

Femininity as a gig? An interface analysis of childcare and sugar dating platforms

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate how the design and affordances of childcare and sugar dating platforms construct gender in the work roles of these occupations primarily performed by women. And second, to understand whether these role expectations contribute to the reproduction and reinforcement of normative imaginaries of femininity. To this end, we conducted an interface analysis of two work platforms, namely Seeking and Babysits. The analysis consisted of a walk-through method of the login procedure and a visual analysis of the homepages. We conclude that the design and affordances of these platforms confirm normative gender roles, which justifies women's occupational segregation. First, through the communication on occupational role expectations, the transactions with customers and the blurring of the working conditions negotiation. Second, through the expectations surrounding femininity and the portrayal of a desired aesthetic norm. And third,

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through the asymmetric rules adopted by the platform and the facilitation of higher-risk contacts.

Keywords: platform labour, sex work, care work, sugar dating, platformisation; reproductive labour, interface analysis, digital ethnography.

1. Introduction¹: gendered platform work

Digital platforms have pervaded a wide range of industry segments, producing new configurations of work and employment. Platform-dependent work encompasses a continuum of different forms of employment relations, characterised by the two-fold role of digital platforms as shadow employers and market intermediaries (Friedman 2014). Most platforms do not take on an employer role by strategically appointing workers as independent contractors, potentially leading to precarious working conditions and raising concerns about limited social protection (van Doorn 2017). Their role as matchmakers is characterised by the implementation of techno-normative forms of control based on workers' emotional engagement (Gandini 2019). To access job opportunities, gig workers must be able to effectively navigate regimes of visibility and presence, where reputation is embedded in the technological infrastructure in the forms of rankings, feedback and rating systems (Gandini 2019). Therefore, working in the gig economy requires high flexibility and emotional engagement to effectively adapt to abrupt and often opaque changes in platforms' infrastructures and governance (Poell *et al.* 2021, 114). Moreover, to keep their metrics high, workers often engage in forms of emotional work (e.g.

¹ This paper was produced through shared authorship, meaning that both authors contributed equally to this work.

quick and friendly responses to online enquiries) (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Extensive research on platform work has identified its key issues related to precarity, individualization, and the increase of systematic inequalities (Poell *et al.* 2021).

Low-wage gig work mainly involving men has received scholarly and popular attention as exemplary of the precarisation and individualization of the labour market (e.g. ride-hailing and food delivery). However, studies which specifically focus on feminine segments of the platform economy are still limited. Platform-mediated work disposes of a high potential for reinforcement of existing gender inequalities, as job opportunities are often unevenly distributed according to intersectional categories of gender, ethnicity, age, and ability (Fetterolf 2022; Poell *et al.* 2021). Moreover, the software infrastructure and algorithmically regulated affordances of on-demand platforms tend to further endorse the historical exploitation in racially feminised service work and the perception of these workers as a reserve labour force (van Doorn 2017). The metaphor of the ‘digital housewife’ poignantly captures this parallel between unpaid reproductive labour and unpaid online work in digital societies, and its undervaluation and under-recognition as being full-fledged labour (Jarrett 2015).

Indeed, taking the platform infrastructure and interface into account is important to understand the gendered nature of the work experience. Visibility management on the platform further reinforces the flexibilisation of work (Ticona and Mateescu 2018) and an emotional display of the affective qualities central to reproductive labour (Hochschild, 2013) often through stereotypical representations of femininity. This paper focuses on platform-dependent childcare and sugar dating as they constitute privileged points of observation to understand the reproduction of (feminine) gender stereotypes and inequality, in occupations historically carried out by women and systematically undervalued in terms of pay and social recognition (Federici 2012). This study, therefore, seeks to investigate how the design and affordances of childcare and sugar dating platforms contribute to

constructing gender in these occupations. And second, to understand the extent to which these platform narratives contribute to the normalisation and reinforcement of normative imaginaries of femininity, which can justify the devaluation of reproductive labour.

We aim to contribute to the debate by analysing how femininity is constructed in the app's interfaces on the platforms Babysits and Seeking, respectively used by prospective childcarers and sex workers. The focus is on the app's interfaces as they constitute the environmental conditions under which, and with which the worker's identity is constructed and understood. The article is structured as follows. We first describe the key features of platformised sex and care work and highlight the similarities between these sectors of the gig economy in which women are predominantly involved. Secondly, we review the literature on the production of gender in digital spaces and we establish the concept of gendered affordances (Schwartz and Neff 2019) as the key analytical lens to examine the construction of femininity on the platforms' interfaces. The methodology of the study is then briefly outlined. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of the findings in relation to our theoretical expectations.

2. Background

2.1. Cases: childcare and sex work

In this paper, we explore how the infrastructure of on-demand platforms contributes to shaping gender in the work roles of childcarers and sex workers. Below, we briefly discuss how internet technologies have impacted work relationships and practices for both professions. We then elaborate on why it is relevant to study them together.

2.1.1. Sex work and the liminal practice of sugar dating

The ubiquity of internet technologies has had a significant impact on the sexual commerce industry, not just in terms of size, but also in terms of the reconfiguration of work relations and practices. Besides digital sex work, internet technologies have also facilitated the platformised brokering of offline sex work. This platformised sex workforce is markedly heterogeneous in terms of educational and professional backgrounds because the potential for considerable earnings and the limited risk exposure constituted an appeal for many newcomers to enter the industry (Cunningham *et al.* 2018; Sanders *et al.* 2017). This transformation compels us to rethink the boundaries between professional and amateur working conditions, between work and leisure time, and between commercial and authentic exchanges (Paasonen 2010; Van Doorn 2010). Sugar dating constitutes an example of those blurry boundaries. It can be understood as a transactional intimate relationship which typically involves an aged wealthy man and a younger economically disadvantaged woman, defined in the jargon as a *sugar daddy* and *sugar baby* (Recio 2022). The relationship has been defined as a form of ‘instrumental intimacy’ (Nayar 2017, 337) in-between commercial sex and heterosexual dating (Motyl 2013). Platformised sugar dating embodies the ‘bounded authenticity’ (Bernstein 2007) that characterizes digital sex work because the transactional and sexual nature of the arrangements remains hidden in the platform’s narratives. As a result, sugar dating relationships are inherently asymmetrical, as the material compensation for the sugar baby’s company is often vague and informally negotiated between the two parties as the relationship progresses. Nonetheless, sexual involvement is often considered inherent to the arrangements, which can blur the concept of consent. Accordingly, the discursive construction of sugar dating has been interpreted as: “a technology of heterosexual coercion that reproduces an unequal heterosexual practice disregarding women’s desire” (Recio 2022, 58). In contrast to the radical feminist view of sex work as inherently coercive, because it’s transactional

(Farley 2018), the ambiguity of consent in sugar dating lies precisely in the unclear nature of the economic agreement between the two parties, which can make it difficult for the 'sugar baby' to negotiate her terms.

