Behind the screen: Indian women on adult webcam platforms

Aishwarya Shridhar

Gender Perspectives on the Digital Economy

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Authored by:
Aishwarya Shridhar[1]

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[1] Independent researcher; Email: aishshridhar@gmail.com

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. What are adult webcam platforms?

Adult webcam platforms are digital platforms where webcam models can livestream themselves to an audience for payment. The stream is usually sexually explicit but may not necessarily be so. These digital platforms operate in similar ways—every stream is free for public viewing, however, 'tokens' may be bought by viewers and offered voluntarily as 'tips' to models. Adult webcam platforms use these virtual tokens rather than direct payments to get around regulations by local financial institutions which may restrict the purchase of adult content (Barrett-Ibarria, 2020). A chat room attached to the livestream allows viewers to interact with the model. Models may set up a 'tip menu', listing several items and their cost in tokens. These could include private messages, friend requests, saying phrases, and sexually explicit actions. A crowdfunding arrangement can be established to achieve 'tip goals' set by the model where they commit to a particular action when they meet the target. Webcam models also earn tokens through private shows or group shows and subscriptions to their profile. The models can convert the tokens they earn into cash and receive a payout from the platform.

The first prototype of a webcam platform called 'Jennicam' was set up in 1996 by an individual, Jennifer Ringley (BBC, 2016). She had a constant livestream running from her dormitory room, where she exhibited all parts of her life—studying, daily chores, sexual activity, etc. This concept was taken further by Amanda in 1998, whose website 'AmandaCam' added a chat feature where viewers could interact with her (Senft, 2008). This was a critical development in the evolution of webcam platforms. Inspired by these individual streamers, adult webcam platforms by larger companies emerged, allowing multiple webcam models to stream at once and letting viewers choose from numerous streams. MyFreeCams, one of the oldest adult webcam platforms, was established in 2004 and remains among the most popular of them (Henderson, 2011).

Adult webcam platforms are extremely popular, with monthly unique viewers ranging from 2 million to 13 million on some of the most well-known platforms (Rabouin, 2016). A survey of 655 webcam models in 2021 revealed that top-earning models in the United States earned close to USD 6000 per week, while lower-earning or beginner models earned about USD 100 per week (Ready Set Cam, 2022). Earnings depend on several factors, such as the number of hours spent streaming and the model's experience level. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in the use of these sites by webcam models and by viewers. Stripchat, one such platform, noted a 72% spike in traffic since

2020 with over 900 million new users signing up, and over 300,000 new webcam models streaming on the platform (Stripchat, 2020).

Adult webcam platforms can be situated in the larger context of the platform economy. Like many other digital platforms, webcam models are treated as individual entrepreneurs rather than employees. This framing—prevalent under platform capitalism—ends up prioritizing competitiveness over labor solidarity, leading to highly atomized workers who are unable or uninclined to collectively organize (Vallas, 2018). Van Doorn (2017) highlights how platforms, by design, offer "immunity" to both platform owners and consumers by absolving them of responsibilities that traditionally belong to employers. This dynamic exists on adult webcam platforms as well, where models are primarily responsible for their own security and have no fixed income, yet are also subject to control by the platform without any workplace regulations or data and privacy protections. Additionally, the "network effect" means webcam models are reliant on the platform due to its popularity with consumers (Rand, 2019) leaving them with no choice but to work as per the platform's design.

1.2. The digitalization of sex work during the COVID-19 pandemic

The development of digital technologies has enabled many kinds of virtual or online sex work. Besides the more traditional "phone sex", there are platforms that advertise in-person sexual services, and platforms that allow new forms of sexual labor in virtual spaces (Cunningham et al., 2018). Digital technologies have opened up opportunities for sex workers and may offer benefits. For example, virtual sex may be less risky due to the lack of physical contact, preventing STI transmission (Miller & Read, 2005). Increased anonymity, protection from law enforcement, and the ability to screen potential clients more thoroughly are some other advantages of digitally mediated sex work (Jones, 2015). However, working in digital environments comes with specific risks. They include the increasing isolation of sex workers, online harassment, doxing and stalking, and data privacy concerns (Jones, 2015). The inequality in technology access and digital literacy also means that not all sex workers are able to protect themselves adequately online.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have led to the large-scale transition of many sex workers into online spaces. Hamilton et al. (2022), conducted a study to see how sex workers experienced this transition from in-person sex work to online sex work. Although the participants spoke of some benefits, many reported increased anxiety due to public exposure and extreme burnout due to increased availability. Making money through online sex work usually takes a larger time commitment and energy investment as compared to in-person sex work. While the isolation,

anxiety, and loneliness during this period led to an increase in the demand for online sex services, job and income loss across the board means users are not spending as much money on these services (Nelson et al., 2020).

In the Indian context, Khandekar (2020) explores how sex workers transitioned to using technology to continue providing services to clients, primarily with phone sex. Singh & Vashisht (2021) discuss how this transition has been detrimental to their livelihoods. It is not a viable solution for most sex workers, who belong to lower socio-economic classes, as they lack the private space required to provide virtual sexual services and do not possess adequate digital skills to leverage these technologies effectively. Costs of purchasing a smartphone and internet also hindered their ability to earn an income through these means.

