problematised as it echoes colour blindness on the Internet and white skin privilege, which eliminates ethnic or racial categories. According to Nakamura (2002), the elimination of identity categories such as race serves as a means to sell the appearance of a progressive space. Along the same lines, Nakamura (2008:86) argues that ‘the figuration of cyberculture as “white by
“default” tends to demonise people of colour as unsophisticated, uneducated, and stuck in a pre-technological past. This process is present in notions of race in adult live cams, in the tension related to what performers call niche or minority girls.

This division is mainly based on corporeal differences arising from notions of beauty that usually differentiate slim white performers from others of different races and body shapes. For instance, in a post on a forum, a tip for being a successful cam performer was directed exclusively to ‘black’ girls: ‘Exercise, do your nails and your hair, buy a better webcam and good lighting. You will be noticeable if you present yourself well’. Even the term ‘black’, though originally used in the post and by YPMate, was a target of criticism: ‘Nobody is black, and the correct term in this business is ebony, and this is the way I address Afro-American women in the industry and also in my personal life, because I think ebony is a classy term in comparison to black!’ (Clare 2011). After a heated discussion regarding what was perceived as a race-based attack, the topic was modified to address ‘niche/minority girls’.

Although ‘ebony’ performers can be considered a minority in terms of their numbers, the reasons why there are so few of them are never really debated in forums (e.g. economic barriers to accessing computers and the Internet, or structural racial prejudice). In fact, many factors contribute to their absence or lower visibility. According to one ‘ebony’ performer, she had been ‘turned away from affiliates’, called ‘ghetto’, and asked what project she lives in: ‘We are treated either like a taboo or fetish, or like a dirty nigger’. Most performers are said to lower their expectations and prices since racist comments such as these cause them to feel even more vulnerable. However, because these performers regard their attitudes toward who they are, what they have to offer, and what they are about as an important part of their webcam interactions, they learn to cope, change their attitudes, and accept it.

Nina (2011), meanwhile, is an example of an ‘ebony’ performer who uses customers’ fetishes to negotiate these stereotypes, simultaneously ‘avenging’ white male fetishism by ‘raping’ white men’s wallets and cashing in on them as a ‘powerful black goddesses’. She also emphasises that the relative absence of black performers can be seen as an advantage because the competition is less fierce: ‘I have had men come into my chat and say, “I have finally found a black woman on here!”’ (Nina 2011). Moreover, she
counts on the assumption that customers who have a preference for ‘ebony’ performers will stick to their preference:

I have logged out before the end of my ‘shift’ and checked on a few other ebony performers’ rooms, and I saw some of my regular customers in there. They did not want to see me go from my chat, but when I did, they went to find another black performer who was online. (Nina 2011)

Nina’s comments echo those of white performers in particular. In discussions of ethnicity, most performers believe they are the sole cause of their failure, if it occurs, not systematic structural racism.

Hispanic/Latino models also suffer from prejudice, as they are called names and assumed to be nothing more than horny, baby-making, barefoot, pregnant housemaids. However, regarding notions of ethnicity and cultural background, it is easier for performers from a Hispanic culture—as well as those from many other cultures—to hold on to their culture since it is regarded as exotic or beautiful. In Sarah’s words,

What I am trying to say is that, if she can have a thematic ‘ethnic’ Latina chat room, she also may have as a nickname ‘Xochitla’, put on some music from her home country while online, speak with an accent, and it is not a problem. It can be considered hot because she is not expected to listen to Mozart and drink champagne in order to be accepted. But if it were me adopting an ‘ethnic’ [name] such as ‘Shaq’ and speak[ing] an ‘ebonics lingo’, then I would have no class. I have to assimilate entirely with white culture/standards in order to get by in adult live cams. (Sarah 2011)

Such views show that Nakamura’s analysis of perceptions of people of colour as unsophisticated and uneducated also extends to ethnicity. Hence, this section aimed to show that perceptions of race and ethnicity on YPMate are not only intertwined but also intrinsically related to class. These perceptions reflect social divisions within and among
countries, as well as unequal racial relations, despite the fact that they are masked by neoliberal discourses of self-made entrepreneurs (which will be discussed in the next chapter).

4.6 Tag! I see you

While performers can select and construct aspects of their own identities when filling in their profiles, members can also give them ‘tags’ for the purpose of identification or to transmit information about them. Tags were introduced on YPMate in 2012; they consist of keywords and phrases created by members to describe performers and their shows. Members have a great deal of freedom in creating tags: they can tag performers anonymously with any term, even if they have never paid for a show. However, not all tags are displayed publicly on performers’ profiles; they are filtered first by the website and then by performers themselves before being displayed on profiles and connected to the search system. Most performers believe tags are useful for customers who are looking for a very specific show. As Roxie (2013) says, ‘I asked if the guy had searched specifically with tag words and he said yes!!! It does help, because many horny folks do not take their time to check the comments section’. Moreover, according to the website, tags influence the creation of new cam categories: ‘Over time, this will greatly improve the accuracy of the categories on the site and the overall experience for members’ (Streamate News 2013). YPMate has already fashioned a library with all tags created to date, and now customers can either invent new ones or select from existing ones; anything a model has been previously tagged with shows up in alphabetical order in a drop-down list.

However, performers also point out that tags are sometimes used beyond their intended purpose, either because customers fail to grasp the intent or because they appropriate tags for other means (e.g. revenge against a performer). Because of the complex process of tag creation and use, a question remains about whether tags can actually spur new arrangements outside the classification of identities and the vernacular of pornography. If tags are the creations of individual users, they should reflect those users’ perceptions of performers and their performances, which can be contrasted with the identities made available by the website and constructed by the performers. The main
argument here is that if performers’ identity work tends toward massification due to market demand, in contrast, tags are more diverse and allow for customers’ personal perceptions to be expressed.

As mentioned earlier, although tags are freely created by members, not all are displayed publicly. Tags are reviewed as often as possible by YPMate staff, who usually approve all tags unless they contain illegal or illicit terms (‘incest’, ‘blood’, etc.). The norm is to approve all tags, even those that would be considered abusive and demeaning by some performers. This is because, in general, tags are subjective, and it is difficult for reviewers to determine what might be interpreted as rude or as reasonable. What one model might interpret as insulting might be pleasing to another since it reflects a niche in which that performer wants to position himself or herself: ‘It is hard to tell; I have a number of tags calling me “stuck up” and “bitch”, which actually leads to many exclusive shows for customers wanting small-penis humiliation’ (Ruth 2014). Moreover, because tags are so subjective, some performers end up with contradictory tags: ‘I did look up this thread to protest about my big, small, gross, amazing, boobs tags’ (Lina 2014). Users may have different perceptions of the same performer, and adjectives such as ‘big’ and ‘small’ are not necessarily explanatory on their own. Tags also go through a second filter, and the performer can decide whether to block them; they have the option to ‘show tag’ (make it public) or ‘block tag’ (keep it private, visible only to the performer and YPMate). Once a performer blocks a particular word, it is blocked for good, and although customers might keep tagging them with that word, it will not show up in their profile.

The tag system has been criticised by performers for several reasons, usually for the lack of control performers have over it. Moreover, the effect of tags on performers’ self-esteem seems more hurtful than with other kinds of insults: ‘I can see the effect of being tagged with something offensive; it is worse than having a user troll shouting out insults at you in chat. [This is] because tags are somehow more permanent and defining, and you do not know from whom [they] came, and you have to check [them] constantly to see what new abuses may have appeared’ (Susan 2013). The fact that tags simply appear on a performer’s profile with no notification is aggravating—especially because it puts performers in constant fear of undesirable tags, which makes them constantly check their profiles to avoid such tags. The power relations fostered by tags are often
considered unbalanced: performers regard tagging as a one-way interaction in which they are at a disadvantage in terms of their control over their image/web persona. Other criticisms are that anyone can tag a performer anonymously, and even if certain customers are blocked from a performer’s chat and shows, they can still tag the performer if they can access the profile. Hence, some customers can use tags as a sort of retaliation system:

I believe part of the reason some customers give us negative tags on Streamate is because we do not allow them to treat us like marionettes. When they come to our chat rooms and shout orders like ‘turn around’ or ‘stand up’, we will not answer with ‘Sure!’ They are used to behaving like this with some other performers and getting what they want without paying for it. Hence, the moment a different performer says to him, ‘Oh, no, you have to first tip me and them ask me politely’, then he gets very angry, like a little kid who just ran out of juice in his cup. (Melissa 2013)

Performers argue that they should be the ones to create their own tags since tags work as a marketing device for their attributes: ‘Our profiles are an advertisement to generate sales, not a bathroom wall where you write nasty things’ (Rebecca 2013). The argument is that tags that do not correspond to their identities and shows could ultimately hurt business. According to one performer, ‘Degrading tags can easily scare off user traffic from a performer’s room if she does not block them’ (Berta 2013). If on pornographic tube sites ‘users regularly include unrelated tags in order to generate more interest in their material’ (Mowlabocus 2010:86), on webcams customers can act with the opposite intention: they can retaliate against performers by writing bad comments and tags to discourage traffic. However, if performers were to tag themselves, it would defeat the purpose of tagging, which is to convey accurate information about a performer. As discussed in the next section, some performers would probably not tag themselves with the words customers apply to them or their performances. Besides, it is likely that customers want to hear ‘real’ feedback from other customers, because they think it paints a truer picture of the performer. On the company side, if tagging can be considered a
marketing and advertising strategy, Streamate ultimately has all the power, according to their contract with performers. In this sense, performers have always had minimal control over their marketing and advertising since the company is contractually responsible for those things: it decides to do the marketing itself or leave it to customers, not allowing performers very much control.

Basically, tags can reinforce identities and categories already set by the website or point to something new or unnoticed. As described below, many tags are not innovative; most just describe the performer and reproduce information already given in the profile, or they just state obvious things. They tend to be redundant and repetitive, often including words that simply indicate a performer’s characteristics (e.g. ‘ebony’, ‘Colombian’, ‘American’) or parts of the body (e.g. ‘boobs’, ‘pussy’). Aisha (2013) ironically notes the lack of creativity among users who tag her: ‘So not long ago, I was tagged “pretty clit” and “ebony MILF”. Ebony MILF? Wow, so creative’. However, a closer look at these tags shows that besides the obvious, there are some misleading ones that refer to traditional categories but do not apply to the subject they are attached to: ‘The performer’s profile will say a specific ethnicity or sexual preference, and the tags will bestow them a new one’ (Rebecca 2013). Misleading tags may cause problems for performers, including annoyance or mistrust among customers, who might feel they have been lied to; one example would be tagging a performer as ‘pregnant’ when she is not. Moreover, some misleading tags are deliberately created to force performers to change to fit them; that is, customers can use fake tags to force performers to do things they usually would not do. ‘What if some moron tags you with ‘fisting’ and you do not do fisting at all?’ (Briana 2013). Trust issues can emerge in these cases since customers might feel that a performer did something for other customers but not for them.

Some misleading tags can also reflect a customer’s perception of a performer in a way that illuminates that performer’s practice; these belong to the ‘unaware niches’ category. Some performers might even think that these tags are not good representations of themselves or their shows. Performers do not necessarily know what their niches are, and some might get upset if they find out they are ‘known for their fat ass, their bitchy attitude, or their barely legal looks’ (Barbara 2013). These tags often conflict with performers’ self-perceptions and how they actually want to market themselves. However,
other unaware niches might simply be distinct from categories already available, such as ‘braces’ and ‘piercings’. Other innovative tags describe parts of performers’ bodies that are not considered pornographic and are not particularly eroticised, as with ‘smile’. Others focus on adjectives that give clues about performers’ personalities (e.g. ‘erotic’, ‘sensual’, ‘sexy’, or ‘yummy’).

Some tags are difficult to categorise because although they might convey a particular meaning, they are not useful for searching and categorisation. These seem to indicate a lack of user understanding about the new feature; examples include tags such as ‘talk’ and ‘I cum’. However, the tag ‘talk’ could be related to customers’ expectation that performers will be communicative, as discussed in chapter 2. Meanwhile, ‘I cum’ can be taken to indicate general approval of a performer. Other common tags that defy categorisation include customers’ nicknames, such as ‘niggah please’, ‘eruptingcumvolc’, and ‘uselidtoeatnuts’. It is likely these customers tag performers with their nicknames to keep track of them, instead of using the ‘favourite model’ feature. It could also mean that these customers are trying to brand performers as ‘theirs’ in the sense of ‘marking territory’. However, the meaning of their tags is hard to grasp, and they are mainly known for being ‘super cheap’ customers (Jodi 2013).

It is also noteworthy that misspelled or creatively spelled tags can be not only typos but also a strategy to avoid having a word blocked by the system or by performers. If a tag is already blocked by a performer, customers can write the same word in a different way to get the message through: ‘A person might tag you with bitch, stupid bitch, beotch, although you hid the first “bitch” before getting the other two. […] The same thing happens with expressions like “don’t talk” that can be written in other ways such as “do not talk”’ (Rose 2013). Missspelled and creatively spelled words also circumvent YPMate’s automatic filtering system, which does not catch such subtle differences. Hence, the system fails to filter words like ‘beotch’ or ‘stupid bitch’, causing them to appear on performers’ profiles and allowing customers to leave warnings to other users. These tags, however, are not useful for searches, as performers think no customers search for misspelled words such as ‘beotch’.

There are other tags that could not be investigated in this study: those that are filtered by the website or blocked by performers. These are mainly negative tags,
considered illegal/illicit or demeaning by performers. Although data on these tags could not be gathered, performers have reported users tagging performers with their real names and addresses. As an imaginative exercise, in the forum performers played with the idea of tagging customers; in that scenario, the most common tags for customers were things like ‘thinks webcam is a dating site’, ‘leaves the chat when you do not do things for free’, ‘one min man’, ‘lonely boy who needs a therapist and a fuck’, and ‘cheap asshole’.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of YPMate performer demographics (based on their profiles) conducted in this chapter shows that the distribution of performers in terms of social identity cannot be understood outside their identity-work strategies. The data showed that, first of all, performers’ identity work is related to customers’ desires. These desires are mainly related to traditional pornographic categories associated with male consumption. Further, as adult live cams are inserted in a global context, the category of locality shows the need for the production of commonality in order for users to communicate and cooperate in the production of content and social relationships. As a result, performers’ identity work leans toward the massification of identities, which tends to involve the erasure of differences: an international mass identity is established that is classless and consumer oriented, partly controlled by the ideology of advanced international capitalism (Lewis 1991). In this sense, mainstream power structures influence the ways sexualisation and commerce intersect at the expense of the exploration of diverse identities (Gill 2014). These employment trends show that the hegemony of immaterial labour is emerging in coordination with the existing global divisions of labour and power.

In terms of gender, the fact that the majority of performers are women points to the feminisation of the work. This is related to the fact that sexual work has traditionally been associated with women. Beyond that, it can also be related to the (re)production of social relationships in the form of care and affect in terms of affective labour, a subject discussed further in chapter 5. On the other hand, the data also showed that there is space for performers to assert and construct their identities based on their own preferences, especially when it comes to the kinds of interactions they want to have with users. For
instance, although youth is valorised in the business, performers often avoid inserting themselves in the teen category because it spurs interactions they might find uncomfortable.

In terms of locality, users prefer to interact with performers who are physically closer to them—in the same country, for instance. One explanation for this preference is that users have the intention (in reality or fantasy) to meet performers in person, and so they value physical proximity. However, many performers also believe that users prefer to interact with performers they believe are similar to them in terms of culture and background. This is intrinsically related to the fact that the adult live cam is a user-generated genre, and interaction with performers is indispensable for the production of content. However, this preference is also related to the fact that adult live cams are about creating connections between performers and users, and it is easier to create bonds with people with whom one has something in common. Hence, identities are also manipulated to conform to a market demand for ‘personal connection’, and performers focus their identity work on expressing identities they believe help to create bonds with customers. Further, in contrast to the massification of identities, users’ tags aim to describe performers in more personal ways. Through tags, users publicise their perceptions of performers but also challenge identities perceived as wrong or misleading—although performers are quick to erase such challenges.

The analysis of these dynamics advances the broader aim of this thesis: to understand adult live cams as a kind of pornography centred on the commodification of subjectivities within an affective network. In that sense, this chapter analysed a context where global consumption is a force that forges consumable identities. This also shows that the global division of labour should be considered since the precise conditions under which people work and reproduce themselves have a huge impact on content production. In the next chapter, these conditions are further analysed in terms of website economic structure.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE DIGITAL ECONOMY AND THE YPMATE NETWORK

As with other commercial adult websites, adult live cams are constituted by the capitalist forces of the online adult industry. Although the economic dimension of the adult industry is often cited as a key reason why scholars should study it, grasping the exact size of the industry is problematic. There is a lack of accurate data and precise statistics (Tibbals 2014) since sources tend to be biased (Weitzer 2010). However, commonly cited revenue estimates situate the US adult industry at 3–10 billion dollars a year and the global industry at 50–60 billion dollars a year (Comella 2010; Paasonen et al. 2007; Weitzer 2010).

A more detailed report by Covenant Eyes (2005) showed that in 2005 pornography accounted for 69% of the total pay-per-view Internet content market. However, a newer report shows that global porn revenues declined by 50% between 2007 and 2011; this can be linked to another finding: that nine out of 10 Internet porn users only access free material—samples, illegally copied versions of pay material, or just amateur material (Eyes 2015). Hence, the decline in revenues does not necessarily indicate a decrease in overall porn consumption: one in eight online searches are still for pornography (Eyes 2015). Although some scholars use the abovementioned statistics (Hoszowska & Janovsky 2014; Darling 2013), it is important to note that the source can be biased: Covenant Eyes is one of the largest for-profit companies marketing accountability software, and it markets a re-branded version of its product though the ‘Biblical manhood’ organisation Promise Keepers.

Voss (2012) notes that while most figures related to the pornography industry’s profits are unreliable, those from the trade publications are considered more valuable and valid. According to adult industry figures, revenues from online subscriptions and sales in 2005 were around USD$2.5 billion (Richtel 2007). In 2006, the website TopTenReviews reported that US revenues from Internet porn were USD$13.33 billion, up 13% over 2005 (TopTenReviews 2006). Although the pornography industry has incentive to exaggerate its revenues, Kirk Doran (2008:1) used independent data to corroborate the 2005 estimate, showing that it was close to the real figure.
Adult industry profits are linked to the great consumption of sex-related content online. However, in a context where pornographic content can be easily accessed for free online, the online adult industry has increasingly faced the problem of how to continue making profits. The online adult industry has, therefore, undergone several transformations and adapted to new economic models. Such adaptation needs to be viewed in the broader context of convergence, where websites in general have shifted from offering content produced by companies to the distribution and organisation of user-generated content (Grinnel 2009).