Another fundamental challenge faced by sex workers who rely on digital platforms is the restriction of their ability to promote themselves on the internet. This is due to the implementation of stricter content moderation policies following the passage of the FOSTA-SESTA² bills in the United States in 2018. These laws have had a significant impact on the nature of sex work in digital environments globally. The legislation was intended to reduce the potential for online sex trafficking and as a result, platforms have been legally held accountable for the content posted by their users. Consequently, many platforms have adopted a cautious approach to the moderation of sexual content (Spišák *et al.* 2021). Instead of increasing sex workers' safety, this regulation has increased the precarity of this occupation by limiting their ability to screen clients, promote themselves, and engage with peer communities (Tiidenberg and Van der Nagel 2020; Paasonen *et al.* 2019). Content moderation policies on platforms are often presented in an ambiguous manner through their Terms of Service. Consequently, platform-dependent sex workers are limited in their ability to establish their terms of arrangements with clients due to a lack of clarity and a safe space to do so. This is particularly problematic for workers who engage in 'sugaring' relationships, given the blurred nature of these activities.

2.1.2. *Childcare work*

Childcare is part of the wider range of care work typically performed by women and characterised by low wages, little social protection and low societal esteem (Faulkner *et al.* 2014). The societal idea that women possess a natural gift or in-

² Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act.

instinct to care for children is extended into the professional context and, consequently, 'feminine' skills are not considered as skills to be acquired, but as innate (Vincent and Braun 2013). While elderly care and care for people with disabilities often involve a medical component, childcare is generally perceived to be a matter of 'common sense' and instinct (Vincent and Braun 2013). This is evidenced in part by dissatisfaction among qualified childcarers who feel that the importance of their work is often downplayed (Faulkner *et al.* 2014). Furthermore, childcarers, and babysitters in particular, are often the subject of eroticisation and hetero-sexual masculine fantasies in literature or pornography (e.g. Biswas, 2018). The babysitter is then sexualised via a stereotypical interpretation of femininity (i.e. young, caring, innocent, childlike).

Childcare work has also undergone a reconfiguration of working relationships and practices, influenced by internet technologies. Although care workers are known as the 'original gig workers', in the sense that in the past babysitters or nannies were also employed informally and were often paid per task, the presence of on-demand platforms has nevertheless changed the field of work. First, platforms have increased the importance of self-branding in the competition for employment opportunities (Ticona and Mateescu 2018). Digital platforms offer a large client base in geographically concentrated regions at the click of a mouse, but to effectively recruit those clients, the childcarers' profile needs to be visible (Gruszka and Böhm 2022). In doing so, the platform offers a range of tools to create a profile, which often involves the public sharing of confidential data (e.g. social media profile, photos). Creating, updating and maintaining the profile, as well as having to be constantly available to reply to messages blurs the boundaries between work and leisure and emphasises the importance of the smartphone as a job access tool (Ticona 2022).

Second, the presence of digital platforms has thoroughly shaken up the care market, as professional childcare is often expensive and inflexible (e.g. for parents

who work late) (Hall *et al.* 2022). Digital platforms provide a solution to this demand for affordable care, but at the same time contribute to a deprofessionalization of the work. The ease with which anyone can create a profile on the platform further reinforces the pre-existing idea that childcare is not a full-time job, but rather a task that can be executed by anyone with time on their hands (Schoenbaum 2016). Platforms often advertise the possibility of finding a babysitter quickly and at short notice, which reduces babysitters' chances of building a long-term, consistent working relationship (Hall *et al.* 2022) and forces them to invest time in looking for new clients to obtain their desired income. Additionally, it is important to understand that most platform companies emerged at a time of economic recession (i.e. 2008 financial crisis) and growing inequality. Platform companies seem to reinforce rather than weaken that trend as a crowding-out effect (Schor 2017) occurs whereby highly-skilled workers (e.g. a teacher with time off during school holidays) increasingly perform jobs that were previously carried out by lower-skilled workers (e.g. someone with a college degree in childcare). Platform companies make elementary professions more accessible and also give them a 'trendy' image (Schor 2017). This explains the seemingly paradoxical presence of both workers in very precarious situations and high-earners (with decent, permanent jobs) on babysitting platforms.

2.1.3. Regimes of visibility in the reproductive sphere

In both sectors, a reinforcement of the gendered nature of the work can be observed, taking shape through a delicate navigation of regimes of visibility on the platform. Workers must simultaneously be visible (attracting attention from potential clients) and invisible (not explicitly promoting their services as sex work; not presenting childcare as a professional job) (Gruszka and Böhm 2022). This partly results in a further flexibilisation of work and a boundless professional life in terms of time (working times) and space (workplace).

Additionally, this visibility management also encourages an emotional display of the affective qualities central to reproductive labour. Care and sexual provisions are forms of reproductive labour that are increasingly outsour-ced from the domestic sphere to the global capitalist market (Hochschild 2013). Given the intimate nature of working relationships, both care work and sex work involve emotional labour in the form of deep acting (Hochschild 1983). Furthermore, due to the importance of visibility in navigating competition in the platform economy, workers' emotions are no longer simply managed in the workplace, but become commodified themsel-ves (Illouz 2017). The display of affective qualities then plays a key role in the construction of the worker's digital persona. In doing so, workers' material goals are minimi-sed, and they are encouraged to exude authenticity by presenting their work as inherently satisfying (Fetterolf 2022). This often leads to heteronormative representations of femininity, such as the woman as a naturally caring and subservient mother figure or as a sexually promiscuous object of lust (Boryszewsk 2018). These imaginaries combined with the denial of the emotional value of this work (Hochschild 2003) may in turn justify the social and professional devaluation of gendered reproductive labour.

A comprehensive study that detects the significant similarities between platformed childcare and sex work contributes to the debate on gender and digital technologies by exploring the role of platforms in further enhancing the gendered nature of these professions. On the one hand, the affective qualities of reproductive labour (Hochschild, 1983) are no longer limited to emotional management but have become a key asset for visibility (Illouz, 2007) on the platform. On the other hand, the demand for 'feminine skills' such as flexibility and constant adaptability, historically required in these sectors (Standing, 1989), has become embedded in the platforms' affordances.

