

**From Porn Performer to Pornpreneur: Online  
Entrepreneurship, Social Media Branding, and Selfhood  
in Contemporary Trans Pornography**

Sophie Pezzutto

Australian National University, Australia

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**Abstract**

Drawing on ten months of ethnographic field work in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, this article reflects on how transgender pornography performers navigate various economic, technological, and social changes confronting the industry. From the fracturing of the production landscape and the rise of social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, porn performers today operate in a vastly different environment than just two decades ago. Because they can no longer rely on big studios to provide them with a stable income, performers are much more productively thought of as entrepreneurs, or as I call it, pornpreneurs who are harnessing social media to earn income from a diverse range of erotic and sexual services that are based on a carefully curated personal brand.

This personal brand extends into various aspects of their lives and shapes decisions from friendships to surgery. My research suggests that the most successful porn performers today embody a unique brand distinct from their competitors, often so all-encompassing that it can cause alienation. Reflecting on how transgender performers act as active agents situated within these technological, economic, and social structures can help us better understand subject formation in the context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century neoliberal internet capitalism.

**Keywords:** transgender, pornography, online entrepreneurship, social media, personal branding.

## 1. Introduction

Economic, technological, and social changes in the pornography industry have radically transformed what it means to be a porn star in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the traditional studio system waning in the face of piracy and other technological shifts, porn performers are increasingly subjected to a workplace logic in which they have to be increasingly self-reliant, adaptable to change, proactive, and creative in finding ways to make ends meet. As a result, today's porn performers, whether they work in the straight, gay, queer, or trans segments of the industry, are much better thought of as internet entrepreneurs, or as I call it, pornpreneurs. Relying on numerous online platforms and social media to manage their careers, understanding what it means to be a porn star is no longer possible without examining this subjectivity within the cultural logics of what digital social scientists have termed Web 2.0 culture (Banet-Weiser 2012; Marwick 2013).

My research focuses specifically on the trans pornography industry. For many people, trans or not, pornography has historically been and still is the first encounter they have with trans people, let alone naked trans bodies. As a trans person living in a capitalist economy, I was drawn to studying this segment of the porn industry because trans porn performers seemed crucially positioned at the intersection of neoliberal market logic, self-commodification, and social media. In this article, I draw on data from participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2017 –

April 2019 with 28 participants who worked in or were associated with the transgender pornography industry in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Interviews typically ranged between half an hour to three hours and were conducted in person, in some cases multiple times throughout my time in the field. The overwhelming majority of those interviewed were active performers between the ages of 18 and 30. Due to time and financial constraints placed on my research, and in line with amplifying sex workers' voices, I decided to primarily pay attention to performers and secondarily to studio employees, owners, directors and fans. My desire to highlight the voices of trans sex workers stems from my intention as a privileged, white trans person to highlight those voices within the queer community that have historically been silenced in the name of appealing to middle-class sentiments, an issue described by scholars as "homonormativity" (Valentine 2007).

An anthropologist by training, my research seeks to echo the call in porn studies for a 'porn studies in action,' which pays close attention to the lived realities of the sex workers we write about by spending a significant amount of time on the ground and not on campus (Comella 2014). As part of participant observation, and in line with anthropology's interest in the quotidian, much of my research involved taking part in as many day-to-day activities alongside my participants as possible. This included sharing households with two well-known performers in Las Vegas who allowed me to shadow them. This involved attending various social events and parties, trips to the mall, and outdoor hiking excursions, as well as attending professional industry events, including conventions and expos, transgender themed nights at strip clubs, and being on set for numerous pornography shoots in Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>.

What can an examination of the trans porn industry teach us not only about the industry, but about gender, technology, and agency under neoliberal capitalism? Rather than thinking about difference, as is the tradition in anthropology, the field of science and technology studies and social media research presents ethnographers with an oppor-

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<sup>1</sup> I use pseudonyms throughout to protect the identities of my research participants. Additionally, due to the very small size of the industry and the intimate nature of some of the events, data presented from my field work might consist of an amalgamation of multiple events and/or people with the goal of protecting my participants' identities.

tunity to think about similarities. Drawing on an emerging body of scholarly work on social media culture (Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova 2013; Duffy 2017; Elias and Gill 2018; Goldberg 2016; Hillis 2009; Marwick 2013, 2015; Senft 2013; Zuboff 2019a), this article looks at porn as yet another site where technology is changing what it means to be a working (trans) person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By thinking about agency in porn through the lens of a now-ubiquitous social media culture, this research follows in the footsteps of recent scholarship on sex work that seeks to unmoor porn from its privileged and sometimes sensationalised position where concerns about agency are often portrayed as unique, particularly pertinent, and/or somewhat detached from ‘mainstream’ society (Berg 2014a, 2014b; Sanders 2005). Similarly, even though transgender porn performers face many unique challenges, some of which I examine here, I seek to move away from a narrative that focuses on the transness of my informants and portrays trans people as particularly unique and different. Instead, an analysis of social media culture demonstrates that many of the challenges and opportunities around agency are not only shared by all porn performers, trans and cis alike, but also, more broadly, with other cultural workers (Banks, Gill and Taylor 2013; Duffy 2017; Gill and Pratt 2008).