1.3. Relevance of the study

The design of adult webcam platforms has significant implications on the proper remuneration of webcam models' labor and their safety and security. Currently, the information on Indian webcam models is very limited. However, preliminary observations and case studies from other countries indicate that the number of women working on these platforms is increasing. Former in-person sex workers, unemployed women, single mothers, and several others are seeking new opportunities created by the digital economy in situations of uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

India has among the highest number of visitors to Stripchat, especially since the lockdown, and "Indian" was the most searched category among users (Stripchat, 2020). This is further evidence that such platforms are highly popular in India, yet the literature and research available on the topic do not reflect these trends or address them. This work entails a number of risks that are not fully understood or disclosed due to its social and legal status that renders it invisible. Despite this invisibility, webcam models are threatened by the large-scale collection of highly sensitive data that could expose their identity and threaten their well-being. Further, platform policies affect their ability to earn a stable income. As these platforms are usually based in the USA and Europe, there may be more barriers on webcam models from the Global South to avail of payment in consistent and timely ways. This has not been investigated in the Indian context.

Although there are several webcam models from India, there is no information available on their earnings, practices, and experiences. In 2017-2018, the Periodic Labour Force Survey showed that 93.1% of Indian women in rural areas and 77.2% of Indian women in urban areas were informally employed (Chakraborty, 2021). Women in India lost more jobs during the COVID-19

pandemic, with 47% suffering permanent job loss as compared to only 7% of men (Azim Premji University, 2021). Considering this unprecedented situation, many women turned to webcam modelling which allowed them to earn money from home during the lockdown. However, webcam modelling is yet another manifestation of women's informal work that is delegitimized due to its hidden nature and gray legal status, meaning these women have no worker protections and their working conditions are unregulated. This academically neglected group warrants further study.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study aims to illustrate the experiences of Indian women who use adult webcam platforms as an income source. It conceptualizes webcam modelling as work by understanding webcam models' motivations, working hours, investments, risks and mitigation strategies, and practices to maximize benefits. The study also analyses the design of adult webcam platforms and its impacts on working conditions, remuneration, and practices. Further, it explores the long-term goals, aspirations, perceptions, and practices of Indian webcam models with reference to the sociocultural and economic context of India. To investigate these questions, the study uses quantitative methods to analyze data on general trends in Indian webcam models' operations and qualitative methods to understand their subjective experiences.

2.2. Quantitative study

The site of research was a popular adult webcam platform after filtering for Indian models. Data was manually collected from all streams (N=108). These streams were viewed on different days and at different time points. As this data is publicly available, there was no need to register or sign up to collect this information. The information collected through observation is as follows:

- Username
- Date and time
- Practice for anonymity (masks, cam placement, none)
- Audience size (with and without tokens)
- Number of male and female performers
- Camera type (mobile or web camera)
- 'Lovense' toy activation[2]
- Stream quality (lag frequency; camera quality; lighting)

Based on time of streaming, each subject was assigned a category—(a) 00:00 to 06:00 IST (b) 06:00 to 12:00 IST (c) 12:00 to 18:00 IST (d) 18:00 to 00:00 IST. Based on the quality of the stream, each subject was given a score—1 being poor, 2 being moderate, and 3 being good.

Associations were checked between audience size and stream quality; audience size and time of

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[2] The 'Lovense' is an audio-activated sex toy that vibrates when the sound associated with tipping plays: It is very popular among webcam models and is used to encourage tipping among viewers.

streaming; and audience members with tokens and without. Associations were also checked for the type of camera and anonymity practices, and its impact on the number of viewers. Scatter plots were generated for these associations. Besides this, a bar graph was generated to understand the percentage of viewers with tokens based on audience size.

Results

Significant correlations were found between stream quality and audience size: Refer to Figure 1. A significant but weaker association was observed between time of recording and total audience size: Refer to Figure 2. No significant associations were found between camera type and audience size. No association was found between the anonymity practice and the total audience size either.

Significant associations were observed between the audience size and viewers with tokens. Figure 3 shows the percentage of viewers without tokens increases significantly with an increase in audience size. Those with up to 33 viewers have an average of about 15% of the audience as members with tokens. Those with about 34 to 148 viewers have 6% of their total audience who are paying members. And those with 149 to 2850 viewers have only about 3% of their total audience as paying members.
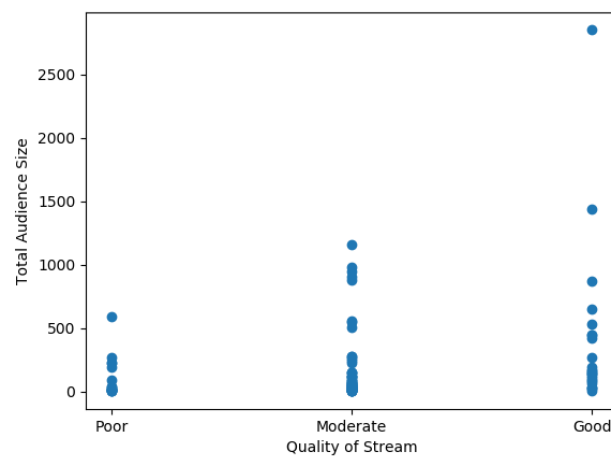
Figure 1: Total audience size vs. Quality of stream
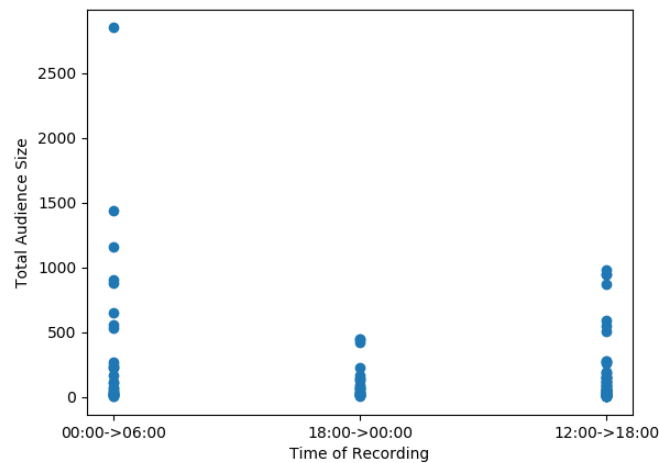
Figure 2: Total audience size vs. Time of recording
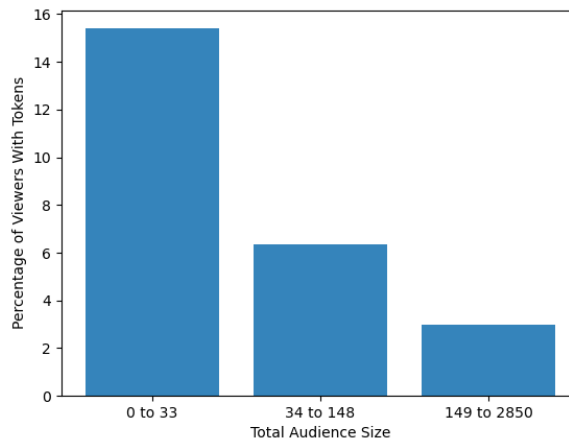
Figure 3: Percentage of viewers with tokens as per audience size