2.2. The (re)production of gender in digital spaces

Being privileged sites for self-expression and social interactions, digital environments have come to re-mediate gender and sexualities in several ways (Burgess *et al.* 2016). Previous research has demonstrated the gendered nature of digital technologies, referring to the way in which social assumptions on gender and sexuality have become embedded into social media environments. By reproducing dominant conventions on gender, online spaces may normalise and hence reinforce gender inequality in society (Marwick 2014; Light 2011; Noble 2018). The process of identity making and performance in digital environments involves not only users' interactions but is also shaped by the socio-technical and governmental infrastructures of digital platforms (DeNardis and Hackl 2016). Social media have been identified as the crucial, yet not exclusive, sites of this process. Research on the account registration of mobile dating apps, for instance, has demonstrated that the apps' self-presentation tools effectively constraints users' self-expression by limiting the available gender categories to male and female (MacLeod and McArthur 2019). Studies of digital porn consumption, on the other hand, have investigated how the algorithmic profiling of users determines content recommendation informed by questionable conceptions of gender and sexual orientation. This process of sexual datafication (Saunders 2020) may in turn contribute to reinforce heteronormative perspectives on sexuality (Rama *et al.* 2022).

More attention, however, could be paid to the representation of gender in the gig economy and how it affects workers' experiences by creating expectations for their roles. Even though more than half of the platform workers are women (Ticona *et al.* 2018; Flanagan 2019), the focus has mainly been on fields largely dominated by men, leading to a gender bias in the research (Ticona and Mateescu 2018). Opportunities in the gig economy are stratified by gender, with women being primarily employed in service sectors that provide various forms of intimacy-on-demand, from care to erotic services. These two gendered sectors of the gig economy

have been studied separately, yet there are notable similarities that allow for a comparison.

In this study, we build on the concept of gendered affordances, as defined by Schwartz and Neff (2019), to analyse the account registration process on the platforms Babysits and Seeking. The concept of affordances refers to how the technical properties of an object enable users to perform specific actions (Scolere *et al.* 2018, 2). Gendered affordances in particular, shape user behaviour based on social and cultural understandings of gender as understood by the platform's designers and users (Schwartz and Neff 2019). This concept was developed to demonstrate how digital interfaces provide opportunities for specific categories of users based on their gender, and how these opportunities may reinforce gendered and sexualized power imbalances (Schwartz and Neff 2019; Bainotti and Semenzin 2020). In this context, the framework of gendered affordances is employed to investigate the representation of femininity in the platforms' interface and its potential impact on the workers' experience.

3. Methods

The platforms Seeking and Babysits were selected as case studies using a purposive sampling approach, a non-random method through which the researcher chooses cases based on specific criteria that are relevant to the research question or objectives (Cardano 2020). Given our theoretical expectations on the parallels between platformised care and sex work, we chose these two platforms to investigate the representation of femininity. The first criterion used for this case selection concerns the size and reputation of the platform. Given that only two cases were selected, it was important to choose platforms that have been operating for some time and have built a sufficiently large user base (see table 1). Seeking is

the most popular sugar dating platform worldwide (Tapper 2019) and Babysits appears in the ranking of most popular free parenting apps on Similarweb (2023). The second criterion is the 'activity-range' of the platform. Since the aim of this paper is to assess the construction of femininity in two specific occupations, it was necessary to choose platforms that focus exclusively on childcare or sugar dating and exclude platforms that offer a range of activities (e.g. including other forms of care or sex work).

We analysed the interfaces of Babysits and Seeking, using the walk-through method (Light *et al.* 2018). This approach allows for a direct examination of the app's interface, technology, and cultural references to understand how an app guides its users and shapes their experiences. The core of this method is to observe and document the different elements of an app in a step-by-step manner, with the purpose of reviewing the app's overall design, operation, and governance. For the interface analysis, we documented every screen visible to the user (respectively a babysitter and sugar baby) in the process of profile creation. The hints provided by the apps constitute the environmental conditions under which, and with which, the gig workers' subjectivity is constructed and understood. To conduct the fieldwork, it was necessary to create fake profiles as a babysitter and sugar baby, respectively, using an approach similar to covert ethnography (O'Reilly 2018). We are aware of the ethical concerns that arise from this practice (Bulmer 2001) yet, to prevent causing any harm to users, we made the fake profiles invisible once the registration process was completed.

In addition, we conducted a visual analysis (Rose 2016) of the homepages of the two platforms. The notion of 'gender displays' (Goffman 1979) was employed to frame the representation of femininity in the interfaces. According to Goffman, gender roles are not situated entities but embodied practices and representations; femininity and masculinity are constructed through interactive ritualism in daily interactions. The author emphasises the objectification and commodification of

the female body conveyed by the image composition of commercial advertisements. The analysis was conducted between August and September 2022. Moving from the assumption that platforms are not fixed entities but rather subject to frequent technological and governmental changes, we regularly checked the two apps to ensure that our observations were still supported empirically. Nonetheless, we are aware that the analysis is situated in time and our findings can be challenged by future changes in the design and governance of the platforms. Given that the apps are location-based, we created the profiles using our respective cities of residence, namely Brussels and Milan. Using Babysits, this methodology enabled us to observe variations in the platform's guidelines for wage selection across different contexts.

	<i>Babysits</i>	<i>Seeking</i>
<i>Self-declared mission</i>	“Babysits is there to improve the lives of families in need of childcare, to give parents peace of mind and help them find a perfect fit for their family. Our mission is to empower communities around childcare”	“Seeking.com is the leading elite dating site where over 40+ million members find real and honest relationships that fit their lifestyle”
<i>User categories</i>	Parent; Babysitter; Nanny; Childminder	<i>Attractive; Successful</i>
<i>Founder(s)</i>	Peter van Soldt	Brandon Wade . Current owner: Ruben Buell (from June 2022)
<i>Founded</i>	2008	2006
<i>Available in no. of countries</i>	130 countries	+82 countries
<i>Members</i>	+40 million (according to Babysits.com)	+4.000.000 (according to Seeking.com)

Table 1 - Overview platforms³

³ This table contains self-reported data from the platform (e.g. user counts). Due to a lack of figures from more objective sources, it is difficult to estimate how reliable this information is. Please interpret this table with caution.

