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“500 tokens to go private”:

## Cam-girls, cybersex and feminist entrepreneurship

Paul Bleakley

### **Abstract**

The adult entertainment industry has often been seen by feminist groups as antithetical to the women’s liberation movement, with the commercialisation of misogyny taking place under a patriarchal business model. The advent of live streaming video and webcam technology has forced a considerable paradigm shift in the power relationships involved in pornography; the burgeoning ‘camgirl’ genre – in which young women independently broadcast explicit material at the behest of an audience – essentially serves to return control over adult entertainment to the female participants that are involved in its creation. The interactive nature of the camgirl genre has resulted in the development of a unique transactional relationship between performer and consumer that transcends that which currently exists within the industry. The rise of the camgirl has significant implications for both the adult entertainment industry and internet culture on the whole, presenting innovative business opportunities for young performers to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour.

**Key Words:** pornography, camgirl, internet, feminism, entrepreneurship

### **Introduction**

There are few industries that have been better served by the evolution of the internet than pornography. The global adoption of the World Wide Web breathed new life into a business that had been traditionally viewed as a sordid aberration in an otherwise moral society; by utilising the internet as an innovative avenue to distribute sexually explicit material, pornography businesses were able to expand into previously untapped markets and normalise the pervasive presence of erotic content when engaging with the online world.

The interrelationship that has developed between pornography and the internet has resulted in a permanent evolution of the industry: producers of sexually explicit material are constantly searching for ways to create a unique and distinctive product in order to stand apart from the deluge pornographic content that can be found online. One of the most significant challenges facing the adult entertainment industry is the growing role of amateur pornography; as technology has advanced and become more readily accessible, young women have been able to participate in online sexual entertainment from the comfort of their own homes, operating independently of mainstream pornography producers as members of the burgeoning camgirl community.

The term 'camgirl' is used to refer to young women that operate their own webcams to communicate with a broad audience online, often engaging with sexually explicit behaviour in real-time in return for financial compensation. The camgirl industry differs from traditional pornography in a variety of ways; the ease of global connectivity in the age of the internet allows camgirls to directly communicate with audiences and respond to specific instructions in a manner that is impossible under the standard conventions of pornography. This interactivity between performer and audience provides the camgirl industry with a unique selling point, giving these young women the ability to foster positive relationships with clients and encouraging repeat business on a level far exceeding that of mainstream pornographic performers. Moreover, the camgirl business gives young women interested in joining the adult entertainment industry the ability to act in an entrepreneurial manner by operating without the management of production companies; this essentially subverts the stereotypical view of the pornography business as an inherently exploitative patriarchy and provides women with the ability to reclaim the proprietary rights over their own bodies, with camgirls responding to the high level of demand for adult entertainment in a manner that retains maximum profits for the performer rather than a production company. The increasing role of camgirls in online pornography places entrepreneurial amateurs firmly at the forefront of the industry's evolution, paving the way for independent operators to take control of the adult entertainment business in a revolutionary form of sexual feminism.

## **Background**

### *Feminism and Pornography*

The role of pornography within society is a subject that has divided feminist academia since the advent of the women's liberation movement; the term *sex-positive feminism* was created to describe the belief that sexual liberation was a core component of the women's rights movement, in contrast with the *radical feminist* perspective which dictated that pornography was a physical manifestation of an exploitative patriarchal culture (Hanmer, 1990). The conflict between these two branches of feminism derives from a lack of agreement as to whether pornography reinforces or subverts traditional misogynistic attitudes within society. Radical feminism suggests that the production of pornography inevitably results in the commodification of women in a manner designed to be profitable for corporations typically managed and owned by men. The argument that women are manipulated and exploited by a patriarchal adult entertainment industry is challenged by sex-positive feminists, who contest that this perspective ignores the notion that women are in control of their own sexuality and are competent to make decisions regarding the way in which it is utilised.

Sex-positive feminists claim that pornography provides women with a medium through which they are able to challenge conventional values and beliefs in relation to a woman's relationship with sex. Ellen Willis, a prominent American activist credited with coining the term *pro-sex feminism*, claimed in her 1981 essay *Lust Horizons: Is the Women's Movement Pro-Sex?* that anti-pornography advocates were essentially reinforcing patriarchal attitudes by opposing the production of sexually explicit material. Willis addressed the complaint that pornography is a form of violence against women, arguing that this claim was "code for the neo-Victorian idea that men want sex and women endure it" (p. 36). Contrary to this 'neo-Victorian' perspective, the sex-positive branch of feminism argues that modern pornography reinforces the dominance of women by removing the conservative stigmas associated with female sexuality and showcasing women that are confident enough with their own body image to appear naked on film. Sex-positive feminists are also critical of government censorship, claiming that restricting alternative discourses has historically served as a means of silencing marginalised groups and oppressing individual expression; censorship of pornography is therefore seen as a haphazard political action that only serves to reinforce negative cultural connotations regarding sexual relations.

