

WAVE TO PROVE YOU'RE REAL

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You are too pretty to undress here i will pay if you don't do it.
(nickname hidden), chaturbate.com

It can be argued that emotions were never more commodified than in the times we live in. Researchers are being paid to predict the emotional reaction to advertisements in different groups, psychologists are used to increase corporate productivity, and some people are employed as emotional performers to varying extents. Emotional labour connects different activities such as education, communication, consoling, or entertaining, to those more closely connected to gender such as nurturing, domestic labour, or sex work. Historically, the discourse around this type of labour was tied to the Anglo-American feminist tradition focused around reproductive rights or domestic work.¹ Later it was expanded by the discourse of immaterial labour from post-operaismo, a movement emerging from Italian workerism.²

Washing machines, according to some, enabled women to participate in labour outside of the domestic sphere.³ Online learning tools decreased the human interaction involved in teaching and made it possible to learn through interactive technologies. In these examples, the shifting role of technology has been associated with a reduction in the time and engagement demanded by this kind of labour, largely through the production of new

tools and systems. However, technology can also change existing forms of labour in more complicated ways—as in the following example.

I am drawn to the connection between various kinds of sex work and affective labour in particular, but also intrigued by their difference: the physical aspect of labour may decrease for those privileged enough to have access to new technologies without limits, yet the emotional aspect intensifies. The Internet created space for camming services—websites offering private or public shows in exchange for users “tipping” tokens, or currencies defined by the platforms. These services are reductively described as virtual sex, but in reality, the environment embeds a much more complicated variety of transactions. Camming models are often stereotypically perceived as lonely women in their bedrooms or studios, performing sexual activities completely on demand of the viewers. In reality, the gendered aspect is very often controlled by the website, presenting a kind of biopolitical Internet power: the performers are limited to women and the viewers have to be registered as men.

Less regimenting platforms also exist, expanding the direct interaction into an act of voyeurism. Many models decide to perform as couples, challenging the argument of direct oppression put forward by some sex work abolitionists; instead of soliciting particular actions by women in exchange for the tokens, the viewer pays to look into someone’s “private” life, which is an important and rarely mentioned aspect. In the sex work discourse, camgirls are often perceived as bodies controlled through the Internet, and their work is simplified to the supply of virtual sex. Yet many of the models decide not to undress, speak, touch themselves, or show their faces. These disavowals have the potential to expand our understanding of what sex work is. The product is therefore not only sex but also care, feelings, relationships, conversations, or consoling—the same forms of emotional work already performed by women in other, less-stigmatised industry sectors.

Virtual sex work seems to differ in the conditions most associated with danger—contact with both clients and the police. In a way, technology has created space for non-physical, seemingly safer types of sex work, yet it may intensify social stratification. It is popular in the U.S. and Europe, but illegal in the Philippines and restricted to heterosexual performances in Russia.⁴ Digital labour in general is characterised by a lack of materiality and defined geography, but here it directly influences physical safety. The worker’s space shifts very often to their private bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, or garden, and the geographical location is carefully camouflaged. In my observations, I’ve seen a viewer comment, beneath the woman’s performance, “I know where you are, only in Western Europe wallpapers are so ugly.”

The digital environment creates new dangers: the videos are recorded and can, potentially, last forever. The violence directed towards “virtual” sex workers is not directly physical, yet can have disastrous consequences, as in the recently launched cam engine tool. The creators of this system, which lets a viewer look for “models similar to your crush”, have defended their invention through dehumanizing arguments—not even acknowledging the possibility that “your crush” could also be a camgirl. In reality, already existing and continuously developing forms of digital surveillance pose the biggest potential harm to the virtual and disembodied forms of sex work.

- 1 Oksala, J. (2016). Affective Labour and Feminist Politics. *Signs*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 281-303
- 2 Weeks, K. (2007). Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics. *ephemera*, vol. 7, no 1.
- 3 Greenwood, J. (2005). Engines of Liberation. *Review of Economic Studies*. vol. 72, pp 109–133
- 4 Farvid, P. and Henry, M. (2017). ‘Always hot, always live’: Computer-mediated sex work in the era of ‘camming’. *Women’s Studies Journal*, vol.31, no.2