

A young girl in a pink dress with black polka dots stands by the side of a bed. The bed is covered with a blue blanket that has a white scalloped edge. The girl is looking down at the bed. In the background, there is a white dresser with drawers. The scene is set in a bedroom.

*A Liminal Connection*

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*a huge thanks to the webcam models who participated in this research,  
for the enlightenment and for making me laugh*

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## 0. introduction

*“Realms of being other than the ordinary provide natural experiments in which a property of ordinary activity is displayed or contrasted in a clarified and clarifying way.”*  
(Goffman 1974: 564)

The internet has always been my place for exploration. When I was discovering my sexuality, the online world was the place I went to. It shaped me, and my understanding of sex and sexuality, in many different ways. As an artist, my work often investigates how we, as a society, view and shape our sexual identities through these mediated spaces.

Cyberspace can be seen as a liminal space where different kinds of people can interact with different kinds of sexualities. “The internet provides this space, previously unavailable, where a person can type without doing, or do without being.” (Ross, 2005:344)

I look at these spaces through different lenses, to create a distance from its explicit content, to re-contextualise it. This thesis has developed alongside the film-plan for my experimental short film *Liminal Connections* and focusses on the digital connections webcam girls create with their clients and the relationships that emerge from these encounters. In this text, I try and touch upon different affective and ethical questions raised by this subject. I want to argue that this contemporary form of sex work is about far more than sex. This form of interaction opens up different and valuable forms of relating.

Webcamming creates a new form of intimacy. It's not traditional sex work, not a relationship, but "something in between." (Zelizer, 2013).

The thesis comprises four different essays focusing on various aspects of the phenomena 'camming', concentrating on the experiences and stories from different female webcam performers through research and interviews. Alongside my research, I have worked with webcam performers to create a photo-series. These photos are presented throughout this thesis.

#### chapter i. pixelated wallpapers

This chapter focuses on my practice as an artist and my fascination regarding the thematics used in the film I am currently developing. It also gives an insight into the way I dealt with the visual research as well as the material gathered for my film. I conducted different interviews with female webcam performers in Romania about their encounters and experiences that will be part of my film. Excerpts of these interviews are also used throughout this thesis.

#### chapter ii. they come here to feel good

Seeing how webcamming is defined as a form of sex work it is important to focus on what defines this form of contemporary sex work and what needs attention within this. Talking to different female webcam performers it became apparent to me that the most important and demanding aspect of their work is the connection between them and their clients. Seeing webcam performers as emotional workers affords the possibility to move away from the stigmatisation of sex work and opens up the discussion on the

definition of sex work, giving credence to the experiences and agency to the workers involved, while remaining wary of issues concerning potential exploitation and negative aspects of the work.

chapter iii. my disembodied body

Through research and personal recollections about objectification, the male gaze and being looked at within traditional heteronormative sexual images, I investigate ways in which we can move away from the 'male' gaze associated with the display of female bodies as a sexual object. Being in control of that gaze, through taking agency in the objectification it may be possible to subvert the idea of seeing bodily display merely as an index of male fantasy or of female discomfort.

chapter iv. the fantasy is real

The internet affords the possibility to open up in ways that the corporeal world doesn't provide. This could be explained by seeing this digital world as one that is liminal. A space that is disconnected from one's place, where different rules and symbolic interaction applies that gives room to explore fantasies and sexualities that might be denied in the corporeal existence. Webcam models perform these fantasies and sexualities on a daily basis and through this can give us an insight into human sexuality.



i. pixelated wallpapers

*“Computer-mediated communication is a dislocated form of interaction that occurs in a social “place” without necessary connection to geographic “space”, where the activities of participants and experiences of self are not necessarily contained to affixed corporeal bodies.” (Waskul, Douglas and Edgley 2000:220)*

A. My interest in the internet as a place for exploring sexuality was formed when I was young. In part, this might have had to do with the frustration I felt when looking at how sexuality was represented online, and how I, as a heterosexual female couldn't really identify with the way this 'female sexuality' was portrayed in pwwopular online-pornography. In a later stage of my life, this led me to make different works regarding the thematics of representation and viewing through forms of mediation. One of these works, *Talk Neural To Me* (2016), consisted of a neural network capturing pornographic images. The caption database was one that didn't contain any nudity and the result was a video that captioned 'a girl is brushing her teeth in a bedroom' instead of 'a girl is sucking a penis in a bedroom'. For me this acted as a metaphor regarding the duality of how we look at pornography in society; we watch it but we don't really talk about it. I see this as one of the problematic issues regarding the representation of the female body and female pleasure in most heterosexual pornography. If we don't talk about it; how can we take control of the discourse of female representation and how do we start to change it?

Working with such subject matter I started getting interested in the digital space as a space for different forms of sexual encounter. My interests in this space/place started with webcam sites like chaturbate.com and myfreecams.com. These are websites where webcam-models (female, male, transgender, couples or groups) earn money by performing (sexual) acts in front of a webcam. Contemporary sex-work has changed a lot with the coming of the internet. Without the requirement of being physically present, without even leaving your chair, one can connect to another person for sexual pleasure. 'Camming' has become more and more popular over the last years. The money generated by cam sites is hundreds of millions of dollars at least, and possibly upwards of \$2 billion annually, according to industry insiders and analysts surveyed by Newsweek. The general porn industry is estimated to be worth around \$5 billion dollars. This increase in webcam pornography within the porn industry might have something to do with the growing loneliness experienced in contemporary society (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, Brashears, 2006). In a study on internet use, participants engaging in chat sessions with anonymous partners, was found to decrease loneliness and depression, while perceived social support and self-esteem increased (Shaw, Gant, 2002).