2.3. Qualitative study

Semi-structured interviews and observation were used for the qualitative study. Approximately one hundred streams were observed for understanding the model's engagement with users, interactions in the chatroom, and aspects of platform design.

To approach potential participants for interviews, an account was created on the platform and tokens were bought. The models were approached through private messaging first. The study was explained and their consent was obtained via message. Most models refused to participate. It appeared they were wary of the researcher's intentions, concerned about security, or did not want to reveal information about themselves. Therefore, random sampling was done based on whoever

had a positive response.

If the model consented, an 'exclusive private' show[3] was initiated with them. Both video cameras were switched on to establish rapport. They were paid for the entire duration of the exclusive show. A total of eleven interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. The questions asked broadly covered themes such as the circumstances that led them to webcam modelling, whether they see it as full time and sustainable work, their experience with the platform's policies, their ability to access technology and utilize strategies to maximize their income, their income satisfaction and experiences with payouts, the risks they encounter and how they alleviate it, the extent to which they perceive the work as lucrative or desirable, and their future plans to exit or stay on the platform. Follow-up questions were asked based on new insights.

2.4. Ethical concerns

- **Consent:** It is crucial that the participant is fully informed about the study and the context of the researcher, as this may impact their willingness to participate. The study was explained through a personal message. The interview was conducted only if the participant consented after this.

- **Remuneration:** The participant was compensated with the value of a 'private show' of an equivalent time to the interview. This ensured they did not lose out on potential earnings.

- **Ensuring anonymity:** Anonymity is an important consideration for women in the sex work industry. This extends to those engaged in webcam modelling who face different kinds of risks. The anonymity of all participants was protected and no questions that would identify them were asked. A pseudonym is used instead of their username.

- **Discomfort:** Participants were free to refuse to answer any question that they felt uncomfortable with. They could also end the interview at any time.

- **Follow-up:** The participant may want more information about the study and how the data obtained was used. They were given the researcher's contact details to follow up.

- **Data collection:** The quantitative data collected was publicly available. The analyzed data is presented in ways that protect anonymity and convey general trends rather than

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[3] In an 'exclusive private' show, no other viewer can watch the show, thereby ensuring privacy during the interview.

specific information about user practices.

- **Data misuse:** The data obtained was sensitive. To ensure no data misuse, all collected data was stored on an encrypted drive.

- **Censorship of the website:** There is a possibility the website hosting the adult webcam platform may be banned or reported if identified. So, the website is not named in the report. This also offers additional protection for the participants and ensures further anonymity.

Chapter 3: Findings and discussion

3.1. Challenging the notion of webcam modelling as 'non-work'

Antonia Hernández (2020) describes the notion of 'non-work' that adult webcam platforms appeal to for absolving themselves of responsibilities toward webcam models. In presenting webcam modelling as a leisure activity because it is done on a free platform with a voluntary payment system, the model's labor goes unrecognized and undervalued. This section challenges this notion by presenting evidence from the collected data to suggest that webcam models invest considerable amounts of time, energy, and finances into their business practice; their motivations are primarily financial; and they perform affective labor while working.

Investments & business practice

Blog posts intended for novice webcam models emphasize the necessity of proper equipment to be successful (Lansing, 2019). A high-quality webcam, good lighting, and a fast internet connection are listed as prerequisites. The quantitative data analyzing the quality of stream with audience size suggests a positive correlation between the two. A good stream is one that runs smoothly with clear image quality. Models are aware of these requirements and ensure they are in place while streaming. Users in the chatroom may also comment on the stream quality, making it clear when there are lags, buffering, or a lack of clarity. This provides feedback to the model who can then adjust the stream or acquire the equipment needed to rectify these issues. Many models also had the 'Lovense' sex toy, which enabled further interactions from viewers. This, too, is a considerable investment, costing about USD 100.