As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, the interactions promoted by websites like YPMate are becoming exemplary of the ways in which users are positioned as value-producing subjects in the new information economy (Arvidsson 2007:70). Accordingly, users who engage in an online participatory culture are producing ‘immaterial labour’, which is defined as labour that produces the ‘informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (Lazzarato 1996:138). Several scholars regard immaterial labour as the invisible labour force supporting the new informational capitalism (Terranova 2004; Coté & Pybus 2007; Pasquinelli et al. 2007). Most studies on the subject have criticised the ways websites appropriate user-generated content for profit, especially in social media where users freely engage in content production (Terranova 2004; Coté & Pybus 2007). On the other hand, Hesmondhalgh (2010:277) questions whether this free labour should always be viewed as exploitative; historically, he argues, most cultural productions have been unpaid, and some should remain so. Moreover, Hesmondhalgh (2010) maintains that practices of user-generated content appropriation should be discussed in terms of intellectual property and copyright. As I will discuss in this chapter, in the case of adult live cams, copyright issues appropriately describe the appropriation of content, since performers’ immaterial labour is paid and inserted in a formal market.

Adult live cams are emblematic of the ways the online adult industry has adapted to new digital economies. By focusing on interactive content, companies guarantee the production of unique content that is difficult to copy and distribute elsewhere. Despite the innovate features of adult live cams, previous studies of their formal forms of commerce are not extensive and have failed to explore issues related to the new digital economy (Lane 2001:240; Bars 2010). Instead, most studies have praised these forms of gift and
alternative economies as channels for creating reciprocity and bonds among users (McGlotten 2013:108; Jacobs 2007; Bocij 2004).

In this chapter, to grasp the economics of adult live cams, I investigate a company with ties to YPMate and its network. The company is called MindGeek, and it is an adult entertainment IT business focused mainly on software engines. This company is analysed in the framework of the digital economy, with an emphasis on profit-making strategies in terms of the appropriation and distribution of content. Moreover, the flow and recruitment of performers and users by Streamate is also analysed in terms of both traffic commodity and marketing strategies. This chapter aims to highlight the strategies used by adult entertainment companies to increase profit margins, which are part of the tense relationship between the user’s freedom to produce content and the corporate-driven process behind participatory culture (Bauwens 2009; Zimmer 2008; Petersen 2008). The existence of a highly concentrated oligopoly that owns the spaces of production, allied with copyright contract laws, strips users of their rights over the content they produce.

The analysis will show how content and its forms of production are controlled and managed indirectly through marketing and networking rings. Although the control over content is indirect, Streamate exerts great influence over the distribution of content and the flow of users to specific websites. Central to these flows are the company’s methods for recruiting both performers and potential customers, which are based on luring them into economic networks portrayed as affective networks. This means that in its recruitment process, the company deemphasises the sexual aspect of adult live cams and focuses great attention on its social networking aspect.

I will begin by addressing the three main characteristics of digital labour: the autonomy, agency, and responsibility of participants in the production and management of their affairs; the website’s control and management of content; and website control in terms of producer/consumer traffic. After discussing those characteristics, I will explore how they are presented on YPMate, especially concerning performers’ recruitment and their ability to regulate the market in terms of customer demands and prices. I will present the company structure of YPMate, with a special emphasis on the network spread and the loop in terms of the customer traffic these adult industry rings generate. Here, special attention is given to marketing strategies and how the website indirectly manages
and controls content. Finally, I discuss customers in terms of marketing and user traffic in general, emphasising their relation with the website and performers. Here, I will show that the strategies used to draw user traffic aim to create affective relations with potential customers. This characteristic points to the existence of an affective network in adult live cams, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

5. 1 Immaterial labour

Despite the proclaimed size of the adult industry, there are few extensive studies of pornography from a business perspective. Cronin and Davenport (2001:285) note that ‘in the literature on the information society and the information economy, the subject of sex, and by extension, pornography, has been undertheorised’. An exception is Georgina Voss’s recently published book *Stigma and the Shaping of the Pornography Industry* (2015), which analyses the business models used by the industry and the people involved in the more business-related aspects of porn—including managers, accountants, and technicians. Voss argues that stigma plays a role in facilitating some exchanges within the adult industry, creating certain cohesion within the group and facilitating knowledge-sharing processes. Different from the present thesis, Voss’s main focus is on the American industry, with no particular emphasis on the new digital economies where the role of *prosumer* is intensified—that is, where the roles of performers and business-only staff are conflated.

Recent trends in the online pornography industry highlight its increasing deregulation, resulting from the decline of pay-to-view websites as a consequence of free pornography on the Internet. Companies have been forced to develop alternative strategies to maintain profitability. These include encouraging independent performers to enter the business and profiting from their participation, buying competing websites, creating rings of affiliates, and focusing on users’ emotional experiences to convert them into regular customers. The present section explores new digital economies, such as those on YPMate, with an emphasis on the literature on the digital economy and webcams.

Adult live cams differ from traditional pornography because they provide services and content, which are inserted into the broader context of the post-industrial economy, where services and information are prominent. Moreover, in adult live cams, the
production of content relies on a balance between freely produced user-generated content and controls exerted by the market and the website company. Because they are commercial but produced by independent content providers through interactions with customers, adult live cams challenge the longstanding division between ‘glossy, expensive couples pornography and boy/girl-next-door amateurs porn’ (McKee et al 2008:182) and ‘fake’ commercial mainstream productions. Since in theory anyone can become a performer—as no training is required to sign up to the website—these performers can be considered amateurs, though inserted into a formal market. Moreover, the blurring of such divisions combined with marketing focused on emotional ties provides the basis for the creation of personal connections and affective networks.

As shown in the previous chapter, one characteristic of YPMate performers is that they come from around the world but adapt their locations to fit market demands. In this sense, adult live cams can be seen as occurring in a ‘social factory’, as performers’ activities are deterritorialised, dispersed, and decentralised (Gill & Pratt 2008). In this social factory, there is an individualisation of production, where ‘small and sometimes very small “productive units” (often consisting of only one individual)’ are the components of the production process (Lazzarato 1996:137). These workers are usually autonomous, and, to adapt to a constantly shifting market, they embrace neoliberalism’s entrepreneurial ethos of individualisation and risk-management processes (Gregg 2011; Ross 2009).

Chapter 2 observed such entrepreneurial skills on YPMate in terms of the ways performers manage interactions in the rooms, while chapter 3 focused on how they create their identities according to market demand. Hence, YPMate performers are given sufficient autonomy to adapt and ‘be made compatible with the conditions of “production for production’s sake”’ (Lazzarato 1996:135). Dyer-Witheford (1994:7) echoes this perception, noting that ‘far from being a passive object of capitalist designs, the worker is the active subject of production, the well-spring of the skills, innovation, and cooperation on which capital must draw’. The idea of small units of production in immaterial labour resonates with the trends in convergence culture discussed in chapter 1, where everyone becomes a potential media outlet and producer of his or her own content.
In terms of pornography, access to media by ordinary people has increased the dissemination and production of amateur pornography online. The concept of amateur pornography is controversial as it is often associated with free, independent agents performing sexual acts for ‘fun’. Along these lines, amateur pornography is usually contrasted with commercial mainstream pornography as its polar opposite. While on the one hand commercial pornography is associated with mass culture and seen as a standardised kind of pornography, on the other, amateur pornography is considered creative and unique—a customised good for those who can afford it (Paasonen 2010a:1300). This separation is based on a division where amateur pornography is viewed as produced by hobbyists out of love for their activities, with no financial motives. Hence, the role of an amateur is also opposed to that of a professional, as the latter is assumed to work for financial gain while the former does so for pleasure (Zimmermann 1995:1). Furthermore, the dichotomy between professional and amateur marks different positions in terms of the private and public spheres: ‘While the professional conducts activities for work, an amateur labours away from work […] recording his or her domestic life and private sphere’ (Zimmermann 1995:1). In practice, these divisions are far from clear: the categories themselves are contingent to begin with (Paasonen 2010b:140). For instance, amateurs might aspire to professional standards (Esch & Mayer 2007) while professionals might work out of pleasure.

Moreover, in the context of new media, the division between amateur and commercial pornography has been further problematised as amateur pornography has become increasingly permeated by sexual positions and other elements from the so-called mainstream (Cramer 2006:136) and has also inserted itself into market dynamics. For instance, while early webcam sites like JenniCam were mainly non-pornographic and non-commercial, with their popularisation, most started engaging in informal economies such as ‘wish lists’ in exchange for more personal or sexual interactions. Meanwhile, the pornography industry has emulated and profited from ‘amateur’ content while trying to reach new audiences and find new uses for online platforms (Attwood 2007:452–3). Such is the case with big corporate productions that are labelled amateur and appropriate amateur aesthetics, such as grainy or poor-quality images and ordinary-looking models.
The trend toward assimilating independent production occurs in terms of not only aesthetics but also productive units, which in adult live cams comprise performers and users. Both are co-opted as a wider capacity for social labour by companies that take them ‘on board and [adapt]’ them (Lazzarato 1996:138). For Lazzarato, however, the subjugation of immaterial labour networks and productive units to capitalist logic ‘does not take away the autonomy of the constitution and meaning of immaterial labour’ but instead ‘opens up antagonisms and contradictions’ (1996:145). While the productive units composed of performers and users enjoy a certain autonomy, ‘for economics there remains only the possibility of managing and regulating the activity of immaterial labour and creating some devices for the control and creation of the public/consumer by means of the control of communication and information technologies and their organizational processes’ (Lazzarato 1996:146).

In other words, companies relinquish direct control over performers and production but in turn shape or influence their motivation and creativity to organise their collective actions toward the company’s ends. The devices of control Lazzarato refers to are more concretely material channels people use to bind themselves to a specific ‘frame of mind’ and to the production of immaterial subjectivities, as well as specific frames of mind that channel immaterial labour and consumer behaviour. Here, by ‘frame of mind’ I mean the system of ideas and meanings that influences users’ motivation and creativity.

Regarding both kinds of control devices, the YPMate website offers a paradigmatic case study for analysing the digital economy and the appropriation and distribution of immaterial labour. Some performers and industry agents claim that the IT company MindGeek bought Streamate/YPMate while others say the companies simply work closely together, with MindGeek sending traffic to Streamate/YPMate from its tube sites like Pornhub and YouPorn. Either way, the economic strategy is based on a dual movement of concentration and decentralisation: MindGeek is the company that concentrates most activities and the ownership of various adult websites, while relying on decentralised outlets for content production.

This strategy also creates a dual dynamic between unrestricted content production and controlled distribution. On the one hand, performers have control over their business; on the other, Streamate owns the rights to all content production and its distribution. Such
division is established when performers sign a contract with the company, which says that performers grant

to Streamate, its employees, agents, representatives, contractors, successors, and assigns the perpetual, irrevocable, fully paid, royalty-free, universal and unconditional right to: (a) use, simulate, portray, publish, copy, distribute, perform, display and generally exploit Performer/Studio’s identity, name, fictional names (if any), voice, signature, photograph, words, images, personality or other likeness (‘Publicity Rights’); and (b) subject to paragraph ‘a’ immediately copy, distribute, perform, display, and create derivative works from any copyright protected works or materials developed or created by Performer/Studio, based in whole or in part on, or arising from or related to the Publicity Rights, for advertising, distribution, marketing, promotion, publicity, sales or any other lawful commercial or non-commercial purpose, in any form or manner, in whole or in part, in any electronic or non-electronic medium now known or later devised. (Streamate 2013)

Because of this clause, performers have little control over the content they are involved in, especially in terms of how it is distributed, marketed, and publicised. Along these lines, to profit from users’ activities, Streamate has worked on the distribution side, adopting a complex strategy to cater to user flows. The company developed an aggressive marketing and affiliate strategy that uses performer-produced content aiming to create loops within adult website rings as well as an emotive attachment to content. For instance, Streamate works closely with MindGeek to create a loop where user-generated content is used on free websites to attract more customers to paid sites.

In terms of the frames of mind that channel immaterial labour and consumer behaviour, in adult live cams these models are associated with a kind of work that is outside the production process but necessary to initiate production. This is the work that consumers do in choosing—in creating a demand or need for a given product or service. Here, consumption is also considered a form of work since ‘consumption is then first of all a consumption of information. Consumption is no longer only the “realization” of a
product, but a real and proper social process that for the moment is defined with the term communication’ (Lazzarato 1996:141). This is because, as Lazzarato (1996:138) says, ‘immaterial labour finds itself at the crossroads (or rather, it is the interface) of a new relationship between production and consumption’.

In terms of user flow, Streamate’s strategies are similar to those of other websites inserted in the context of convergence: their focus is to broaden markets and reinforce user commitment (Jenkins 2006a:18). By influencing the user and content flow with a focus on emotionally invested users, the adult webcam business aims to create bonds between performers and potential customers, which they hope will result in recurrent payments to the website. To do this, the company also pays affiliates for customer traffic that originates from dating websites. In this way, customers associate adult live cams with meeting possible dates. While this strategy can potentially make it difficult for performers to draw money from customers, the risks and onus of this approach are passed on to the performers.

In the next section, I discuss performers’ work conditions, with special emphasis on their recruitment by the website, as well as the way they engage in entrepreneurial work to operate a financially viable enterprise. The self-regulating model of adult live cams imposes challenges, especially because of the inequalities generated by global capitalist economies. In addition, I show how companies continue to exert control over performers’ work, albeit indirectly, by manipulating the network of websites they work on as well as the marketing of performers in such networks. Finally, I further analyse the control and management performed by YPMate in terms of producer/consumer traffic control in the context of user traffic and dating propaganda.

5.2 Minding their own business

Adult live cams are part of a new participatory culture where independent performers have taken a central role in managing and producing sexually explicit material. Performers interact with users without a direct third element of influence, such as ‘outside editors, directors, or producers’ (Knight 2000:24). Thus, they are at liberty to make their own decisions in terms of performance. This autonomy in terms of content production was partly addressed in chapter 2, where the channels of communication and
negotiation performers and users employ to produce content were highlighted. In this section, I address perceived autonomy in terms of economic relations, especially between websites and performers. First, I argue that the industry is sustained by a surplus of performers attracted by the successful histories of other performers and the apparent flexibility of the job in terms of working conditions (no boss, flexible schedule, working from home).

Moreover, because adult live-cam performers are considered independent content providers, they also have autonomy in self-regulating their market prices according to demand. In this case, performers’ strategies resonate with the neoliberal culture of enterprise, and the act of self-regulation unveils global hierarchies on the website. These hierarchies generate a highly competitive environment that auto-selects performers who will endure in the business—that is, many performers who are not ‘cut out for the job’ do not make money and end up quitting. Despite the performers’ autonomy, website policies still influence their decisions. For example, they encourage high earners by placing them on the first page and requiring them to have high-quality equipment to broadcast. This section aims to show elements of the new digital economy based on immaterial labour that are present in adult live cams.

As already discussed, adult live cams rely on performer–customer interactions to create content. Hence, an important part of the business is based on attracting participants. As such, the recruitment of performers is inserted in not only a cultural convergence context but also a scenario where the normalisation of sexually explicit content in mainstream media has led to a phenomenon called ‘pornography chic’ or the ‘mainstreaming of pornography’ (Lynch 2013; Paasonen et al. 2007). In turn, this phenomenon has contributed to a shift in social perceptions where work in the sex industry is more accepted as a mainstream option (Agustin 2007; Skulj 2011). As a consequence, there is an emergence of ‘a vast and visible middle class of sex workers who cater to middle-class’ consumers, sometimes attaining a ‘pseudo-celebrity status’ (Ray 2007:49). This ‘pseudo-celebrity’ status is analysed by Senft (2008:26) in her study of amateur webcams as ‘micro-celebrity’, a term that refers to the communicative technique that ‘involves people “amping up” their popularity over the web; a popularity
which depends upon a connection to one’s audience, rather than an enforced separation of them’.

In a similar dynamic, what is observed on YPMate is that although many porn stars have migrated to adult cams, most have struggled with the new genre because interaction with customers is not their strength. The ‘extremely interactive nature of webcam websites is the appeal of these websites, which is why performers need to have some interactive and social skills regardless the grand history they may have. And this does not come automatically with being a porn-star’ (Barbara 2012). Therefore, in terms of becoming a top performer on YPMate, ‘the more interactive, the more responsive, the more personable […] and “up for it” any performer seems the better’ (Barbara 2012). Barbara’s analysis suggests that successful performers behave as micro-celebrities, as they are not necessarily known outside the cam business but not completely unknown: they have a fan base of regular customers who make their business profitable. This intermediate position between porn stars and ordinary people renders performers more approachable by potential customers while also feeding on pornographic fantasy.

The idea of micro-celebrity as ‘viewing followers as a fan base, acknowledging popularity as a goal and managing the fan base by using a variety of affiliative techniques’ (Marwick & Boyd 2011:141) is used by YPMate to recruit performers. First, the website refers to performers as ‘models’, as seen in the call, ‘live models wanted now’ on the ‘Become a Model’ page (Figure 10). The same notion is found on the website’s Frequently Asked Questions page, where the meaning of the word ‘model’ is adopted in deliberations about suitability. One example—‘I’m not exactly tall and thin. Can I still become a model?’ (Streamate 2013b)—refers to the common idea that a model is associated with fashion and mainstream notions of beauty. The company’s answer is that ‘webcam models come in all sizes, sexes, ethnicities, and orientations’, and ‘everyone has something to offer’ as long as you are ‘confident, outgoing, and driven to be successful’. This logic resonates with the idea in post-industrial economies that ‘marketing recognizes the difference of each commodity and each segment of the population’, fashioning its strategies accordingly; in the market, every difference is an opportunity (Hardt & Negri 2001:152).
Furthermore, performers’ testimonials displayed on the page reinforce the image of micro-celebrity: ‘I’ve met so many cool people through web cam modelling, and have many repeat customers that pay to watch me perform every week!’, and, ‘Being a web cam model lets me afford the luxurious lifestyle that I’ve always wanted’.

Beyond the notion of micro-celebrity, these recruitment advertisements also focus on benefits and working conditions rather than sexual activities. For instance, it is emphasised that models can perform from home, create their own schedule, earn up to USD$10,000 a week, and chat with tons of visitors daily, while the requirements are few and simple: performers simply need to have a computer, a webcam, and an Internet connection. The benefits and requirements of joining an adult live cam site both reinforce the notion of making money in an easy and fun way, while also emphasising the entrepreneurial notions of being independent and one’s ‘own boss’. By being their own bosses, performers can decide on not only the interactions they want to have with customers but also the conditions related to their work: they decide where, when, and how they are going to work.

Although the omission of sexual activity could be based on the fact that content production depends on particular negotiations with customers, the lack of any mention of sex-related activity is misleading. Moreover, Ray (2007) has called attention to the potential risks faced by individuals who choose to enter the seemingly unproblematic online sex business with excessive haste, overestimating the financial rewards while underestimating the negative psychological and social effects. For instance, most private performances involve fetishes, and the impression of easy money can be easily

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questioned, as customers’ private demands can be quite rough or unusual. As seen in chapter 3, some one-on-one interactions can be very intense. As Mary (2013) notes, it can be very tiring trying to ‘keep going with a deep penetration show, or twenty minutes of anal, or any other random and long complicated fantasy’.