*Camgirls in the Adult Entertainment Industry*

The technological connectivity made possible through the development of the internet allowed the producers of pornography to disseminate video and images to a global audience at the click of a button. Usenet newsgroups formed the initial foundations of the internet pornography industry; encoded images – usually scanned from adult magazines - were shared by individuals over the limited bandwidth of the early internet, with the practice later extending to pay-for-access bulletin boards that formed the first wave of commercial internet pornography (Mehta & Plaza, 1997). The organic growth in this type of file-sharing revealed the potential opportunities that the internet could provide to pornographers, leading to adult entertainment businesses quickly establishing a foothold on the internet via pay-to-view websites featuring exclusive images and streaming video. Throughout the late-1990s and 2000s the pornography industry was one of the largest operating online, with global revenues estimated at around \$20 billion per annum; this boom has recently slowed with statistics released in 2011 showing that porn revenues had dropped by 50% since 2007, largely due to an increase in free streaming websites reducing the need for viewers to engage with pay-to-view providers (Moye, 2013). This reduction in the profitability of internet pornography has forced the adult entertainment industry to adjust and evolve in order to find inventive ways to increase the value of their product in the competitive online marketplace.

The camgirl industry began in the mid-1990s, shortly after accessibility to the internet became widespread and the increased capacity of bandwidth allowed consumers to engage with live video streaming. The reported instance of a camgirl-style website occurred in 1996, when 20-year-old Jennifer Ringley connected a webcam to the computer in her dorm room at Dickinson College, Pennsylvania; while Ringley's sexual encounters were featured on her webcam, the primary purpose of the website was to document every aspect of her life and broadcast to audiences via the internet (Senft, 2008). Ringley's success - with an estimated 100 million viewers logging onto her website each week - was later emulated by other amateur internet pioneers that would utilise then-innovative video streaming technology to garner online notoriety. Bulletin board style website 4chan became a popular forum for young women – often under the age of eighteen – to upload provocative images and video, raising early concerns about the dangers of the internet as a tool for the dissemination of child pornography; as ownership of webcams became more common, the trend of young women exposing themselves online transitioned to real-time broadcasting and allowed them to communicate directly with internet users from around the world (Conti, 2013). The

widespread popularity of this grassroots incarnation of the camgirl industry highlighted the clear commercial opportunities presented by webcam technology, with the interactive nature of camgirl websites providing the unique selling point missing from traditional pay-for-use pornography.

## **Methodology**

The interrelationship between the camgirl industry, entrepreneurship and feminism must be examined utilising a range of research methodologies in order to ensure that a thorough understanding may be ascertained. This research investigation primarily takes the form of a qualitative study, wherein social phenomenon can be observed and documented; by collating data in this manner, it is possible for researchers to recognise patterns in human behaviour and determine what factors motivate these behavioural trends (Patton, 1990). Independent research into the camgirl industry was undertaken in order to accurately document the practicalities of the genre; this included the passive observation of around forty camgirl performances, with an analysis of approximately twelve prominent camgirls via social media platforms such as Twitter. There was a concerted effort to limit observation of camgirl performances to independent operators that were not employed by a webcam studio or otherwise commercial adult entertainment organisation. This allowed research to explore the entrepreneurial techniques utilised by performers that are operating under their own accord – the challenges to the industry posed by webcam studios and international adult entertainment producers are only touched on briefly in this article as a counter-point to the work undertaken by independent operators.

Ethnographic research into the camgirl culture is particularly accessible given the significant role that the internet and social media plays in fuelling the adult entertainment industry online; the multitude of young women working on the internet as camgirls has made it necessary for those in the industry to maintain a visible public profile in order to ensure that they are able to stand out from the crowd. This provides considerable benefits to ethnographic researchers as it allows for passive observation of camgirl work without the risk of unduly influencing the findings of the study (Stake, 1995). Passive observation can also provide crucial insight into the experience of the camgirl audience, with researcher's interaction with camgirl subjects initially restricted to the same level of contact that is enjoyed by the typical consumer.

Although there is an array of literature that exists in relation to the pornography industry, the recent growth of the camgirl business means that a significant research gap exists that does not focus on the unique aspects of webcam-orientated adult entertainment. The lack of available literature means that any research case studies must be undertaken independently; the considerable presence of camgirls on social media provides researchers with immediate contact to a range of women that are currently active within the industry. By working in conjunction with social media feeds that are popular with members of the camgirl community, it is possible to identify women that are willing to participate in a study and conduct interviews or surveys that can highlight relevant details to be included in the research (Stake, 1995). It is essential to have direct contact with a range of camgirls in order to examine the industry from a phenomenological perspective and develop an understanding of the subjective experiences of this type of adult entertainers; current literature does not typically take this phenomenological approach, therefore ignoring the motivations and practical considerations of performers in favour of a predominantly academic evaluation of the camgirl business (Butler, 1989). This multifaceted approach to qualitative research allows the study of camgirl work to more accurately reflect the experiences of webcam performers and apply a more rigorous analysis of their role within the broader pornography industry.