	<i>Babysits</i>	<i>Seeking</i>
Free standard membership	<i>Parent</i> Free login procedure Posting a job listing Browsing babysitters' profiles	<i>Successful member</i> Free login procedure Searching for <i>Attractive</i> members Saving 'favourite' profiles Viewing visitors and favourites
	<i>Babysitter</i> Free login procedure Applying to job listing Receiving job alerts	<i>Attractive member</i> Free login procedure Searching for <i>Attractive</i> members Saving 'favourite' profiles Viewing visitors and favourites Unlimited messaging
Premium membership	<i>Parent</i> 19.99 \$/30 days; 39.99\$/ 90 days ; 99.99\$/year Direct messaging Access to reviews and references Access to babysitter's ID verification and background checks	<i>Successful member</i> 99\$/ 30 days or 90\$/30 days per 3 months Unlimited membership Profile picture not required Priority over Standard members in profile/photo approval process Ability to hide profile from searches Ability to hide online status Ability to hide last login country Saving custom search filters Displaying multiple profile locations Receiving confirmation for read messages
	<i>Babysitter</i> 14.99\$/30 days; 29.99\$ / 90 days; 74.99\$/ year Access to unlimited job listing Read reviews and references Access to parent's ID verification and background checks	<i>Attractive member</i> Not applicable
Diamond membership	Not applicable	<i>Successful member</i> 249,99\$/ 30 days All benefits of Premium membership Profile Boosts Being featured as a Diamond Member to all <i>Attractive</i> users Priority over Standard & Premium Members in profile/photo approval process
		<i>Sugar Baby</i> Not applicable

Table 2 -Platforms' membership systems and conditions

4. Findings

The platform's infrastructure and login procedure serve to create clear expectations and rules towards users, as it is the only form of communication that precedes the gig. At the end of the login process, workers will have an active profile with which they can recruit clients. This implies that all guidelines regarding work execution should be given throughout the registration process. Often, users will be asked to agree to a set of terms and conditions and role expectations will be made clear to them via the questions asked and through the visual design of the website. Indeed, through the login procedure, the platform communicates the rules, norms, values and expectations that apply within the confined space of the virtual workplace. Complementarily, the aesthetic design of the platform infrastructure provides visual cues that also communicate role expectations to users. Below, we present the findings of the interface analysis in two parts. In doing so, we seek to understand the construction of gender through the roles (5.1.) and the rules established by the platform (5.2).

4.1. Establishing and blurring roles

In the context of this paper, we look at two roles that the platforms' infrastructures discursively shape: the work role and the gender role. Although both roles occur intertwined on the platform, we discuss them separately for the sake of analytical clarity.

4.1.1. The work role

The work role refers to how the platform shapes the transactional relationship between the worker and her clients (Ticona and Mateescu 2018). As indicated earlier, the work roles of babysitters and sex workers are historically characterised

by a high degree of informality, often leading to poor working conditions. For instance, wages are negotiated at the interpersonal level, which makes the workers' earnings fluctuate according to each arrangement. Furthermore, these intimate forms of labour are often not (legally) recognised as 'work' and consequently enjoy little social protection (Schoenbaum 2016). It is therefore important to look at how the work role is reshaped by the platform that acts as a mediator.

For babysitters, the monetised relationship with families (babysitting in exchange for money) is clearly embedded in the platform infrastructure. Babysitters can specify how much they want to earn per hour and are strongly encouraged by the platform to be paid through the platform infrastructure (as opposed to cash). The requested wage has a fixed, visible place in the corner of each profile. Moreover, pay also seems to be linked to skills and experience, indicating a degree of professionalisation of the job. The focus of the login procedure and questions asked refer to the skills of the babysitter, especially: education and training, amount of experience and the type of activities they can do with the children (e.g. reading, drawing, music). However, the platform also deploys that monetary relationship to govern and manage platform workers by encouraging them to use their profiles as self-optimisation tools (Gruszka and Böhm 2022). For example, when asking about hourly wages, the platform indicates that the average hourly wage in Brussels is € 7.85 and encourages asking for a lower rate until the babysitter has built up reviews and a network on the platform. The platform thereby encourages workers to be paid lower than the minimum wage for domestic workers⁴, allowing

⁴ The legal framework in Belgium is not clear on when someone is considered a 'domestic worker' and thus entitled to the minimum wage (€ 1954,99/month) as opposed to 'a babysitter', not covered by collective agreements (Fairwork Belgium, 2022; ACV, 2022). This frames within a long history of informal labour relations and underpaid care work. The platform thus provides a minimum pay rate (which cannot always be enforced informally), but that rate falls below the legal minimum wage for domestic workers. The same is true for Italy. In Milan, the platform suggests asking for the average of € 7.77 per hour, while the minimum wage for workers in Italy from 2021 is € 9.50 per hour. (D.Lgs. No. 81/2015 - Consolidated Law on the protection of health and safety in the workplace; D.L. No. 34/2019 converted into law No. 58/2019)

them to advertise the availability of affordable babysitters. Furthermore, directly linking pay to visibility on the platform and client reviews is a way to steer the power relationship towards more platform dependency. You can be rewarded by the platform with visibility and that visibility results in more clients and higher pay. The platform provides clear instructions on how to achieve that visibility in the form of a 20-action checklist that reads like a ‘career plan’ (see table 3). Each step taken is associated with a corresponding badge, which would improve one’s search ranking. The actions focus on increasing credibility and authenticity by, for example, linking one’s platform account to other social media profiles. This prompts users to curate their profiles (e.g. not disclosing them publicly, removing content that could be damaging to their reputation etc.), which in turn adds extra (unpaid).

Furthermore, babysitters are encouraged to share as much information about themselves as possible in the form of profile photos, videos and detailed biographical descriptions. These forms of visibility management (Ticona and Mateescu 2018) allow the platform to collect plenty of data which benefits their revenue model. However, using that data to algorithmically manage workers and assign visibility carries the risk of reinforcing existing power relations and stereotypes (Gruszka and Böhm 2022). While the monetised relationship between babysitters and parents is thus made clear on the platform, there is a lot of ambiguity regarding what is to be given in return. For example, at the beginning of the login process, the platform asks users to indicate which profession they exercise from three options: babysitter, nanny or childminder. However, the terms and conditions of - and differences between those three professions are not explained. Furthermore, the platform stretches the job content. Besides babysitting, you are also asked to indicate whether you are comfortable with the following tasks: cooking, taking care of pets, household chores and helping with homework (see fig. 1). While platform workers have the choice of whether to indicate these tasks, it does blur the line

of what parents can ask of a babysitter and what additional cost should be charged in return. This is particularly relevant as domestic workers often become victims of exploitation due to the boundarylessness of their tasks and wage conditions that must often be enforced informally and individually (ILO, 2021).