Webcam modelling also requires business acumen and planning. It can be seen as a form of digital entrepreneurship (Dy, 2019). One of the models, Shalini, discusses the research she did prior to joining:

> *"I observe other models, their tip menus, I look at their shows, and then I figure out how to do these things. This is how I learned how to talk, how to engage. How did they get a "king of the room[4]?" How do they use different things to get more tokens? I want that too."*

The research has to be undertaken independently as the platform does not provide this information. Additionally, Indian models may not be able to access forums and blogs as easily due to the language barrier. They primarily gain knowledge through research or experience. This prior

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[4] "King of the Room" refers to the user who has spent the most amount of tokens on a particular webcam model. This is displayed publicly on the stream and the user receives a badge indicating the same.

research, whether it is through observation of other models, or through forums and blog posts, is required to maximize popularity and income. For example, models who did not know how to set up tip menus were unable to encourage more audience engagement. In general, several models mentioned how they had difficulties setting up, and were assisted by others, or did not know how to increase their audience size and make more money. This suggests that investments, time, and dedication are required for those intending to earn their income primarily from webcam modelling.

Working hours

Adult webcam platforms purport that they offer flexibility to models as they can work for any number of hours at any time. However, this is challenged in several ways. A survey detailing the income of webcam models revealed the number of hours spent working is a strong determinant of income, with those who spent 35+ hours a week on the job—which would constitute a full-time job—making significantly more (Ready Set Cam, 2022). Vlase & Preoteasa (2020) use the case study of Romanian webcam models to show they spend long working hours that go beyond conventional work hours due to their financial circumstances. Flexibility becomes a cover for unregulated labor that is not subject to the limits of stipulated working hours in formal establishments.

Quantitative data for this study suggested there is a correlation between audience size and time of streaming. The highest number of audience members were observed in the 00:00 to 06:00 IST slot. This is corroborated by one of the interview respondents who said most users arrive after 10 PM. This challenges the "flexibility" of webcam modelling. It may actually be inconvenient as the hours one can expect more activity is late at night, requiring significant lifestyle changes to accommodate.

Most models said they worked about five to seven days a week, for at least four to five hours, if not more. This was also evident in the preliminary research observations, where many models were streaming at different hours on different days. Three of the models mentioned they work even when they do not want to and feel compelled to do so in order to make money. Sunita said working for a limited amount of time does not achieve much:

> *"I can't come for just an hour or two. It takes time for the audience to come, and become bigger. Only after two hours do I even start seeing some major engagement. But I also can't sit and work for too many hours."*

Setting up "tip goals" via the platform also illustrates this: the closer the tip goal is to reaching the

target—which can take hours—the more audience members are willing to contribute.

It also takes time and work to build relationships and a user base models can rely on for a continued income. Khushi talks about the learning curve in webcam modelling:

"It took me time to understand what the other person, the customer, actually wants and how to do that for them. Before, it was not very clear to me what I needed to do. Now I understand it better and things go more smoothly."

Not only are the working hours for a webcam model in line with standard full time working hours (if not more), time also needs to be invested consistently into the endeavor to establish a customer base and learn how best to interact with customers, much like any other business.

Recognizing affective labor

Bolton (2009) criticizes conceptualizations of affective labor as being "immaterial, unproductive, unskilled and outside of the labor process" with reference to women, who are the ones mostly performing this kind of labor. She argues such work is not immaterial: it contains physical components and has material consequences. This is true of webcam modelling as well, which largely consists of women performing in specialized ways that require physical engagement in combination with the emotional, bringing into question the "immateriality" of such labor.

Three of the interviewed models said they see themselves as service providers, where their service is to entertain viewers with a good show. The entertainment consists of sexual acts they may be asked to perform, but it goes beyond that to include casual or deep conversation, giving advice, making jokes, etc. Models preferred to discuss this aspect of their work rather than the sexual. Sunita says, of the varied nature of her work:

"Whoever is on this site, they are doing the same kind of thing, being naked or flirting. I thought, why not do different things? I can entertain people. I can sing, I can put music on. I even dance, I talk to people, and if someone needs advice, I can give them that too. They also love it when I swear at them. And everyone tells me, 'Your shows are the best shows'... My words have a lot of value here."

Their tip menus also contain more than sexual items: sharing their phone number, sending friend requests, sending private messages, speaking out the user's name, etc.

Sunita said one reason for her popularity is that her audience recognizes her as "genuine". She believes the way she is online is the same way she is outside, too. Anjali and Uday—who are married and do webcam modelling as a couple—expressed a similar sentiment: Viewers enjoy

looking at couples like them who have real "chemistry". The performance of authenticity is a part of the professionalization of amateurism, as noted by Nayar (2017). However, this authenticity is also mediated through what the viewer desires. The webcam model thus performs through a complex interplay between the expression of their own personality and the accommodation of the fantasies of viewers. Sunita says:

> "One thing I want to tell other webcam models is: Don't sit there looking bored, your head in your hands. Be lively and interact with them. They're here to watch a good show… Sometimes I do things I don't want to do. But I know the audience pays out of their pocket for it. So, I owe it to them."

And Uday says:

> "We are here to fulfil the fantasies of the audience, the things they cannot do themselves."

Sunita and Uday and Anjali are among the more popular streamers with a large number of followers. They recognize the value of their authenticity to viewers. At the same time, they acknowledge their responsibility in entertaining and providing a service to those who are paying for it.

Affective labor can translate into relationships with specific users—romantic or platonic—which may coexist as both professional and personal. Shalini spoke in detail about the friends she made on the platform. She emphasized how she differentiated between friends and non-friends:

> "I have made a lot of friends on this platform. I know they're friends because they don't expect me to do sexual things. They simply want to talk to me and enjoy my company."

However, although Shalini sees them as friends, she herself did not open up or reach out for support the way they did with her. She saw this as a part of the service she provides:

> "People share their problems with me all the time. It feels good to know that I've been of use to someone, that I'm in their thoughts, and that they can share what's happening in their life with me."