The advertisement also fails to mention that YPMate keeps a percentage of performers’ earnings to pay for costs related to hosting the experience and driving customer traffic to the website. The company pays performers between 30% and 35% of what the customers spend in their rooms. For instance, while a typical performance costs approximately USD$2.99/min, an hour’s worth of time at that rate would cost approximately USD$180, but the performer would receive only USD$54. Performers are often critical of the percentage taken from their earnings, but they are also dissatisfied that they cannot renegotiate their contracts: ‘Usually in other jobs if you have been working for a company for years, you can ask for a higher wage. Performers who have been working for an adult live-cam website for a long time should be having a higher cut than a base of 35%’ (Alba 2014). However, most performers accept these conditions because of the advantages YPMate provides, such as the advertising/partnering necessary to attract webcam customers to their site; covering ‘chargeback’ losses when webcam customers refuse to pay after the show; all bandwidth, hosting, and operating costs; all online credit card processing costs; and dealing with all customer issues (thus maintaining ‘virtual’ anonymity for the performer).

These characteristics of YPMate performers’ working conditions reflect what Lazzarato (1996:137) assumed to be the norm for immaterial labour workers: ‘precariousness, hyperexploitation, mobility’. Thus, although the website offers autonomy to performers, there are consequences. First, this form of temporary contract work increases companies’ options and flexibility by distributing part of the risk burden to performers. Flexibility, along with weakened social protection, means that post-industrial work depends on the worker’s ability to manage uncertainty in unprecedented ways.

Moreover, the model of atomised producers isolates and individuates performers, making it difficult for them to unionise. To circumvent this isolation, performers create other spaces for dialogue, like the forums investigated here, where performers share tips.
on how to make more money or deal with specific situations, along with providing moral and emotional support. Along the same lines as Voss (2015), these online forums give performers (who are also industry agents since they conflate roles such as directing, marketing, and other non-sexual services) a way to facilitate knowledge sharing in face of the stigma they encounter for working in the adult industry. As I will show later in this section, however, divergences in the adult cam industry are also present in the forums. Performers are in a constant state of conflict between helping each other and competing with each other. In the tips that are given, some performers project certain identities onto other performers, creating mistrust among them—especially when it comes to ‘cheap girls’.

Upon deciding to become a performer, the person must sign a contract establishing that Streamate will provide performers through an electronic medium to generate revenue on a ‘pay-per-minute’ basis. Meanwhile, performers agree to provide content to Streamate and its affiliates. In other words, Streamate is the platform that allows ‘models to set up their own shops’ as ‘Independent Content Providers (“ICPs”) offering a myriad of choices for the consumer’ (Naiaddev 2013). This division between performer and website is similar to the issues discussed in chapter 3—namely, the fact that cooperative and communicative qualities are internal to adult live-cam content production, and the company has no direct control over it (Lazzarato 1996:145). As ICPs, performers not only have great autonomy in choosing their performances but can also stipulate many of their work conditions—the place where they work from, their working hours, and their prices. Here, it is important to note that although performers are not required by the company to choose a specific work schedule, they tend to adapt their schedule according to user traffic time zones and users’ likelihood of spending money. Aligned with their identity work, as discussed in chapter 3 performers tend to be online either during US time or Western European time.

In terms of setting their prices, performers’ autonomy gives them the sense of being their own bosses. As Ruth (2014) puts it, ‘You want a raise, it is easy: raise your per-minute rate’. Such independence is allied with the fact that immaterial labour is anchored in a social labour power that is compelled to organise both its own work and its relations with business entities. As a result, adult live cams spur the dynamics of the free
market, where performance prices are set freely by the forces of supply and demand, and are allowed to reach their point of equilibrium without direct intervention by the website. Performer Ruth (2014) illustrates the dynamics of adult live cams as follows: ‘It is a market where if performers do not make money at a specific price point, they can themselves lower it. If the market rewards them for raising their prices, then they definitely should. It is basically a free market’. To help performers know their optimum prices, the website provides them with metrics that show how much they are making and exactly what happens when they raise or lower their rates (Beth 2014). As with all ‘market efficiency’ situations, performers are subject to intersecting curves where higher pricing levels intersect with lower paid sales conversion rates, yielding some particular price level that produces the maximum amount of total paid sales revenues. Of course, finding the ‘most efficient’ price level involves a fair amount of experimentation on the part of the performers and often involves a learning curve. As a consequence of performers being able to assert their own prices, adult live cams spur a competitive environment.

Another important factor that has influenced the market and driven wages down is the increase in the number of performers in the business: the more performers involved, the smaller their piece of the pie. Although the amount made by individual performers might have decreased, the website can still make the same money. For example, if a webcam site had a hundred performers performing for USD$10 each in 2010, this would come to USD$1,000; today, the same website might have 1,000 performers performing for $USD1 each, and it still makes USD$1,000. However, as more performers join the website, the number of ‘marginal performers’ increases.

Marginal performers are those whose paid sales conversion rates are lower than the point required for YPMate to recover the costs incurred by providing them with a space on the website and a live stream. Although marginal performers create outright financial losses for the website, the site has no sanctions against them. Instead, the auto-regulating system also applies for them, as ‘low paid sales conversion rate’ performers usually give up before the company needs to do anything about them. According to some performers (Ruth 2014; Catherine 2012), ‘The market already puts performers where they belong’, because performers ‘who do not make money end up quitting the website on
their own’. The marginal-performer phenomenon is intrinsically related to the fact that the demand for adult live-cam content is elastic, as performances are considered a luxury good:

In the end, adult live cams websites are a ‘market driven’ economy just like any other. Customers have practically unlimited options to choose from, and they are completely free to spend or not, and as much or as little, as they want. Unlike other commodities such as food or petrol, webcam demand is entirely elastic. Hence, the ‘marginal value’ of any performers is completely determined by what customers are willing to spend on them. (Brigitte 2014)

Not only do customers have a ‘virtually unlimited supply’ but also the increase in the number of performers has a particular impact on the market as many of these performers are physically located in different parts of the world. It is in this sense that the decentralisation of production can measure the extent to which the cycle of immaterial labour has come to assume a strategic role within the global organisation of production (Lazzarato 1996:137). This phenomenon influences the structure of the industry’s space of flows, as it connects performers from poorer regions who might be willing to set lower prices for themselves. This creates a division among performers, with those from Western countries regarding some of the low-fee performers as ‘cheap girls’ for selling themselves short. For instance, Noelle (2011) notes that some performers charge very low rates because they are from countries where the cost of living is much lower than in the UK, the US, and Western Europe. Hence, Noelle’s monthly rent alone can be the same amount as another performer’s income for several months, depending where that performer lives.

However, this consideration fails to observe that many performers from poorer regions might incur in additional costs. Some might not speak English as their native language and might hire interpreters, with whom they split their earnings. In that case, the interpreters are paid a fixed amount for a block of time, which keeps them from getting any of the fees models earn from their private shows—even when it is the translator who is actually the show’s ‘director’.
Another aspect to consider is the fact that some performers from poorer regions have their work intermediated by what are called ‘studios’. There are two types of studios: ‘virtual studios’ and ‘physical studios’. Virtual studios are considered online agencies or virtual representatives that recruit performers and take a percentage of their earnings in order to sign them up with bigger websites like Streamate. Usually, these percentages are staggering, and performers end up earning 15% to 30% per minute instead of 30% to 70% per minute. Such studios thrive on two things: users not knowing how to sign up for sites directly, and the rule imposed by some webcam websites that requires performers who live in certain countries (which are not disclosed but are not the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or any country in Western Europe) to sign up through a studio in order to stream on their websites.

On the other hand, physical studios are facilities specifically designed for the purpose of broadcasting adult live-cam performances; performer Lila describes it as a webcam calling centre (2012). Performers who sign up through a physical studio do not work independently from their homes; instead, they work at a third-party establishment where they have access to a computer and an Internet connection (Biddle et al 2012).

Performers who work for a studio are considered low-end, and their payout varies greatly. First, from the amounts paid by customers, 30% to 40% goes first to the studio, and then from this 30-40% the studios take a big percentage for itself – say, 20%-, and the rest goes to the performer (sometimes only 10% or less). The amount given to the performer is arbitrary, and some studios adopt a point system: for doing positive things like refreshing their photos in their profiles, performers are rewarded with one point that is worth X amount of money. However, for infractions of studios rules, points are deducted from the model’s ‘salary’. Such studio rules are often rigid, and the punishment fines are expensive; this strategy allows studio administrators to ‘take back’ some portion of their nominal monthly earnings as ‘givebacks’.

Further, in politically volatile countries or in those where pornography is forbidden, studios tend to pay the models much smaller percentages, because they feel they can and because there is a greater risk to them. Such a relation is described in the following account:
Some Asian performers I’ve watched were talking about how adult live cams were considered prostitution in their countries, with serious legal sanctions for those performing. Hence, maybe some studios know the right people in these countries and bribe them to make it possible for some performers to work for them. (Josh 2010)

Despite the disadvantages of working for a studio, some performers join physical studios because they have no other way to join an adult live-cam website. Computers cost money, ISPs cost money, and in some countries it is difficult to get good Internet, which can be very expensive. Studios can amortise these costs both over a longer time period and across different performers, and have 24/7 use of these facilities, unlike independents performers. Studios also might help performers to keep their ‘private life’ from being directly affected by ‘work life’: if a performer lives in shared accommodations with other people (family members or roommates), it can be very difficult to keep their work secret.

Women’s rights activists and non-governmental organisations often report that such studios are linked to conditions similar to slavery and human trafficking, especially in less regulated countries in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. Such claims have already had concrete repercussions—for instance, the Filipino government’s veto of adult live-cam websites (O’Neil 2013). On the other hand, adult live-cam industry supporters claim that these studios do not reflect the business as a whole; according to them, most performers are independent and broadcast from their homes. Unfortunately, due to the intrinsic characteristics of adult live cams (i.e. wide, global broadcasting), it is almost impossible to discern whether a performer is working for a studio, which obscures the potentially exploitative practices of studios. In several adult live-cam forums, performers urge everyone to avoid, at all cost, any kind of studio because of the potential harm.

Although performers view the inequalities that lead some to work through studios as disastrous, they are quick to defend the existence of price variation on the website and argue that competition should be stimulated:

It is a normal and good thing that not everything is equal when it comes to the adult live cams business. Or else, we would have what, communism? The
business industry is just not an equal place, and I do not think it would work out as well if it were. If everything was ‘equal’ in the adult live cams business, there would be no ‘top’ performer, no successful model or business model, as we would all be the same. (Sandra 2014)

This discourse and the website’s free-market dynamic encourage the capitalist logic that ‘set[s] all its subjects in competition with each other and thereby seize[s] for itself an ever-increasing proportion of this global wealth’ (Dyer-Witheford 2001:143). Moreover, it illustrates Terranova’s (2004:42) argument that the Internet is not a ‘free-floating post-industrial utopia, but in full, mutually consisting interaction with late capitalism’—in particular, global venture capital.

Moreover, despite the predominance of self-regulated dynamics on YPMate, the company still exerts influence on the market. For instance, YPMate provides extra perks to high-earning performers with the most up-to-date equipment, especially in terms of visibility (extra promotion and higher placement) and access to new features (gold shows/TV gold shows). This accentuates the division between ‘cheap girls’ and other performers in terms of access to the technological means to stream their videos. It creates a cycle: performers are displayed on the site according to their sales rates; hence, the more they sell their shows, the more likely it is they will appear on the first page. Moreover, those who appear on the first page get more customers/money. Hence, those on top have greater opportunities to stay there and rise further while those at the bottom have fewer opportunities and are more likely to decline. Moreover, although performers have a certain degree of control over the production of content and the conditions of their work, they have little say when it comes to marketing and distribution. Although the adult live cam is a genre based on its unique aspect of providing ephemeral live interactions, the company can resort to recording shows and appropriating performers’ material in order to promote them within their ring of websites.

5.3 The network loop

In this section, I discuss the network of websites YPMate belongs to. The aim is to show adult live-cam companies’ indirect influence on content production and the ways
they profit from it. First, I explore how the decentralisation and diversity of the network is a façade for a highly centralised business. In fact, the business dynamic reinforces the binary of decentralisation/centralisation, which acts out of mutual concern, and the two retro-feed each other in terms of traffic and pornographic content. For instance, the vast network of affiliates and white labels (rebranded websites that display the same webcams) linked to YPMate feeds the latter with user traffic. In exchange, performers’ recorded shows and images are fed into the network to attract more users in the form of marketing and advertising. This loop and the company’s network also reveal a dynamic where free and paid adult websites cooperate in a symbiotic relation among adult companies. In this case, there is cooperation between ‘mainstream’ adult content production with ‘professional’ adult performers and ‘amateur’ content websites. At the centre of the dynamic is the discussion of immaterial labour and intellectual property, and how the company controls and manages content in the form of distribution and marketing.

YPMate is part of a large and complex network comprising a variety of adult websites. First, YPMate has a direct link with one of the most famous adult tube sites: the ‘YP’ in YPMate is an acronym for YouPorn. On YouPorn, a link to live cams connects both websites, creating a loop of visitors: around 85% of users accessing YPMate come from the link on YouPorn, while around 65% of users go back to YouPorn after visiting YPMate (Alexa 2013). Journalist Gareth Branwyn observed this interconnection, noting that ‘the most trafficked Web rings are found in the amateur e-pornography and adult webcam communities’ (1999). However, YPMate’s connections extend far beyond YouPorn since it is also part of another platform called Streamate. YPMate is a Streamate white label, meaning it only rebrands the Streamate page to appear as if it were a different website. In fact, both websites offer exactly the same content, displaying the same performers and information. The platform Streamate provides to YPMate is the same platform provided to over 500 popular adult websites, which guarantees performers maximum exposure and traffic.

Aside from YPMate, some of Streamate’s other white labels include ebonycams.com, cambitches.com, latinsex.com, and trannywebcamsex.com. As mentioned previously, the same adult live-cam performers are displayed on all white-
label websites; the difference is that on niche websites, performers corresponding to that niche are shown on the first page. Such a marketing strategy can cause much trouble for performers. Regarding Streamate’s white labels, performer Ava (2011) said she found herself listed in all the above-mentioned white labels, although she is a white female. Moreover, many of the white-label names are very offensive (i.e. Blackhoes.com), which can cause customers to be overly rude to performers.

In 2012, rumours spread that a company called Manwin (now known as MindGeek) had bought Streamate. This company consolidated itself as one of the largest providers of online pornography. It operates a wide variety of services, from webcams to dating websites, and owns content brands as well as the most highly trafficked adult video-sharing websites (including YouPorn). Brigitte (2012) is among the performers who believe MindGeek bought Streamate, and she points out that MindGeek is trying to maximise market profits by reducing market competition.

For competitors, MindGeek’s dominance in online pornography might have negative results, especially because of the monopolistic power it wields from owning both production and distribution avenues. Since MindGeek dominates the market, today only super-corporation cam companies—who have the capital to start a business with the same level of quality (HD technology and the capacity to host thousands of webcams) and possess regular-customer databases (e.g. mainstream companies such as Playboy have a fan base that could be reallocated)—could make profits in the industry. Hence, people in the industry note that the last period during which a webcam site could have been easily launched was up until 2006, since an impenetrable adult live-cam oligopoly now exists (Sasha 2012). Given the difficulties of entering the business, industry agents argue that antitrust measures should be applied to the three mega-companies owning adult live cams: MindGeek; WEmpire, owner of LiveJasmin, the world’s most visited video chat community; and Xbiz, owner of MyFreeCam.

Performers also believe such an oligopoly exists, describing it as ‘a mafia club you cannot join’ (Alana 2012). Performer Blanca (2014) says there is an oligopoly because there are only three to four
top camming websites agreeing as a cartel, [and] they can do as they wish! They can pay performers only 35% because cam sites are not subject to antitrust laws. But if the same happened in a non-adult industry, say an Internet provider had 80% of the market and could cut payout to its providers as they wished [...] antitrust would come and split that company in pieces.

Along the same lines, an industry agent claims that no government would take antitrust measures to help any adult businesses out of fear of ridicule or scandal for being associated with a ‘taboo’ industry (Mark 2012). David Auerbach (2014) raises the same concern about antitrust laws not being applied to the adult industry in his article ‘Vampire Porn’. However, there is no evidence that antitrust lawsuits are not opened against the adult industry in general. Most industry agents mention a major case from 2001 when MindGeek sued ICANN and ICM for having exclusive rights to .xxx domains. In that lawsuit, MindGeek claimed there was an approval of .xxx in the absence of a competitive tender, and that its subsequent launch policies and pricing violated US antitrust laws. Although ICANN and ICM argued that MindGeek was just scared of a little competition, the companies settled and agreed on lower prices for .xxx domains.

Moreover, an industry agent noted that MindGeek did not buy other companies but merged with them. Such mergers are regulated in the US by the Clayton Act, which was designed to proactively prevent antitrust issues. For example, before two companies can merge, they must notify the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and obtain approval prior to the merger. The Clayton Act also created exemptions from enforcement for certain organisations, the most significant being labour unions. Hence, since the FTC authorised such mergers, such consolidation cannot be categorised as an oligopoly.

Although the legal details of the online adult industry are fascinating, they are not analysed in detail in this thesis. Here, it is important to note that either way, the predominance of a few adult live-cam websites challenges the idea of the Internet as a decentralised space characterised by equality among websites. Some websites are more attractive to users and become more strategically placed than others, producing a hierarchy of value among them. Such an oligopoly also corresponds to the tendency in
contemporary Web design to, first, centralise the site in the overall flow by providing an attractive service or content; second, audience behaviour is managed to either follow a specific path via advertising banners or stay on a specific page for as long as possible and spend money (Shaner 1998).

Like other new pornographies and adult companies (Barss 2010), Streamate is a master, not of pornography production but of affiliate marketing, search-engine optimisation, and traffic-conversion ratios. Since it does not profit from directly producing content, it makes money by manipulating user traffic and charging users for using its space to produce content. In the case of YPMate, the company keeps a percentage of performers’ earnings to pay for hosting the experience and attracting customers through affiliates and marketing. Although some performers view this as unfair, since around ‘two-thirds of their money is taken by the website, as a fee for hosting’ the experience (Debra 2014), other performers talk about how expensive it is to set up their own website with the same structure. These performers say that most of the money kept by the company is used to pay for costs related to running the website.

According to performers, around 35% of the amount retained by the company goes to affiliate websites and other marketing (Donna 2011; Phoebe 2011). Affiliate programs are a type of performance-based marketing in which the company rewards affiliates for visitors or customers brought to YPMate through their own marketing efforts. Hence, the purpose of affiliates is for the company to shift part of its marketing effort and attract more visitors to the pay site. To this end, affiliates are given access to promotional media such as hyperlinks, photos, and videos they can use to advertise YPMate. In return for directing visitors to the pay site, affiliates are rewarded with a fraction of the revenue that is generated by those customers who were referred by the affiliate. However, performers can also be part of the affiliate system and advertise their cams on social media such as Twitter and Facebook. By doing so, they can increase their earnings; as Stephanie (2014) explains, ‘Performers can earn around 70% more if they get customers to sign up to YPMate under their profile link and buy their shows. By doing so, performers can earn around 20% as commission on every payment these customers make on the website’. Hence, Stephanie (2014) argues that performers should heavily market themselves so they can get this additional money. Through such means,
performers can not only recover part of their money earned but also have better control over how they are marketed online.