## **Literature Review**

The interrelationship between pornography and feminism is central to the understanding of the camgirl business as a transformative evolution within the adult entertainment industry. There is a considerable range of literature available that analyses pornography through a feminist prism, with the issue of sexual liberation essentially dividing the women's rights movement regarding the industry's implications for female empowerment. Sex-positive feminist literature began to appear during the second-wave of feminism, with activists such as Ellen Willis articulating the pro-pornography viewpoint in the late 1970s; Willis's 1979 essay in liberal publication the *Village Voice* entitled 'Feminism, Moralism and Pornography' expressed the belief that moves to censor pornography constituted a restriction on freedom of speech and was contrary to the guiding principles of the feminist movement (1992, pp. 219-227). Willis's subsequent essays served as the foundation for sex-positive feminism, promoting the idea that banning pornography reinforced the Victorian perception of women

as submissive and incapable of sexual gratification. Gayle Rubin – a contemporary of Willis – further argued that anti-pornography feminists had exaggerated the exploitative aspects of the adult industry; in the 1984 book *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Rubin contended that consensual participation in pornography allowed women to determine the way in which they are perceived and did not solely exist as an avenue for male gratification. Early sex-positive feminist literature typically served to defend the participation of women in pornographic productions as a form of sexual liberation; however the advent of the internet has made a re-evaluation of the industry necessary in order to obtain a complete understanding of the modern state of the adult entertainment industry.

An understanding of pornography as a form of media is also important in addressing the appeal of the camgirl genre within the adult entertainment industry; whereas Ellen Willis explored pornography as it related to women as a gender, academics such as Linda Williams have been able to take a more objective perspective on the issue in order to investigate the relationship between explicit material and the response of audiences. Williams – a professor of film studies at University of California, Berkeley – suggested in her 1989 book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* that pornography was an inherently contradictory genre of film that claimed to reveal the ‘truth’ of human sexuality whilst simultaneously adhering to a series of genre-based conventions. Williams claims that these cinematic conventions – including visuals and sound – operate in combination to elicit a physical response from viewers. This evaluation of the way in which sound and imagery has developed throughout the history of pornography has several implications for any study of the camgirl industry; Williams claims that the transition of adult entertainment from primarily male-targeted ‘stag films’ in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the couples-based material of the 1970s occurred as a result of shifting gender dynamics that increased the value of female sexuality. The largely solitary nature of camgirl performance raises questions regarding whether – like the ‘stag films’ of early pornography – this genre is intrinsically skewed towards male gratification at the expense of acknowledging the role of female sexuality in the modern era. Williams’ exploration of pornography as an art-form rather than a social movement provides useful insight into the production of camgirl material and its implications regarding gender dynamics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The substantial impact that pornography has had on the internet is reflected in the comprehensive range of literature that explores its influence on users in a variety of ways.



The majority of recent literature is specifically concerned with the internet's role in the proliferation of child pornography, however limited research has been published in the past year that directly addresses issues relating to gender and empowerment in the adult entertainment industry. Brian McNair, a member of the Stirling Media Research Institute, released a book in 2013 claiming that "we are better off as societies which permit pornography and sexual liberalisation than those which do not" (p. xii); the book – entitled *Porno? Chic!* – goes on to argue that the internet has facilitated the global integration of pornography in mainstream culture and that "there is no evidence other than anecdotal that cultural sexualisation or pornographication has damaged or is damaging women and other groups" (p. 85). This perspective is disputed by a Danish-American study also completed in 2013, wherein a qualitative investigation of Danish pornography consumers showed that increased exposure to adult entertainment resulted in more hostile expressions of sexism within a sample group; Hald, Lange and Malamuth's article 'Pornography, and Sexist Attitudes Among Heterosexuals' claimed that men with a history of consuming pornographic material tended to hold less egalitarian attitudes towards women, conflicting with the sex-positive feminist perspective on pornography. The contrasting findings of these recent studies demonstrate the need for further evaluation of modern pornography and the impact that its integration into mainstream society has had on social attitudes towards women.

The camgirl subsection of the adult entertainment industry has been relatively unexplored in academic literature, with very limited examination of the highly unique aspects of this type of interactive sexual performance on the internet. Much of the literature that directly addresses the role of camgirls within contemporary society comes in the form of investigative journalism; while investigative journalism can be utilised to provide general insights into the practical aspects of the camgirl industry, the largely anecdotal nature of the genre and the lack of academic evidence means that this material being limited in its usefulness (Bacon, 2006). Media organisations such as *The Huffington Post* have recently featured examinations of the camgirl industry, often in the form of editorial debate regarding the dangers associated with working as a webcam performer; in the description for a nineteen minute video entitled 'The Murky Money Behind Cam Girls', *The Huffington Post* refers to the camgirl business as "a multi-billion dollar industry using underage girls and money laundering schemes" while the clip prominently features several women's rights activists speaking out against camgirl-style pornography (Redd, 2012). An article by Allie Conti in *Miami New Times* also focuses on the negative elements of the camgirl industry,

insinuating that camgirl performers have naturally evolved from bulletin boards notorious for featuring child pornography; these media reports are purposefully designed to cast aspersions on camgirl websites and their inherent biases must be taken into account when utilising them as a facet of broader research into the development of the adult entertainment industry.