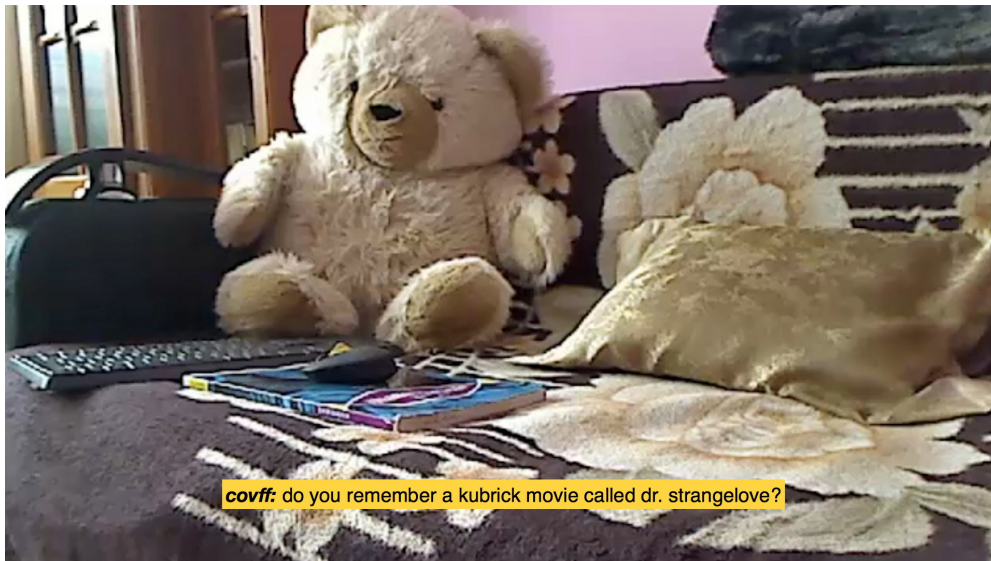
The amount of 'cam-sites' are steadily rising. There are many different platforms, some more popular than others, and they all work in different formats. The main difference between them are 'free' or open cam-sites and private cam-sites. Platforms like chaturbate.com and myfreecams.com are open sites, where the webcam models perform in an open webcam environment connected to a chatbox, open to anyone to enter. The models perform sensual and sexual acts



like stripping and masturbating in front of their viewers. In order to ‘tip’ the performer, you need to be a member, which comes with other privileges like being able to send public messages in the chat. Tips are called ‘tokens’ on many platforms and are, after a commission taken by the websites, deposited as cash onto the performer’s bank account (or payment platform). On most open cam-sites there is also a possibility to buy private shows. Next, to the open cam-sites there are also ‘private’ webcam platforms like [livejasmin.com](http://livejasmin.com) where the performer talks/chats in public chat, accessible for members (being a member is free). The viewer has to buy a private session, paid per minute, if they desire the performer to take off their clothes.

During my research, I came across performers that work from home (e.g. their own bedroom, living room, kitchen, etc.) and performers that work for and from a webcam studio. (Web)cam studios provide private rooms to work from, mostly glamorous and colourful rooms set up with lighting, a webcam, a screen, a keyboard and mouse and a high-speed internet connection. Sometimes these cam studios also provide hairdressers and make-up artist and other ‘extras’.

All sites and formats work with moderators. Moderators are people that keep a chatroom ‘clean’, in case of models working from home, most of the time moderating is done by members as a form of free labour, in return for private shows and/or ‘friendships’ with the performers. I emphasise the word friendship here because it is seen as a medium of exchange. In the case of web-cam studios, it’s the company that provides the moderators. On ‘private’ sites like [livejasmin.com](http://livejasmin.com), most of the time the models moderate their own chatroom.



B. The idea of gazing into someone else's space, through this mediated format, fascinates me. There is an interesting interplay between what is revealed and what remains hidden. The image of a space is never a true depiction of the actual physical space. I became increasingly interested in how this physical space informed the digital space and vice-versa. I started screen-grabbing empty rooms of webcam performers in the 'open' chat areas of free sites, when the performers were on a break. I recorded the empty spaces that show hints of human presence, like signs saying; 'Be Right Back'. This slowly turned into my last project *BRB* (2018). *BRB* is a poetic observation of the spaces of online webcams, where the absence of sex is the focus of the work. In *BRB* the chats that occur during the absence of the performers are made visible in text. There is a very strong sense of community on websites like chaturbate.com where users talk amongst other users about far more than just sex. The image shows us empty rooms, a poetic reflection of what is not there. The chats that occur when the performers are gone create sometimes funny situations, where other conversations suggest a darker context, leaving the viewer wondering what might be going on in these rooms. The work raises questions regarding privacy as well as the sense of online community created within these platforms.

Coming from this project, my fascination for online connection on cam-sites between performer and client grew and I wanted to continue to create work regarding this subject. My research mainly focusses on female cammers/performers and their, mostly, male clients. I use different names for these clients; sometimes because

they are just seen as ‘viewers’ or because they are acknowledged ‘members’ or act as ‘fans’.

Ambercutie.forum is one of the places I spent a great amount of time reading about various topics concerning camming. Ambercutie.forum is a forum created by a webcam model, Amber, in 2009. It has different sections, most of them tips and tricks on how to use different webcam websites, traffic problems, how to handle clients, software and hardware, lighting tricks, etc. The forum has a public section, where performers and clients talk amongst each other. It also has a private model-only section that you need to be granted access to.