I draw on Ortner’s (2006 and 2001) definition of agency as a form of power and as a set of culturally constituted intentions and desires. Trans performers’ agency of power refers to their ability to act within the technological, economic, and social structures they find themselves within. My intention is to illuminate how performers navigate various changes in the industry, how they make use of new technologies and income opportunities to grow their careers, and how they manage to deal with some of the struggles and challenges that arise from these various changes. Trans performers’ agency of intentions, on the other hand, refers to the desires that grow out of the structures of their lives. I take this to specifically refer to discourses in the industry around what it means to be a ‘successful’ porn star, which typically involves performers striving to attain a higher status through peer as well as industry recognition (‘fame’), the accumulation of material wealth, and the attainment of physical desirability, often through plastic surgery. To put it in the words of one informant: “We all wanna be alpha, we all wanna be princess, we all wanna validate ourselves as trans women”. An agency of intentions takes into account the cultural logic and value hierarchies of both the pornography in-

dustry and broader U.S. capitalist consumer culture and seeks to understand why performers actively work towards certain outcomes. In short, I ask: How have the circumstances under which trans porn performers currently work changed? How have performers adapted to these various changes? And how do they accomplish being a successful porn star?

In this article I argue that economic, technological, and social changes have resulted in porn performers transforming themselves into active internet entrepreneurs who rely on a new range of skills and online platforms to succeed. By adopting social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter as central tools in managing their careers, performers have harnessed internet technology in productive and empowering ways. At the same time, these technologies have inadvertently subjected them to increased self-commodification, competition, alienation, and online harassment. Ultimately, many of the opportunities and challenges that trans porn performers deal with are reflective of broader changes in the labour market, making trans pornography yet another locus through which to critically reflect on subject formation in the context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century neoliberal internet capitalism.

## **2. Trans porn matters**

While trans pornography only makes up 1.97% of all searches on the world's most frequented pornographic website, the search for it nearly quadrupled between 2014 and 2017 (Pornhub.com 2017)<sup>2</sup>. Renamed 'transgender'<sup>3</sup> in 2018, the category was listed in Pornhub's (2018) annual review as the 13<sup>th</sup> most viewed category, with searches related to trans pornography registering a 167% increase to 2017 and an increase of more than

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<sup>2</sup> While Pornhub may not be representative of commercial pornography sales – much of it notoriously difficult to obtain due to the private nature of production companies – it is the world's 8th most visited website and certainly indicative of internet porn consumption patterns (SimilarWeb.com 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Trans pornography has historically been referred to by the term "shemale" or "she-male" porn. Following pressure by trans performers, this has slowly begun to change.

200% for visitors over the age of 45, making it the fifth most searched pornographic category for those between 45 and 64<sup>4</sup>.

Although pornography with trans men has found a following among gay men (G. 2017), the overwhelming majority of trans porn revolves around trans women. Trans porn's popularity is largely viewed as owing to its fan base: "White American male, college-educated, six-figure salary, Ivy League-educated-doctors, lawyers, and educators", according to Venus Lux, a director, performer, and producer of trans erotica (Dickson 2015). Indeed, on Pornhub (2017) men are 63 percent more likely to search for trans pornography compared to women, while on xHamster, another popular tube site, 87.5 percent of the searches for the genre are from men (G. 2017). Many of the production companies that shoot trans pornography, such as Evil Angel and Devils Film, specialise in producing heterosexual pornography, with trans pornography dubbed a «straight speciality» (Ogas and Gaddam 2011, 216). In terms of gendered embodiment and erotic fantasies, mainstream trans pornography has much in common with mainstream, heterosexual, cisgender pornography's aesthetic: Big boobs and butts, skinny figures, big lips, long hair, lacey underwear, and full makeup are typically the norm. The only feature that sets trans women in porn apart from cisgender women in straight porn is the centrality of their penises. Large and erect, they are the object of desire in this genre and feature prominently on Dvd covers.

Despite the apparent size and popularity of trans pornography, research that has focused on the lived experiences of the people who work in this "niche" part of the pornography industry is sparse. With the exception of a handful of personal exposés (Angel 2013; Chavalier 2007; Hill-Meyer 2013), little research exists on trans porn performers. Those who have addressed the topic have not looked at the lived experiences of those in the industry, but rather at trans porn as a genre (Escoffier 2011; Kipnis 2004; Tibbals 2014) or its representational politics (Steinbock 2016 and 2014). Aside from some sociological research that examines attraction towards transwomen (Mauk, Perry and Munoz-Laboy 2013; Weinberg and Williams 2010), and research done in the context of

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<sup>4</sup> I hypothesise that this increased interest in trans porn is related to the recent emergence of trans identities in mainstream media and political discourse, perhaps best exemplified by Laverne Cox being the first ever transgender person to grace the cover page of Time magazine in June 2014 (Steinmet 2014).

Hiv prevention with transgender sex workers (Operario, Burton, Underhill and Sevelius, 2008; Sausa, Keatley and Operario, 2007), most research on trans pornography is outdated, cisnormative, and ignores the voices of the trans people on whose behalf it speaks (Blanchard and Collins 1993; Hsu, Rosenthal, Miller and Bailey 2016; Jeffreys 2016; Phillips 2006). More research needs to be done on the popularity of trans pornography, the people who consume it, the contexts in which it circulates, and, most importantly, I suggest, those who work within this industry. This article seeks to be a starting point in this quest by bringing together ethnographic research, pornography studies, and transgender studies, privileging the experiences of those trans people who work and live in the industry, and highlighting the rich data that can be derived from ethnographic approaches to studying the pornography industry.