## **Discussion**

### *Camgirls – An interactive form of adult entertainment*

The growth of the camgirl industry has played a substantial role in the transformation of the adult entertainment business, with greater levels of interactivity essentially altering the transactional relationship between consumer and producer. Mainstream pornography typically involves performers being filmed engaging in sexually explicit behaviour, with this material later released through a production company's distribution system. The core strength of the camgirl business lies in its ability to transcend this traditional method of distribution, with performers able to directly interact with an audience and create customised pornographic material that is broadcasted live across the internet (Senft, 2008, p. 81). Although consumers are able to choose from an expansive range of traditional pornography online, the appeal of the camgirl genre can be attributed to the accessibility of performers and the sense that consumers have control over the actions that take place on screen. This element clearly distinguishes the camgirl business from alternative forms of internet pornography: camgirl performers are able to develop a personal connection with individual audience members utilising open communication, encouraging repeat business and cultivating a dedicated client base (Attwood, 2007). It is this kind of interactivity that separates camgirl material from the 'stag films' explored by Linda Williams – whereas 'stag films' could be seen to objectify female sexuality for a male audience, camgirl performers encourage patrons to articulate their physical responses and show tangible appreciation via tokens or alternative means of payment. Although 'stag films' and camgirl performances are similar in several ways – including their often limited perspective and low production quality – the camgirl genre builds on the foundations established by pornography's 'stag film' origins; the more successful camgirl performers are highly articulate and use verbal communication to provoke responses from consumers, validating Williams' theory that the use of sound and visuals in the adult industry have developed in relation to changing societal understandings of gender dynamics.

The transactional nature of the camgirl business also allows performers to establish firm boundaries in regards to their work: audiences are typically provided with information detailing the specific type of sexual behaviour that performers are comfortable with and at what price. Negotiation between camgirl performers and their audience is an essential aspect of the genre, with the sense that consumers have directed the actions of performers serving to increase investment in the sexual material that is ultimately produced (Jacobs, 2004). On a practical level, becoming a camgirl is the easiest subcategory to join within the adult entertainment industry. Unlike traditional pornography, individuals are not obliged to partner with a production company or talent agency; the only essential requirements to commence work as a camgirl are a computer, a webcam and an internet connection. Performers must then engage with a camgirl hosting website, which provides access to an established customer base and limited promotion of the service across the internet; popular camgirl hosting servers including MyFreeCams, Streamate and LiveJasmine typically promote their service through pop-up advertisements and partnership with traditional pornography websites (Biddle, 2012). Consumers are able to utilise these camgirl databases to select individual performers, using payment methods such as credit cards or PayPal to purchase 'tokens' from the website; these tokens can then be used to 'tip' performers for their service or – in some cases – to give individuals private access to a camgirl (Bocij, 2004).

Camgirl websites manage their payment system in different ways, however the use of tokens as a form of digital currency has been almost universally adopted as standard industry practice. Streaming website MyFreeCams sells tokens in bundles of 200 for US\$19.99 (US\$0.10 per token), 550 for US\$49.99 (US\$0.09 per token) or 900 for US\$74.99 (US\$0.08 per token). Although it is generally free to observe and interact with camgirl performers on this site, a private show would cost around 60 tokens per minute; aside from these private performances, camgirls are able to set their own token benchmarks before undertaking explicit activity in the non-private medium. Hosting websites are entitled to a significant portion of camgirl revenue, with prominent organisation MyFreeCams taking around 40 per cent of performer profits as an administrative fee (Biddle, 2012). Once the hosting organisation has taken its percentage of camgirl revenue, the remainder is transferred to individual performer through a standard electronic banking transfer; camgirls are typically paid their cumulative revenue at regular intervals, with major hosting

organisations paying performers on a weekly or fortnightly basis (Web Modelling Agency, 2014).

Although heavily reliant on their host website to facilitate their business, successful camgirls utilise a variety of promotion techniques in order to drive web traffic and secure an audience for their live streaming performances. Many prominent camgirls engage with social media through platforms like Twitter in order to communicate with their audience; camgirls often tweet reminders regarding the time that they will be performing and occasionally upload explicit material designed to increase their profile and viewership (Senft, 2008). Camgirls such as Aedan Rayne (@AedanRayne) have over sixty-six thousand Twitter followers who are updated on a daily basis with explicit material, updates on her camgirl career and personal anecdotes unrelated to the adult entertainment industry. Social media marketing is a useful tool for camgirls, with Rayne's popularity on Twitter translating to a robust fan base and a Favourite Webcam Girl nomination at the 2014 AVN Awards (Rayne, 2014); maintaining a prominent public profile allows camgirls to cast themselves as pseudo-celebrities, relying on a grassroots word-of-mouth campaign to grow their audience and differentiate themselves from the legion of other camgirls found on major hosting websites. Camgirls with an active public profile are able to supplement the revenue earned on webcam hosting websites by making direct appeals to their fan base; camgirls often use social media to advertise their 'wishlists', allowing fans to subvert the traditional camgirl payment system by sending items directly to performers via mainstream organisations like Amazon (Bocij, 2004). The visibility and accessibility of camgirls on social media has contributed to their increasing prominence within the adult entertainment industry, giving these independent operators the ability to establish themselves as key players in the ongoing evolution of internet pornography.