That monetised relationship is much more ambiguous on Seeking. For a start, Seeking presents itself as a dating website. Yet the role descriptions make it very clear that there is a ‘providing party’ (referred to by the platform as ‘*successful*’) and a ‘receiving party’ (referred to by the platform as ‘*attractive*’). The pictures consistently indicate women as an example of *attractive* and men as an example of *successful*. Users who register as *successful* are asked for their net monthly income. Users who register as *attractive* are particularly asked questions about their bodies: length, body type, and ethnicity.

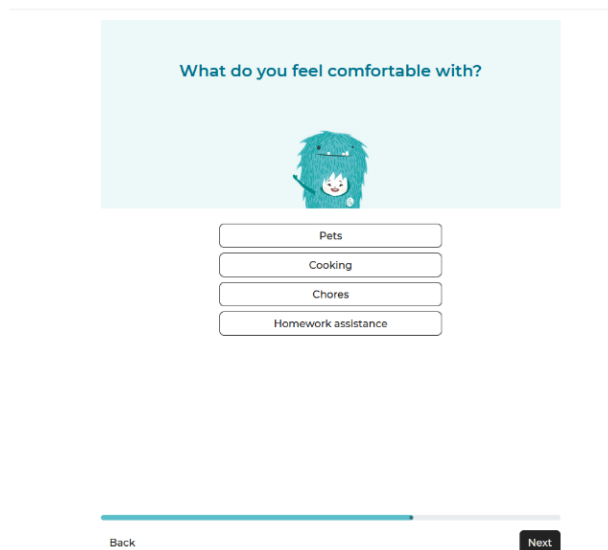


Fig. 1 -Predefined tags to select the work arrangement on Babysits

The existing literature on the platform (Recio 2021; 2022), and the fieldwork we previously conducted show that, until January 2021, the two user categories were defined as ‘sugar daddy’ and ‘sugar baby’⁵. This suggests that the platform is actively trying to rebrand itself to distance its services from the stigma associated with sex work. The consequence of this ‘dating narrative’ is therefore that neither work nor wage is discussed by the platform, even though it implicitly concerns labour as the presence of women on the platform creates value (Sallaz 2013). In the sugar dating discourse, femininity is regarded as the key asset to be commodified (Recio 2022). That value extraction becomes apparent from the platform’s notification that the gender ratio plays in men’s favour:

Millions of Possibilities. The ratio of attractive members to successful members is 4 to 1. The odds are in your favour (fieldnotes, seeking).

It is a commonly reported complaint of men on dating apps that there are too few female profiles, preventing them from finding a date due to high competition amongst each other. The high presence of women framed by the platform within a dating narrative is thus clearly intended as a lure strategy for male customers who subsequently will be motivated to spend more money and share data on the platform. This can be inferred partly from the fact that *attractive* members can use the platform for free, whereas *successful* members need a paid premium account to interact with other users. *Successful* members, on the other hand, are offered affordances that are not available to *attractive* members, especially in relation to privacy, such as not disclosing a profile picture or hiding geographical locations, as previously shown in Table 2. Using the presence of large groups of (beautiful) women as ‘bait’, is not peculiar to the platform economy, but concerns

⁵ The previous version of the interfaces can be accessed via the Web Archive online tool: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201219195206/https://www.seeking.com/> (last accessed on the 11th of January 2023).

a well-known market strategy often used in nightclubs and the broader service economy (Mears 2015). In addition, by highlighting that the imbalance in supply and demand favours the sugar daddy, Seeking further amplifies the power imbalance between the two parties by portraying the sugar baby as interchangeable with many other candidates. Although the platform never mentions the existence of a 'wage', there is a gift-giving system built into the interface. *Attractive* users can create a wish list that *successful* users can then access and select and buy items from. Using gift-giving as a built-in tool highlights a form of reciprocity but with the aura of an authentic and affective gesture, as opposed to an economic relationship with an employer. Moreover, it also contributes to a further distancing from commercial sex, thereby creating a more disguised form of compensated intimacy (Clement 2006). Additionally, the platform frequently reminds users that paid dates are against its Terms of Service, preventing users from discussing financial arrangements within the platform, and forcing them to share personal contact information to continue interactions elsewhere.

Alike Babysits, Seeking's registration process also suggests that users select a set of activities they intend to perform during a gig, based on predefined tags. Notably, both platforms present the activities in an ambiguous manner. As the figure above shows, some tags in Seeking refer to the preferred type of relationship, others to the ideal activities for a date, and still others to the desired characteristics of a potential partner. Sex is never mentioned in the range of suggested activities. It is only mentioned as a subject of negation (i.e. 'platonic relationship'). On the other hand, the 'luxury lifestyle', 'investor' and 'mentor' tags also subtly suggest that there is some kind of economic transaction behind the arrangements. This stage of the registration process is proposed to both attractive and successful members but only successful users have the option of using the tags as a filter to browse attractive profiles. These striking differences in the options for the two user categories embedded in Seeking's design led us to interpret it as an

instance of gendered af-fordances (Schwartz and Neff 2019). Based on these observations, we can argue that digital platforms rather reinforce than challenge existing gender inequalities by blurring the transactional relationships and encouraging workers to use their profiles as a self-optimization tools.

The screenshot shows the 'Seeking' app interface. At the top, there's a progress bar with five steps, the fifth of which is active. Below the title 'Seeking', the question 'What are you seeking?' is followed by the instruction: 'Choose at least one tag that will help define what you are seeking in a relationship. 7 max. (*Required)'. A grid of 30 tags is displayed, each with a plus sign. The tags are: True Love, Luxury lifestyle, Active lifestyle, Flexible schedule, Emotional connection, All ethnicities, Attentive, Discretion, Fine dining, Friends, Investor, Life of leisure, Long-term, Marriage minded, Mentorship, Monogamous, No strings attached, Non-monogamous, Open relationship, Passport ready, Platonic, Romance, Seeking trans-friendly, Seeking transgender, Shows & entertainment, Travel to you, Travel with you, and Vacations. Below the tags is a text input field with the prompt 'Describe what you're seeking (Optional)' and the instruction 'Explain the sort of relationships / arrangements you're interested in.' A character count '0/50 characters minimum.' is shown. At the bottom, a red button says 'Tag Required' and a link says 'Or skip for now...'.