For me, it was extremely interesting to read about the different concerns discussed and how these discussions showed the different power dynamics between performer and client. What struck me was the number of clients posting about their concerns on how the models treated them, either because they didn’t get enough attention or felt they were treated unfairly. The webcam models’ replies on these kinds of posts were extremely funny and always took an empowering stance towards sex workers. For me, the clients posting on these forums were reminiscent to obsessed fans. This is the same feeling I had with certain viewers when visiting the different chatboxes of the ‘free’ sites. There are a lot of members (or fans) that act very protectively toward the performers by calling other members out for being rude etc. This protectiveness is appreciated to a certain extent by the models but is often discussed as over-protective members, obsessed members or just plain weirdos.

“These dudes have spent a lot of money on you, and even if you (as a model) haven’t promised anything apart from online entertainment, they reject the notion and may turn into creepy stalkers with time. Identification marks: ‘I wish It became real’, ‘You’re something more than just a cam-girl for me’, ‘You don’t love me, I understand, I won’t bother you anymore’ [...] avoid any communication with them because new mental health can’t be bought for any amount of money.” (Beawaresweety on ambercutie.forum, 2018)

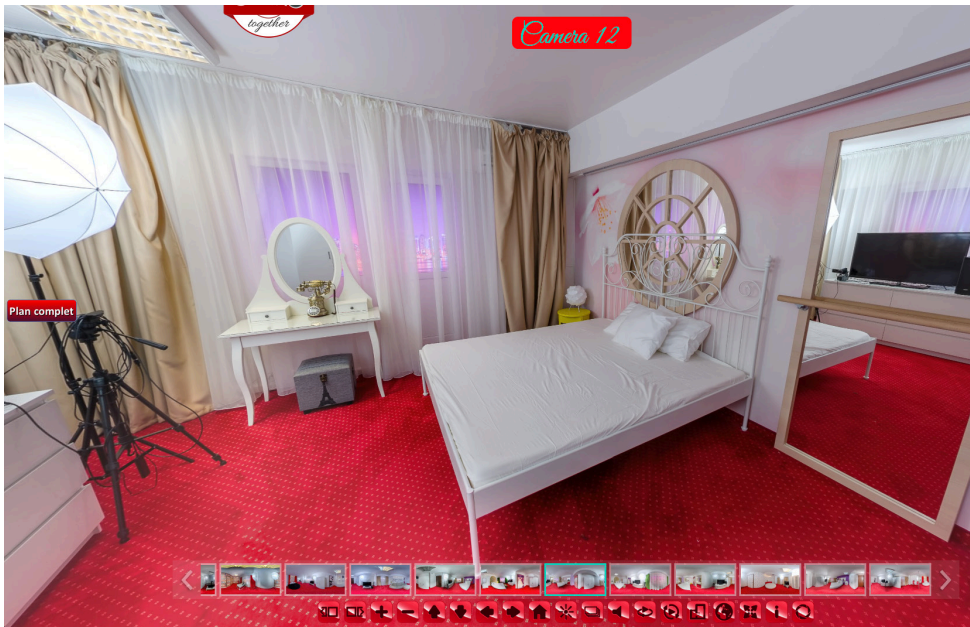
During my research, I became increasingly interested in the emotional labour side of webcamming that was discussed on these fora. A lot of the webcam models also talk about friendships and ‘true connections’. I am interested in when and how these online-connections become something more than fulfilling a personalised, sexual act. The film I am currently developing, *Liminal Connections*, focusses on emotional labour by discussing the different forms of connection created with webcamming and the relationship that arises from them.

C. I was reading a lot about the question raised, mainly by the (male) clients, about the situation of webcam-performers working from webcam-studios. There was incredibly little known and/or shared about webcam studios on these fora, apart from the fact that they were mostly situated in Eastern-Europe. I became increasingly curious about the studios located in Eastern-Europe and wondered in what ways the experience of women working in webcam-studios differed from women working from home.

Surfing the endless websites of different cam studios, I found there are a lot of webcam studios that try and sell ('rent') their studio to prospective employees (webcam-models) through showcasing their offered spaces and rooms through in 360 photograph walkthroughs (like those used in google maps). As a visitor on their website, you can click through these empty ghostlike hallways. All that is left in these images is the 'decor'. In the same way as in my work *BRB*, looking at these images you can clearly imagine the performer using the space, the webcam endlessly prying into the room.

The rooms that are created within these studios intrigue me. A lot of rooms have names like 'Los Angeles', 'Hollywood' and others referring to the western world of fame, which probably sound attractive to work in. The rooms are filled with kitsch and cliché ideas of what conspicuous wealth looks like. They are in themselves liminal spaces, almost as if stepping into a virtual reality box. A room created just to exist in an online digital setting, for the spectator, not one to be experienced offline or unconnected. Some are even equipped with a green screen. As in a theatre these rooms have a clear backstage and frontstage.

D. I conducted my first interview with Jessica, a Romanian webcam model, through Skype. We talked about her experiences with clients and the difference in working from home and for a webcam studio. After the interview, I decided to contact different studios and see if I could visit them. First of all, because I was curious about their labour conditions, and secondly because I wanted to interview different webcam models about their idea of connection and performing in the online world for my film. Through



a Romanian webcam forum, I got in contact with Best Studios, a webcam studio based in Bucharest. I was welcome to visit them.

The whole building felt like it was closed off from reality. From the outside, there are no real windows, the door which you enter through acts as a one-way mirror. I can see the obvious reasons for it to be an anonymous place since there is quite a stigma around ‘videochat’ in the Romanian community. Downstairs you pass by the offices and the hairdresser, when you go up the stairs you enter a space that is a mixture between a smoking room and a cantina. There is one little window in the kitchen, which you can open a crack, but you can’t look outside. I recognised this set-up from other webcam studios I have seen online, they all have a smoking room as the centre of the space. From there you see the hotel-like hallway with doors on each side, on the different doors there are golden nameplates for the rooms, showing names like ‘Marilyn Monroe’ and ‘Madonna’, even though everyone uses the room numbers.