### **3. Web 2.0.**

The rise of social media culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has typically been placed within an epoch of the internet termed Web 2.0. Initially an industry call to action for a more open, collaborative, and transparent internet (O'Reilly 2005), Web 2.0. has been used by digital social scientists to signify a moment in internet history marked by a string of new technologies, collaborative online platforms (such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), and discourses in the wake of the dot-com bust of the early 2000s (Marwick 2013). Although some (Everitt and Mills 2009) have criticised it as too ill-defined a term to be used critically, this article borrows from Marwick's usage of Web 2.0. to signify a set of discourses originating in Silicon Valley's tech start-up culture, characterised by promises and hopes about what technology can do for individuals and for society. Many of the discourses which emerged from this culture have ultimately become established as mainstream discourses of a precarious labour market, where digital platforms are heralded as enablers of independence and entrepreneurship (Ravenelle 2019 and 2017). In an economy marked by job insecurity and high competition, values of entrepreneurship such as proactivity, adaptability, and networking have all become indispensable qualities for those seeking to set themselves apart from the competition, with social media figuring centrally in this landscape (Duffy 2017; Marwick 2013).

Though the term neoliberalism has taken on a variety of meanings (Birch 2017), I use the term to refer to the increased expansion of supply and demand driven market logic into various aspects of life, specifically the commodification of inter and intra-human aspects of life such as friendships, embodiment, intimacy, and understandings of self. One of the most striking features of my field work was the extent to which almost all my participants had internalised and expressed neoliberal tech discourses and how this drastically mediated the ways in which they related to one another, myself, and themselves.

#### **4. The economics of being a transgender pornstar**

The economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been characterised by a relatively drastic shift away from stable and structured employment at a single company to a job market that is marked by increasingly unstable, casual, and contracted work, as well as the emergence of the ‘gig economy’ and the ‘precariat class’ (Banks *et al.* 2013; Gill and Pratt 2008; Ravenelle 2019). While contracted work has long been a feature of the pornography industry, fixed term contracts at big-name studios have become increasingly elusive. With the exception of a select few, almost all porn performers today are paid on a shoot by shoot basis, unsure about when they will next get booked (Tarrant 2016). At the time of this writing there was only one so-called ‘contract girl’ in trans pornography, Aubrey Kate, whose contract with Evil Angel guaranteed her a number of shoots every month. While the porn industry as a whole has seen a rise in young talent joining the industry in search of glamour and fame, trans pornography in particular has witnessed a growing number of aspiring performers as transitioning has become relatively more socially acceptable and accessible. Several of my participants expressed concerns not only about the growing number of young trans talent entering the industry, but their increased attractiveness due to higher rates of early-life transition, which typically results in increased ‘cis-passability’<sup>5</sup>, a much-desired aesthetic in trans porn.

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<sup>5</sup> Widely critiqued in trans rights discourse (Rogers 1992; Sycamore 2006), cis-passability, or simply ‘passing’, e.g., ‘looking like a biological woman’ (excluding external appearance of genitalia) remains the



On the production side, studios are competing with an ever-increasing number of people who are self-producing content due to the increasingly affordable nature of video technology. This includes amateur couples posting their intimate moments on tube sites such as Pornhub, as well as performers who start their own production companies and directly compete with studios for business. The emergence of online clip stores like ManyVids and, most recently, Pornhub's 'Model Hub', have allowed performers to skip traditional avenues of distribution and sell their self-produced clips online and on-demand. While piracy is still a huge issue in the industry (Tarrant 2016), leading tube site Pornhub has now made efforts to reimburse performers for their content with a program of certification and copyright ownership. This has allowed performers to monetise the videos they upload, much like YouTube, enabling them to earn ongoing revenue, thus attracting a growing number of semi-professional couples to the site.

As a consequence of the growing performer pool and the democratisation of production and distribution channels, remuneration per scene paid by commercial pornography companies has significantly decreased. While pay varies from company to company, trans women in porn typically make anywhere between US \$500-\$600 for a solo scene and US \$800-\$1,500 for a hard-core scene, which is defined as involving penetration (Grooby.com, 2019; Tarrant, 2016). Unlike trans female performers, regular shoots for trans male performers are not yet a reality. There is a select group of about a dozen performers who are informally considered 'in the loop', because companies and directors regularly shoot with them, partly due to popular demand, partly due to them fulfilling a certain niche/look, and partly due to the level of professionalism and reliability they bring to their work. These performers are able to obtain more or less regular shoots, typically around four times a month; but for most other performers shoots can happen at significantly less frequent intervals. As a consequence of the unreliable nature of income from pornography, budgeting can be extremely difficult and often weighs heavily on performers' self-esteem, making them feel as though they are not in control of their

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single most pervasive beauty ideal in the trans porn industry. There are numerous factors which determine the results of a person transitioning, but one determining factor is how early in life hormone replacement therapy (Hrt) is begun, as the development of certain secondary sexual characteristics are not entirely reversible without invasive surgery (Mahfouda, Moore, Sifarikas, Zepf and Lin 2017; Panagiotakopoulos 2018).

income. When I first arrived in Las Vegas, for example, one of my participants was going through a prolonged dry spell and, as time went on, she began questioning various things about herself, such as whether she had said something inappropriate to a director during a past shoot or whether there was something wrong with her appearance.