Fig. 2 -Predefined tags to express the desired arrangement on Seeking

You have 20 badges to earn! Earn badges to improve your search ranking and increase the amount of people contacting you. The aim of the badges system is to foster a community of motivated members by recommending the highest quality and most verified profiles.

The badges that are set out are the following:

- *Profile video*
- *First review/reference*
- *Verified account*
- *Criminal record*
- *Get paid safely*
- *First booking*
- *First rebooking*
- *First Review*
- *Review on Facebook*
- *Review on Google*
- *Shared on Facebook*
- *Shared on Twitter*
- *Following on Facebook*
- *Following on Instagram*
- *Following on TikTok*
- *LinkedIn professional*
- *Profile picture*
- *Extended profile description*
- *Availability updated*
- *Apple Connected*
- *Facebook connected*
- *Google connected*
- *LinkedIn Connected*
- *Email verified*
- *Phone number verified*
- *Recent login*
- *Distributed my poster*

Table 3 - Badges to earn on Babysits

4.1.2. *The gender role*

The gender role refers to how platforms incorporate social assumptions about gender and (female) sexuality into their digital infrastructure. Given that both professions are mainly practised by women and are linked to a clearly established idea of what femininity constitutes, it can be assumed that the platform communicates expectations about gender. In this paragraph, we examine how these expectations are shaped through the login procedure and through the aesthetic design of the platforms' homepages (the focus of our visual analysis).

Both platforms take a rather stereotypical, binary approach to gender. For instance, both Seeking and Babysits ask about the gender of the worker via binary response options: only the options 'male' and 'female'. It's also noteworthy that the openness to ethnic and gender diversity implies the selection of specific tags, suggesting that they are considered exceptional preferences (see fig. 2). Moreover, it is consistently women who are portrayed as babysitters and the *attractive* party on Seeking. The platform thereby further normalises and legitimises unequal gender relationships based on caregiving and material dependency. Furthermore, the portrayals are always of young women. Linking a woman's 'value' to youthfulness is a well-known feature of our social life, but this is particularly striking with babysitters since the maternal role and desirable characteristics involved (responsible, capable) are often societally associated with older women (Sjöberg and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist 2018). The fact that young women are nevertheless the signboard of both platforms indicates the presence of a particular aesthetic norm as found in professions such as barmaids, shop girls and flight attendants (Mears 2014).

A visual analysis of the landing pages of Babysits and Seeking sheds light on the expected gender roles. Fig. 3 displays a woman sitting on the ground playing with two girls inside a living room. The website's design has a cool colour palette. The woman is modestly dressed, in shades of grey and blue and rather concealing clothing. Figure 4, on the other hand, shows Seeking's landing page, which consists of

a warm colour palette with red as the dominant colour. In Christian theology and symbolism, the colour blue often represents virginity, divinity and purity (i.e. Mary is always dressed in blue) and its opposite colour is red, representing lust, sin and the devil (Maher, 2018). Seeking's logo also includes a red triangle, possibly referring to the devil's tail. This woman has long, blonde, curly hair and is elegantly and scantily dressed. The overall look is luxurious and elitist. She is climbing a staircase of a posh entrance hall, resembling the lobby of a luxury hotel. None of the women looks straight into the lens: one woman is looking at the children playing, the other one seems to be looking at the crotch of the Jesus-like statue hanging near the stairs. She is holding the hand of an invisible man. Because of the perspective from which the picture was drawn, it appears to be the spectator's hand. This male hand also appears in the platform's introductory video: there, the hand seems to be providing something (see Figure 5). The woman is depicted from the back, suggesting the anonymity provided by the platform. From an ethological perspective, the pose also implies vulnerability, as prey in the animal kingdom is typically hunted from behind (Goffman, 1979). Additionally, the woman's delighted expression as she looks around the venue suggests anticipation for the acquisition of a luxurious lifestyle, which is a central aspect of Seeking's idealised construction of sugar dating. This is also clearly communicated through the revealing 'start dating up' button, which can be interpreted differently from both perspectives (sugar baby and daddy). Women date up in an upward class movement: more luxury, more status. Men date up in beauty, sexuality and possibly age (younger women). That double ascension subtly clarifies the transactional relationship and accordingly presents this form of 'dating' as an equitable win-win situation.