All that was present in the room was the decor. The spaces present an empty idea of wealth. The rooms are an empty shell. The windows in the rooms were not actual windows, just a light box behind a curtain. The lights next to the beds were not connected because there were only sockets on one side of the room. The rooms are a mix between a hotel room and a film set, but what happens in the spaces is real. In the film I am currently developing, *Liminal Connections*, I want to recreate these rooms as a performative space. This will be made in the manner of a film-set, seeing the room located within a film studio. The fact that it is a fictional setting, that is visually present, will make the viewer think about what reality means in a world where





everything is mediated by ones and zeros. At the same time, the film plays with an idea of front-space / back-space. Erving Goffman (1959) uses the idea of frontstage and backstage in understanding human interaction and behaviour. In this perspective, social life is a “performance” carried out in three different places: “front stage,” “back stage,” and “off stage.” I see the digital environment as this front-space, while the physical rooms of webcamming is the back-space.

The contrast between the anecdotes from the interviews and the fictional setting creates space to think about where these connections actually take place; in a space between reality and fiction, between the digital space and corporeality. Narratively the film focusses on the experiences of the online connection created by webcam models and the emotional labour that comes with it. I conducted six different audio-interviews with models that wanted to contribute to my project. In my film, I want to give these webcam performers a voice. Through the interviews we will hear how these different and diverse relationships and connections are formed and how intimacy and sexuality is experienced within webcamming.

What is incredibly valuable is the agility and playfulness with which these models address subjects like sexuality and emotional labour. The interviews used in the film share this sense of lightness and humour without shying away from darker sides of the work. The film counterbalances the over-represented sexualised female bodies online (and in other mainstream media). Choosing not to see the interviewees as they tell their stories will leave the viewer to imagine these stories, working with their own fantasy, without being distracted



by the corporeality of the female web-cam models.

Through hearing the cam-girls talk about friendship, performance, kinks and fetishes we learn about what clients look for within these connections. It gives us insight into the emotional side of the job as well as insight into the (quite diverse) sexual needs a large part of our society deals with.



ii. they come here to feel good

*“Why do they come here? Because they are frustrated, they have enough to fight with their wives or have their own problems. Here they need here a smile, they need a compliment. [...] They come here to feel appreciated, to feel good.”*  
*(from an interview with Jessica, Feb 2019)*

When I first encountered webcam websites it was through my, at that time, boyfriend. We would watch porn together from time to time, which mostly consisted of me laughing and commenting on what was fake and wrong about the images appearing on screen, or trying to find some feminist porn that was relatable. At one point he showed me a website called cam4.com, a website that hosted webcam models. This was a completely new world for me, somehow one I hadn't discovered before. A lot of questions were racing through my head, but the main question was; does it bother me that my boyfriend watches these girls, and might even interact with them. Somehow, being in a chat-box with a live-performer, it was impossible for me to ignore these questions of labour.

There has been a long tradition of stigmatising and marginalising of sex workers and sex work. With the introduction of online-based sex work, especially those focusing on a live-connection, comes a possibility to look at sex work in a new way. In traditional feminist theory and research, sex work, and especially prostitution, has invariably seen as inherently exploitative, mostly due to the physical vulnerability that comes with the work. There is a tendency to categorise sex work as a synonym for prostitution, even though contemporary sex work beholds a whole range of activities and

forms of labour.

‘Camming’ – models performing sex acts, often from their homes or other indoor spaces like web-cam studios, for online viewers who pay them – is one form of contemporary sex-work. When looking at these new forms of sex-work the hybridity and complexity of contemporary sex work should be taken into consideration. “Camgirls are able to offer the visually explicit content of traditional pornography while allowing for the personal contact and customisation that is usually associated with prostitution; unlike physical sex workers, however, camgirls are protected through the buffer provided by the webcam medium similarly to the passive performance of a stripper.” (Bleakly, 2014:901)

One major difference between traditional sex-work, like prostitution, and digital sex-work, like webcamming, is the presence and absence of physical dangers. In the case of webcamming, the models cannot be physically threatened or be infected with diseases through sexual contact.

There has been a lot of discussion around the terminology of sex work. One of the suggestions is to make a distinction between direct sex work and indirect sex work. As Angela Jones (2016) states; direct sex work refers to sex work where genital contact is present, as opposed to indirect where there is no genital contact. There have also been scholars that suggest the term ‘bodywork’ and/or ‘emotional’ work. These terms illustrate the employment of the body and/or emotional performance as a tool of labour. I personally prefer the latter.

This emotional performance is the main reason people choose to visit a webcam site over traditional pornography sites. The actual connection with the performer is the one thing that is not possible in traditional pornography. With webcamming there is a possibility to talk (either orally or through text-chat), to express your wants and your needs. Webcamming creates a new form of intimacy. It's not traditional sex work, not a relationship, but "something in between." (Zelizer, 2013).

Many of the models I talked to said that the most important aspect of their job is forming connections and friendships with the clients that come into their chatroom. What is different from regular porn is that many of the viewers want to be heard, they want to connect.

As some Marxist feminists argue; sex work is inherently exploitative due to the oppressive nature of work under capitalism. (Henry, Farvid, 2017) But this would be the case for any form of labour within this economic system. Camming was originally a 'cottage' industry, but there is growing evidence that this is changing, with some models working in formats such as webcam studios, resembling traditional organised sex work venues (Mathews, 2017) However it is a widespread misunderstanding that women and men are necessarily trafficked and/or forced into this line of work, especially when located in Eurasia (Henry, Farvid, 2017). One of the main reasons that there are so many webcam studios located in, for example, Romania, is because of the economic situation and liberal rules towards the webcam industry and high-speed internet. Webcam models in Romania can make up to 10 times the average wage.