Nayar (2017) notes this distinction as well: the performance of authentic friendships can originate from genuinely liking someone, but is also strategic in ensuring the retention of regular clients. The webcam model would not be friends with someone she does not actually like to interact with (in Shalini's case, perhaps they are those who make sexual demands from her), as it poses more of a challenge to perform authenticity and cater to the desires of those she does not appreciate in some way.

Affective labor can also be understood in terms of the self-regulation of negative emotions

through the course of work. This is termed "emotional labor" by Wharton (2009), who calls this "the process by which workers are expected to manage their feelings in accordance with organizationally defined rules and guidelines." Webcam models are subject to large levels of verbal harassment and abuse due to the unregulated nature of the platform that allows for anonymity (Cuen, 2016). While there may be no formal rules indicating how they must behave, it is implicit that this is a part of the job and must be dealt with. Several of the interviewed models said the harassment, insults, and bad language used against them was distressing and made them cry in the beginning. However, later, they learned to cope with this in a number of ways. Chandni says:

> *"Even if they are rude to me, I'm always sweet to them. I try to manage the situation by talking very sweetly."*

Sunita, too, learned how to cope with negative comments over time and became more resilient. But they still affect her and she says:

> *"Ask for whatever you want. Say what you want. Just don't make any personal attacks. And I speak on behalf of all the webcam models here when I say this to viewers. Respect all models. You do not know why someone is here and doing this work. Many of us are here because we are compelled to be here. You are getting entertained, so enjoy that. Give respect, get respect."*

Most other models said they used the in-built security features on the platform such as banning, blocking, and muting, to protect themselves from harassers.

As noted by Van Doorn & Velthuis (2018), effective communication skills, emotional calculations, and a lively personality contribute to success on the platform. Thus, not only is affective labor far from immaterial and non-productive, it is skilled labor. Webcam models like Sunita, who manage to leverage their authenticity and sociable personality, do well. On the other hand, models who are quieter, for whom such interactions do not come naturally, cannot succeed.

Motivations, Livelihoods, and Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jones (2016) discusses webcam models' motivations as being pleasure-driven and a form of "anti-work" in which pleasure is the focus, and the job is done through the experience of pleasure. The relative lack of danger as compared to street-based sex work contributes to the appeal and ability to maximize pleasure. This may represent the ideal circumstances under which webcam modelling is taken up freely. However, it does not reflect the motivation of most Indian models. The study on Romanian webcam models by Vlase & Preoteasa (2020) highlighted the models' financial motivations and the desire for flexibility as advertised by the platforms. In India,

too, this appears to be the case. Ten of the eleven interviewed models said they were compelled to do this due to their financial conditions. Several of them had lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns. Raina says:

> *"This is the only work that supported us during the lockdown so I am grateful for it. I am OK with continuing with this."*

Sunita also says:

> *"One of the things that draws people to this work is that no one wants to go out and work, as they do not know when another lockdown will be imposed. Here, you can sit at home, do a show, and make money."*

Prior to this, the models had worked in factories, tailoring, and in offices as tele-callers. Others were housewives but needed additional household income. Two of them expressed that they would probably not be here if not for the lockdowns. Three models mentioned they are not well-educated enough to find a different job, and that led them to this work.

Many of them said they cannot imagine anyone would do this unless they needed to. Two of them expressed their desire to open a small business of their own after they earn enough money. Others stated they would exit if they found any other good opportunity. However, some of them said they saw themselves continuing with this for as long as it works out for them: This was a lucrative opportunity that allowed them to work from home, independently. Motivations of models were also indicated on the "Goals"[5] customization on the profile: it could range from earning money for family, a new baby, or to buy a new house.

The only exceptions among the interview participants were Anjali and Uday, who said their motivation was to have fun while entertaining people and not to make money. Uday works in technology service, and Anjali is a housewife. Their financial circumstances were better in comparison, and this possibly allowed them to pursue webcam modelling as an avenue for pleasure.

3.2. Platform design and working conditions

Van Doorn & Velthuis (2018) highlight the role of the platform economy in how adult webcam platforms function. These platforms configure a specific competitive environment within which

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[5] An optional customization on the profile where the model can indicate a specific goal she has in her life and how many tokens will be required to fulfil it, and how many tokens have been collected. This is different from "tip goals": Per-session goals indicated in the chatroom that involve the model committing to a particular act for the audience, rather than her own goals.

models act as individual entrepreneurs, yet are simultaneously constrained by specific aspects of the platform's design. A degree of technological and digital knowledge is also required to leverage the platform to its fullest. This section will discuss the ways in which Indian webcam models navigate the platform and how they work.

Security and privacy

Webcam models may experience security and privacy concerns through two avenues: security in their engagement with users; and the security of their data and information. Spammers run rampant across webcam platforms. In several streams that were observed, chat rooms were practically unusable due to the barrage of spam messages which included sharing numbers, advertising other models, or advertising services and products. Besides spammers, harassers, trolls, and scammers either try to verbally abuse the model or get them to perform for free.

There are options available to mitigate this: Appointing moderators (usually viewers who gain the trust of the model over time) to monitor the chat while the model is busy; activating bots to prevent spammers; or muting "gray"[6] users so they cannot use the chatroom. However, not all webcam models are able to use these options. Of the interviewed models, several said they prefer to block those who use abusive language. Most models had gray users muted, preventing them from participating in the chatroom. Moderators were observed in some of the more popular streams.