In addition to the income insecurity from irregular pornography shoots, the costs of being a porn performer can be extremely high. Living expenses such as rent and food aside, performers are expected to pay for numerous things not covered by the companies hiring them. These include wardrobe, STI testing, transportation and accommodation, as well as various cosmetic costs relating to appearance. A sample list of one informant's recurring expenses provided to me included \$150 for STI testing every two weeks; \$300 on hair maintenance every three weeks, with an additional \$2,000 in hair extensions every three months; \$150 per month in tanning expenses; \$150 every two months in tanning lotions; \$250 every three weeks in semi-permanent eyelashes; \$150 every three weeks in manicures; and lingerie, which may cost anywhere from \$450-\$2,000 per set, per shoot, and is typically not re-used on shoots, at least not for the same company. "Factoring in all my expenses and the money I lose from not camming, porn does not really make me money", my informant pointed out.

It is also common for porn performers to spend significant sums of money on cosmetic surgeries. From breast augmentation, to butt lifts, nose jobs, anal bleaching, fillers, and Botox, the list of possible procedures is long. Apart from common procedures such as breast augmentation, which are very popular among performers, there are numerous other surgeries related to transitioning that many trans performers seek. These procedures can be exorbitantly expensive and place an additional and unique financial burden on trans performers. Such surgeries include the popular 'Facial Feminisation Surgery' (Ffs), which involves the reshaping of the facial bone structure to take on more 'feminine' features (Plemons 2017), as well as other procedures such as Adam's apple shaving, hip implants, vocal cord surgery, hairline advancement, and many others. At social events, surgery was a regular topic of conversation among performers, with people readily exchanging information about surgeons and pricing and asking each other whether they thought they needed a particular procedure. The majority of performers I met had undergone at least one procedure, most commonly breast augmentation sur-

gery, with Ffs surgery being the other highly sought-after procedure, although this was often something only established performers could afford.

A large number of performers interviewed entered the industry at least in part to fund their transition. Sex work was for them a lucrative and, at the same time, empowering avenue to self-actualisation because it provided funds for prohibitively expensive surgeries which were otherwise unattainable and not covered by medical insurance. This was particularly the case for those performers who grew up in Midwestern states and lost their jobs due to the discrimination they suffered when beginning their transition, as most U.S. states do not have adequate anti-discrimination legislation covering gender presentation. Numerous participants I spoke with had been in and out of unemployment, and in some cases homelessness, prior to entering the industry, and if they had held jobs, they were remunerated poorly. One of my participants had previously worked as a bartender, which originally provided her with a good income. When she began her transition, however, she was demoted to working in the back of the kitchen for \$5 an hour, because the business's owners did not want her visibly queer appearance to upset customers. Another informant had worked as a pizza delivery person for multiple years, as well as a cleaner for the local scrap yard, cleaning out vehicles in which homicides had been committed.

While on one hand, porn provided many performers with an empowering avenue to pay for their transition and afford a way of life otherwise not attainable, on the other, performers were concurrently tied to a powerful aesthetic-erotic hierarchy. Although diverse in some ways, this hierarchy was also highly cis-normative, rewarding those trans women who pass as cis women, as well as those with big, hard penises and breasts. When transition clashed with this aesthetic-erotic hierarchy, such as for those performers who wished to undergo vaginoplasty, it typically meant deciding between transitioning on their terms or their career. While most performers were acutely aware of this and not interested in this procedure, one of my participants was initially confident she could continue doing porn after her vaginoplasty. Shortly after her surgery, however, she quit the industry and returned to her home state, because directors were no longer booking her. In other instances, performers regularly skipped their hormone replacement therapy in the lead up to shoots in order to have more consistent erections and more visible or-

gasms on camera, despite it causing mood swings and unwanted hair growth patterns. One participant decided to not take hormone blockers at all, so she could be more consistently aroused and thus perform better on camera. Instead, she attained her transition through plastic surgery, which would typically be considered unusual from a transgender healthcare point of view (World Professional Association for Transgender Health 2012). Another participant admitted that she had never planned on having a breast augmentation, but eventually had one because she saw it as a way of advancing her career and thought she might be at a disadvantage without it. Echoing Abu-Lughod's (1990) call not to romanticise agency and resistance, porn performers were able to resist and free themselves from the rigid financial and class-based constraints placed on them and their ability to transition in their home states by working in porn. At the same time, however, they «... perhaps unwittingly enmesh[ed] themselves in an extraordinarily complex set of new power relations» (pp. 51f), which bound them to a global capitalist internet economy and an aesthetic-erotic hierarchy.

Expenditure on plastic surgery was further incentivised by the fact that performers tended to be booked for a string of new shoots after they changed something significant about their appearance. A haircut, hair extensions, or change of hair colour, for instance, was often justified by participants as having the beneficial side effect of appealing to companies interested in shooting the performer's 'new look'. On set, participants regularly received feedback from photographers and directors about their looks and were frequently complimented after changing something about their appearance. Plastic surgeries were often planned in such a manner that they were spaced out from one another over multiple years, not just merely for medical and financial reasons, but also in order to sustain an ongoing sense of novelty in terms of appearance. The tactic to stay relevant and novel through makeovers and surgery was a strategy many of the performers consciously employed and may be interpreted as an agentic response by performers to navigate their objectification as products, maximising their ability to generate revenue within a capitalist market logic which fetishises the new as the driver of sales.