Looking at sex-work, especially digital sex-work, we have to see it as an evolution of the adult entertainment industry that defies existing categorisation. One that is maybe not inherently exploitative. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the industry of webcamming, especially when looking at studio-based work forms of labour, can be exploitative. I have read many messages on online fora from models that have had bad experiences with different webcam studios, most of them being about the monetary aspect of the labour (no or late payment etc.). This also has to do with the fact that a large part of the webcamming industry is illegal and the models have no legal grounds to stand on. This makes it very hard to protect models from financial exploitation. Visiting Romania and having talked to different models that have worked for different studios, I haven't heard one of them talk about women being coerced or forced into the camming industry. The industry is mostly focused on persuading students and other young women through advertisements about making lots of money in videochat.

“... the really hurtful part is when people ask ‘Are you at home or in a studio?’ With the impression that studio girls are exploited by some sort of sex mafia. I'm not gonna deny many girls being treated badly by studio's, but that's less than 20% of cases...” (MonikawithaK on camgirling.tumblr.com, 2015)

I feel these above arguments and discourse is somehow needed to talk about the emotional part of this form of sex work. It's important to move past the marginalisation of sex work and move towards

giving agency to those performing the work. At the same time, we can step away from the problematised definition of ‘sex’-work. “We argue that camming presents a convincing case that body and/or emotional work are more appropriate terms than sex work. ‘Sex’ is a contestable definition grounded in problematic heteronormative ideals (Green, 2016), whereas the use of the body as a tool of erotic labour in these contexts is indisputable” (Jones, 2015a). (Henry & Farvid 2017) We can place the emotional side of sex-work, and the mental pressure and problematics that come with it, in the same line with other professions that ask for emotional labour like nursing, counselling, teaching, etc. By doing this we can move past the stigmatised aspect of the work and look at what is important to support these types of labour.

The emotional labour involved with this line of work can be physically draining and can lead to physical and mental health issues. It’s important to note that this is not specific to sex-work – for example – counselling to nursing also involves clients benefiting from emotional work. This emotional labour (in sex-work and other professions) has been researched extensively, especially in relation to the ways it is devalued and under compensated. (D’Adama, 2015)

In order to understand these concerns regarding emotion labour, we should listen to workers performing these kinds of professions. Talking to different webcam girls gives good insight to the fact that the possible psychological damage has little to do with getting naked and performing on cam (this also makes sense as there is little physical danger connected to the performance). The pressure that comes from the constant connection and being in a ‘service’ industry

stand out in the conversation's I had.

“Yeah I’ve cried in front of the camera [...] Sometimes you are alone with yourself, in front of the camera and no one is watching, you’re alone you have nobody to talk to and you watch yourself and you say “What am I doing wrong? And why is nobody talking to me?” (from an interview with Annemarie, Feb 2019)

The idea that sex work is, by definition, harmful despite the fact that sex-workers themselves continuously try and subvert this idea, shows intense social and legal policing of an industry. For example, dentists, show high suicide rates (Brondani, Ramanula, Pattanaporn, 2014), but there is no call to prohibit the profession of dentistry. Camming is also a form of labour with issues and concerns similar to those which relate to other creators of ‘amateur’ online user-generated content.

‘... about the insults, maybe I wasn’t clear enough; This job isn’t for sensitive girls [...] some of my colleagues cried or got depressed and quit the job, you need a strong character and to understand it’s a game, not something personal, and yes there are more compliments than insults.’ (from an interview with Jessica)

The webcam models I have talked to deal with a lot of different people with a lot of different problems and a lot of different sexualities. I would like to stress that it’s important to listen to these stories. The webcam performers deal with a lot of issues and concerns that is not unique to sex work. “As scholars have noted, emotional labour is

difficult, draining and can lead to a variety of physical and mental health issues.” (Henry, Farvid, 2017).

A couple of the models I interviewed indicated that they sometimes feel sorry for their clients, due to their addiction to webcamming or the fact that they want to be insulted or degraded. At the same time a lot of them indicated that it’s not their responsibility and that if they wouldn’t talk to them, someone else will.

“They [clients that act like slaves] should learn to respect themselves, they shouldn’t be paying girls just to laugh of them [...] I mean I would like to help them, I would like to teach them to accept themselves how they are and to appreciate themselves. [...] I had one client, he was addicted to blackmail [financial domination]. He told me that he had lost two houses, his car, two jobs. Just because he paid some mistresses, very expensive girls, not me! He came to me just to cry and complain.” (from an interview with Jessica)

Patricia Wallace (1999) has indicated that the internet is well-suited for sexual preferences that have a stigma surrounding them and, for example, would be embarrassing if they would be revealed. “The internet is likely to attract disproportionately those who might be stigmatised or disadvantaged (including facing criminal sanctions) should their sexual interests become known.” (Ross 2005). Webcam models deal with many different people and a lot of them have issues regarding their sexuality. It is key that this gets attention when discussing what is of importance within sex work.