The company invests in affiliates because user traffic is essential for the business. Performers work with/for customers, and without them they would lose their source of revenue. If one owns a pre-recorded content site, it can be left with no traffic for a while without major consequences. In the case of webcams, however, without traffic, performers would quit; this means companies must keep their content a/live. Hence, adult live-cam user traffic is directly associated with the website’s profit.

While there is no scholarly documentation regarding the current size and profitability of the adult live-cam industry, there are many speculative mainstream media accounts of it. For instance, a CNBC article titled ‘CamGirls: The New Porn Superstars’ quotes Douglas Richter—a representative for Adult Webmaster Empire (AWE)—who affirms that the adult webcam industry has grossed over USD$1 billion and is visited by approximately 5% of the world’s daily Internet users (Morris 2013). In another article called ‘How Live Sex Will Save the Porn Industry’, Alec Helmy—publisher of the porn industry trade magazine Xbiz—argues that the top cam companies have been growing by as much as 20% annually (Stabile 2012). According to both articles, the success of adult live cams in a context where porn is freely available is mainly due to its interactive nature. By the same token, New York Times reporter Matt Richtel (2013) wrote that

the cam business, a kind of digital era peep show, has been around for a few years, but as the technology has become better and cheaper […] it has created a money-making opportunity in a pornography business eroded by the distribution of free content on the Internet.

Regarding user traffic, most popular webcam websites reach over 30 million visitors a month according to Compete.com, a company that measures Internet traffic. However, such measurements may be misleading. For instance, according to Compete.com, Streamate’s competitors such as LiveJasmin and MyFreeCams have 10 million and 2.2 million daily page views, respectively. On the other hand, Streamate has a daily page view of only 628,000 visitors. Performer Britney (2014) states that ‘one would
think according to such statistics that LiveJasmin is a better site to work on and that all performers should work there’. She goes on to say, however, that such statistics should be taken with a ‘grain of salt’ because these numbers do not take into account Streamate’s white labels, which redirect traffic to the website. So, even if Streamate’s website traffic is measured as very little, there are thousands of white labels not taken into account in these statistics that add traffic to Streamate.

Even if these traffic figures were reliable, performers argue they do not matter since what is important is the paying traffic. According to performer Catherine (2014), ‘Paying traffic is the most important commodity on adult live cams, and that is why a substantial percentage of performers’ earnings is directed to it’. In Rebecca’s words, ‘Visiting a website is one thing, but how many visitors are paying? There is a difference between paying customers and user traffic: they are not mutually exclusive’ (2013). In fact, many performers say that having a lot of traffic can cause some inconveniences since it also means ‘more hecklers, users who troll and waste our time’ (Anna 2012). As already discussed, data related to the number of paying customers on the website are not available to performers or the general public.

Regarding Streamate’s revenues, there is no documentation of its exact size or profitability. This does not stop performers from trying to estimate webcam sites’ profit margins. While most performers agree that most of the 65% Streamate keeps from performers’ earnings is reinvested in the websites, they wonder how much is really put back into it. Performer Stephanie (2011) asserts from personal experience that ‘because I work in marketing, I can assure you that Streamate is not reinvesting that much in marketing. Hence, I assume they are easily in the profit of over one million per week’. Along the same lines, performer Anna (2014), discussing the amount of money the company spends on advertisements, calculates the revenues this way:

Five hundred performers [are] online per hour, 24 hours per day at USD$20 per hour average. Simple math equals to USD$240,000 per day and USD$7,200,000 per month. So, even at those conservative numbers, Streamate is left with USD$4,680,000 after performers are paid their 35% share. If Streamate spends one million in advertising and affiliates, the company would still profit USD$3.68
million. And even if the company spends another million to buy traffic and host the website, it would still make USD$2.68 million. Bottom line, the company still takes more than all performers put together.

However, other performers reason that Streamate also has to deal with chargebacks and other expenses, and most of the money could be going to their expenses. Although the actual size of Streamate’s business cannot be grasped, its importance is still acknowledged by many performers. YPMate/Streamate was chosen for this study because Streamate is one of the oldest adult live-cam websites and has adapted itself to changes in the business, employing both pay-per-minute and tipping systems. Moreover, the website is considered fast-paced with great traffic: ‘You put on some lingerie, you connect the webcam, and traffic arrives’ (Barbara 2012). YPMate performers highlight the great user traffic as the main reason why they chose the website over others:

Stores pay extreme rent prices to be located in a trendy mall because of foot traffic. If these stores were in the middle of nowhere, no one would be able to find them, and they would not make any profit. So is it bad for the stores to be paying high rents, is it lost money? No, because it also helps them to make more money due to one important rule in business: location. (Gilda 2014)

While payments to affiliates guarantee that performers will have high exposure and greater opportunities to maximise earnings, the fact that performers receive roughly the same amount as affiliates also indicates how user traffic is commodified. Just as in the traditional media, the website is selling an audience (now converted into prosumers) to advertisers (performers), who in turn need to persuade the users to pay for content. In traditional media, such audiences are called an ‘audience commodity’ since they are a product that is bought and sold; marketers purchase access to individual users to solicit their attention with marketing messages. The notion of an audience commodity relies, of course, on the related concept of audiences as consumers. As Smythe (1981:6) puts it, ‘the work which audience members perform for the advertiser to whom they have been sold is to learn to buy particular brands of consumer goods, and to spend their income
accordingly’. This audience-based economic model was originally developed by the press and then TV, with studies identifying whether advertisers were assured that they were getting the audience they were paying for (Smythe 1981:4–5). With the rise of the Web, authors such Elizabeth Van Couvering (2008) started calling this a ‘traffic commodity’. On the Internet, where audiences are extremely fragmented, this turns out to be a much more useful value chain to construct, since the problem is not so much getting content to your audience but audiences to your content. Moreover, in the case of immaterial labour, it is difficult to discuss audiences since users are simultaneously consumers and producers. Coté and Pybus (2007) state that to analyse social networks, immaterial labour should be discussed with regard to the active participation of audiences on social networks. In short, they think that such participation and construction is not the commodification of an audience; rather, it is immaterial labour 2.0—that is, a more accelerated and intensified variation of immaterial labour.

Aside from affiliates, another way the company can market adult live cams is through its complex network. Other MindGeek websites that host free content are used as advertising platforms for paid websites such as adult live cams. For instance, when someone is watching a video clip on a tube site, he or she might notice advertisements from adult cam websites; as a result, most users come to YPMate from its link on YouPorn, as discussed earlier. Another example is that other websites owned by MindGeek, such as Brazzers and Twisty, have their live shows featured on Streamate. Such dynamics cut costs in terms of buying online advertising space, which is quite expensive (Branwyn 1999).

The promotional materials for affiliates and other publicity are often taken from performers’ profiles or private shows. However, performers have little control over which material will be used and where: ‘Any affiliate can open a website and upload the content YPMate gives them, so performers just never know. I believe most advertisements are on major tube sites, but beyond that it is not easy to say’ (Sasha 2011). This happens because, according to the contract, performers’ images and content belong to performers and the company alike, as previously explained. According to performers, another significant issue that emerged in the last few years is that many webcam sites and their affiliates have been recording private cam shows given by their performers and uploading
them to major tube-like sites. This has huge implications regarding performers’ privacy, since until recently they could perform sex acts online with little fear of being recorded. Performers argue that in an ideal world, posting videos and other marketing materials would be under the complete control of performers (Linda 2013). The same critiques are directed at the tag system, as both marketing and tags take away performers’ power to decide how they want to be portrayed and where.

Because performers have no control over the distribution of their content and marketing, becoming affiliated helps them to not only recover part of the money earned but also decide how their image will be exposed. Along these lines, Linda (2013) suggests that performers should ‘wreck the system’ by uploading their own videos to tube sites, since they know their images will be exposed anyway. If performers do so, they will be able to ‘control the content advertised—if they are shown naked or not, performing a striptease or a sexual act’—and be able to manipulate an ‘influential marketing and branding tool to brand themselves’ (Linda 2013).

Since performers are paid for their performances, their immaterial labour cannot be considered unpaid labour. However, questions of copyright arise. In terms of marketing, the company does not need to pay to have advertising material produced: they simply use content provided by performers. In this case, the problem seems to concern the appropriation of rights to performers’ content, which, according to the contract, includes not only the shows performed on the website but also their nicknames, the information on their profiles, and any picture they upload. Hence, although performers have control over content production, they have little power to control their content distribution online, especially when it comes to YPMate’s marketing strategies. Because of this appropriation of rights, Hesmondhalgh (2010) suggests that the argument against such practices should be framed in terms of intellectual property rather than unpaid labour.

In summary, YPMate’s adult network follows the tendency in contemporary web design to centralise the site in the overall flow and manage the audience’s behaviour. This means that although there is an illusion of choice for users, they are in fact in the same domain, walking in circles. The webmaster for Butts-N-Sluts, Brian Muir, claims that, rather than alienating potential customers, exit console loops, or ‘circle-jerking’ as
insiders call it, actually turn weary surfers into paying customers (in Uebel 1999). Being part of this tendency, webcam companies aim to control or reshape the ways in which people communicate, pushing them in the direction of brands (Hesmondhalgh 2010). In the next section, I will analyse how the website attracts customers.

5.4 Mixing dating and business

User traffic is crucial for the adult live-cam business, and effective marketing plays a significant role in attracting this traffic. To attract users, adult webcam pages are often portrayed as adult networking; for customers, e-mail spam and pop-up images appeal to friendship making. As seen earlier, this is also how the company portrays itself in order to recruit performers. Despite not being a recent phenomenon, performers point to an increase in this kind of traffic: ‘It is not a new thing, the dating traffic, but what is new is that almost all the traffic is dating traffic now’ (Virginia 2013). The website also actively encourages performers to establish a relation with users by, for example, sending them private messages so users will feel intimate and believe a relationship is developing between them and the performers.

Performers might use customers’ expectations of dating and friendship in their favour: ‘Give me a tip so we can become friends, and then I will give you access to my friends list and we can exchange private messages’ (Samuel 2010). Other performers see these exchanges as problematic: dating websites are often free while webcams are a paid service. Hence, these performers prefer to be direct and let members know that adult webcams are not a ‘dating service’. Nevertheless, such warnings could backfire for performers since they are ‘breaking the spell’ that binds customers to them and their websites. However, this does not happen very often. When customers come to realise that performers lack any interest in dating and that live webcams are not a form of adult networking, it is usually through their personal experiences, and they then become overly suspicious of performers’ activities.

Aside from attracting traffic, an important question for the business is how to convert user traffic into paying customers. Sales of content have always been difficult on the Web because users want free content, and content costs are front-loaded. This means that costs occur when the first unit is made, and afterward every copy is free. Some
people even say that converting users to customers on adult live cams is more difficult than converting them on other kinds of pay sites. The interesting observation is that users of adult live cams seem to become and remain free users with an account for years, freeloading content—whether they ‘log in often or rarely does not matter; he says, “I will never pay”’ (Mark 2013)—until they decide to spend some money on the website, and sometimes even spend a fortune on it.

For adult live-cam customers, the question that remains is why buy or participate in such a context when there are so many uncontrolled free spaces and so much free content. Why would some guys ‘waste’ that kind of money ‘jerking off to a pixelated and grainy webcam image, when they can get a real and gorgeous baby for real sex for half the amount of money’? (Pamela 2012). First of all, adult webcam sites not only arrange the mess of information available online but also provide a secure environment for users, legitimise the business, and provide important resources in the form of community forums (Lane 2001). This means that adult live cams and pornography in general have not been completely reinvented; they have simply been provided to the public in a different way.

Another way of analysing the issue is trying to grasp who adult live-cam customers are. Although the porn user has traditionally been associated with the abnormal, dangerous, or clandestine (Attwood 2007), the ways they are represented have changed according to particular historical contexts. Drawing on Kendrick (1987), Attwood argues that these historical changes are constructed through ‘discourse mobilized by elites’ and reflect pornography as an indicator of social dangers in a given time or place (2003:161). Attwood (2003:161) further notes that the porn user has recently been associated with the child victim and the porn addict, symbolising the dangers of easy access to sexual material online and its invasion of family homes.

Historically, the narratives about porn users have had in common the scenario of danger and rescue described by Kendrick (1987) and the construction of an expert and an ‘other’ (the porn user is never one of us). In the case of adult live cams, the figure of the addict is still present but reconstructed in the idea of ‘regular customers’ who create a connection with performers. Moreover, additional representations, such as the old, ugly, lonely man, are added to reinforce customers’ need for human interaction.
Analysing performers’ descriptions of their customers, we find that their perceptions reinforce the well-known stereotypes of porn users—specifically, the perverted, lonely, ugly man. One performer says, ‘Have you ever thought that around 30% to 40% of men on adult live cams websites either have very weird fetishes or are very lonely, ugly, or old and sometimes need someone to talk, to console their loneliness?’ (Amanda 2010). From this perspective, the representation of porn users as perverts is still present in performers’ perceptions. This is mainly due to one of the characteristics of adult live cams: the customisation of content production, which gives customers the possibility of living out very specific fetishes. Hence, performers still categorise some customers as being at least ‘weird’ because they are ‘into a particular a thing’ that can be considered shocking.

On the other hand, performers also report having many ugly customers: ‘In my three years of camming I only saw a hot guy once, maybe twice’ (Leona 2012). As a consequence, many performers conceal the repulsion they might feel because of a customer’s ugliness:

I think performers are great actresses. I, for instance, have seen so much ugliness I always want to throw up. And still you could never tell because I am [all] sexy smiles and lustful. But when the chat ends, I think to myself: what the heck was the customer thinking? If I was that ugly, I would never even own a cam! (Ana 2012)

To overcome their repulsion, performers often try to focus on something good about customers’ appearance. Most performers say they get used to this kind of customer, especially because they focus on the money-making part of the business; ugly and older customers are likely to become ‘regulars’. According to some performers, this type of customer seeks some kind of external validation and social interaction; as performers put it, they just want to feel liked and appreciated. Adele (2015) says that performers who are making the most money are ‘mainly stroking egos, and not so much stroking cocks’. Hence, the top earners make customers feel recognised by how great they are, and as a result ‘customers open their wallets’ (Adele 2015). It is also important to note that seeing
adult live-cam customers as loners in need of human connection/interaction perpetuates the position of performers as their rescuers (their counsellors and companions).

The representation of customers as ‘ugly old loners’ is often opposed to that of the perverted man, and it is used strategically by customers themselves when interacting with performers. As Barbara (2012) says, ‘Customer: Just talk to me, that’s all I ask honey. I am not a pervert just a lonely person who wants a decent conversation: Is that ok?’ Some performers note that these customers are the ones who get most attached to them: ‘I understand that some of you are lonely and want a girlfriend as awesome as me. But please, stop getting upset when I tell you that I am not single. If you don’t want to know the truth, just don’t ask!’ (Linda 2011). Some performers note that they, too, feel lonely sometimes and that interacting with customers can make them feel better: ‘I’d have to say some customers want to talk and have someone listen to them: they are looking for company and affection. I do feel lonely, too. […] Some customers make me feel less lonely; since we chat and all. Is that sad or what?’ (Marina 2011).

However, according to Amanda (2011), the ‘pervs’ and loners ‘are’ only, at most, half of their clientele. Performers see the other half as just ‘normal horny men’. Performer Lauren (2011) suggests that customers have their own reasons for visiting adult live cams:

I certainly do not believe that using adult live-cam websites makes anyone a freak. The customers who buy shows are just regular guys. Maybe they pay us because they are lonely, or their partner is away, or to make a fetish come true. Performers see their dirty secrets that no one else knows about. But it is not fair to paint them with such a broad stroke.

However, performers such as Pamela (2011) note that the odd customers, the real ‘freaks’, are over-the-top ‘freaks’. In a context where the enactment of an individual’s desires is a common demand, the line between having a fetish and being a ‘sick’ pervert is not easily drawn by performers. Although Mona (2011) says it depends on the lens through which performers look at customers, a good parameter she uses is whether she feels threatened by them.
Several performers reinforce other stereotypes of porn users. They report, for example, having ‘older, generous, married, kinky’ male customers, while there are fewer young ‘douches/frat boys’. Performers report that their bigger spenders—the so-called whales—are mostly men ranging from 40 to 50 years old. According to them, it is rare to see a whale younger than 30–35 since people at that age have not yet accumulated wealth and probably have other more important expenses, like education, first homes, and raising children. In contrast, younger customers are less likely to spend money on ‘vanity entertainment’ on a regular basis, and when they do, they are the major cause of chargebacks. Adult live-cam agents describe in particular those in their twenties—who have just started living on their own and still rely on their parents’ money—as one-time big spenders: after the first time, they accrue debts with the website, have their credit card cancelled, and chargeback everything (Mark 2012).

At the other extreme, there are some whales over 60 who have overcome their difficulties with operating computers. They are retired and have already accumulated some cash; in the performers’ opinions, they are the best customers they can ask for. They highlight many reasons, but the most frequent one concerns the way they treat the performers, being perfect gentlemen. They sometimes occupy the rooms of dressed performers and tip them, just as ‘friends’. This can also be a way to gain a performer’s trust, in the hopes that they can impress the performer and perhaps date them in real life.

Performers say older men behave like gentlemen because they come from a generational culture of spending money on pornography. In an industry agent’s words,

Older guys are the guys who were taught they had to pay for pussy and be grateful for what they got. Most people discovered free pictures, movies, etc., in 1996–7. Any guy born after 1980 will be unlikely to pay for pornography, or cams. But the guys born ‘75 and earlier will pay until they’re 80. (Sasha 2012)

They not only have a culture of spending money on pornography but also pay for the convenience. Customers in general pay so they do not have to spend time searching for something they know already exists. Considering that time is money and they do not have the patience or the means to search, they are unwilling to waste time surfing around
when they know that USD$30 a month can get them what they want. Most of these enterprise (mainstream/adult) sites are easy to search, they have what customers want, and it is easy to purchase. One customer explains it as follows: ‘I have better things to do with my time than going through all of the hassle to be a fucking freeloader, thief, whatever people would like to characterise those who do this’ (Mia 2012). As mentioned earlier, pornography companies today do not produce content, which most of the time can be found for free. Instead, they alter the forms by which content is distributed and consumed. In this sense, they are not so different from websites such as Amazon and eBay, which are platforms for others to sell something—things that could be easily found locally.

As argued throughout this thesis, adult live cams are not simply about paying for sex; performers see webcams as ‘social work’. One customer even says that participating in an adult webcam can be ‘an education on how to communicate with a real [beautiful woman]’ (Paul 2008). This goes back to the fact, explored in chapter 2, that customers are after not only ‘sexual images’ or voyeurism but also interaction.