These ordinary and extraordinary expenses, paired with a widespread lack of financial literacy, a U.S. consumer culture built on commodity fetishism, and the pornography industry's overall valorisation of 'living the high life', in which performers are ad-

mired for spending money on luxury cars, designer fashion, and numerous other consumer items, often lead to performers spending several years in the industry with little to financially show for it. As a consequence, the majority of trans performers I met during my field work neither owned property, nor had any substantial savings and most did not have medical insurance. Even though many saw pornography as an empowering means through which they had been able to transcend rigid class boundaries, attain a level of wealth otherwise unimaginable to them, and realise themselves as trans women, angst about ‘having nothing to show for it’ was a periodic topic of conversation among more established performers.

## **5. Pornpreneurship**

As a consequence of industry-wide structural and technological shifts, income from studio produced pornography no longer pays the bills for the overwhelming majority of porn performers. As a result, porn performers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century rely on a diverse range of income streams in order to make ends meet. Aside from studio produced porn, performers today generate income from custom clip sales, trade shoots, webcamming, escorting, stripping, go-go dancing, phone sex, sexting, monetised social media platforms, such as OnlyFans and Snapchat Premium, dating ‘sugar daddies’, or selling their underwear. Income from monetised platforms such as OnlyFans can easily far surpass income from studio produced porn for many performers (J. Bernstein 2019). Two of my participants confirmed making five-digit figures per month on OnlyFans, and two other participants made similar income through online clip sales. Webcamming, another popular and lucrative source of income, allows many performers to earn a consistent income from the safety of their own home, with some of my informants reportedly making approximately \$200 an hour for camming anywhere from two to six hours a day (Pezzutto 2018).

In this world of multiple income streams, being a porn star is much more productively understood as being an internet entrepreneur, or as I term it, a pornpreneur. Porn performers must decide which income streams have the most earning potential, how much time to invest in each of them, and be creative about how they can innovate and

maximise profit from them. They have to be technically savvy with a variety of online platforms, all produced by different developers, and responsive to changes in remuneration models across those platforms. As other scholars have noted about today's internet economy, changes to remuneration models, service offerings, and algorithms occur frequently and often without notice or explanation, thus leaving workers feeling vulnerable to the whims of tech companies (Ravenelle 2019 and 2017). In many instances conversations about online platforms, including non-monetised ones, such as Instagram and Twitter, were extremely technical and demonstrated extensive knowledge about algorithms and post-prioritisation.

One concern shared by many performers I spoke with was the process of having one's social media accounts removed or 'shadow-banned', thus stripping them from an important source of marketing, income, and socialising and causing serious anger, anxiety, and sadness among many. Shadow-banning involves making invisible any 'unwanted' individuals without explicitly removing their account. Typically, when searching for a user, social media platforms suggest a number of possible accounts. This is particularly useful for people looking for a person of public interest without knowing their exact username. Shadow-banning involves removing an unwanted account from these suggestions, thus only allowing someone to be found if their exact username is entered into the search function. More insidious forms of shadow-banning involve deprioritising posts from certain accounts so that they appear less in public searches and on people's feeds. This typically leads to a reduction of traffic to shadow-banned accounts, haemorrhaging performers' ability to grow their following. Due to the difficulty of verifying whether one has been shadow-banned (platforms typically do not notify users) and the often political nature of banning certain accounts over others, it is a practice frequently criticised as discriminatory, especially by sex workers (Turner 2019a and 2019b). Following the 2018 enactment of the Fight Online Sex Trafficking and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Acts (Fosta-Sesta), which criminalised the advertisement of sexual services, numerous platforms moved to proactively remove sex workers' accounts even though the level of nudity in their posts did not necessarily exceed that of non-sex workers and despite pornography being legal in the United States. Popular blogging platform Tumblr, for instance, announced it would remove all 'pornographic'

content, which many argued resulted in the unfair targeting of sex workers on their platform (Clark-Flory 2018). In order to grow their market and avoid being removed from these platforms, performers have responded by increasingly marketing themselves as actresses, entertainers, or models, removing any pornographic references from their accounts, and providing each other with advice about how to prevent being shadow-banned.

The ability to utilize multiple platforms and technologies allowed performers to have more control over how they managed their income and careers. While contract work with a studio implies a hierarchical relationship between performer and producer, or worker and those who own the means of production, self-producing content through various monetised online platforms actively blurred the line between performer and producer and gave performers more flexibility, autonomy, and agency of power. One performer who regularly webcammed and who also had a substantial following on the paid social media platform Onlyfans described it to me as follows:

The most empowering thing is that it's no longer centralised. Being able to work on cam alone, on Onlyfans, and the idea you can shoot a video with one person and post across three platforms that make approximately the same amount of money... you couldn't do that before where you had conglomerates and agents to go through. You couldn't perform with a black man or a trans person before... but now performers can decide more what they want to do.