“A client can say; ‘I’ll give you millions of dollars but I want you to tell me to stretch my balls’. No, I won’t accept that.” (from an interview with Isabel, Feb 2019)

I argue we can look at sex workers like webcam models in the same line as we look at therapists. The work they do benefit a lot of people in teaching them how to deal with their different needs and at the same time it can also be mentally draining for the workers. I think it’s extremely important to listen and especially deal with the stories sex workers tell us in the same way we would listen to people with any other profession that involves emotional labour. This way we can talk about the (potential) emotional damage and empower sex workers in the field of webcamming to take care of their mental well-being.



iii. my disembodied body

*“Camgirls and alt-porn producers often insist on the presentation of a sexual self which is firmly located within the context of their lives, relationships and politics.” (Attwood 2011:214)*

When I was around eleven years old I dialed the number of a sex-phone. I remember the choice menu you had to go through very vividly; what kind of woman would you like to speak to? Old and experienced, young and naive, etc. I don't remember what choice I made, but what I do remember is that my parents found out quite quickly when they were confronted with the high telephone bill. Not long after this, I downloaded my first porn. Back then it was usual to pay for pornography on websites, but I'd learned my lesson by then, and everything I downloaded was done so illegally, through peer2peer software such as lime-wire. With software that doesn't moderate its material in any way, and everyone being able to share whatever they like, my eyes have crossed a lot of wonderful and (sometimes both at once) disturbing material. Throughout my youth and still, the magical world of the internet has influenced and shaped me and my sexuality in different ways.

Not only in porn, but in general, the objectification of the female body has always worried and fascinated me. Especially during my teenage years, I felt that the insecurities I dealt with found their origin in the way the female image was portrayed in magazines, movies and videoclips, etc. My high-school research project, and in retrospect the beginning of my artistic career, was a short documentary I shot visiting several dancehall music parties around 2006. I edited the

material together with some sexually explicit videoclips that were shown on TV at that time, like 'lapdance' by N.E.R.D. where women were objectified in one of its purest form; all they did in the video was give lap-dances; to make a comparison between the way me and my peers behaved at these sorts of parties and the images we were confronted with every day. During the public presentation of my project, the grandparents of one of my classmates stood up and left. The school almost failed me for showing such explicit content. At that moment it struck me that some people willingly close their eyes and don't want to be confronted with the reality of sexuality present within our society. We can consume porn but we can't talk about it.

Although objectification of the female body has obvious negative aspects to it, it also fascinates me. I have always fantasised about how it would feel to be wanted just for your image, there to be looked at, to get off on. It has something to do with the gaze and the pure physical desire as well as the opportunity to be something and somewhere 'else'. Apart from some occasional sexting, I didn't really experience having virtual sex myself until I had a boyfriend who lived in another country. Seeing myself on camera was a turn-on. Often, I caught myself gazing at my own body rather than my boyfriend's. I could see my own body and my actions through someone else's eyes, dissociated from my person. Somehow the representation of my body as an object for desire was something very sexual.

By viewing my body as an object through a digital lens, I could see my body as something different, something disembodied from myself (selfhood). The body, much like the self, exists as both a viewed object and an experienced subject. As Dennis D. Waskul describes in *The*

Naked Self: Being a Body in Televideo Cybersex, participants of webcam-sex manipulate this relationship by presenting themselves as only a body, the experience of which feeds back in an erotic “looking glass” affecting how the self conceives of the body (Waskul 2005). It is important to note that this research was only done with participants of webcam sex where no money as a medium of exchange was involved.

Representing the body, especially a naked body, through digital mediation, gives you the opportunity to see yourself as someone else might see you. For me, this experience was very liberating and exciting. Even with someone I knew dearly I already experienced this partly disembodied state. The excitement brought us to other experiments where we even went so far as to broadcast ourselves and watch each-other on websites like chaturbate.com, without showing our faces. It was an interesting experience to know that other people were watching you. Since the face is the most identifiable feature of one’s body and self; it is the single human physiological feature that concretely conjoins the corporeal body with the self (Waskul 2002), it was very easy to view your body as a sexual object. At the same time, there was still this fear of being recognised by someone close to me through other features (tattoos, environment, etc.) which became the reason to not continue.

As we grow up, we have to acquire a self by looking at how others see us. (Mead, 1934). George Herbert Mead points out that young children do not have a self, but acquire them through interaction with other human beings in combination with the symbolic capacity to take on the role of the other. Waskul argues that the same applies

to the body. “We are born into a body, but we are not born with the capacity to understand that body as an object— to see it as others might, to assess what that body is, what it means, its parts, and its relationship to the whole being.” (Waskul 2002) It acquires meaning in a symbolic process that is no different from any other object. We need to view our body through others to understand it as a body.

“It is perfectly true that the eye can see the foot, but it does not see the body as a whole. We cannot see our backs; we can feel certain portions of them, if we are agile, but we cannot get an experience of our whole body. . . . The mere ability to experience different parts of the body is not different from the experience of a table. . . . The body does not experience itself as a whole” (Mead 1934:136). Being naked on webcam reduces the self to the body. Selfhood is not only reduced to the body but is also made into an object; a naked sexual body to be looked at and commented on. In research done on online-sex (webcam-sex but also research focussing on complete disembodiment within virtual sex in second life, through using an avatar) participants play with this experience of being the object/subject and gain much more than sexual pleasure. In everyday life, it is almost impossible to reduce the self to the body in the same extent as we do online. (Waskul 2002).

Objectifying our bodies through a digital lens is, of course, not limited to webcam sex. But do I, being a woman, contribute to the ‘male gaze’ by objectifying my body and showing this objectified body online? I want to point out that there is one important and notable difference between my own objectified body and someone else’s. As there is a choice in when, and more importantly how, I objectify my

body. This way of giving agency to one's own sexualised body has in recent years been looked at by different theorists, including Feona Attwood. Attwood argues that in this age and time we are more in control of our own image than ever. She argues that the male gaze (Mulvey 1987) may not apply to these contemporary forms of female pornographic production. She argues that women, through creating their own cultural production of the sexual body also create agency. "Although it is important that it requires explanation in the case of female bodies being over-exposed in the representational system of modern and late-modern cultures, explaining bodily display merely as an index of male fantasy or of female discomfort is a stance that is too simplistic." (Attwood 2011). In this sense, 'experiencing', (not as an experience) objectification of the body in the traditional sense, as described in Laura Mulvey's (1989:19) where woman are "turned into objects of display... Yet, in a real sense, woman are not there at all." They are "simply the scenery on to which men project their own fantasies" (Mulvey, 1987:131). This is very different from 'creating' an objectified body. Creating an objectified body asks for experimenting with ways of refusing, commanding and controlling the representation of woman as a passive sexual object. (Attwood, 2011:13)