#### *Defining 'camgirl' – Pornography, prostitution or something else?*

The interactive nature of the camgirl industry poses several difficulties when it comes to placing it on the spectrum of adult entertainment. While the camgirl business shares a number of similarities with modern pornography – including the medium of distribution and style of production – the type of communication between performer and consumer sets it apart from traditional pornographic material. In this respect, the service provided by camgirls can also be compared to that offered by women engaging in prostitution; a personal connection is formed between sex worker and client, wherein the sex worker is

paid in exchange for specific services at the behest of the consumer (Larson, 2004). It may be argued that the medium through which this service is provided is irrelevant to the classification of the practice itself, and that if a camgirl were performing the same actions in person it would inevitably be considered a form of prostitution. Unlike prostitution 'webcam modelling' is not illegal in countries like the United States of America, which differentiates between in-person solicitation and its digital equivalent; while soliciting a woman for sexual services can lead to imprisonment in most American states, the presence of a computer screen as buffer removes most legal restrictions in terms of providing payment for sexual activity (Payne, 2004). This distinction was addressed by Filipino lawmakers in 2012, when the government introduced legislation made camgirl work punishable by a US\$6000 fine and six months imprisonment; the legislation defines 'cybersex' as "any lascivious exhibition of sexual organs or sexual activity, with the aid of a computer system, for favour or consideration" (O'Neil, 2012).

The camgirl business is often described by practitioners as 'webcam modelling', highlighting another potential way of categorising this aspect of the adult entertainment industry. The lack of physical contact between camgirl and client could be seen to have more similarities with professional stripping rather than prostitution. Like strippers, camgirls are paid by consumers to display their body without the expectation of 'actual sexual intercourse'; this definition of webcam modelling would serve to legitimise the practice to a greater degree than either prostitution or pornography (Arthurs, 2006). The practice of camgirls engaging in explicit sexual activity – including vaginal penetration – is problematic when it comes to defining webcam modelling as a form of stripping. While patrons engage with conventional stripping in a relatively passive manner, camgirls perform sexually explicit actions upon the request of their audience; this means that the relationship that the consumer has with a performer transitions into an active collaboration that bears comparison to pornography and prostitution. The complexity involved in defining webcam modelling clearly reflects the multifaceted nature of the genre, which combines elements from a range of adult entertainment classifications in order to provide a holistic service to their audience. 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. Camgirls should

therefore be seen as an evolution of the adult entertainment industry that defies existing categorisation, and must be evaluated accordingly on its own unique qualities.

### *Camgirls and the neo-feminist evolution of pornography*

The independent production of adult entertainment that has emerged with the expansion of the camgirl industry has fundamentally altered the connection between pornography and feminism. The foremost argument made by anti-pornography advocacy groups is that sexually explicit material is produced by patriarchal organisations as a way to objectify and demean women; this perspective has become challenged by the independent nature of the camgirl business, which means that male involvement has become limited and female performers have taken a central role in managing and producing content (Knight, 2000). While it could be argued that these performers are conforming to patriarchal expectations of female sexuality, a guiding principle of the feminist movement is the edict that women have the right to make decisions relating to their body. Performers working as camgirls are not subject to professional direction and are at liberty to make their own decisions in terms of what they will and will not do on camera; professional camgirls typically have an established set of regulations outlining their limits that is made available to audiences prior to and during performances (Attwood, 2011). The decision of how explicit a performance will be is ultimately at the discretion of the individual, making it difficult for anti-pornography feminists to claim that camgirls are being manipulated by an oppressive male-dominated society. To the contrary, it could be seen that camgirls are actively subverting traditional notions of sexuality by wresting control away from men its entirety; the experiences of predominantly male audiences are mediated by female performers who have the option to withdraw their services at any time and for any reason.

The relationship of dominance that exists between a camgirl performer and her audience provides further evidence of the significant role that feminism plays in the modern adult entertainment paradigm. Ethnographic observation of camgirl websites reveals that the vast majority of messages sent to performers during a live show are complimentary; comments of a derogatory nature are usually ignored by the performer or condemned as inappropriate by other audience members. This aspect of the audience-performer relationship highlights that dominant role of the camgirl in this genre of adult entertainment - female performers are venerated by men and “take on the power relations of looking, defying objectification and experimenting with ways of refusing, commanding and controlling the spectators’ gaze”

(Attwood, 2011, p. 214). Direct observation of the camgirl-audience relationship provides a more accurate understanding of the role that feminism plays in modern pornography. Although it is difficult to determine the background and motivation of camgirl patrons, it is evident that regular audience members tend to enforce an organic form of community moderation - camgirls are rarely required to address misogynistic or degrading comments made by patrons, with other consumers often taking action against disrespectful members of the community in a form of 'peer-shaming'. Peer-shaming takes place when members of a particular social group ostracise other members of that community as a way of punishing unacceptable behaviour; this type of social phenomenon traditionally develops from the desire for validation from dominant figures within that particular community (Heaven & Virgen, 2001). This need for validation is a clear reversal of the traditional pornography model, in which 'porn stars' perform in a way designed to garner the consumer support needed to attain elevated status within the adult entertainment community. Whereas in the traditional model women are perform for the approval of men, the camgirl genre places the onus on male audience members to conduct themselves in a way that will earn a performer's approval. This essentially returns control and power over female sexuality to performers in a way that could be seen to enhance the dominance of women in commercialised adult entertainment.