Fig. 3 -Landing page of Babysits

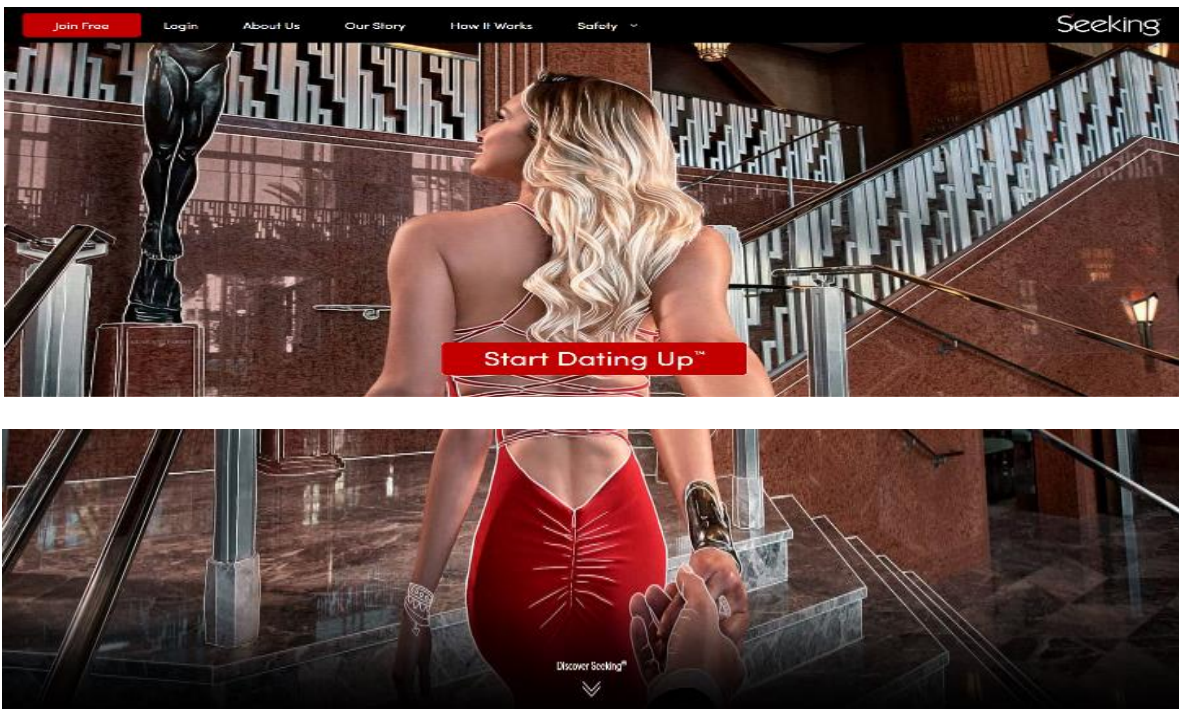


Fig. 4 -Landing page of Seeking



Fig. 5 -The providing male hand on Seeking from the introduction video

Besides the platform's interface and aesthetic design, gender expectations are also communicated through the language used by the platform. On Babysits, for example, the platform asks users to choose three character traits from a list of twelve options (Table 4). Eight out of the twelve traits can be classified as 'feminine' adjectives, according to previous research on gendered language use (Berdie 1959; Gaucher *et al.* 2011; Hoyle *et al.* 2019). In the work context, certain trait are attributed more to women and others more to men (Ellemers 2018). Women are generally perceived as more communicative and interpersonally oriented than men. Men are often attributed traits such as leadership and competitiveness. This has already been evidenced in studies on letters of recommendation (Madera *et al.* 2009), but also on job advertisements (Gaucher *et al.* 2011). The perpetuation of such stereotypes (e.g. housewives as warm, caring, but also incompetent women) justifies women's reproductive roles, but also their exclusion as economic providers and full-fledged members of the labour market (Cuddy *et al.* 2004). We also find this kind of gendered language on Seeking.

The platform recommends never using your real name on the profile for security reasons and makes a number of suggestions for a fictitious username (Table 4). These suggestions also include ‘feminine’ adjectives such as: ‘hysterical’ and ‘stylish’ (Berdie 1959; Gaucher *et al.* 2011). The focus primarily lies on bodies and appearance through words such as: ‘gorgeous’ and ‘elegant’. These elements support our hypothesis that the discursive making of these jobs draws on a stereotypical performance of femininity (Connel 1987).

<i>Babysits traits</i>	<i>Seeking usernames</i>
Responsible (x)	<i>HonestMusician</i>
Funny	<i>HotChick</i>
Sporty	<i>NiceTemptress</i>
Creative	<i>GorgeousEnthusiast (x)</i>
Friendly (x)	<i>ElegantBeauty (x)</i>
Talkative	<i>StylishMarathoner</i>
Calm (x)	<i>HystericalActress (x)</i>
Enthusiastic (x)	<i>PhotogenicGambler</i>
Caring (x)	<i>BrilliantMiss</i>
Patient	<i>ChicBae</i>
Imaginative (x)	<i>AstuteVenus</i>
Empathetic (x)	<i>StylishBelle</i>
	<i>NiceGymGirl</i>
	<i>FunLover</i>
	<i>HonestAphrodite</i>

x = Feminine adjectives according to Berdie 1959; Gaucher *et al.* 2011; Hoyle *et al.* 2019.

Table 4 -Suggested character traits and usernames by platform

4.2. Establishing and enforcing rules: mind the gap between reality and the platform

A large part of the login procedure on the platform also focuses on establishing rules. Those rules are important to consider because they reveal the desired behaviour, the affordances and the restrictions that are imposed by the platform (Schwartz and Neff 2019).

Gig work platforms often advertise their virtual environment as characterised by trust (Fetterolf 2022). On Babysits, users are welcomed into a “community of trust”, and on Seeking the platform’s confidentiality is often emphasised by stating that it is a “secure and private community”. Both platforms create that atmosphere of trust by highlighting a personal, biographical foundational narrative. For example, Babysits was founded by a man who saw his family and friends struggle to find a reliable babysitter and Seeking is narrated as the result of the founder’s relationship problems. This personal emphasis on a sense of community and trust is not coincidental, as the contacts facilitated by the platform are intended to turn into non-virtual, face-to-face contact between the two parties. Indeed, a platform proposes to mediate trust between strangers (Ticona and Mateescu 2018).

Clearly, there are certain risks involved in that contact between strangers. Babysits therefore operates at a minimum age of 15 years old and holds a rule that any underaged babysitter must have permission from her or his parents to become a member. Seeking also applies a minimum age requirement. On Babysits, the safety rules primarily focus on the duties of the babysitter to ensure parental trust rather than the other way around. The ‘babysitter guidelines’ are more comprehensive than the ‘parent guidelines’ and focus heavily on child protection and obedience towards parents. For example: follow the parents’ instructions, dress appropriately for the babysitting job (e.g. no clothing featuring cuss words or inappropriate images) and do not open the door to strangers. Seeking, on the other hand, advises users to keep their full names private and not to mix online dating with social media. Remarkable advice considering that the platform itself asks for

this kind of data during the registration process and actively encourages users to link social media accounts to their platform accounts. These optional background checks via social media combined with trust-based branding and optional platform-mediated payment mechanisms allow platforms to exercise surveillance over their workers while simultaneously protecting themselves (Fetterolf 2022). The optional security measures indicate that the ultimate responsibility and risks lie with the users. Despite the emphasis on trust and community, the platform is thus to be used at one's own risk, or as it is clearly stated on Babysits:

It is ultimately up to our members to run background checks on those with whom they choose to work. We can address problems that arise with member interactions occurring on our platform. However, we cannot address issues that arise outside of our platform (fieldnotes, Babysits).

Besides the rules on safe dating and cautious management of identity, Seeking also devotes an entire webpage to the dangers of human trafficking and prostitution which signals that it is a critical concern of the platform. That concern also frames within the previously mentioned FOSTA-SESTA law that holds platforms accountable for prostitution ads posted by third parties. While sex workers are at risk of abuse even without the mediation of an online platform, and the online context also offers advantages such as the ability to video call with a potential client first, the ambiguous communication about sex work on Seeking is not conducive to a safe working environment. Allowing large numbers of women to portray themselves anonymously and virtually in a context of lust and sexuality, while building up but also blurring the expectations that *successful* members may have of those *attractive* members (section 5.1) creates a difficult-to-manage potential for abuse.

5. Discussion and conclusive remarks

5.1. Implications of our findings

Internet technologies play an increasing role in the development of our social structures and relationships. Although they are often presented by the platforms as neutral, the literature teaches us that cultural ideas and power relations surrounding gender are embedded in the technological infrastructure of platforms and, in turn, are also shaping our social world (Comunello *et al.* 2020; Schwartz and Neff 2019). In this paper, we studied the interfaces of two on-demand child-care and sugar dating platforms, namely Babysits and Seeking. In doing so, we asked how the platform's design and affordances construct gender in the work roles of these occupations mainly performed by women; and whether these role expectations contribute to the reproduction and reinforcement of normative imaginaries of femininity.