The shift toward a more relational and interactive kind of ‘pornography’—from a product/image to a service/act—can also be seen as a consequence of the ‘burnout factor’, a desensitisation to sexual matters that is sending people to dating and social networking sites where they can talk about their sexual feelings and find out more about them. A survey by Hitwise (Goldsmith 2008) found that visits by Generation Y (people aged 18–24) to adult or sexually explicit websites had fallen by about a third in recent years. During the same period, there was a rise in the popularity of social networking sites among the same demographic. However, among those aged 25 and over, visits to adult entertainment websites are still among the most popular. Performers have also perceived such a shift. As an industry agent puts it,

I remember my first cam sites in 2004 and 2005: for camgirls it was enough to sit there and beg for private in broken English, then in private do clone shows, and this was banking ok. Now, the guys are no more so impressed by a naked girl in cam; they want her to be also funny or different, to be online when [the] customer is online [in order] to make a more real friendship and so on. These
girls need to learn the art of seduction and to stall, because every guy they show just MAY HAVE joined and visited that site repeatedly. (Mark 2012)

As already mentioned, there are customers who are interested in creating relationships and/or romance with performers. Among them are the ‘white knights’ who aim to ‘save’ performers from selling their bodies and from the underdeveloped conditions they live in their home countries. Usually, white knights proclaim to be ‘in love with a performer, and they are always in her chat room fighting against others for her attention’ (Rosanne 2008). They usually take performers into private, not for sexual shows but to get them away from other customers. Underlying the knight’s perception is the notion that ‘poor’ performers will accept the friendship and company of well-off customers for its own sake. They will do so because performers should be ‘excited that a “Westerner” is interested on them’ and will ‘expose them to new and thrilling things that are not available in their country, so they accept friendship as a form payment’ (Liliana 2010). Despite the appearance of being ‘saved’ by a customer, one performer asks, ‘Who is saving whom?’, arguing that most customers want to save themselves from old age, loneliness, and so on.

On the other hand, some performers bring their hopes to their work as well—for romance and perhaps also for geographic and social mobility. Their emotions and projections of a future relationship are also self-referential and self-centred. The intimacy of chat—physically and psychically—sometimes seems only tolerable for the performer when she believes the relationship is unique. That the performer normally does not see her ‘special customer’ behaving similarly in other rooms with other models boosts the chances of self-deception. Hence, some performers also rely emotionally on some customers, as they spend long hours online in front of the webcam—even with rude visitors—feeling sometimes lonely, while customers can more easily create boundaries and disconnect. Moreover, such virtual ‘friends’ become very important since nearly every performer keeps her job a secret: with few ‘real world’ friends with whom performers can discuss their work, having customers who are friends makes it possible for them to vent about work.
Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the online adult industry has faced the consequences of a media shift where pornographic content is both easily produced and distributed online for free. In this chapter, the analysis of the relations between performers, customers, and YPMate’s network showed how the industry has adapted to these changes. First, the adult live-cam industry is highly dependent on user traffic for the production of content, both in terms of performers and customers. This traffic is mainly controlled by the ways the company markets adult live cams, which attract particular subjectivities to the genre. In this sense, the company manages the new productive subjectivities required for production through the content of the various affective and cognitive elements of subjectivity, and through structuring the environment in which the subjects operate. Moreover, the company’s extensive rings reinforce these relations, as both performers and customers can be trapped within the company’s network. By owning most free and paid adult websites, the company can easily manage the flow of participants.

In terms of performer recruitment, the company emphasises the possibility of creating relationships with customers, as well as performers’ autonomy in managing their own business. Performers are attracted by the freedom to be their own bosses, to set their own prices, and to regulate the market in a free-market manner. Hence, performers are constructed as agent-subjects by the website and by themselves, free to establish their preferences and choices. The independent and entrepreneurial nature of adult live cams can be seen as empowering performers within the industry. However, the website encourages performers’ freedom and entrepreneurial activity to shift to them the responsibility for administrating and producing content. This leads to a highly competitive market where marginal performers are cut down ‘naturally’ by market forces.

As a consequence, the company has stepped back from producing content to focus on hosting the production, connecting users, and organising content. As discussed, MindGeek owns a great number and variety of adult websites but is described as a global IT company focused not only on web design but also content delivery, streaming media, and online advertising. The company plays a crucial role in the flow of participants. For performers, it provides incentives to work on the website; for customers, it directs them to pages where they can ‘connect’. Moreover, the company often sends dating traffic to
adult live cams, as they believe users looking for personal connections will be more likely to spend money on adult live cams. In this sense, while the performer’s identity is portrayed as entrepreneurial, potential adult live-cam customers are mainly those looking for relationships. This leads to potential conflicts arising from the interaction between commercial transaction and the desire to create personal relationships.
If you want to be played for a long period in a fantasy world, then keep on visiting webcam websites; but if you want physical intimacy, then there are other places to go. (Josh 2010)

In the previous chapters, I explored how adult live webcams are situated in the context of the online exchange of a participatory culture and global digital economy, which are mutually constitutive. One way to unravel how these spheres overlap is to consider adult live cams in terms of both what is produced and the work that goes into producing it. In the previous chapter, the concept of immaterial labour was briefly introduced to describe work that produces ‘the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (Lazzarato 1996:133). Aside from producing ideas, symbols, images, and other such products, immaterial labour also produces emotional effects, social networks, and forms of community (Hardt 1999:96). Such labour is not simply performed at defined work sites such as factories; it ‘is dependent on a socialised labour power organised in assemblages of humans and machines’ (Terranova 2006:28). Adult live cams can be considered one such type of assemblage, where users are ‘active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked’ (Jenkins 2003:20).

In this chapter, attention is given to the emotional effects that are part of the immaterial labour created on adult live cams. Analysed here as intimate labour, these emotional effects include customers’ affective investment in and attachment to the platform, performers, and/or specific types of sexual exchanges. These emotional effects have a crucial role in promoting the culture and economy of adult live-cam sites; they are part of the ‘the biding, dynamic force’ that animates and provides coherence to customers’ experiences (Coté & Pybus 2007:90). Meanwhile, performers are also highly motivated by the prospect of financial compensation, and they deploy a range of strategies to create ‘connections’ with users and manage the intimate interactions between them; simultaneously, they set up frameworks of intimate exchange that are optimal for the performers themselves. These affective exchanges are understood to be situated in a broader context of shifting, complex physical and emotional boundaries, and
they blur and cross these boundaries—for example, between private and public, between the intimate and the commodified (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003).

Recent literature on the commodification of intimacy readily accepts that clients of sexual services seek providers of these services ‘not solely for sexual intercourse’ (Oso Casas 2010:55) but to fulfil a range of emotional and social needs (Sanders 2008; Weitzer 2009a; Xantidis & McCabe 2000). Moreover, the growth in sexual services available online creates new forms of potential value and intimate labour (McDowell 2011; Sanders 2005; Sassen 2001). The understandings, experiences, and performances of intimacy, however, are shaped in this context by the spaces where they take place and the participants involved in complex and often contradictory ways (Bernstein 2007; Zelizer 2005). For instance, Lerum (in Richtel 2013) argues that men are ‘more open, vulnerable, and emotional in cam rooms than in strip clubs’, becoming ‘more invested in a relationship that exists only on the screen’, because of their physical distance and anonymity. The intimacies produced through adult live cams can not only be more intense but also produced and managed according to specific practices, temporalities, relationships, and negotiations. They are rooted in the interplay between economics and relationships, as adult webcams are neither traditional sex work nor traditional intimate relationships but ‘something in between’ (Zelizer in Richtel 2013). In this sense, adult live cams are inserted in a matrix of bodily, affective, and cultural exchanges that result in intermingled ideas of intimacy, pornography, and sex (Maher et al. 2012:55).

The aim of this chapter is to elucidate the discourses and structures that govern intimate labour in a global, technologically mediated, participatory culture. To do so, I first examine the ways in which intimacy is shaped and regulated on YPMate, and how these transactions may challenge and reinforce perceptions of, and the demand for, those services based on notions of pornography, sex, and intimacy. I begin by clarifying important concepts, such as intimacy and intimacy online, in light of previous scholarship. Studies of virtual intimacies indicate that such intimacies can be enhanced by factors such as physical distance and user anonymity, which can help with the creation of long-term connections. I move on to relate intimacy to commodification in general, and then specifically with regard to sexual transactions. This discussion will help us to later understand how online pornographic forms such as adult webcams can be analysed.
as examples of intimate labour. I go on to analyse the forms of intimacy found on YPMate, first by investigating the relationship between nude embodiment and sexual intimacy and pleasure on webcams, looking in particular at the embodied work involved ‘doing’ sexual intimacy. Then, I approach the ambivalence of connections and disconnections in adult live cams, framing them within the mutual movements of intensification and extensification also observed in other aspects of adult live-cam interactions.

6.1 Online intimacy

Traditionally, the main focus of studies of intimacy has been on relationships between couples. However, with shifts in the very idea of what ‘intimacy’ means in a networked world, intimacy has recently been explored in other types of relationships as well. Online relations based on socialising at a distance are increasingly becoming a part of everyday life, challenging and redefining our notions of what it is to be ‘close’ or intimate. The Internet has played an important role in the development and transformation of social networking, reconfiguring old intimacies and creating new ‘virtual intimacies’ (McGlotten 2013). This term refers to intimacies mediated by technology—screens in particular. Virtual intimacies are often ephemeral, ambivalent, and constituted by a chaotic bleed between relational categories. Moreover, information and communication technologies, aligned with a confessional culture, have encouraged people to disclose personal information to mass audiences. This is the ‘disinhibition effect’ that can foster a profound sense of intimacy—what McNair (2002) calls a process of ‘public intimacy’: bringing out into the open discourse that used to be fiercely guarded as highly personal.

The concept of intimacy can refer to one’s level of emotional self-disclosure and perception of a partner’s receptiveness to such disclosure within a relationship. In these cases, the role of self-disclosure is key to the development and maintenance of the relationship (Bargh et al. 2002; Derlega et al. 2007), and disclosures are often related to the exposing of those private parts of oneself that are hidden from public view. However, as implied above, the shift toward confessional culture has expanded the realm of what is potentially publicly accessible and contracted the scope of what is fundamentally
personal—a move from the ‘passion for privacy’ of the nineteenth (and to a lesser extent twentieth) century to the ‘empowering exhibitionism’ of the Internet age (Koskela 2006). Koskela’s perception of empowerment through exhibitionism comes from the idea that self-published images would ultimately contest conventional mainstream ones. This means that users can now, through their erotic display, contest not only shameful considerations of sexuality itself but also particular practices and identities. Showing yourself, according to Koskela (2006), can be a political act.

This broad definition of intimacy covers relationships that are primarily maintained online as well as those conducted offline; either way, the role of self-disclosure is key to the development and maintenance of the relationship (Bargh et al. 2002; Derlega et al. 2007). What differentiates these two types of relationships is that in offline intimacy, people have opportunities to view potential partners within social or other observational contexts; meanwhile, those involved in exclusively computer-mediated relationships might have limited opportunities and must rely heavily on self-disclosure. Hence, the injunction to mutually self-disclose is intensified online. These virtual disclosures and intimacies differ from face-to-face intimacy, especially because of the ways in which self-disclosure occurs online—that is, through different features and in a different environment compared to face-to-face interaction.

Rabby and Walther (2002) claim that the earlier and more profound nature of online self-disclosure leads to faster and deeper intimacy. Also, since vulnerability and the risk of being hurt are perceived as lower in online spaces, this intimacy may be even more quickly achieved. There is also a need in online spaces for quick intimacy because of the more dynamic nature of interactions and identities in cyberspace: there is a bigger pool of potential partners online, and people can also go offline, sign off from the site, or create a new name or new persona at any time.

According to Ben Ze’ev (2003), online relationships can be distinguished between those seeking a romantic or sexual partner and those seeking an exclusive online romantic or sexual relationship. Ben Ze’ev argues that online-only romantic relationships are a new type of social relationship. One of the unique aspects of these relationships is the greater value placed on conversations and the imagination, which fill in the
informational gaps people have about online partners. This type of play requires one to sustain an illusion, which is easier to maintain in an online environment.

For Ben Ze’ev (2004), the online context creates a fundamentally new form of relationship whose salient feature is what he calls ‘detached attachment’—a condition arising from several seemingly contradictory elements that make virtual intimacies both appealing and problematic. One of these elements is the previously mentioned idea that self-disclosure is exacerbated online because of anonymity, which reduces feelings of vulnerability and can encourage self-disclosure and therefore intimacy. Combined with distance, anonymity allows for a medium in which experimentation and assuming different sexual personae allow for a continual exploration of the sexual aspects of self. This is only encouraged by the lack of social control and sexual regulation experienced in offline society.

Turkle (2011:26) argues that digital interaction redefines intimacy and reduces it to easy connections: ‘when technology engineers intimacy, relationships can be reduced to mere connections. And then, easy connection becomes redefined as intimacy’. Turkle further says that constant digital connection makes it easier to communicate through social media than face-to-face, and some people’s offline relationships may be reduced to simple connections through social media. On the other hand, online relationships can become more intimate due to the easy access to them thanks to the affordances of virtual world.

As a result of these factors, Ben Ze’ev (2004) suggests that virtual intimacy provides an easy and desirable alternative to the difficult circumstances of real-life relationships: one can achieve maximum intimacy with minimal investment (of time, energy, emotional capital, etc.). While these relationships remain online, they also may seem more appealing and enticing than physical relationships, leading to idealisation (Whitty & Carr 2006). Anonymity, controlled self-disclosure, and the ability to disappear from the online environment all offer the appearance of relative safety, but they may also create conditions or feelings of deception, secrecy, and potential discovery.

Following this discussion, Van Manen (2010) compares online and offline intimacy in terms of space, the former being distant and the latter being physical. The greater intimacy experienced online can also be credited to the ability to lose track of
time and space, and to be drawn into an alternative imaginary world where only the people involved exist, isolated from other social contexts. These rather intense relationships have been referred to as ‘hyperpersonal relationships’ (Tidwell & Walther 2002; Walther 1996), reflecting how online environments give individuals the opportunity to manage impressions of them. Virtuality might, for example, allow individuals to present a more likable self than would be possible in face-to-face situations.

Because virtual relationships are, in general, relationships at a distance, they also instil a desire for ideal circumstances that may not be possible to achieve. This gives virtual relationships an intensity involving yearning, yet a distance related to the consumption of fantasy—that is, having intimate closeness at a distance. Profound online intimacy seems to compensate for physical distance. People in online relationships report that they feel as if the great emotional connection between them and the desired one overcomes the physical distance. Hence, another dichotomy here is between physical and mental or emotional investment: online relationships demand relatively little in terms of physical resources but can demand a lot in terms of mental and emotional (immaterial) investment. Distance can also be overcome in other ways: the temporal immediacy created through ubiquitous real-time communication technologies creates an emotional immediacy and continued (tele)presence, despite a lack of physical contact. Such relations are, of course, further problematised when inserted into a market where affections are exchanged for money.

### 6.2 The commodification of intimacy

Something within us tells us that if a relation is intimate, it cannot—or should not—involves money. This assumption draws on two fallacies strongly rooted in our society: those of separate spheres and hostile worlds (Bandelj 2009; Zelizer 2005). The separate-spheres notion claims that the world is divided into separate and exclusive spheres of emotion and rationality. Meanwhile, the hostile-worlds idea says, further, that contact between these separate spheres corrupts in one or both directions. The mixing of money and intimacy would introduce contaminating, self-interested calculation into a world of sentiment, but would also introduce non-rational action into a world in which
efficiency should reign. Despite this idea, ‘intimate labour’ remains present in our day-to-day lives as ‘work that involves embodied and affective interactions […] tending to the intimate needs of individuals inside and outside their home’ (Boris & Parreñas 2010:5). These intimate needs and demands are ‘not just [for] sexual gratification but also our bodily upkeep, care for loved ones, creating and sustaining social and emotional ties’ (Boris & Parreñas 2010:5). Hence, intimate labour can entail bodily and emotional closeness and personal familiarity—for instance, through sexual intercourse or bathing someone else, or through the close observation of another person and knowledge of another person (history, selfhood, personality, etc.) (Boris & Parreñas 2010:2). Boris and Parreñas further argue that intimate labour involves the forging of interdependent relations (however temporary or enduring), although it may nevertheless require ‘maintenance of precise social relations between employers and employees or customers and providers’ (2010:3).

As discussed, intimate labour rests on access to in-depth knowledge about the other, and time is needed to develop trust and adapt and tailor the provided service according to personal needs (Zelizer 2005). Both knowledge and time are more likely to be controlled when intimate labour becomes paid and bureaucratically organised. The temporal domain is reflected in the way in which service is delivered and received—for instance, in the form of time-bound tasks provided at regular or irregular intervals. However, these constraints of paid intimate labour are always permeated by alternative opportunities for the provider. For example, although restrictions on time and physicality are imposed by adult live cams, performers can use other channels—such as e-mail, Skype, and personal websites—to overcome these barriers. Another important aspect of intimate labour is the emotional labour contained within it (Hochschild 1983). Intimate labour relies on ‘a sense of emotional attachment and connection to the person being cared for’ (Badgett & Folbre 2001:328). To connect with customers, providers may engage in commercially oriented manipulation of their own as well as customers’ emotions; in fact, they may manipulate their own emotions precisely to produce and evoke feelings in customers. In short, in addition to the physical labour of their occupation, providers perform intimate emotional labour to encourage ‘return customers’.
The fallacies of separate spheres and hostile worlds, in the context of intimate labour and sexual gratification, also create assumptions about ‘what sex is’ in terms of personhood and subjectivity (Kesler 2002). In Western societies, ideas about sex rest on deeply embedded notions of sexuality and the body as the core of individuality or something close to it (Bernstein 2007:58). The notion that sex involves the intimate exchange of an authentic or truer aspect of the self raises questions of exploitation and harm when commodification is involved (Brewis & Linstead 2000). Hence, sex work is always subject to disdain, on the basis that money somehow contaminates that which should not be tainted (Pickering 2013). The distribution of sexual labour through commerce is understood to diminish in some way personal sovereignty and selfhood, much more so than labour or bodily distributions in other forms of intimate labour (Kesler 2002). In sex-work scholarship, there is a particular focus on questions of authenticity, intimacy, and power—questions that invoke the complex relationship between sexuality and selfhood. This relationship leads to a situation where sexual labour is often understood as more intimate than other work, and the potential for exploitation is seen as heightened when sex is commercialised (Pickering 2013).

However, intimacy and authenticity do not automatically stand outside markets or workplaces; intimate market exchanges are not necessarily false or damaging. Scoular (2004) challenges the assumption that non-commercial sex is free from questions of power and inequality. By the same token, Agustin (2007:62, in Pickering 2013) has observed that ‘paid activities may include the production of feelings of intimacy and reciprocity whether the individuals involved intend them or not, and despite the fact that overall structures are patriarchal and unjust’.

This does not mean that commodification does not change the nature of intimate sexual exchanges. Rather, it means that all intimate exchanges inevitably connect to or are infected by markets, commodities, and monetary value. In The Commercialisation of Intimate Life (2003), Hochschild shows how all relationships are interconnected with markets and expresses the fear that intimate relationships can no longer be free from the market sphere, as exemplified by the extensification of care and the purchase of intimate services. Going beyond this, Zelizer (2005:39) suggests that ‘monetization does not in itself corrupt moral life. But it moves moral questions increasingly into the arena of cash
and carry’. This means that such questions have to address matters of how monetisation can create inequalities in human welfare.