Data privacy concerns are especially consequential when it comes to adult webcam platforms. Security breaches have been reported on these platforms, where email addresses and IP addresses (that could be used to locate physical addresses) were leaked (Paganini, 2021). This could lead to doxing, harassment, blackmail, and a threat to physical security. The interviewed models, however, did not seem concerned about the possibility of data breaches even though they stated they had to provide their Aadhar card to set up their account. This could be because they were not aware of this threat or its potential consequences. However, two of the models were upset about their streams being recorded and displayed on different platforms. Chandni says:

> *"The one thing about this job that I do not like… I feel really bad when I see that people have put recordings of my show on Google. Some people make videos of private shows too… I used to show my face during private shows, and now I have stopped that too."*

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[6] "Gray" users are those that do not have any tokens in their wallet or have never purchased them, indicated by the gray color of their username in the chatroom.

As no mechanism on the platform inhibits screen recordings; it is impossible to prevent it from happening. Several sites exist for the sole purpose of collecting and storing recordings of webcam models. A large number of mirror sites that replicate the original site's stream also exist, so one stream can be viewed through multiple avenues. This is not only a privacy concern; it also has implications for fair remuneration as the model's stream is made even more accessible without their consent. They are not compensated in any way for this increased availability and only face additional risks due to it. Additionally, as observed in the quantitative analysis (Figure 3), an increase in the audience size primarily means an increase in the number of non-paying viewers. Thus, the presence of mirror sites in combination with non-paying viewers means that the vast majority of their labor is executed for free.

Entry of new models

As discussed earlier, more women are turning to webcam modelling for making an income. The "flooding" of the labor pool has consequences due to low barriers of entry and increasing influx of newcomers and amateurs (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). This was noticed by the interviewed models as well. Anjali and Uday said the entry of new models has led to a greater number of scammers who take money without performing in exchange:

> *"They only look at the earnings, not at what's right or wrong. This makes things harder for people like us who are genuinely working. Our reputation is ruined and the audience has less trust in us."*

This wariness among audience members affects their ability to work. Sunita, too, said the entry of more scammers has led to a mistrust in genuine users like her, who are expected to do more to prove their trustworthiness.

Sunita also remarked on another major issue that cropped up with the influx of new models on the site:

> *"These new models have caused a lot of problems for us and have ruined the reputation of the entire site. They have also ruined things for other models. They sit there, in the open, completely nude. What excitement will remain now? If the audience is getting to see what they want for free, then why will they come to any other stream?... They think them being nude will help them get more audience members, that's why they do it. And yes, they will get a bigger audience, but what is the point? They are watching it all for free. And now us models, who prefer to do things differently are affected even though we do not want to compete with them."*

This aligns with Van Doorn & Velthuis' analysis of the competitive environment configured by adult webcam platforms which they characterized as a "race to the bottom". Models see their rates decline and the expectations from them increase when the competition gets more "cutthroat". They may feel compelled to do more for fewer tokens. For better working conditions and the proper remuneration of labor, the models in Van Doorn & Velthuis' study highlighted the importance of properly valuing one's shows and oneself. Sunita, too, expressed a similar sentiment saying she loved her body and thought it was worth a lot, so why not make someone earn to see it? This ties in with how most of the interviewed models engaged in sexual activity only when it was absolutely required.

Payments

Hernández's (2020) work on the cost and value of tokens reveal another aspect of the exploitative mechanisms underlying this system. Tokens are purchased by viewers at varying prices (the higher the number of tokens bought at a time, the less the cost). However, when models convert the tokens to cash to receive their payout, the exchange rate is fixed at a price that is about half the cost viewers purchase them at. The difference is what constitutes the platform's commission. This disparity in the value chain means the webcam platform may end up keeping approximately 50% of the money spent on the site. Besides this, multiple legitimate payment options exist to buy tokens, but limited options are available for payouts, because a lot of regular financial services such as PayPal do not allow sex work related payments.

This was corroborated by the interviewed participants. Most of them said receiving payments was a challenge: There are only a few options available for payouts. On the other hand, customers buying tokens are able to use legitimate options such as UPI and debit or credit card transactions. Models in India are able to receive payouts through cryptocurrency or international wire transfers. International wire transfers often get stuck, require a great deal of identifying information (such as bank details, full name, etc.), and take a long time to go through. Cryptocurrency transactions, although instant, come with a number of challenges in set up, investment, and payouts, and need to go through other channels to be available to models. Uday said:

> *"We have received payments successfully the last few times, but this time it is stuck. I tried following up with the bank but we do not have any information yet."*

Most models, however, preferred not to receive payments directly from the platform. Instead, they linked it to another individual's bank account and received payments from them. They said this

way was more convenient for them both for reasons of anonymity but also because they did not feel comfortable with handling the payments themselves. Khushi says:

> *"I get payments through someone else's account. They linked their account to the platform and then they send me the money every month. This is better because it is too much trouble to do it all ourselves."*

Sunita, too, has a similar approach:

> *"I asked someone else[7] to link their account so they can send me payments. Because there are a lot of problems, sometimes it gets stuck and doesn't come to you even if the money goes from your balance. But I am not working 'under' anyone, I don't want to lose my independence. This person just helps me get my money."*

Working in a studio

Vlase & Preoteasa (2020) describe the phenomenon of studios emerging to capitalize from the growing webcam modelling trend. Many models opt to work from studios for a number of reasons: It offers them privacy, especially if they have family members at home, and the studio arranges for high quality equipment which they may not be able to invest in otherwise. However, the existence of studios makes webcam models vulnerable to a third party that takes a significant cut from their income besides the platform's own commission.