The gendered nature of the affordances on Seeking becomes evident through its portrayal of sugar dating as an exclusively heterosexual affair and through the different actions afforded to its two user categories (sugar daddies and sugar babies). The requirement for sugar daddies to provide financial details and for sugar babies to provide details on physical features suggests a transactional relationship. However, the platform's reminders that paid dates are not allowed make the negotiation of these agreements opaque. In contrast, Babysits presents a more subtle dynamic, as the two user categories are not explicitly gendered. However, the platform's imagery and suggestions for profile creation target a young female audience. Both platforms limit workers' agency by obscuring the transactional nature of the arrangements. On Seeking, this concerns the denial of the occurrence of paid dates, while on Babysits it is achieved through suggestions for charging lower rates and an emphasis on intrinsic motivations to hide the workers' material needs.

Our findings hence illustrate how the platform infrastructure of both platforms reproduces and confirms normative gender roles, economic - and power relations and relational patterns through the affordances and limitations of the application. This becomes evident first, through the occupational role expectations that the platform communicates about transactions with customers and the blurring of the negotiation of working conditions. Second, through the explicit expectations surrounding femininity and the portrayal of a desired aesthetic norm. And third, through the asymmetric rules adopted by the platform and the facilitation of higher-risk contacts.

Both babysitting and sex work are forms of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). A transaction of intimacy takes place that is built on the personal relationship a babysitter or sugar baby establishes with her client (Schoenbaum 2016). The platform's (gendered) affordances significantly influence how users shape those relationships (Schwartz and Neff 2019). In that respect, we observed in both cases a platform-created ambiguity as to what the two categories of users can expect from one another. That ambiguity makes it difficult for babysitters and sex workers to negotiate their terms of employment (e.g. job content, pay).

For babysitters, this translates into a devaluation of work through visibility management. Visibility is both the carrot and the stick with which the platform encourages workers to promote themselves by reducing their requested pay, sharing data and generating unpaid platform activity in the form of clicks and reviews. Furthermore, Babysits also encourages users to be 'flexible' by being available often, responding quickly and being willing to take on different types of tasks. This flexibility, which incidentally is only attributed to one party (the babysitter), results in a need to be available all the time that is contrastingly combined with an aesthetic norm of babysitters as young girls with little professional experience. The requirement to link other social media accounts to their platform accounts ensures that social media activities automatically become work-related as well,

further blurring the boundaries of the workplace and further permeating labour relations into all spheres of life.

In the case of sex workers, this translates into a 'dating narrative' of feigned authenticity where the monetary relationship with clients remains hidden. Instead, the platform resolutely opts for vague descriptions of the arrangement with rhetorical techniques that hint at a form of compensated intimacy using certain images (see fig. 5, for example) or keywords (see table 4). Unspecified terms leave room for a wide range of interpretations of the expected form of intimacy and the payments in return, which directly constrain the agency and consent of sex workers. Furthermore, the platform regulations reveal a clear risk of misunderstandings and violence, as highlighted by Schwartz and Neff (2019, 14): "Platform affordances allow relationships to incubate in low-risk anonymous settings before progressing toward higher risk in offline contexts for negotiation".

The correspondence between occupational role expectations, the gender role and asymmetric rules hereby become clear. Flexible and low-paid reproductive work is justified through a presentation of women in caring, submissive and sexualized constellations. This happens within a regulatory framework that places ultimate responsibility on the worker. In other words, the blurring of economic exchange relations, the blurring of the boundary between work and leisure, and the feigned authenticity ultimately justify the commodification and commercialisation of care, intimacy and emotional labour, which leverages worker exploitation. In sum, the platforms contribute to a reproduction of gender inequality and reinforcement of normative imaginaries of femininity through three pathways. First, through the gendered division of reproductive labour (Duffy 2005), by constantly presenting women as the babysitter and *attractive* parties. Second, through the feminisation of work (Standing 1989), by facilitating the precarisation of labour via low economic compensation, little social protection and precarious employment relationships. And third, through a further invisibilisation of work (Gruszka and

Böhm 2022), by building the identity of the worker on stereotypical images of women as dependent, naturally caring and to be gazed at.

5.2. Limitations and directions for future research

A first key limitation of our study is the lack of an intersectional approach that relates the construction of femininity in the gig economy to social class and migration background (Duffy 2005; Kendall 1998). Care and sex work have traditionally been linked to class, racial, and gender inequalities. Both sectors were historically dominated by working-class immigrant women, often including undocumented migrant women as well (Colen 1995). While we were not blind to class or racial signifiers in our analysis (e.g. Seeking's date-up button), this was not central to our findings. It is difficult to reveal the complex intersection between gender and class and gender and race based on an interface analysis alone. Nonetheless, we should consider that what we refer to in our paper as 'constructed femininity' might concern an ethnocentric, middle-class version of that aesthetic and normative societal standard that women are held to (Collins 2004). For example, ethnically diverse women share different perspectives on femininity, while also being judged by different standards (Cole and Zucker 2007). Black women are still more often depicted as sexually promiscuous or as bad mothers (Hancock 2004; Cole and Zucker 2007). The construction of femininity may also have different implications in the two professions. Whereas race in sex work might mainly lead to fetishization and exoticisation (e.g. race-related porn categories), in babysitting it might mainly lead to underpayment and different job expectations (e.g. 'white nannies watch children while Latinas also clean': Romero 2002). Although our study design did not allow us to make substantiated claims on this issue, we do recognise that this intersection is central to both professions and needs further exploration.

A second limitation concerns the single-directional nature of our study design. Indeed, we studied how the platform infrastructure contributes to the construction

of gender in care and sex work, but in doing so did not examine how workers subsequently interact with those expectations communicated by the platform. As a result, it might seem that we are supporting a techno-deterministic view of digital platforms, attributing little agency to workers. However, we recognise - and refer to the strategies and coping mechanisms that care and sex workers use to negotiate with the platform's gender expectations in our theoretical framework. Unfortunately, the scope of this study and our data (interface analysis) were not large enough to address this. For future research, it would therefore be interesting to expand on the exploration of profile analysis (how do workers themselves perform gender) and work experiences (how do they pursue that performance in non-virtual life).

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