Through performing in front of a webcam, webcam girls become producers. With that, they challenge the representation of passive sexual objects and become something that speaks. "Webcams offer a possible site of resistance to this dualistic structure of looking because the spectator is too close to the screen and the image is too fragmented for voyeurism to operate properly." (White, 2006:59) By performing live in front of a camera, and the viewer having to

be behind this 'device' (be it a smartphone, computer or tablet) the construction and processes of the distributed images are part of the view. Through this, the spectators and operators can resist the binary logic of classical cinema and the objectifying gaze of other media. Next to these visibly recognisable constructions, the operator of the webcam has also another power in hand. The refusal of woman operators to provide certain performances makes webcamming very different from traditional pornographic sites. "Women webcam operators maintain control of their representation and develop a form of power by the ways that they become visible."(White, 2006:57)

"When a slave approaches me I just try to talk to him, cause I don't know what to make him do... [...] So instead of just wasting their time and mine, I just refuse them in a polite manner. That's all I can do." (from an interview with Avery, Feb 2019).

Bleakly (2014) describes in his paper "500 tokens to go private: Camgirls, Cybersex and Feminist Entrepreneurship", how 'the adult entertainment industry has been described by feminist groups as misogyny taking place under a patriarchal business model.' Although I agree with this view, how in traditional pornography woman had no role in their representation, only the 'being a body to be looked-at'. Bleakly continues to argue that there has been a radical shift in broadcasting and production of pornographic images. There are more and more pornographic filmmakers that identify with feminism and make 'feminist pornography' as well as woman independently broadcasting explicit material and through that regain control of female representation. "Camgirls present themselves as cultural producers, challenging the representation of

women as technologically inept and as passive sexual objects. They take on the power relation of looking, defying objectification and experimenting with ways of refusing, commanding and controlling the spectator's gaze." (Attwood, 2011:13).

Disembodying through a webcam is of course different for a voluntary participant of webcam sex than it is for those working as webcam girls. But looking at your own body as a sexual object, and controlling how this object is displayed is an important aspect to webcamming. "The cam girl genre could be seen to empower woman within the industry, subverting traditional power relationships by compelling male audience members to seek the approval and acknowledgement of a female performer." (Bleakly, 2014:908). It is important that technology and innovations take this female adult entrepreneurship into account when further developing. And, as camming becomes increasingly present in the adult entertainment industry, lawmakers and industry leaders form legislations designed to ensure it doesn't become a place for sexual exploitation and other potentially high-risk practices.

iv. the fantasy exists

*“He said to me: ‘Yesterday night I dreamed of you’ and you know how wonderful this is? Thousands of kilometres away, in America, at the end of the world, someone dreams of you.” (From an interview with Annemarie, feb 2019)*

My family was the first in our neighbourhood to own a computer, and I used to have daily fights with my brother over who could claim it. I was obsessed with the wonderful world the computer offered me. I was around 5 years old, in 1994, when I started playing my first computer games. Just like films, this magical place of fiction sucked me into a different world. I was a little stuffed animal bear for a while, trying to cook a cake for a birthday party (unfortunately this is all I remember). A couple of years later, we must have been around 10 years old, a friend of mine introduced me to Leisure Suit Larry’s (Published by Sierra On-Line in 1987), a game she had on her father’s computer. Leisure Suit Larry was a graphic adventure game with an adult theme, the aim of the game being; to get ‘lucky’. We on the other hand, only got lucky if we entered the age verification questions right, since we didn’t speak any English, by pure guesswork. On the rare occasion we did pass it (there was a time-out after guessing wrong), the fun of the game was quickly over since it was a text-based adventure game. What I do remember is the fact that it was exciting and naughty, even though the pixels were barely decryptable.

The protagonist, Larry Laffer, is a 38-year-old virgin living in his mother’s basement. Being sick and tired of his loneliness, he decides



to visit the city of Lost Wages (Las Vegas) hoping to finally find the woman of his dreams. In the course of the game he ‘meets’ a couple of different women to try his luck with. The first woman Larry encounters in the city of Lost Wages is a sex-worker.

I imagined many virgins, just like Larry Laffer himself, have played this game from their mom’s basement. In early 2003 the game Second Life came into existence. The special thing about Second Life was that it was based around the interaction with other players through chat and avatars in a 3D world. Although not intended as an adult-oriented game, through second life it was possible to experience adult entertainment including nudity and full-on sexual activities, almost all player-made content.

Victor Turner (1967, 1969) suggests that all social worlds exist with parallel worlds. On the one hand, “the structure of rural, political and economic positions, offices, statuses, and roles, in which the individual is only ambiguously grasped behind the social persona”, and on the other hand there is the “society as a *communitas*” a relatively unstructured and undifferentiated “*comitatus*, community or even communion of individuals”.

In short, Turner (1969) emphasises how individuals are necessarily tied to their social world through institutionally grounded statuses and social roles, yet also experience with equal necessity moments of *ekstasis*; circumstances where they ‘stand outside the totality of structural positions one normally occupies’.