#### *Grassroots entrepreneurialism in camgirl culture*

The driving force behind the rapid expansion of the camgirl industry is the way in which technology gives performers the ability to operate independently of major adult entertainment businesses. The affordability of webcam technology results in negligible levels of capital expenditure, while social media provides performers with a free channel to market and distribute their services (Payne, 2004). Recent trends in the internet pornography industry highlight increasing deregulation of online adult entertainment resulting from the decline of pay-to-view websites; the rise of free pornography on the internet in recent years has created an anarchical business model in which stakeholders are forced to develop alternative means of maintaining profitability. The decline of pay-to-view websites served as a way of equalising the internet pornography business, loosening the control that major corporations once held over the industry and allowing independent performers to access to one of the most lucrative businesses in the virtual marketplace. As in almost every economic boom, the rampant growth in the camgirl industry led to a divergent range in the quality of performers and services offered online – 'webcam modelling' became a broad category that

defined a variety of performance types, from broadcasting commonplace aspects of an individual's daily routine to more explicit sexual material. Although there are several examples of performers that have achieved success without broadcasting sexual content, the majority of prominent camgirl performers are compelled to engage in some form of adult entertainment in order to remain commercially viable and competitive within the industry.

Without the institutional support of an established production company, camgirl performers are forced to function in an entrepreneurial manner in order to operate a financially viable enterprise. Interactivity is the principal commodity sold by camgirls as opposed to traditional pornographic actresses; consumers financially compensate performers for their attention as much as their sexually explicit material (Payne, 2004). Entrepreneurial camgirls have therefore developed innovative methods by which they are able to transform interactivity into a tangible product – many well-known performers offer to sell their fans used underwear or sex toys for a premium cost. Performers often utilise their webcam sessions to add value to the items that they advertise to consumers; by featuring identifiable products in their performances, camgirls essentially create their own merchandise range based on further commercialising the interactive adult entertainment experience (Dobson, 2012). Some performers like American camgirl Ashe Maree offer their personal telephone number for sale, giving consumers unrestricted and exclusive access to performers; in these situations, camgirls will regularly change their contact details and offer patrons the chance to purchase their new details for an additional fee (Maree, 2014). The camgirl business has ushered in several changes to the mainstream adult entertainment industry – by engaging in entrepreneurial innovation, camgirls have set a high expectation for interactivity in adult entertainment and fundamentally altered the performer's transactional relationship with audiences on the internet.

### *Criticism of Pornography and the Camgirl Industry*

The participation of women in the adult entertainment industry is an issue that has been divisive within the feminist community; divergent approaches in addressing female sexuality ultimately led to a separation between sex-positive feminists and anti-pornography advocates. This second-wave schism was driven by the conflict between the principles of sexual liberation and the practicalities of exploitation: whereas sex-positive feminism extolled the genre as a form of empowerment, anti-pornography campaigners like radical



feminist Andrea Dworkin suggested that the adult entertainment industry was underpinned by a culture of coercion and abuse that was fundamentally detrimental to the women's rights movement. Dworkin, who acquired international profile as an opponent of pornography, told the Attorney-General's Commission on Pornography in 1986 that around 70 per cent of adult entertainers had suffered sexual abuse as a child; these statistics were included in the final report into the pornography industry, although Dworkin failed to provide any statistical evidence justifying her claims (BBC News, 2005). Some feminists also claim that – rather than an expression of female sexual liberation – consumption of adult entertainment served to dehumanise women and portray them as passive participants in sexual intercourse; extreme anti-pornography campaigners like Robin Morgan propose that this objectification is a precursor to sexual violence, claiming that “pornography is the theory, rape is the practice” (Segal, 1990). The belief that there is an inherent connection between adult entertainment and sexual violence has informed contemporary feminist critique of camgirls, with the lack of industry regulation seeming to validate the perception that pornographic performers are vulnerable to exploitation and sexual manipulation by an overwhelmingly patriarchal establishment.

Opponents of the camgirl industry claim that the lack of regulation governing the business inevitably leads to an increase in exploitative practices and exacerbated safety concerns for performers. Media coverage of the camgirl community has primarily focused on the prevalence of 'sexcam studios'; these facilities are specifically designed for the purpose of broadcasting camgirl performances, with women employed by these studios forced to give a significant cut of their revenue to studio management (Biddle, 2012). Often located in less regulated countries in Eastern Europe or south-east Asia, camgirl studios have been attacked by women's rights campaigners due to claims that performers are not financially compensated and forced into a form of indentured servitude; action taken by the Filipino government to restrict the establishment of camgirl studios came after reports by non-governmental organisations that they were linked to sexual slavery and people trafficking consortiums (O'Neil, 2012). While supporters of the camgirl industry claim that these studios do not reflect the majority of performers, the remote-broadcasting capabilities of webcam modelling means that it is almost impossible to discern whether an individual is operating as an employee of a larger sexcam studio; although hosting websites like MyFreeCams.com require performers to indicate if they are working as part of a studio upon registration, this represents a tokenistic attempt to provide oversight as there is no effective way to

independently verify this information. Critics of camgirl culture suggest that the prominence of independent, Western women within the industry only serves to obscure the unscrupulous and inherently exploitative nature of sexcam studios.