Thus, relationships based primarily on paid work often involve complex forms of intimacy and emotions, while those assumed to be based solely on emotions are linked in new and evolving ways to commercial practices and material desires (Pickering 2013). Scholars refer to the receipt of these services as the ‘commercialisation of intimacy’ (Hochschild 2003), citing clear-cut cases of the psychotherapist and therapeutic massage. A variable in these instances is the degree to which a client may assume that the service provider is genuinely concerned about the client or the intimate revelations the client has unilaterally offered. These complexities are also present in sexual transactions, which can also involve varying degrees of intimate labour. (This does not mean there are no workers who sell sexual but not emotional services; it means there are some who sell both sexual and emotional services.) In the following sections, I discuss how cam performers produce intimate labour through interactions with customers in an attempt to create an emotional or affective connection to make money.

6.3 Intimacy in sexual transactions

Although there is a widespread idea that commercial sexual transactions and pornography are exclusively about sex, several studies have already pointed out that features other than sex are also purchased in these transactions. For instance, intimate treatment has long been sought by customers of indoor sex workers, and it usually occurs when clients have regular interactions and long-term relationships with providers. In this sense, Hershatter (1997) and Norberg (1998) have highlighted the recreational and affective aspects of brothel and courtesan prostitution. More recent studies argue that there has been an intensification of these affective aspects of sexual transaction in recent decades (Bernstein 2007; Lever & Dolnick 2010; Sanders 2008). According to Bernstein (2007:110), this phenomenon of intensification must be understood in relation to several interrelated features of post-industrial societies, such as the extensification of the service economy, new information technology, and changes in family structure. Along the same lines, Paasonen (2010c:76) argues that ‘the movement and translation taking place between the carnally performed, the mediated and the sensed bring forth questions
concerning affect’. In this sense, Paasonen (2014) argues that there has been a turn to emotion and affect theory to study both sexual transactions and pornography in general.

Another feature of post-industrial societies is the reconfiguration of the boundaries between public and private. As seen in chapter 2, this reconfiguration produces new meanings and practices within commercial sexual transactions since the binary ‘public/private’ has been constitutive of modern sexual transactions. According to Bernstein (2007:69), changes related to public and private spaces have fostered the decline of Internet-based sexual transactions and the corresponding expansion of indoor private transactions. She calls this reallocation of spaces associated with sex work toward private homes, hotels, and rented apartments the ‘privatization of public women’ (Bernstein 2001:70). In related research, Lever and Dolnick (2010:194) observed this shift empirically, as nearly two-thirds of the call girls they interviewed affirmed that the last interactions they had had with clients took place in the privacy of either their home or the client’s home. This ‘privatisation’ can be analysed as a re-insertion of sexual transactions into private spaces but as a commodified product: public-sphere market logic becomes intertwined with private-sphere emotional needs (Bernstein 2007:5). Barbara Brents and Teela Sanders argue that these mainstreaming processes have to be understood within the larger context of neoliberal policies, where ‘consum[ing] and commodify[ing] all aspects of social life’ serves as a powerful draw (Brents & Sanders 2010:58). At the same time, the commodification of such aspects of sexual transactions helps and is helped by the normalisation and professionalisation of sexual transactions—the sexualisation and pornification of culture enable the emergence of a pool of middle-class workers and consumers who feel more at ease participating in such transactions.

The trend toward the privatisation of sexual transaction goes hand in hand with an intensification of the affective aspects of such transactions, since indoor environments are more likely to spur intimate encounters compared to street work. In this sense, Bernstein argues that the shift from the public space of the street to the private space of indoor prostitution has also entailed a social and emotional privatisation of sexual transactions (Bernstein 2007:69). Other researchers have emphasised that many clients now seek forms of emotional expression from workers, who are under pressure to adapt to this demand (Castle & Lee 2008; Holt & Blevins 2007). Although sex is still part of the
service, clients of indoor workers increasingly seek providers who are friendly, affectionate, attentive, and generous with time, and who have good communication skills (Holt & Blevins 2007; Sharp & Earle 2003). These characteristics are also seen in other types of services where workers have to deal directly with members of the public and elicit an emotional state in them, as with care workers and most hospitality roles. The requirement of displaying certain emotions toward customers as part of a service is what Hochschild (1983) called ‘emotional labour’.

Aside from this publicly visible facial and bodily display, these indoor sexual transactions, and the emotional regulation and production they involve, also foster connections that transcend the body. In her study of escorts and massage parlours, Sanders (2008:98) found that indoor customers do not view sex workers ‘simply as bodies’ or as ‘targets of sexual conquest’; instead, they seek a meaningful, personal connection with them. It is in this sense that a strip club dancer acknowledges on a forum that ‘some customers really want to know the performers and find out more about them’ (Virginia 2008). Moreover, the quality of a client’s physical experience is often reliant on the perceived reality of some emotional connection between the parties (Earle & Sharp 2007; Sanders 2008). In this context, not only sexual encounters and sexual fantasies but also the emotional needs of clients (Sanders 2008) become a market commodity. Like any other commercially packaged leisure activity, intimacy is now readily available for a price.

These sexual transactions based on personal connection have acquired the label of the ‘girlfriend experience’ (GFE)—a modality that emulates a private relationship and aims to give the impression of a mutual exchange of sexual intimacy analogous to that between a boyfriend and girlfriend (Milrod & Weitzer 2012). According to Milrod and Weitzer (2012), GFE customers feel like ‘they are in a paid relationship—albeit part-time and remunerative—rather than simply paying for sex’. For the workers, providing a comprehensive GFE has both advantages and disadvantages. One benefit is that time spent in nonsexual pursuits reduces wear on the body; one downside is that they have to work extra hard, not only by remaining pleasant and attentive but also by ensuring that customers are comfortable, happy, and feeling a personal connection. According to Davidson (1995:4), these requirements make the provision of a GFE ‘extraordinarily
stressful work. […] It calls for emotional labour of a type and on a scale which is probably unparalleled in any other job’. Although some providers see the GFE as a manufactured emotional connection—a sort of counterfeit intimacy also used by strippers and telephone sex operators (Frank 2005)—for others, authentic bonds with clients do emerge. It is in this sense that Bernstein argues that the GFE attempts to integrate ‘an ethos of bodily pleasure, intimacy and authenticity’ in the sexual transaction, blurring the line between ‘the public instrumental touch’ and ‘private intimate touch’ (Bernstein 2007:101). This does not necessarily mean that the boundaries between private and commercial sex are dissolved; rather, they are reworked, under both temporal and contractual constraints.

Bernstein (2007:103) describes these new boundaries as a form of ‘bounded authenticity’—an ‘authentic emotional and physical connection’ that is potentially genuine but limited by both by temporal and financial parameters. These commercial boundaries usually involve, for instance, time limits that make these encounters briefer than those that are common in non-commercial romantic relationships but longer than traditional street-based encounters. As the focus of the service shifts from sex to companionship, the method of payment is also altered. According to Hulusjö (2013:240), to downplay the commodified nature of sexual transactions (which could kill the sense of having a real GFE), customers are charged for providers’ ‘time rather than for specified acts’. For customers, this type of transaction contractually guarantees a relation without any responsibility other than payment: ‘the client is absolved from any responsibility to reciprocate displays of intimacy’ (Lever & Dolnick 2010). As a strip club customer puts it, ‘I can go out tonight and find a brainless one-night stand and not have nearly as much fun as merely enjoying that dancer’s company. There’s also no guilt or BS of feeling the need to call/e-mail or vice-versa the next day. In the club, it’s simple—flirt, look, laugh, pay, go home guiltless’ (Kesler 2002). In this way, these constraints and limits are what make these encounters different from non-commercial relationships and, for some customers, desirable.

Bernstein shows that although some men who buy sexual services still want to have ‘traditional’ non-commercial private intimacy with a partner, they still have a preference for the bounded authenticity of commodified intimacy over the ‘messy
diffuseness of non-market exchange’ (Bernstein 2001:409). In her research on the multiplicities of prostitution experiences, Anna Hulusjö (2013) similarly observed that some clients prefer this kind of bounded, commodified, but still emotionally engaged relationship. However, the way they make sense of this preference alternates between the attempt to avoid emotional dependence or responsibility and gain control in sexual situations, to the sense of feeling free and independent (a narrative aligned with neoliberal ideals). Both of these reasons point to a need for control and (relatedly) to the ease of disconnection from providers, showing that as much as connections are valorised in these sexual transactions, the possibility of disconnection is also a major advantage for many clients. Layton (2008:69) argues that this creates a context in which dependency on others and unbreakable connections must be renounced.

Bernstein (2007) and other scholars have relied on data gathered from web pages advertising sexual services to help them formulate their ideas on the GFE and other new forms of commodified intimacy. Indeed, the Internet and the success of e-commerce have extended the reach and cultural visibility of the sex industry in general (Comella 2010:286). They have increased the ability of sex workers to reach large numbers of potential clients, build a reputation for their services, and apply screening methods to verify clients. At the same time, for customers, online platforms allow them to browse and compare a large number of providers and their prices. This leads Weitzer (2009a) to claim that assumptions about the scale of the GFE phenomenon may be biased by the more thorough documentation of its existence due to the online environment. Still, according to Weitzer (2009a), it is not the existence of the GFE that is new but its marketing, including the term and its modality.

Relocating sexual transactions from the street to the Internet has not only entailed new opportunities to advertise and locate sexual services but also opened up spaces for the emergence of new meanings, new practices, and (as discussed previously) new subjects. For instance, Hulusjö (2013:226) notes that providers see online platforms as an entry point into the business and a space to perform the role of ‘the escort’ under the client’s gaze. Moreover, they have difficulty delimiting and separating public and private identities online, and often feel their private lives are invaded as a result of the need to always be available to clients. In general, these studies show how the Internet serves as a
link to trade for workers and customers alike: a place where solicitation takes place, not where encounters happen.

Although there is wide recognition of the Internet’s influence on the service economy and new information technology, relatively few studies have considered the Internet’s influence on commercial sexual transactions, especially those that take place in virtual environments. However, analysing sexual transactions in online environments is important since these are semi-public spaces that can be expected to spur different kinds of intimacies and sexual encounters. Online, there is no touch in the physical sense, but people nevertheless want to be somehow connected. Some studies of commercial sexual transaction online have addressed the commercialisation of sexual interaction in ‘life simulation’ games such as The Sims and Second Life. In these transactions, users engage through avatars in animated sex with others in return for in-game money, which can be exchanged for real-world cash at fluctuating rates on various Internet exchanges. In his ethnographic work on Second Life, Boellstorff (2008:215) points out that these exchanges exist within a larger service economy and are probably the highest-paying job in the game, with rates varying from 500 to 1,000 ‘linden dollars’ for 30 minutes of sex (Bainbridge 2009). Neely (2011) points out that transactions can be simultaneously considered sex work and pornography, and thus contextualised in relation to other forms of avatar and animated pornography that are popular both outside and within virtual worlds. One difference between these and the bodily types represented in ‘real-life’ pornography is that the latter are limited to the variety of individuals’ biological bodies, whereas in avatar pornography (including Second Life) such physical restrictions do not apply: one can create an avatar pornography star to fit one’s own unique preferences.

While some studies have analysed how intimacy is created in virtual environments, and others have focused on sexual transactions online, there remains a dearth of literature concerned with how intimate labour is produced and commodified in different ways in virtual environments. In the following section, I will discuss how YPMate performers produce intimate labour in their interactions with customers in an attempt to create an emotional connection.
6.4 Connection on YPMate

The appeal of the early webcams was voyeurism; and the appeal of contemporary webcams is their intimacy. The adult live-cam industry owes to phone sex as much as to pornography. Because the aim for performers is not for customers to get off, but to entice them into being online for a long time—at a high rate per minute—the sizzle [is] more worthy than the steak. (Beth 2012)

Over the course of this thesis, I have highlighted the importance of personal connection in new, interactive pornography forms such as adult live cams. I regard these connections as relationships that bind or join together performers and customers, creating a sense of intimacy between them. My main argument is that particular intimacies are produced and managed through adult live cams according to specific practices, temporalities, relationships, and negotiations. Adult live cams differ from other kinds of sexual transaction by virtue of their means and the kinds of connections forged and commodified in the online environment. Since adult live cams are a mediated form of interaction, participants’ bodies play different roles compared to non-mediated sexual transactions, where the expectation is that physical contact is part of the service or a way to create a connection with customers.

The use of body and touch in offline sex transactions is also not uniform; they are employed in characteristically different ways in street-based and indoor sexual transactions. Street workers’ practices are more instrumental; for instance, they tend to avoid attitudes or actions that could convey intimacy or romance, such as kissing (Kirshenbaum 2011; Brewis & Linstead 2000). In contrast, indoor sexual transactions seem to blur the line between what Oerton and Phoenix (2001) called ‘the public instrumental touch’ and the ‘private intimate touch’, as discussed in the last section in terms of enmeshment between commodified sexual and intimate transactions. In this sense, a strip club customer advises dancers to touch customers ‘lightly couple of times on the arm or hand to create the feeling of intimacy’ (Jacob 2005). Lever and Dolnick’s (2010) research on indoor sexual transactions had similar findings. One of their interviewees, a call girl, said, ‘The majority of my clients want to hold you really tight—I don’t know if that’s a sexual or emotional need—they just want to feel close to someone’
Lever and Dolnick suggest that customers request these practices because they view them as a token of desire and of the existence of an emotional connection between them and the call girl. Call girls respond to this demand by employing strategies that vary from nonsexual massage to hugging and kissing clients, both as a way to add a sense of intimacy to the encounter and to ‘fill time so the client thinks he got a lot for the fee’ (Lever & Dolnick 2010:197). These practices tend to blur the lines between instrumental and intimate touch, in that they are crafted toward and inserted into formal market logic but also aimed toward intimate relations. Along these lines, Bernstein (2007:101) argues that unlike street-based workers, who tend to divide their sexual relations into a public work sphere and a private personal sphere, indoor sex workers attempt to integrate an ethos of bodily pleasure and authentic intimacy into their occupational practice.

On adult live cams, however, all these bodily strategies used to convey intimacy and create a connection with customers are rendered impossible since participants are physically distant from each other. As a consequence, adult live cams are less about hands-on bodily experiences than in traditional sex work. This is not to say that the body does not play a role: as a pornographic genre, adult live cams thrive on images of naked bodies, presented in private spaces accessed by those who pay for them. Images of naked bodies are, of course, central to most pornography across genres. However, given the shifting public/private divide in which adult live cams exist—and especially the increasing dissemination of nudity and pornographic images in public spaces—there is a special kind of impact on how they are perceived. Some authors note that the nude body becomes less valued in the face of increasing bodily disinhibition (Twigg 2006; Wouters 2004), which may herald a change in its meaning and role in the creation of intimacy. In this sense, the purpose of nudity in adult live cams goes beyond pure sexual arousal, as in traditional pornography. Generally, nudity has also been recognised as one facet of the expression of feelings in intimate relationships. Quoting Bindrim, Irvine (1990:105) argues that nudity is a route for intimacy, as it hastens and intensifies emotional openness. The association between intimacy and the naked body is often based on notions of the body and the genitals as the most private parts of a person: exposing them may show a person’s vulnerability and trust of the lover (Weinberg & Williams 2010). To
mitigate this vulnerability, everyday clothing, a norm that most people take for granted, exists to regulate the life spaces where nudity is not legitimised. Some YPMate performers echo this perception, as Anna (2014) says, ‘Seriously? And what is more personal and intimate than seeing someone’s private parts?’ However, replying to and directly contesting Marina’s point of view, several performers, like Karen (2014), relate their experiences in order to mitigate the idea that there is nothing more intimate than the naked body:

I could not disagree more: all of my best customers—the top three of all time—are young guys around my age who were into the girlfriend experience. One of them has never seen me naked, and another just barely. (Karen 2014)

For me, an intimate webcam experience [is] in the sense of creating a connection with the person. I love shows with customers where that happens. I want the customers to feel a connection with me, because it deepens the experience. And that is way more intimate than only seeing someone’s private parts. (Susan 2014)

These accounts clearly show that in adult live cams, intimacy goes beyond nudity. Further, as discussed in the next section, a performer’s body work inevitably involves an interplay of intersubjectivities, as the conflation of image and act leads to the conflation of body and self. As the above quotes show, adult live-cam performers actually prefer creating some type of connection over merely performing sexual acts. This is usually for personal reasons, since they do prefer to feel connected, but also because they find bodily work tiring. Along these lines, Anna (2014), acknowledging the intimacy of some camming practices, says, ‘I love long and chatting “privates”, especially because I would rather use my body as little as possible. I am a new performer, so I do get a lot of customers that only want to talk and confess their curiosity and desire’. As her experience shows, some customers do attach greater importance than others to conversation and sharing private feelings. The impossibility of touch is addressed through the use of other strategies to convey intimacy, as one customer attests:
Adult live-cam performers cannot plop down on customers’ laps and imply ‘pay me for a show, moron. You came here for that, and now you are just wasting my time’. Because then customers would just simply disconnect […] which means performers’ hustle has to involve pretending to genuinely like you much harder. (Albert 2015)

Albert’s scenario exemplifies two major points that differentiate intimacy and intimate labour on adult live cams from other modalities. First, the intimate labour is intensified and reshaped in the absence of physical contact. Seeking a connection, customers want to engage with performers whose capacity for emotional expression the customers see as equal to or more important than their physical attributes (Earle & Sharp 2007; Milrod & Monto 2012). Hence, performers may be under more pressure to create a feeling of connection with strangers, which may become a major part of their shows. At the same time, performers and customers can both, to some degree, turn their connection ‘on and off at will’ (Ohmygodwhathaveldone in Milrod & Weitzer 2012:453); indeed, the connection is to some degree explicitly valued for this feature. This ease of disconnection is not only a characteristic of mediated media in general but a central characteristic of adult live cams in particular—namely, their extensification, which plays an important role in disconnection between performers and customers. This is because of the ease with which either can dismiss the other by ‘clicking them off’, as they are physically distant from each other and also immersed in a global pool of other potential customers and providers. Aside from these two characteristics, the commodification of intimate labour in adult live cams differs from other sexual transactions in that it reinforces the movements of intensification and extensification in specific ways, as will be discussed below.

6.4.1 Intensification

In adult live cams, the body can be experienced only as a visual, not a tactile, stimulus; thus, there is an intensification of the role played by personal connections. Such connections are enabled by specific technological means—a computer, an Internet
connection, and platforms that bring performers and customers together. In addition, as discussed in chapter 2, these connections are negotiated through myriad modes on a cam website, based on formal and informal rules that commodify them. Beyond the materiality of mediated means, these connections are encounters between selves; as performer Mary (2011) says, customers ‘want a connection, they want to feel that someone, a real person, likes and is attracted to them’. This intersubjective exchange is central to the appeal of adult live cams but is dependent on the modes available for self-expression. For instance, as seen in chapter 2, customers’ personal information and identity are restricted to what they choose to disclose. This is because the website’s design guarantees customer anonymity to allow them (slightly paradoxically) to engage in self-disclosure by sharing inner experiences and talking freely about their fetishes. Of course, this creation of a connection with performers also requires openness on the part of the customer. In private rooms or private messages, being open to revealing one’s deepest desires can allow an exchange of trust, which is an important aspect of intimacy that develops when revelatory self-disclosure from one participant finds validation through another’s response. In adult live cams, trust is intrinsic to fetish acts. Moreover, the cam experience in general entails trusting that the other participant can provide what is wanted, revealing the interdependence of this shared experience. In adult live cams, commodification produces a kind of unity or cohesiveness of purpose between agents, in that reciprocal exchanges and control are based on payment through tips and pay-per-minute interactions. Hence, there is an implicit pact that performers will not judge customers based on their desires: ‘I make an effort to respect customers and their fetishes too, even if they seem unusual and weird to me. And even though I would not do something like that in real life’ (Jennifer 2006). Ideally, customers subsequently interpret this as evidence of an emergent and binding understanding with performers.