Chandni was one of the participants in the study who works from a studio. She said each room is equipped with equipment such as a web camera, microphone, high speed internet connection, and lighting to facilitate streaming. There was a marked difference in the quality of her stream compared to most other streams observed due to the higher quality of the equipment. The studio also appears to exert control over the model, undermining the independence usually associated with this work. Before the interview started, Chandni called the studio manager to ask for permission to participate. The studio also sets up their profile and tip menus. When asked why she prefers working out of a studio, she said:

> *"Payment problems happen often on this site. The studio sorts that out for us. In the studio, we can relax and work freely, we can take breaks whenever we want, have some tea and snacks. It is up to us, how much we want to work. No one forces us to do anything."*

She was unsure of the cut taken by the studio, and said it is possibly about 50% (this is almost

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[7] Several models mentioned these intermediaries but when asked for specifics, gave vague responses saying it was just a friend or someone who agreed to help them out.

equal to the cut taken by the platform as well). However, Chandni seemed satisfied with the arrangement at the studio, and did not think the studio managers were exploitative. She mentioned she had freedom to choose her hours. Consistent payments given directly to the model lend some structure and formality to the work. It is clear this is another motivation for why they may prefer to work out of a studio: it offers stability they would not have if they worked independently. Technological and digital assistance is also valuable especially if they have no prior experience or capital to make investments.

3.3. Webcam modelling in India: Context-specific concerns

Digital sex work such as webcam modelling comes with a different set of risks, primarily the exposure of one's identity through doxing or security breaches (Henry, 2017). India's social and cultural context makes webcam modelling especially risky, as the social consequences of being outed as a webcam model amongst a close-knit community could be devastating. Besides this, there is a gendered digital divide impacting women's ability to leverage technologies and participate in an increasingly digitalizing workforce (Rasheed, 2021). Although this has mostly been understood in terms of access to technology, it is also a factor in the suboptimal usage of available technologies.

Social stigma

The social stigma of engaging in sex work is prevalent in adult webcam work as well. All the models said none of their family members or those in their community knew of their work. However, two of the models did say their husbands were the only ones who knew and were supportive of what they did, due to their financial circumstances. Chandni describes what she does in a specific way:

> *"We call this 'do number ka kaam'[8]. What that means is, we cannot tell our family or people we know about this work… But for me personally, this is my number one work because my thinking is different from theirs."*

Uday also said his and Anjali's thinking is different:

> *"I know this is considered bad in Hindu culture. But we are all human beings, we all want to find ways to entertain ourselves, I see this as an art too. Orthodox and uneducated people are the ones who think something like this is wrong. But according to me, this is not wrong. If*

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[8] 'Do number ka kaam' translates literally to "work number two", which might indicate hidden/non socially acceptable work.

people are happy and not harming anyone, it is not wrong in my opinion."

Chandni, and Uday and Anjali both acknowledge the larger societal view of their work while setting themselves apart from mainstream society. Webcam modelling is a possible outlet for them to express themselves in non-conforming ways. However, they were the exceptions. Most of the models said that they would prefer to quit if they found better opportunities, and did not consider this to be 'good work'. Social expectations of women played a role in how they felt. Raina says:

> *"You are also a woman, so I'm sure you understand how difficult it is to do this kind of work. But what can we do? Majboori ka naam Mahatma Gandhi.[9]"*

Sunita spoke about how being a woman affects her work decisions:

> *"We are women, we really need our self-respect. I care about my self-respect a lot. And I love my body too. So, I cannot fulfil the audience's requests to see me with multiple men even if I could make money from it."*

The models were affected by ideas of propriety as a woman, and their identity as women in Indian society. They had their own ways of reconciling with that, whether it was by accepting the circumstances under which they were compelled to work this way or by setting boundaries for themselves.

Anonymity as an enabler

Jones (2020) discusses the "manufactured identities" webcam models utilize in the form of using different usernames to protect themselves from harassment and identification. Part of this manufactured identity lies in the performative aspect of their work where they take on a stylized persona. As India's sociocultural context makes webcam modelling especially risky due to stigma and strong community ties, webcam models employ various strategies to keep their work a secret. For example, they usually wear masks or hide their face by placing the camera below eye level. This is unusual in comparison to popular models from other countries who do not hide their face as it is less appealing to viewers. However, the quantitative analysis for this study showed that hiding the face does not have a significant impact on the popularity of a webcam model in India, possibly because a shared understanding of the cultural context and negative consequences of being outed makes viewers (who are also mostly Indian) more accepting of hidden faces.

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[9] A Hindi quote that literally translates to "The name of necessity is Mahatma Gandhi", which might indicate the circumstances that compel her to do this work.

Nearly all the interviewed models said they feel more confident, and do not have many concerns about privacy and security because they hide their face. Khushi said:

> *"If I don't show my face, why should I be scared? I am only showing my body, they won't get to know anything. If I showed my face, I would be ashamed. But since I am not, I am confident about doing anything."*

In a way, anonymity enables them to express themselves more freely. Shalini said anonymity has also enabled her friendships online:

> *"I have been betrayed many times by my relatives in the past… I know my friends here will not betray me, because they do not know who I am. I feel safer."*

Senft (2008) discusses how online relationships, owing to their physical detachment, potentially allows for more honesty in communication. A similar phenomenon is observed here, where Shalini feels like she can trust her online friends more as they are removed from her surroundings and do not know her identity.