The argument that camgirl modelling can lead to exploitative practices within the adult entertainment industry is reinforced by the inability of authorities to enforce age restrictions on performers. Anti-pornography activists are often critical of pornographic production studios for objectifying women; however the legitimisation of the adult entertainment industry means that reasonable restrictions are applied in order to ensure the health and safety of those involved. This includes a strict adherence to age restrictions, banning women under eighteen-years-old from appearing in sexually-explicit material and criminalising the dissemination of child pornography (Quayle & Taylor, 2002). The accessibility of webcam technology and camgirl hosting servers gives young women the ability to begin working in the industry with relative ease; hosting websites do not require documentation as proof of age, and as such underage girls are able to confirm their age by checking a box without verification (Bartow, 2008). The possibility that minors may engage in the production of child pornography – autonomously and without external manipulation – is a major challenge for the camgirl industry; staunch anti-pornography activists have noted that the anarchical nature of webcam modelling gives child pornography with an opportunity to enter mainstream internet culture that would not exist in the highly-regulated business of traditional pornography (Payne, 2008). The challenge of policing the age of camgirl performers places the practice in a high-risk category, fuelling the claims of detractors that webcam modelling is susceptible to child pornographers and associated exploitative practices.

The unregulated nature of the camgirl industry also presents considerable welfare concerns for performers, many of whom are untrained and are encouraged to directly communicate with audiences without the safety net of an experienced adult entertainment organisation. Whilst the independent nature of camgirl performing could be seen as an expression of feminist ingenuity, it fundamentally ignores the benefit that institutional knowledge can provide to an inexperienced beginner in the adult entertainment industry; without appropriate protection in place, it is possible that camgirls will fall victim to intense fan interactions such as stalking or otherwise threatening communication (Bocij, 2004). In the same way that the internet has made it easier for amateurs to become involved in the adult

entertainment industry, operating online results in adult performers being considerably more accessible to audiences via social media and live video streaming. One of the major selling points of camgirl culture is the insight that audiences are given into the everyday lives of the performer; whereas this aspect of webcam modelling counters the traditional view of pornography as dehumanising, it contributes to a bond being formed between viewer and performer that could be misinterpreted as an incitement for inappropriate behaviour (Gershon, 2011). The perception that camgirls interact with audiences in a way that incites inappropriate advances is reinforced through the method by which performers are compensated: by requesting that audiences send them gifts from a personalised 'wish list', camgirls could be perceived as blurring the lines between performance and reality by inviting fans to become a part of their life (Bocij, 2004). The interactive nature of webcam modelling poses significant dangers to amateur camgirls who – without an effective safety net – could put themselves at serious risk by tacitly encouraging the formation of unsafe relationships between performers and their audience.

## **Case Studies**

### *Aedan Rayne – Camgirl superstar*

Due to the predominantly amateur nature of webcam modelling, the majority of performers are only identifiable to other members of the camgirl community; on occasion, successful camgirls like Aedan Rayne are able to transcend this niche popularity and are recognised as leaders within the industry. Rayne – a 23-year-old American based in southern Florida – is a camgirl that has been working through hosting website MyFreeCams since 2012; she gained attention in the mainstream adult entertainment industry during 2013 with several nominations as best webcam model of the year (XBIZ, 2014). This rapid growth in popularity can be largely attributed to Rayne's proficiency in cultivating a fan base across a range of digital platforms – aside from her performances on MyFreeCams, Rayne engages with audiences constantly through mediums such as Vine, Tumblr and Twitter. This social media presence clearly demonstrates her prominence within the camgirl community, with Rayne typically sending around a dozen tweets each day to her 68 000 Twitter followers (as at 31/1/14). These tweets include updates on her personal life and camgirl performances, as well as explicit images and clips shared via looping video application Vine. Social media is of considerable importance in Rayne's continued development of a fan base, despite her already considerable following – after a car accident that resulted in hospitalisation in

January 2014, Rayne tweeted seventeen pre-recorded video clips over the course of 24-hours to ensure a consistent flow in explicit content (Rayne, 2014). This commitment to delivering content despite personal hardship illustrates the strength of Rayne's transactional relationship with her fan base, which contributes to her development into one of the best-supported camgirls in the industry.

By utilising a range of entrepreneurial techniques, Aedan Rayne has been able to secure one of the most committed audiences in the camgirl industry – known colloquially as 'the Penguin Army'. The creation of the Penguin Army has allowed Rayne to transform a traditional camgirl business strategy into the development of a considerable personal brand. Consumers are encouraged to tip 500 tokens for the title of 'Ice King' – entitling them to exclusive video content – with a sliding scale of titled positions available to patrons based on how many tokens they have contributed over the preceding month (MyFreeCams, 2014). By trading on this brand awareness, Rayne has been able to stimulate increased income generation from audience members competing for acknowledgment and status within the Penguin Army; in this way, she has transformed the conventional camgirl performance into a holistic cyber-experience rather than a purely transactional interaction. Apart from this arbitrary conferral of status within the Penguin Army, the audience is provided personal access to the performer on a level that exceeds most others in the industry: patrons are able to purchase Rayne's telephone number for 2222 tokens, her used underwear for 1000 tokens or even a lock of the camgirl's hair for 11 111 tokens. This lack of a buffer between Rayne and her audience has contributed to her popularity as a performer, allowing for the creation of the Penguin Army brand; she has recently branched out into the sale of Penguin Army sex toys in a clear demonstration of the commercial potential that exists within the camgirl industry.