While customers’ identities are protected and subject only to willing self-disclosure, YPMate’s layout gives centrality to performers’ selves. As seen in previous chapters, performers’ personal information is given in their profiles and video streams. For instance, in chapter 2 I briefly explored how performers’ presentation on YPMate’s main page, showing their faces, serves to anchor their self in the body. Since this is the first image users interact with, it gives the users a self to connect with. Performer Linda
(2013) says that customers who pay for shows see ‘how awesome a performer is and how awesome she looks in a video. And they want to get personal, talk to the performer, and get to know her. And once a customer is seeking a more personal connection with a performer, there is no free pornography video that will stop him from wanting to chat with a performer live’. Here, it is important to question which ‘you’ Linda is referring to, since performers can self-represent themselves in different ways: a cam model is not ‘born’ but ‘made’. In other words, performers’ identity is formed through the production of cultural objects and through multifarious practices including profile crafting, webcam presentation, and the inevitable interaction with users.

We can assume cam models are made not born, as was shown earlier in the discussion about crafting their identities. Moreover, some statements made in the online forums show that performers’ offline lives are also affected by their ‘camming’ activities. For instance, several performers mention that they became more reclusive (Amber 2011) after they started camming. Others say they were shut-ins to begin with, and their introverted personality probably led them to become a webcam performer. Either way, being a bit of a ‘hermit’, as some call it, seems to be a common trait among performers—a trait associated with indoor work. As Chloe (2011) puts it, ‘I am not a hermit, but I definitely stay home much more than I used to. Why should I leave the house if leaving means less time to make money?’ Their work as well as their online connectivity helps them to do other activities, such as grocery shopping and paying bills online. Performer Celine (2011) says,

I have become a total shut-in too. I always work from home: I am an escort, I do in-calls from home, and I also cam. And every day that passes I am more reluctant to go out into the ‘real world’. I guess I feel disconnected from it. And it is actually comforting to know that I am not alone, and other performers [say] that too.

Meanwhile, performers who are not ‘shut-ins’ say they often consider becoming that way since, if they stay home and work, they are more likely to make money: ‘I like going out partying on the weekends, but now I am considering staying at home because I
would probably make more money camming on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday’ (Cara 2011). This research was conducted exclusively online, which made it impossible to know who these performers really are in their daily lives, aside from small clues found in the forums.

Moreover, profiles aim to give extra information about performers, including information that is not necessarily related to adult content, such as their zodiac sign and locality. In this way, adult live cams, like other new pornography genres, create ‘an intimacy of identity’ rather than one ‘based on the objectification of a generic woman, specifically her genitals’ (Voss 2002:86). It is in this context that identity work, as analysed in chapter 3, emerges as a key part of online self-crafting. However, despite the website’s proclamation that ‘we believe everyone has something to offer, and we pride ourselves in that diversity’ (Streamatemodels 2013), performers manipulate their identities to quash such diversity. Instead, there is a voluntary massification of identities toward pornographic scripts based on heterosexual male desires; for instance, as noted, the typical performer is a young ‘lesbian’ female. Thus, although users’ desires are based not only on pornographic stereotypes but also on the need for connection, identity work is still bound to fulfil such stereotypes. This need for connection is often expressed on the customer’s part by searching for performers who share certain similar characteristics with the customers themselves. In chapter 3, I showed that the same or similar background (e.g. nationality) is important for some customers. Performers have also observed that customers generally look for a connection with people of the same age:

I have asked older customers if they think that what they like in a woman matures with her. The majority said yes. It was a big surprise to me, but most of my customers guaranteed me that they think that what they enjoy in a woman grows as they do. Although a lot of my customers like how young I look (because I am 20 years old), they do not feel a real connection with me. If they want a more intimate webcam experience, they go to a performer their own age. (Christine 2014)
Beyond identity in this sense, what performers and customers call ‘personality’ also seems central to adult live cams—another characteristic that sets them apart from other pornography genres. As one customer says, ‘Most pornography bores me. Only rarely do the women show any personality. And only rarely I think they are doing or saying anything other than what the director told them to’ (Hans 2014). This trend is also found in other kinds of sexual transactions, as noted by Sharp and Earle (2003) in their study of online escort platforms, where customers’ online entries about escorts focused more on the GFE and the workers’ personalities than on their physical attributes or sexual performance. This finding is also echoed in interviews with escorts: ‘For many men, sex is the pretext for the visit, and the real need is emotional’ ( Lucas 2005:531). In adult live cams, customers cite performers’ personalities to affirm the authenticity of the mutual affective connection between them. As with identity, however, the ‘personality’ to which customers relate can be the result of a careful process of forging a persona. For instance, some performers say they have to be ‘always smiling’, and many try to convey ‘the young-looking, sweetest and cutest, girl-next-door type’ (Martha 2013). In short, performers’ online personalities adapt to customers’ expectations and align with notions of adult live cams as entertainment. This ‘management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ is another example of what Hochschild (1983:7) calls emotional labour. Although this kind of labour is also found in other services, in adult live cams a bubbly, friendly personality is also required, because interactivity is what differentiates this type of pornography from other genres. Hence, aside from its role in the entertainment factor, an extroverted personality is necessary to prove that a performers’ image is real and live.

Although performers engage in identity work and also make efforts to create a saleable webcam persona, keeping this persona as close to their real self as possible is advisable. This phenomenon correlates to that presented in bounded authenticity, as Bernstein (2007) argues that the authentic part of such relations allows sex workers to maintain a ‘single self’, which helps to avoid emotional exhaustion and burnout over time. This single self is characterised by a self with no divisions between ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’, or between public and private erotic domains (Bernstein 2007).
those, the success of the persona/performer is related to complex networked formations that involve nodes of both affect and affinity.

YPMate’s manual for performers puts it this way: ‘It’s also not unusual for performers to act differently on camera than they do in real life, but don’t try to change too much! You’ll be most successful if you exaggerate aspects of your natural personality rather than inventing a whole new person’ (Streamate 2013). Along these lines, performer Ruth (2013) says she does not change her personality for camming. Instead, she turns her personality up a bit because she cannot pretend to be someone she is not for any length of time. Andrea (2013) and several other performers say that keeping one’s own personality makes it easier to stay in character, especially in a context where intimacy is forged in the long term: ‘I go more with a personality which is more like the real me—trashy slutty I do not give a fuck type—it is easier to keep in character!’ (Joyce 2013). By not resorting to a different persona, performers avoid getting burned out. Such ‘acting’ can be quite stressful, as noted by performer Alice (2013): ‘Because I am very introverted, it can take a lot out of me mentally and physically to entertain my customers, so I only last more than two hours online if I am really busy’. In summary, by being themselves, these performers reduce their emotional labour. This is what adult live-cam advertisements try to convey, as shown in chapter 4: a blurring between amateur and professional, where the lines between working and everyday persona become indistinct.

However, there is a caveat: keeping one’s personality seems to work better for performers who are already extroverted, and even others generally try to ‘turn up’ whatever extroverted aspects they might have. This process is considered by some performers to amount to playing a better version of themselves, as exemplified by the following account: ‘I never decided on a persona; I have just decided to be who I am, but a lot less boring’ (Diane 2013). ‘Being oneself’ is also reinforced to a movement of extensification, explained in the next section.

### 6.4.2 Extensification

The fact that users and performers alike are dispersed across the globe can both enhance and diminish their perceived intimacy. The process of extensification, where there is a distribution and/or exportation of work across different spaces/scales and times,
facilitates self-disclosure as participants can expose themselves more freely, reducing potential risks, like being outed. For performers, this ‘dispersion’ is enhanced by the ability to select and display a different country from the one they are located in, as discussed in chapter 3. By selecting a different country from her own, a performer’s stream is shown preferentially to people who are not physically near her. For users, not only is self-disclosure enhanced by distance but the fact that they access adult live cams from home gives them a private space where they can touch themselves, unlike public spaces such as strip clubs.

On the other hand, physical distance can make it harder for performers to create a connection with users. This is because in adult live cams, both customers and performers touch themselves, replicating on their own bodies the instructions given to each other in the privacy of their homes. In this sense, this sexual transaction can be seen as a form of self-interaction with one’s own body and imagination, mediated through particular forms of cultural expressions, representations, and performances—a kind of ‘autosexuality’. According to Attwood (2002:101), this is a perfect example of how disembodied sexual interactions in new media offer ‘a form of self-interaction free of the danger, mess and inconvenience entailed in sex involving other people’.

Another way extensification helps to create connections is that the presence of a great number of participants increases performers’ chances of finding a potential customer. Some performers believe that turning users into regular customers is an impossible goal, as connections cannot be entirely ‘produced’ and hence would not be part of intimate labour:

I am not sure if getting and keeping regulars customers is a goal that I can set for myself. This because when I think of goal, a goal is something that I can actively work towards. However, realistically, I cannot turn customers and members into regulars. I can only do my best and give my best shows each and every time. But ultimately, if these people keep coming back for more it is their decision: there is not much more I can do. [I do] wish for more regulars, and I wish I had one for every day of the week, since having regulars would guarantee me an enjoyable and profitable shift on webcam. (Jessica 2012)
‘Enjoyable’ and ‘profitable’ are probably linked to several factors already explored in this thesis. For instance, as discussed in chapter 2, some performers believe one-on-one interactions can humanise the interaction and facilitate the creation of connections with customers. In addition, some performers also rely emotionally on customers, as seen in the previous chapter. However, the perception that connections happen and are not produced is related to the fact that performers have a great pool of potential customers—a pool that extends across the world’s Internet users. Due to customer diversity, some performers think that by being themselves they will eventually cater to a particular group. However, intimate labour is still present—it has just extended into the fabric of performers’ personalities in such imperceptible ways that performers can ignore it.

Extensification is also reflected in the (in)existence of performers’ intimate labour. For instance, the differences regarding webcam as image and act are also reflected in how performers of different nationalities relate to their own shows. According to performer Julie (2013), ‘Performers from the US express themselves better, their personality, they treat camming more like fun, a hobby, they give it a sense of value and they make a connection with customers’; meanwhile, ‘Foreign performers make no connection in private, as they go straight to the point of showing what anyone can see on [a] free pornography website. They usually sit there staring at the webcam’. These performers are often associated with the ‘cheap girls’ mentioned in the previous chapters. Here, the difficulty in creating connections, probably due to communications issues, also relates to whether these performers are objectified or not.

6.4.3 Commodification

The creation of personal connections is integrated into an economic dimension that conflates and commodifies both the physical conduct and emotional intimacy that exist in cam work (Constable 2009). The commodification of personal connections in adult live cams functions as a switch to connect and disconnect participants in an interaction. As illustrated by the concept of ‘bounded intimacy’ (Bernstein 2007), paying for sexual services helps customers circumscribe the promise and threat of authentic
intimacy and subordinate it to economic contractual boundaries. However, the way personal connections are commodified in adult live cams differs from other sexual services in terms of measurement and payment. For instance, in other commercial sexual transactions, as with stripteases and escorts, the time allotted is pre-established and workers are paid by the hour (escorts) or the service (stripers); extras are negotiated at an additional cost. Likewise, Lever and Dolnick (2010:199) observed differences between street and indoor workers in this regard: call girls were ‘selling increments of their time, more typically measured in hours than in minutes, while street prostitutes offer only as much time as needed for the particular sex act agreed on’. This difference, allied with the high costs of call girls’ services, usually means that indoor transactions are longer, which in turn contributes to the creation of bonds and to extended displays of intimacy.

Adult live cams differ because they have a ‘pay as you go’ system where customers are charged by the minute. This makes the financial bar to entry lower than for in-person sexual services, but customers also try to maximise their pleasure, counting the seconds and disconnecting right away once satisfied. Some customers will disconnect abruptly if not satisfied with the service, even in the middle of a show, because they can go to another performer in a heartbeat—a result of the extensification discussed above. Usually, customers are the ones who connect/disconnect. However, although performers focus on connecting with customers, they can also ‘disconnect’ by kicking out or banning undesirable customers from their room:

But if customers get too attached, I do not hesitate to draw a line or use the ban. I think it is not smart for performers to let their walls down just because they are far away. People still can do a lot of damage with the Internet. [...] Some of these guys are lonely, and they end up developing false relationships in their heads, that they do believe are genuine. (Heather 2015)

However, as explored in chapter 1 in terms of Bauman’s notion of unequal costs for the people involved when there is a ‘disconnection’, on YPMate, customers have a certain mobility as they navigate the website and connect and disconnect with performers. Meanwhile, performers usually have to stay online for long hours until they
attract a customer. Performers are thus fixed in their chat rooms; hence, their hustle is different from that of other sexual services.

Further, the fragmented nature of interactions counted by the second also influences the tips received by performers. Regarding tips, one performer says the amounts are very low: ‘I would not toss a cent on stage to a stripper, so I do not think I should acknowledge only one gold from a customer. I really believe one gold can be as bad as calling me a bitch. Money is money, but I do not work for small change anymore’ (Kelly 2014). In this sense, fostering a personal connection can be seen as necessary not only to make a customer more amenable to paying (more) for a show but also to make him stay longer in paid chat and come back to the performer’s room regularly. Intimacy is known to grow over time and at the same time to encourage intimates to spend more time together, in a mutually reinforcing development. In the adult live-cam context, however, this is paid time, which leads to contradiction and division. To foster personal connections, interactions should be long, but the very design of adult live cams makes them short by making them costly—the two conditions pull in opposite directions. This contrasts with indoor sexual transactions, since in adult live cams ‘guys who pay USD$2 are not the same customer base who will pay USD$6 […] because the guys who are willing to pay USD$6, they want a one-on-one interaction, they want intimacy, they want something else’ (Judith 2011) beyond the sexual.

The ambivalent nature of performing on adult live cams is better understood when one analyses the steps of intimacy creation and commodification. First, according to O’Riordan and Phillips (2007:129), what matters on adult live cams is the performer’s ability to draw someone out, to get them interested or engaged through the performer’s ability to quickly construct sexually enticing chat scenarios. As pointed out, however, the performer’s ability to draw someone out is restricted by the means at hand, which in a virtual environment are devoid of physicality. Therefore, performers first aim to entice customers to the paid areas, which depends on a fine balance of giving them the right amount of attention and personal interaction, as well as sexual acts. In this regard, performer Teresa (2012) says that finding ‘a balance between seducing customers enough so they want to want sweep me away from free chat but doing it without letting them jerk off on free chat is tough!’ In terms of personality, although this is what customers seek on
adult live cams, they paradoxically resist the idea that the personality they wish to consume should be a commodity. Performers often complain about this ‘double-think’ by customers: one says, ‘If you are going to spend time in my room, and if you truly value my personality, at least you could help support me!’ (Evelyn 2012). This tendency indicates that most customers still separate the paid/sexual and the non-paid/intimate. As another performer points out, ‘Just because I am not doing something sexual, if you are still in my chat room for over an hour and if you are enjoying my company, I believe you are still using my services as a performer’ (Ashley 2012). Ashley goes on to compare the situation to someone going to a restaurant, and whenever the waitress asks if the person wants to order something, he or she says no but still hangs around the restaurant and wants to interact.

Once customers are in the paid area, performers employ strategies to make them stay as long as possible. There are several tactics used to increase paid time, including playing slow music, wearing clothes with buttons that can be removed gradually, and displaying their sex toys and lingerie for customers to choose from. However, it is crucial to encourage customers to interact with them via text, especially because customers who are typing must stop or reduce their masturbating, which can slow things down. One performer says she tells customers she bets ‘they get complimented on their appearance all the time. Then they want to brag about it and take their hand off their dicks to type to me, which [postpones] the orgasm’ (Nicole 2012). Beyond this, being asked questions can make customers feel like they are sexually desirable to performers. Eliciting such affect, however, entails the display of certain emotions by the performer. It is not only about providing certain sexual services but also about giving the impression of a mutual exchange of sexual and emotional intimacy.

**Conclusion**

This chapter showed how adult live cams’ intimate labour is both intensified and extensified, creating and feeding on new mediated dynamics and subjectivities. First, adult live cams are inserted in a broader cultural context where the commercialisation of sexual acts is increasingly associated with intimacy and personal interaction. This shift is often illustrated by the popularisation of the ‘girlfriend experience’. Different from other
sexual exchanges, in adult live cam, the body is only perceived as an image. Because of the lack of physical contact in adult live cams, the intersubjectivity part of the relation is intensified, with performers’ personalities being central to the creation of ‘connections’.

Although performers’ personalities are also composed of the identities discussed in chapter 3—and hence the object of identity work—performers are encouraged to be themselves. This does not mean that some performers do not engage in persona crafting or emotional labour. As discussed, performers note that being bubbly, friendly, and communicative are not only demanded by a business that is considered entertainment but also necessary to set adult live cams apart from other types of pornography, providing evidence that the interactions are real and live. However, instead of adopting a camera persona, some performers talk about playing a better version of themselves, intensifying those aspects they think are more appealing to customers. Moreover, the possibility of ‘being themselves’ is reinforced by a movement of extensification, where the existence of a greater number of participants increases performers’ chances of making a connection. In this sense, the extensive and diverse pool of customers should be a guarantee that any performer could have a fan base. At the same time, however, this movement of extensification makes it easier for customers and performers to disconnect, a movement also observed in recent studies of dating websites.

Creating connections in adult live cams can be analysed as the creation of an affective network where the labour put into creating connections is perceived as non-existent (in the case of performers who are themselves). Since this network sustains ongoing relations of production, connection is needed to make a customer pay for a show and to regularly return to the performer’s room. Since these ties of intimacy grow over time, the network strengthens itself. In the adult live-cam context, however, the commodification of these spaces for sharing creates a contradiction: interactions should be long, but the very design of adult live cams makes them short by making customers pay by the minute.
FINAL REMARKS

I began this thesis by asking the following questions:

What are the identities created in commercial adult live cams? Do they promote affective networks? How are they produced? How do global market forces influence them?

To answer these questions, I presented the genre of interactive pornography known as ‘adult live cams’ in the introduction. Through these cams, customers pay to interact with performers and create their own pornographic content. I also described my case study website—YPMate, a popular adult live cam, which is representative of the commercial pornography I aimed to analyse. In terms of methodological considerations, I emphasised the difficulties in gathering more qualitative data from interviews, and also the possibilities and challenges of drawing data from alternative sources online. In chapter 1, I briefly reviewed the literature on porn studies, aiming to address the changes online pornography has undergone—especially in terms of content production and consumption. These changes are intrinsically related to broader shifts in new media and digital economies, which have culminated in online pornography, such as adult live cams, where content is created by users through commercial transactions online. Moreover, by exploring the previous scholarship on pornography, I highlighted a lack of studies investigating mainstream commercial adult websites.