While these changes have empowered performers in many ways, they also demand a range of new skills. All the back-end work of editing, marketing, distribution, as well as the filing of copyright claims on pirated material, is now done at home, on the computer, and by the performers themselves. Performers often lamented that much of their time was spent on editing mountains of self-produced content, that they had to update their website, or that they had not posted anything in a while on one of their monetised platforms. This not only required a significant level of technological know-how, but also a high level of responsibility, organisation, and time commitment. Above all, entrepreneurship was a key to success. The most successful performers actively sought out new

talent to produce content with, took control of their income portfolios by shifting to the most lucrative platforms available, and creatively used existing platforms to maximize profits.

## **6. Social media and porn**

Porn is the billboard. Cam is the product. – Lisa

As the landscape of pornography production has fractured, social media has come to play a multitude of crucial roles for performers. Reddit, Twitter, Instagram, and, until recently, Tumblr are often the first point of contact through which aspiring performers learn about and get in touch with other performers, hence tying them to a large community of sex workers, irrespective of geographic location. Platforms like Instagram provide an interface between those working in the pornography industry and those who are aspiring to be in it. Some of the performers I spoke to had known each other for years through transgender online forums prior to entering the industry, in some cases deciding together to join the industry. Once they are in the industry, performers get in touch with each other via these platforms and friendships are formed. Social media also allowed already established performers to verify and vet potential co-performers for trade shoots and decide whether that person's look appealed to them.

Regular social media updates were seen as crucial to becoming a successful performer and were thus just one more necessary part of pornpreneurship. Posts, life updates, 'behind the scenes' material, and Q&As, all increase a performer's approachability, likeability, and following, which in turn translates into more referrals to paid platforms like OnlyFans and ManyVids and sponsored partnerships from sex toy brands, beauty clinics, or marijuana dispensaries. Aside from being a marketing tool, performers' use of these platforms is best understood as a form of affective labour as fans become emotionally invested in their favourite performer's life and begin to financially subsidize them by purchasing their videos, subscribing to their premium platforms, buying them gifts from their Amazon wish list, or simply by sending them cash. Established per-



formers understood this aspect of their work as a central component to their success, as one participant highlighted:

People follow the Instagram and Twitter and stuff to get the pictures. They wanna jerk off to it, they wanna get turned on, but even more are there because they wanna learn more about you, you know... They sought you out... to learn more about you. And so, what they wanna learn is something that's attractive and appetizing, you know? You are a fantasy and you're building that world for them.

Research on sex workers has long highlighted the affective dimension of sex work, pointing to the emotional care sex workers provide as one of the main things, in addition to sex, that attracts clients to sex workers. Most importantly, this research has pointed to the dialectical nature of this affective entanglement, an aspect of their work which many sex workers themselves find fulfilling (Bernstein 2007 and 2001; Brents 2013). I noticed performers regularly asking their fans for advice on Twitter and during cam shows, whether it was how to get their removed social media accounts back, recommendations for video games, advice on moving to another city, which car to purchase, or even whether they ought to invest in property in Venezuela. «After an exciting day, sometimes, I cannot wait till my cam show when I can tell my fans what happened», one informant told me. She knew all of her regular fans by username and ran down a list of about a dozen names and their tipping habits when I asked her about them.

The number of followers a performer has is regularly mentioned in conversations about a performer's success. Having more followers is directly associated with a higher level of fame, status, and income. A higher online following means a higher chance of redirecting potential customers to paying sites to purchase content or products, either by the performers themselves or third-party companies that share a percentage of any subsequent sale with the performer through affiliate links. As is common with the 'influencer economy', it can also translate into sponsored partnerships (Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova 2013; Duffy 2017). Having a large following is in fact so coveted that I heard multiple rumours about performers buying followers. Moreover, performers with

a similar social media clout tended to associate with one another. During my field work in Las Vegas, for example, I was part of a small group of performers who might all be considered ‘A-listers’, with Instagram follower numbers ranging between 50,000 – 250,000. Outside of award shows, conventions, and big social gatherings, such as parties or trans nights at the strip club, performers with lower follower counts typically did not spend much time with those who were considered ‘more famous’. A celebrity culture and hierarchy within the industry became apparent and was particularly obvious on one of my trips to Los Angeles where I spent time with a group of lesser known performers, all with less than 10,000 followers. The A-list performers whom I had been spending time with in Las Vegas were the focus of much conversation among the lesser known performers. They looked up to my Las Vegas informants, regularly following their Instagram stories and discussing how well curated their cam shows were and how many people they attracted to their shows. They asked me about their private lives, including whether this or that performer was single or had started dating another performer.

With follower count being a currency for fame and status, there is a complex set of unspoken rules pertaining to social media use. Typically, a performer with less followers will try to post a photo with a performer with more followers, thus signalling a certain ‘upward’ mobility in terms of success and the possibility of growing their own follower count. Unless they have a similar number of followers, the person with more followers will often not reciprocate sharing the photo, except if they take a particular liking to that person, which is then considered giving someone ‘a boost’. A lack of explicitly stated etiquette paired with an omnipresence of social media usage often led to arguments about social media. One informant, for instance, complained that she got into an argument with her partner because she re-tweeted less of her tweets and did not post as frequently about their relationship as her partner did.