Financial and digital literacy

Since much of the customization on these platforms requires dedicated self set-up, webcam models' profiles vary considerably in the information and customizations they have. Those who do not put in the time have bare and lackluster profiles, attracting fewer viewers. It also means they have less options to engage with the audience, thereby reducing their potential income. Success on an adult webcam platform largely depends on the ability to leverage the platform's options for customizing the profile, making the use of tip menus, and games. Besides this, those who did not know how to use the block, ban, and mute features on the site had their chat rooms filled with spammers and harassers, disrupting their ability to work and engage with paying users. These are not straightforward processes and models have to independently figure it out. Engaging with an audience requires knowledge of private messaging, sending and accepting friend requests, etc. For example, Raina was not aware of how to respond to private messages or friend requests. She said she wanted to learn how to do these things, but she is not sure how. A lack of digital fluency also led to being unaware of security concerns. Raina said:

> *"I am not very well educated. I did not know that we were not supposed to show our face and what would happen because of that. It is only after some time that I realized that if my family somehow sees this or my images come into their hands, I will be disgraced in their eyes."*

She mentions a user who brought this to her attention:

"There was a man who would do private shows with me. He would tell me not to show my face and give me some advice on how to use this site."

Other models also said they had assistance in setting up their profile or in setting up their payment methods. As some of them did not know how to link their bank accounts directly to the platform, they relied on studios or a third party to get money delivered to their account. This reliance on others undermines the supposed independence offered to models on these platforms.

Chapter 4: Ways forward

4.1. Platform responsibilities

This section will outline suggestions for adult webcam platform to safeguard the well-being of webcam models and offer proper remuneration. As it stands, platforms are not held accountable for the well-being of models due to a lack of recognition of this kind of work, instead presenting it as an entrepreneurial endeavor.

Remuneration

Webcam models lose out on a significant sum of their earnings. Some suggestions for improving the model's remuneration and financial gains from the platforms could be as follows:

- Restructuring the platform's voluntary payment system to reduce the number of free users by charging a fee for visiting each stream.
- Allowing models to hide their stream from non-paying users.
- Reducing the commission taken by the platform from webcam models, or adjusting the commission based on their earnings.
- Improving options for payouts to allow for ease of transfers. However, this would require the larger acceptance of payment for sex work across financial platforms.

Privacy, safety, security

The platform could take stricter action against harassment, instead of making it the model's responsibility to deal with such users individually. Perhaps a user with a number of reports against them could be banned from the site.

One of the concerns raised by the interviewed models, but also across webcam model forums, is the recording and redistribution of their streams. Better measures need to be implemented to protect against this and deter or hinder users from recording.

Newcomer support

The webcam platform can be tricky to navigate, especially for those who are new to technology and unaware of the various options for customization. Having a straightforward and concise guide catering to new models could benefit them by describing options for customizing profiles, how to deal with misbehaving users, and how to navigate the platform.

4.2. Community interventions

This section will outline community and social interventions that could improve working conditions for webcam models.

Collectivization and community support

Social stigma and a highly individualized workspace mean that webcam models do not interact much with others doing the same. Despite this, they have gained a lot from observing each other's streams. Often, this is how they start out and slowly build their own practice. Enabling the collectivization of webcam models would not only help orient newcomers, but offer them support, which they may not be able to get from others in their community due to stigma. Other sources of community support for them could also be identified, such as NGOs for sex workers.

Financial and digital education

Many webcam models were unable to use the platform optimally, sometimes even risking their own safety, due to a lack of financial and digital education. Identifying key areas to be understood before one pursues webcam modelling would help them navigate the platform. These could include understanding the potential for screen recording, how to mitigate risks, and how to leverage the platform to maximize income. Helping them set up payment options in their own name so that they are not reliant on a third party to receive funds would also contribute to their independence in working.

Mental health services

While webcam models are relatively safe from physical violence, they are still subject to verbal harassment and threats on a large scale. They also perform several hours of affective labor which may impact their mental health. Enabling their access to trustworthy and discreet mental health services would be a source of valuable support.

Exit strategies and rehabilitation

Many of the webcam models expressed that they did not want to stay on the platform and would prefer to exit as soon as they can. This could either be when they collect enough money for their goals, or when they find another opportunity for equal or better income. Some of them mentioned that their lack of education prevented them from accessing other options. Finding other employment opportunities, skill-building, and helping them set up small businesses, would

be another form of assistance that could be offered.

Legality

Webcam modelling exists in a legal grey area that puts models at risk of being reprimanded or of the platform being banned, thereby cutting off their income suddenly. Legitimizing webcam modelling in the law could be a step toward formalizing the work and ensuring that platforms would have to be responsible for regulating the workplace and ensuring worker rights are maintained. It could also deter individuals, both models and viewers, who misuse the platform.

4.3. Future areas for research

This section will mention some of the gaps in the study and suggest potential ways for the findings to be taken forward in new research studies, across disciplines.

Analysis of earnings

This study did not conduct a quantitative analysis of the earnings of webcam models. A study looking specifically into earnings by calculating the token collection of webcam models over several hours, and comparing and analyzing the same based on some of the parameters used in this study such as audience size, popularity of the streamer, quality of stream, etc. would help plug this gap and provide more information about the lucrativeness of webcam modelling.

Analysis of practices

This study only offered a brief description of the different practices of the webcam models. A thorough analysis of the practices of Indian webcam models, and in particular, how they differ from other popular webcam models across the world would provide findings that would offer insights on cross-cultural differences in how such labor is performed.

Case studies

This study consisted of shorter interviews intended to get an idea of general trends. In-depth case studies of webcam models could offer detailed insights into their background, motivations, expectations, and experiences. This would help in creating a profile of the women who usually enter webcam modelling and observe trends and patterns.

Technology solutions

Further research could be conducted in computer science, IT and digital technologies to

look into solutions that could enhance the security of a webcam model's streams. This could include the disabling of screen capture options or search engines that identify all mirror sites and recording storage sites.

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