Erving Goffman also argues, we need this ‘standing outside’ to be

something else, and in that this contrast works in a clarifying way. “Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity resides in the cracks.” (Goffman 1961:320)

The relation between these two seemingly contrasting models of social and cultural life are mediated by experiences of liminality. Waskul (2002:205) suggests that the internet is “a natural environment for liminality”: a place separate from one’s space where the ordinary norms of everyday life can be suspended. It gives space to playfully perform selves that are in between the person and the persona. The internet is a place where people do not need to conceal their stigma or have to be concerned with “cooperatively trying to disattend it.” (Goffman 1963:81). People feel free to openly engage in playful anomaly. “Enacting the performance of transgression and traversing the realm of the taboo in backspaces (backspaces/backstage) allow secret selves to materialise (Redmond 2003:36).

The famous Belgian psychotherapist Esther Perel describes that cheating is not about the infidelity but about the secret-self that needs to be explored outside of the set boundaries of everyday life. (Perel, 2017). In a study of heterosexual internet sexual chat room users 41% did not consider cybersex to be cheating on a relationship partner at all, with significantly more women than men feeling this way. (McKenna, Green, and Smith, 2001)

“This other man, [...] He was so romantic, he came to see me for 2 years almost all the time, on the same hour. Daily, just one day he couldn’t come. And he stayed for like half an hour. He sent me, every day, two or three poems, that he wrote for me, haha. [...] So this man, he didn’t even insist to meet me in real... I mean I think he was aware it was just the virtual stuff. He stayed anonymous. Not everyone shows themselves. I respect that. Maybe he wanted his identity to stay secret” (from an interview with Jessica, Jan 2019)

As Anthony Giddens (1992) claims, the ‘pure’ relationship, which emerged in the late 19th century, was based on the idea that a durable emotional tie could bind people together. Parallel to the pure relationship is the countertrend of “plastic” sexuality (Giddens 1992) - ludic sex-based relationships that are free of commitment, reproduction, and other closely connected projects of the self. According to Falk (1994:65), “The more articulated and multifarious the restrictions on corporeality, the more sophisticated the forms of transgression become.” The liminal nature of the computer-mediated medium facilitates these active transgressions and make the porous boundaries between first and second life (Waskul, Martin 2010).

So the dislocated and disembodied nature of computer-mediated communication makes cybersex an experience that potentially expresses a sexuality separate from and transgressive of the person, the body, and everyday life. This makes it possible to explore and experiment with new forms and different forms of sexual play. “It can be both a fantasy, taken to the point of acting it through

with another person, or a behaviour that, through being virtual, is not actually done, and thus the person does not have to face the dissonance or stigma of actually being, or having a spoiled identity.” (Ross, 2005:344)

Webcam models make a living off these forms of sexual play. “There are so many types of slaves, [...] they don’t have women in real life to dominate them and they have these frustrating things in the bottom of their mind. [...] They want me to punish them [...] they need to be controlled because they are powerful men, slaves are not vulnerable, they’re not like that in real life.” (Interview with Annemarie, Feb 2019)

It is the fact that these fantasies are externalized and constructed with a ‘real’ person online in close real time, that makes these forms of sexual encounters unique. It is more than just sexual play, it is a space for connection. The anonymity provided by the medium opens up the possibility to be another person, for example, to be more open or more direct. “The absence of the necessary social cues, and thus social conventions, on the internet, may lead to greater and more rapid intimacy both because the goal is a romantic or sexual encounter, and because of accelerated intimacy” (Ross 2005). Dinty Moore (1995) observed that being anonymous combined with the ability to switch off the computer creates an environment where sexual issues can be explored with little fear. To put the connections that are created online away as simple scenarios of fantasy wouldn’t be doing the subject justice. Even though these connections are created within this liminal space, they are taken into the corporeal world by their performers and viewers.

Webcamming offers its users an intermediate step between private fantasy and actual behaviour. They can engage in sexual activities online without actually “doing” it. It can act as a performative space where one can experiment with being something or someone else. At the same time, the space that is created through this can help people reach out. “They are afraid to address beautiful women in real life, that’s why they come here.” (From an interview with Avery, feb 2019). Webcam models often act as the client’s girlfriend, teaching them how to address women, sometimes being the first girl they ‘meet’. These virtual connections resonate into the “real” world in different ways, far past the “sexual” fantasy and turn into meaningful connections.

## v. conclusion

*“It’s not only a dirty job, a sexual job. It’s also the opportunity, to make a [...] friendship, to open your heart, to share a part of your life, to share your feelings, to share ideas. So, this why I got to appreciate it.”*  
*(from an interview with Jessica, Jan 2019)*

It is important to recognize sex work as work, so it can move away from the danger of stigmatisation. Looking at webcamming as a form of emotional labour can help us do this. At the same time, it gives us the possibility to direct attention to what risks and dangers come with this contemporary form of sex work, a form that deals with very different dangers than traditional sex work like prostitution.

“Criminalisation, by perpetuating stigma, discrimination and social marginalisation and by alienating sex workers from formal labour protections, creates conditions in which violations of sex workers’ rights, including their labour rights, can continue with impunity. Recognition that sex work is work is the starting point for addressing these conditions, to be able to organise and advocate for improved work environments for sex workers.” (NSWP policy brief, 2017:2)

In continuation of this, we can look at this ‘new’ form of adult entertainment as an activity that challenges the traditional feminist claims of ‘objectivization’ (Mulvey et al). Through taking control in broadcasting, webcam girls become producers and are, as a result, in control of their own representation. With this, they challenge the gender roles depicted in heteronormative mainstream pornography.

The virtual realm that the webcam girls inhabit offers its users a place to experiment with their sexuality and, at the same time, a sense of 'connection'. The possibility to move away from corporeal constraints gives room to test and reflect one's own position within the enormous and diverse range of sexualities. It presents parallel realities, forums for ekstasis in various forms.

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