#### *Lily Madison – A camgirl beginner's tale*

While professional camgirls like Aedan Rayne have been able to considerable success in a relatively short period of time, the usual narrative of webcam modelling involves an evolution in style and technique. British performer Lily Madison has followed the career trajectory of a typical camgirl, experimenting with the limits of the genre in order to enhance her fan base and find her niche within the industry. Madison, a 22-year-old from London, has been active as a camgirl and glamour model since late 2011; the MyFreeCams performer is known for her large, natural breasts and a quirky style highlighting her overt femininity

(MyFreeCams, 2014b). This stylistic direction can be seen through the design of Madison's MyFreeCams profile page, with a girlish typeset and images of pastry set against a bright pink background. The performer has established an audience primarily through engagement with role play and fetishist behaviour – the camgirl offers pre-recorded role play videos as a cheerleader, school girl and nurse as well as a range of fetish-orientated material. Although Madison has not developed a community to the extent of Rayne's Penguin Army, the names of her best customers are listed on a leader board located on her MyFreeCams profile; she also maintains regular social media contact with her fan base, directly addressing the tweets of her 17 000 strong Twitter following and fostering an ongoing personal connection with her audience (Madison, 2014). This unfiltered communication with her fan base has led to Madison becoming known as one of the most personable performers in the camgirl industry, increasing her grassroots support and cementing her position as an active member of the webcam modelling community.

An ethnographic analysis of Lily Madison's internet presence reveals the camgirl's evolution from a beginner within the industry to a rising star in adult entertainment. Madison's MyFreeCams profile makes an explicit statement regarding the limits of her camgirl performances: it says that she will not meet with any audience members as she is "not an escort neither do i want to be (sic)" and that "you must be respectful to me and my room at all times or i will ban and block you forever (sic)" (MyFreeCams, 2014b). These firm regulations indicate Madison's desire to separate her personal life from her work as a camgirl, in contrast to the variety of camgirls that are willing to negotiate private bookings for a fee; despite expressing these hard limits, Madison's recent evolution as a performer shows the beginning of an evolution in the type of material she is willing to produce. In early 2014, Madison attended a gathering of webcam models in Las Vegas called *Cam Girl Mansion* during which a notable shift in her style occurred: despite previously participating exclusively in solo performances, Madison filmed her first sexually explicit scenes with fellow camgirl Allie Bay. This fifteen minute girl-on-girl performance was later offered for sale on Madison's MyFreeCams profile for 300 tokens, marking the first occasion in which the camgirl's business ventures were extended beyond individual camgirl activity. Madison's stylistic progression can be linked to her increasing prominence as a performer, with an escalation in the explicit nature of her content correlating with an increased participation in the camgirl community.

## Conclusion

The decline of pay-to-view internet pornography has forced purveyors of adult entertainment to find innovative ways in which to make a profit from explicit material. The advent of the camgirl genre has had a transformative impact on the manner in which performers interact with an audience, resulting in an increased expectation of personalisation and customisation in the production of pornographic material. In order to remain competitive within the industry, it is necessary for camgirls to provide their audience with extensive and – at times – intrusive access to their real lives; an evaluation of the camgirl community suggests that the most successful performers are those that provide the greatest level of personal access to their fan base. As this genre of adult entertainment continues to develop, it is clear that webcam modelling has begun to transcend traditional definitions of adult entertainment: while there is generally no physical contact between performer and consumer, interactivity and the ability to customise a sexual experience fundamentally separates camgirls from traditional pornographic actresses. The dominant role of amateurs within the camgirl community allows for the organic development of the genre, however the lack of external control that is inevitably associated with amateur pornography presents a range of regulatory challenges. As the camgirl sector of adult entertainment becomes increasingly prominent, it will be necessary for industry leaders and lawmakers to craft legislation designed to ensure that it does not become an avenue for sexual exploitation or other potentially high-risk practices.

The independent and entrepreneurial nature of the camgirl genre challenges the argument made by anti-pornography feminists that adult entertainment is ultimately detrimental to the women's rights movement. The assertion by anti-pornography feminists that the production of sexually explicit material degrades women is fundamentally tested by the growth of the camgirl community; this subgenre of adult entertainment has defied the existing business model by allowing female performers to take full control over the content that they produce and the management of their commercial affairs. The camgirl genre could be seen to empower women within the industry, subverting traditional power relationships by compelling male audience members to seek the approval and acknowledgment of a female performer. The accessibility of the camgirl genre means that it is feasible for any woman to launch their own commercial venture whilst retaining the vast majority of revenue earned. Given that the vast majority of consumers are heterosexual men, the

camgirl business is one of the few industries in which women have an almost exclusive monopoly; it could be argued that the dominance of women in the camgirl profession validates the perspective of sex-positive activists that pornography is a liberating expression of female sexuality. The camgirl genre will continue to evolve as a form of adult entertainment with considerable implications for the future of commercial internet pornography. Although the overall impact of webcam modelling cannot yet be determined, it is clear that the growing prominence of the camgirl community will necessitate a re-evaluation of adult entertainment from a modern feminist perspective.

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