The four chapters that followed presented the case study designed to answer the research questions formulated in the introduction. Chapter 2 focused on content production, examining the relations between communication, technology affordances, and their uses by participants involved in adult live cams. It showed that since communication is intrinsically related to the production of content on adult live cams, it also becomes part of the content-commodity. To commercialise communicative interactions, YPMate, on the one hand, creates a myriad of distinct spaces on the website. On the other hand, performers regulate access to these spaces and manage other interactions with customers (such as negotiations) with a profit motive. Chapter 2 also
explored how the uneven distribution of affordances between performers and customers can encourage customers to communicate and feel connected with performers in hyperpersonal ways.

While communication is essential to adult live cams, those who communicate are essential too. Hence, in chapter 3, data drawn from performers’ profiles were analysed. As performers can engage in ‘identity work’, the focus of investigation here was on the factors that performers take into account when managing their online identities. The results showed that performers’ identity work is established mainly according to users’ desires and performers’ personal preferences. As a consequence, to cater to the largest possible volume of customers, performers manage their identities toward a ‘mass identity’: this means that over half of all performers have similar identities. In terms of sexual identities, these remain closely related to traditional heterosexual pornography categories, with most performers identifying as young lesbian women. On the other hand, the category of locality sheds light on how a shared identity with customers in terms of language and background is important for the genre, as this is the basis for creating a ‘personal connection’.

Chapter 4 focused on the economics of the YPMate website, illustrating how the business works between the logics of independent unit producers (performers) and a highly concentrated company that monopolises most adult (and some non-adult) websites. On YPMate, performers act as independent contractors and regulate most of their working conditions, including their location and work schedule, as well as their show prices. On the other hand, the company that owns YPMate is responsible for marketing performers and feeding user traffic to their live cams. Since content is produced only through participants’ interactions, recruitment is crucial to the business. To attract both performers and customers, the company often overlooks the sexual part of the genre and instead focuses on meeting people and creating personal connections with them.

Such recruitment mobilises participants who are already inclined toward personal connections. Hence, chapter 5 explored the existence of an affective network created through performers’ intimate labour. This network aims to ensure the ongoing production of content and is influenced by intensification and extensification. Since interactions
occur in a mediated environment, the absence of physical contact gives rise to an intensification of the process of connection, in which performers’ ‘personalities’ become central to the genre. On the other hand, the extensification and the greater number of participants are perceived as increasing the chances of successfully making a ‘personal’ connection. On the other hand, extensification allied with the commodification of such personal relations can also stimulate the contrary movement of disconnection, as customers might not feel encouraged to pursue long relations with just one performer.

As a conclusion, I assert that the identities of adult live cams performers are created and reinforced based on characteristics and social skills that facilitate the creation of personal relations with customers. In other words, these identities are produced through performers’ intimate labour and produce an affective network that can be drawn upon in future content production.

7.1 Research contribution

This study aimed to take a further step toward understanding the changes occurring in the world of pornography, which influence the field of pornography studies (Kipnis 2006; Penley 2006; Williams 1989). Such changes started with a shift from an emphasis on film and ‘on-screen’ gender (Lehman 2007; Kerr & Hines 2012; Williams 2004) to the study of pornography in online media. As media technologies change, there are also alterations in the consumption and production of pornography. It has become more interactive, as consumers have the potential to actively organise and control ‘their porn in ever more individual ways’ (Mowlabocus 2010:73). This means that online pornography enables new kinds of interactions and exchanges (Lillie 2002; Reading 2005), in recent years foregrounding the emergence of new forms of pornography made by and for users (Barss 2010; Lane 2001; Ray 2007). This shift to a user-generated form of content production has opened up possibilities not only for new content but also for new forms of social relations among users.

In this thesis, adult live cams were analysed as a pornographic genre, as they share a number of features with modern pornography, including the aim of sexual arousal and the medium of distribution. On the other hand, the mode of content production in adult live cams sets them apart from other pornographic materials. This mode of
production is based on live webcam communication between performers and customers. Since content is produced through communication, it has the potential to spur new types of sexual encounters; this blurs the distinctions ‘between sex as a set of practices and sex as a set of representations’ (Attwood 2011:17). Moreover, these encounters often result in unique commercial transactional relationships between performers and customers, unlike other commercial transactions in the online pornography industry.

The sexual and social encounters created through adult live cams are inserted in a broader context where processes of identity work are situated in the modes of the reflexive project of the self in postmodern societies. Authors such as Giddens (1992) and Bauman (2007) note that contemporary desires and notions of ‘self’ become increasingly intertwined with consumption. This means that with the erosion of traditional frames of meaning, the construction of self has become increasingly associated with processes of consumption, which in turn give some stability and continuity to new identities. Bauman recognises this process, saying that ‘individual needs for personal autonomy, self-definition, authentic life or personal perfection are all translated into the need to possess, and consume, market-offered goods’. Echoing this view, Giddens identifies in ‘the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life’ the creation of identities that are ‘packaged and distributed according to market criteria’ (Giddens 1991:196–198). As a synthesis of these processes, everyone becomes ‘simultaneously customers and commodities’ (Bauman & Vecchi 2004:91).

As seen throughout this thesis, adult live cams operate under such premises, where processes of self-production and identity work are commodified. This means that in adult live cams, the (re)presentation of identities through communicative capacities, affect, and the ability to forge social relationships become part of the purchased content. As the focus of production changes from working identities to identity work, performers’ shows are composed not only of their images but also of their experiences and sense of self—content and identities become inseparable. The deep intertwining of the production of identities with the production of pornography in adult live cams is associated with the conflation of image and act in this genre, as discussed by Kibby and Costello (2001) in their work on amateur adult webcams. As a result, there is a loop where performers not only produce the desired shows with customers but their identities,
in turn, are produced by these shows, shaped by their negotiation flows that eventually determine the efficiency of their labour and the identities produced.

Hence, as this kind of pornography is centred on the production of particular identities, performers are expected to become ‘entrepreneurs of the self’, involved in the ‘continuous business of living to make adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction, and reconstruction of one’s own human capital’ (Gordon 1991:44). It is in this sense that performers are given control over production and its transformation into value, which serves the needs of flexible production in an ever-changing market. As a consequence, performers are self-directed, self-managed, and creative, (re)producing their identities and negotiating personal connections and affect. As part of a formal market, these entrepreneur performers celebrate their insertion into a radically ‘free’ market, where flexibility and fierce competition are the rule. Performers’ working conditions are also different since work is not restricted by factory walls and can potentially be performed anywhere. However, performers’ homes typically become their workplaces, and they usually are not working when not at home—an inversion of the Tayloristic logic of production but intrinsically related to a division of public/private based on sexual acts. Further, the privatisation of these sexual acts in terms of physical spaces also spurs feelings of intimacy, as suggested by Bernstein (2007). However, these acts are also inserted into a network that extrapolates private spaces, which complicates the division of private and public. The temporality of work changes as well and becomes highly flexible, albeit associated with specific time zones related to paying global traffic.

The management skills demanded of performers are thus applied to their communications on the website. Communication is essential to adult live cams since identities and content are produced through negotiations and interactions between performers and customers. As content is produced through communicative interactions, it becomes part of the content itself—that is, part of the content-commodity. A similar phenomenon occurs in ‘phone sex’ transactions; in adult live cams, however, communication is multimodal. On YPMate, this commodification of communication is realised through the website’s design. First, the company makes production more flexible by making available several modal affordances that can be used for different types of content production. In general, these spaces allow performers to cater to both mass and
customised content production. On the other hand, customers’ access to these modal affordances is commodified according to performers’ entrepreneurial and managerial skills. This means that although YPMate can exert indirect influence over content production by changing the website design, performers exert direct control over the commodification of their communicative capabilities by regulating access and establishing prices for their interactions. However, performers’ management of these interactions is not a straightforward activity as they must decide where to draw the line between free and commodified interaction. This question is crucial, especially when performers are negotiating paid shows with customers. These negotiations occur in the free areas of adult live cams, and although they are essential for performers to lure customers into paid areas, customers also take advantage by interacting with performers for free. As a consequence, performers tend to minimise interaction in free chats.

The communicative mode of production of adult live cams also serves to increase personal investment in the sexual material that is ultimately produced (Jacobs 2004). Likewise, the website design aims to increase such investment. For instance, the configuration of chat rooms on YPMate potentially makes customers more inclined to communicate: since customers’ identities are concealed, they can talk freely about their sexual fetishes. On the other hand, performers’ identities are extensively displayed in their images and profiles so that customers can find someone they can relate to and identify with. Such a configuration has the potential to encourage hyper-personal relations between customers and performers. Hence, adult live cams distinguish themselves from other kinds of pornography, as participants who interact to produce content might also feel personally invested in interactions with performers. In this respect, the service provided by performers can be compared to the trend observed by Bernstein (2007) regarding indoor sex work: performers’ sexual services are conflated with the provision of intimate personal connections. Although Bernstein (2007:7) recognises that sex-media use and ‘commercially available intimate encounters’ have become quite popular, scholars, including Bernstein herself, have paid little attention to how these two phenomena intertwine within adult websites—that is, to how these encounters take place in virtual environments only, especially those websites within a formal commercial market driven by global capital forces (as in the case of adult live
Such analysis is important since people’s social and cultural practices are increasingly extending into a wide variety of digital environments.

The question of identities is particularly important in a context where online pornography is increasingly produced and consumed as a transnational commodity by users who live in a variety of cultures and places. Along these lines, YPMate advertises itself as presenting diverse performers on its website, in a process that is, according to Hardt and Negri (2001:150), aligned with the capitalist discourse of world markets that focus on ‘circulation, mobility, diversity and mixture’ as their ‘very conditions of possibility’. In this sense, performers’ and customers’ interactions create and/or reinforce particular identities that are shaped by the channels of communication, global tastes, and, ultimately, forces of capital.

My analysis of data drawn from YPMate performers’ profiles aimed to show the identities and identity work required by industry professionals as well as the ‘skills workers need to possess to negotiate a working environment that is changing in the face of free content and the rise of user-generated content’ (Smith & Attwood 2014:15). This is especially important in a context where, with the popularisation and dissemination of media technologies, there is a ‘dramatic expansion of forms of online self-representation and social networking’ (Attwood 2010:6). In the case of YPMate, performers can change their identities presented on their profile at will. This ‘identity work’ is significant because the pieces of information on performers’ profiles orient both website categories and users’ search results.

The results of the analysis showed that performers’ identity work tends toward a homogenous ‘mass identity’ that is established according to users’ desires and performers’ personal preferences. In terms of sexual identities, they are similar to those encountered in traditional hetero-porn categories. However, the analysis of performers’ locations showed that in a context where communication is part of the production, new desires emerge—desires for communication and communality.

In terms of identities, Hardt and Negri (2005:114) argue that the conditions for new identities are being created by a ‘becoming common’ of labour; in other words, people are increasingly working under the same conditions of production and melding into a commonality, defined by new affective relationships and networks of
communication. However, such an approach ignores major divisions that continue to exist in the conditions of labour in different localities, which are reflected in the production of commonality. For instance, even though YPMate performers labour under the same conditions of production, they depart from different economic conditions determined by their locality. Since the company stipulates rules on broadcast speed and computer assessment, it excludes several subjects from participating in adult live cams.

Moreover, if ‘the common is based on communication among singularities and emerges through the collaborative social processes of production’ (Hardt & Negri 2005:204), it is necessary to consider not only the means by which communication occurs but also which language is used. In this sense, broader social divisions have a direct impact on the conditions of work and therefore on the social relationships and forms of communication that flow from it. As shown in chapter 3, these social divisions are (re)produced in customers’ desires, which are deeply localised; the demand for communication stipulates a common language, and the search for affect requires a similar background. Thus, an Anglo-centric hegemonic force that homogenises cultural differences shapes both language and background.

So, in this commonality in adult live cams, although freely produced by participants, the production of identities takes place within the logic of global capital. Further, structures of inequality in terms of price setting show that the commonality is not immanent to the productive dynamics of global capital; on the contrary, competition still takes place and hierarchies abound.

Although identities are more directly ‘worked on’ by performers, YPMate also plays a role in selecting efficient identities for adult live-cam production. While performers have control over production, the company exerts control outside of content production through the modulation of working conditions. This means the company that owns YPMate controls content not so much through the Tayloristic organisation of time and space but rather through the modulation of identities and behaviours in the fluid network. For instance, YPMate has an important role in recruiting performers and customers who are more likely to thrive in adult live cams. To do so, the company marketed adult live cams as a social networking site by downplaying the sexual aspect of the genre and emphasising the role of meeting people online. Hence, the company’s
strategy to recruit participants aims at particular identities: potential customers and performers both have to be open and social to create emotional ties on the website. It is in this sense that the company buys user traffic from dating sites while also advertising the performer’s job as a fun way to make money while social networking.

Thus, although commonality is necessary to create bonds, singularities tend to be expressed more freely in the affective network produced. Analysing blogging communities, Dean (2010:95-6) found that in these networks affect is produced and circulated as a binding technique, through ‘every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition’ which ‘accrue a tiny affective nugget’ in the network. Likewise, in adult live cams performers use the website’s social network to circulate affect, passing onto customers elements of identity and certain feeling-states, such as a sense of intimacy. This affect is moved around, passing from one participant to the next, stopping when a personal connection is temporarily established.

Hence, unlike most kinds of pornography, in adult live cams the image of the naked body is not the sole content—performers are also selling/producing a personal connection. In this sense, their labour ‘draws on a source of self’ that they ‘honour as deep and integral to’ their own individuality (Hochschild 1983:7). This labour, hence, extends into the fabric of the performer’s personality in such imperceptible ways that performers ignore it. This is reflected in assertions that, ultimately, connections with customers cannot be made—they just happen. However, it is important to note that many feminist scholars have noted that this affective and intimate labour is often associated with female work, and the simple capacities to care, communicate, or interact are degree-zero sociality. This means that performers’ work is best considered as a set of integrated, life-wide practices that cannot be acquired through one-off induction sessions or skills training.

The apparent divergence between singularities and commonalities on adult live cams also points to a theme that permeates all relations in the genre—that of extensification and intensification of social relations in a globalised context. Such polar forces produce apparent contradictory tendencies, such as the massification and customisation of content analysed in chapter 2, the decentralisation of production among performers allied with the centralisation of distribution in the hands of a few companies.
described in chapter 4, and the ambivalent processes of connection and disconnection between performers and customers. Beyond cancelling each other, such processes feed on each other and serve to maximise the profits of capital.

In summary, this thesis contributes to the analysis of the post-industrial commercialisation of sexual content online, with a focus on the identities created in a global market. I conclude that the identities of adult live-cam performers, in particular, are produced through their intimate labour: they are flexible identities adapted to communication technologies, global sexual desires, and capital. These identities also create affective networks and enable performers to become sexed entrepreneurs by building intimacy through communality and communication. In this sense, performers contribute to the business not only through content but also with their communicative skills and their networks of clients within which content is circulated and manipulated.

7.2 Recommendations for future research

Finally, I would like to suggest some avenues for future research, particularly those potential paths and alleyways that constitute fruitful extensions of the concerns raised in this thesis. First, this thesis prioritised ‘content’ and hence paid attention to identities, as adult live cams were perceived as an interactive genre of pornography whose content is intrinsically related to participants’ identities. However, this does not mean that adult live cams are not imbued with materiality—that these identities are not performed through bodies and machines, through the muscle strength of performers’ bodies or the tactile skills of users’ hands. Studies investigating the ‘materiality’ of adult live cams would certainly contribute to the analysis of subject production in interactive pornographies.

The difficulty of analysing such materiality derives from the ephemeral and decentralised nature of the genre. Performances are not recorded, and they are dependent on interactions that cannot be replicated. Moreover, because performers are physically widespread all over the world, it would be difficult to follow their work practices in loco. This dispersion is also the source of another limitation of this thesis: the impossibility of investigating whether there is a difference between performers’ virtual identities and personalities, and what they consider their ‘real’ selves. This means it was
not possible to contrast their online and offline routines and identities, and analyse how they influence each other.

Other venues for future study are directly related to the choice of data used in this research. By choosing a well-known online forum where English is the main language used for communication, the voices of many performers were silenced—especially those who probably do not engage in online forums or do not speak English. Hence, to further the study of global relations and identities, it would be necessary to account for these performers and find additional sources of data that could account for their experiences. Moreover, in analysing discourses about content production instead of the practices taking place on adult live cams, it is possible that what this study accounted for was, in fact, the ideologies created by performers and industry agents regarding these practices. However, as mentioned before, the direct analysis of adult live-cam performances is difficult because of its interactive and ephemeral format.

Additional work could emphasise adult live-cam customers: their voices, identities, and experiences. As McKee (2006:524) puts it, porn consumers usually ‘cannot know themselves, they cannot speak for themselves, they must be represented’. Although some glimpses of customers’ thoughts are included in this thesis, an interesting study could analyse adult live cams exclusively from their perspective. Moreover, a study that gathers information on customers’ identities would be helpful for deconstructing the systematic ‘othering’ of porn consumers (Attwood 2007). By the same token, future researchers could also address industry agents’ identities and explore a comparative analysis between agent and performer forums. The methodological approach used by Voss (2015) in her research can benefit future work in the field: attending several types of events to construct a fuller picture of how companies in the pornography industry manage their identities and interacting personally with business-related agents. Additional comparative studies could address other adult live-cam websites, which might spur different relations. These new resources and other perspectives might serve to further enhance the field.

Despite its limitations, this work aimed to make an original contribution to the knowledge in several areas: new forms of pornography, new forms of sex work, new developments in the relations between intimacy and commerce, and the ways in which
relations, connections, and networks are commodified and commercialised. Adult cam sites have thus far been neglected by researchers, despite their prominence in the adult industry. In the same way, there has been comparatively little academic discussion of new models of business in pornography and of large mainstream commercial porn sites as they adapt themselves to new digital economies. Hence, the focus on these aspects in this thesis is a step forward and an invitation to other scholars to look deeper into matters that are sometimes too close to us. Overall, I hope I have opened up some interesting avenues for thinking about online relations.
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APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW CALL

Hello everyone!

I am a student researcher from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. As part of my University degree I am undertaking a thesis on Adult Live Cams, with focus on the participants that use YPmate, either as performers and/or as consumers. To conduct this research, I have received ethical approval from the University of Melbourne. Currently I am recruiting participants for interviews that will take around 30-45 minutes of your time at your convenience. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and the interviews will be conducted online, using the media you prefer (i.e. Skype, MSN, or other of your choice).

If you are interested in being interviewed or if you have any question about this study, please send me an inbox message.

Thanks for you help,

Janaina F.
### APPENDIX 2 – PERFORMERS PROFILE DATA

#### Performers Bio

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#### Kinky Attributes

- 1. BDSM
- 2. Feet
- 3. Toys
- 4. Smoking
- 5. Underwear
- 6. Uniforms
- 7. Masks
- 8. Leather
- 9. Pregnancy
- 10. Anal Penetration
- 11. Smoking
- 12. Rubber

*Note: you can select up to 7 attributes.*
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