The virtually ubiquitous desire for a greater social media following is in many ways an agentic response by performers to their workplace logic. Follower size not only equates with higher sales and more loyal fans but is also taken into consideration when it comes to deciding who can demand higher pay, who gets to take the coveted center position on porn Dvd covers, and who is ‘in demand’. Much like for beauty vloggers

(Elias and Gill 2018; Gill 2003), social media functions as a portfolio and resume for performers, showcasing their distinct look and level of acclaim to prospective studios. Most award shows now have a category for best online and social media personality, rewarding those who engage actively with their fans and build a large following. Platforms such as Twitter and Instagram are also commonly used by the booking agents of production companies to contact new and aspiring performers, as well as established ones whose contact information they do not have. A social media presence is particularly important in the trans pornography side of the industry as performers do not have agents and thus often the only way for a production company to contact someone is through social media.

While joining the industry ties performers into an aesthetic hierarchy centered around cisnormativity and straight porn aesthetics, social media has enabled performers to assume greater bodily agency by allowing them to create, showcase, and grow their personal look. As long as performers manage to build a big social media following, they are considered ‘in demand’ and will typically get contacted for shoots. This has led to at least a partial, visual diversification of the performer pool, as those who would otherwise be considered ‘niche’ or not conventionally attractive are still taken seriously in terms of their potential to generate sales. This, in turn, has allowed performers to build a brand based on a particular look or set of fetishes, which many feel represents them more accurately than the more classic “porno look”, characterised by one research participant as “glamorous, barbie doll, but not like girl next door natural”. One of my participants, for instance, managed to curate an eclectic style of Japanese hentai inspired feminized masochism in which wearing a pig’s nose mask became one of her signature styles, prompting fans to create fan art of her. Despite the fact that in porn breast augmentations are virtually ubiquitous, especially for trans women, she managed to succeed without one, explaining that her natural breasts suited her ‘look’. Even though her look and kinks would not be considered mainstream within the industry, she nonetheless managed to build a substantial online following, surpassing many of the other big-name performers in the industry. As a consequence, she was able to shoot with some of the most well-known mainstream cisgender performers and studios and win various industry awards.

## 7. Becoming Your Brand

Well... it's hard because you have to invest so much into your character and then it becomes a matter of remembering to turn it off. Like, for me, it can get hard cus I wake up and there's shoot lights surrounding my bed for my webcam show. My bed is a set. It's not somewhere where I instinctfully [sic] know that I'm gonna lay here and rest and catch a breath and stuff. That's a work station and when you're in a work station you are performing as your person... You can forget to turn it off. It can definitely leak into your normal life and a large part why we're successful is that we let that happen cus you need to experience things. You need to experience things so that you can take that experience and make your character more real and believable and more desirable.

From performers re-arranging their closets so that all the clothes from their porn persona are in a separate closet, to various other small acts of rebellion and liberation against their porn persona, separating work identity from personal identity was often very difficult for performers.

In today's competitive 'gig economy', where labour is ample and jobs scarce, the ideal labourer is expected to be flexible, constantly seeking opportunities, and, most importantly, able to stand out from others (Gill and Pratt 2008; Ravenelle 2019; Standing 2011). The dictum to stand out, paired with the emergence of social media, has led to a proliferation of marketing tactics known as "self-branding". Self-branding is the process by which an individual carves out a coherent online identity, shares material relevant to a target audience, and builds a loyal following on social media, which they then may leverage for income in various ways, be it by being hired, the attainment of speaking engagements, targeted marketing, or the sale of goods and services (Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova 2013; Marwick 2013; Senft 2013; Whitmer 2019). In a world in which there is ample explicit material online, self-branding has become crucial to success in porn. Much like universally recognisable corporate brands, performers often think of and talk about themselves as brands. Just like a well-known corporation can use its reputation to sell a range of goods and services, a strong personal brand allows performers

to stand out and be instantly recognisable, which mean they can therefore charge more across their various services. From platinum blonde Baywatch bombshell, to 1950s pin-up model, to tattooed rock chick with elven shaped ears, to Midwestern girl next door, porn is about selling fantasies and the ability to embody a particular fantasy especially well is what distinguishes the porn performer from the porn star. At a social event, one performer once complained to me that she was not happy with her breast augmentation surgery. When asked why she felt that way, she replied: “I wanted more natural looking boobs, but instead they gave me these perky boobs. It doesn’t really go with my look”, which she described as: “Anime-inspired pixie chick”.

While social media was viewed as an essential part of performers’ professional lives, there were also downsides to it, something that a growing body of research now points to (Duffy 2017; Hillis 2009; Marwick 2012; Zuboff 2019a and 2019b). In addition to users of social media spending large amounts of time on these platforms, the use of self-branding techniques, especially for those who rely on it professionally, often involves a process of ongoing self-surveillance, or what Marwick (2013) calls “maintaining a dual gaze”. This process of self-assessment can be emotionally exhausting and anxiety provoking as users continuously measure themselves against competitors and evaluate which posts garner the most likes and engagement. Whenever my informant and housemate was at home, for instance, she was on her phone, updating her status, filming herself rolling in her bed, or catching up on her fellow performers’ Instagram stories. It was hard to distinguish when she was working and when she was not. She would regularly come into my room, bringing to my attention what someone in the industry had said or done, or when they changed their look, went on a holiday, began hanging out with someone previously presumed to be their enemy, or started dating someone we knew. She once came into my room and pointed to another performer’s Instagram account, claiming that she had stolen her signature Instagram poses. As I looked at her phone I noticed that her Instagram feed consisted mainly of other performers. She complained that one performer had recently scored a shoot with a well-known cisgender performer, a scene she thought she would have been well suited for, and that another performer was wearing a lingerie set that she also owned to a shoot. Competition seemed always visible and at hand.

Ongoing self-surveillance is further exacerbated by the fact that users constantly censor aspects of themselves which are either not suitable for work or clash with their brand identity. Thus, despite the fact that authenticity features prominently in self-branding discourse, the requirement to micro-manage one's brand and cater to a particular audience, highlights that users are required to present a narrowly curated image of themselves (Senft 2013). While in most jobs this means explicitly excluding 'unprofessional' actions such as drinking alcohol, doing drugs, partying, and having sex, in porn, this exists too. In the words of a performer appearing on a social media panel at the annual XBiz Show in Los Angeles: "Nothing negative. No sports, no politics. Your job is to entertain."

One of the most significant issues with social media is that users frequently report hurt feelings due to negative comments and interactions, which can cause particular distress to those who are already vulnerable, marginalised, or suffer from mental health issues (Aboujaoude, Savage, Starcevic and Salame, 2015; Duarte, Pittman, Thorsen, Cunningham and Ranney 2018; Nikolaou 2017). Online bullying and mental health is one of the biggest issues faced by performers in the industry today and is commonly seen as a contributing factor in regularly occurring suicide cases, not least since the highly publicized suicide of August Ames two years ago (Horn 2017). Performers are visible and easy targets and stories of stalkers, bullies, and trolls were a common conversation topic during my research (Backman 2019). Because much of a performer's desirability relies on an affective relationship with loyal fans, performers regularly read and interact with comments on their social media, despite some of these comments being extremely hurtful. From people nit-picking every aspect of or change in a performer's appearance to criticizing who they worked with or what content they shot, social media criticism seemed to be a constant fixture in their lives, even if they consciously decided not to interact with it. Regular trolls and bullies aside, many performers had stories of obsessive stalkers who tried to track them down, threatened their lives and even caused them to move houses. One of my participants always carried a gun in her handbag, because a former client had become obsessed with her and began to stalk and threaten her. Another participant dealt with an online stalker for more than two years. This person commented daily on her posts, and even after being blocked they created new social

media accounts to continue the harassing behaviour, which spilled over to others in the industry, including me.

Online bullying not only came from strangers but also from people within the industry. Public twitter ‘feuds’ were a near-daily occurrence in the industry and have become a mainstay feature of an online culture centered around outrage, ‘roasting’, and ‘cancelling’ (Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Bromwich 2018; Rommelmann 2019). During my research I observed regular twitter feuds, from the outing of a secret transgender Facebook gossip group that included some trans performers, to the calling out of production assistants over mistreatment on set, to heated arguments about shooting with crossover performers. Concerns about performers’ mental health is something the industry is increasingly attempting to address. In June 2019, for instance, the industry publication XBiz World ran a cover story about mental health in the industry, highlighting the stress and vulnerability performers face. The issue highlights performer calls for production companies to step up their efforts and fund sex-worker-affirming mental health services, to implement more policies protecting performers, both on set and from agents who do not have their best interests at heart, and for cam sites to more actively crack down on online bullying.

## **Conclusion**

The technological, economic, and social landscape within which porn performers operate today has radically transformed over the past few decades. From a growing number of trans talent entering the industry, to the democratisation of the production landscape, studio porn today pays less while the costs associated with being a porn performer remain high. At the same time, porn performers have transformed themselves into internet entrepreneurs, taking advantage of a variety of online platforms, which has allowed them to self-produce content, manage their careers, and draw on a multitude of revenue streams beyond studio pornography. In order to achieve this, porn performers must not only acquire a range of technical skills but, importantly, embody a model neoliberal subjectivity with an ethos of networking, self-branding, self-reliance, and process opti-

misation. Within this neoliberal subjectivity of internet entrepreneurship, social media has come to play a central role, functioning as an empowering tool for socialising, marketing, self-promotion, and self-expression, which performers leverage to build a following and earn an income. Concurrently, the centrality of social media to their careers has tied performers to a culture in which “likes”, follower count, and engagement are the new currency of fame, dramatically influencing how people relate to one another and how they think about themselves.

In many ways, the experiences of porn performers are by no means unique and mirror the experiences of other cultural workers, from Instagram influencers to YouTube personalities. From the casualisation of the workforce, to the encroachment of neoliberal market logic and ‘branding culture’ on all aspects of life, performers’ experiences are situated within broader socio-economic and technological changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Banet-Weiser 2012; Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova 2013; Duffy 2017; Elias and Gill 2018; Gill and Pratt 2008; Standing 2011; Whitmer 2019). Thus, while being a powerful business tool and helping performers achieve their goals, social media has also led trans performers to experience a heightened sense of self-commodification, competition, and even bullying. In that sense, trans porn performers highlight the promises and pitfalls of social media for cultural workers who seize upon it to further their careers while, at the same time, showcasing the ways in which neoliberal market logic has expanded into personal, physical, and intimate spheres of life.

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