



Selected Papers of #AoIR2020:
The 21st Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Virtual Event / 27-31 October 2020

THE MANY SIDES OF A COIN: EXPLORING THE COST AND VALUE OF TOKENS IN CHATURBATE

Antonia Hernández
Concordia University

Overview

As a social technology, money is one with many incarnations: a unit of account and a store of value, a commodity, an abstract measure of labor-power, an extractive tool, an equalizer that produces inequality. Money, however, is never *just money*, and not even made-up currencies are simple. On the sexcam platform Chaturbate.com, a 'token' is at the same time the name of a unit of its made-up currency ('tokens') and its descriptor (something issued by an authority that can be exchanged later on). A token stands in for something else. But what else, exactly? As this paper shows, Chaturbate tokens have different uses and meanings for the audience and performers. These differences do not only happen at the users' level but are sustained by an ecology of associated payment services that deepen the contrast between them. An analysis of the differences in cost and value of tokens shows their roles as an affective currency and differential exploitation tool.

Drawing upon the sociology of money, social reproduction theory, and affect studies, this investigation interrogated textual and visual data from public broadcasting and chat logs, dedicated online forums, blog and social media posts, gathered between 2014 and 2019. This paper has two main sections. The first one elaborates on the role of a currency designed to pay a work not formally waged and explicitly labeled as non-work. With an emphasis on the *value* of tokens, this section expands on the affective role they have for audience and performers, with material and immaterial results.

The second part of this paper focuses on the *cost* of tokens. Although with clear differences between what the audience pays for tokens and what the performers receive, the dissimilarities do not stop there but expand to associated services at each side of the transaction. This section maps the connected payment systems that participate (or not) in these exchanges, showing two distinct ecologies that seem intended for two different markets. As the final part of this paper shows, the platform not only benefits from this differential exploitation but engages in the same kind of practices as well.

Suggested Citation (APA): Hernández, A. (2020, October) The Many Sides of a Coin: Exploring the Cost and Value of Tokens in Chaturbate. Paper presented at AoIR 2020: The 21th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

A free platform

One of the complexities of tokens is related to the self-declared status of Chaturbate as a 'free platform.' Two common types of platforms overlap on Chaturbate: a user-generated content (UGC) platform and a hire on-demand one. This overlap, however, does not happen without friction. In the guise of platforms that provide UGC, Chaturbate does not ask for an entrance fee, nor a mandatory membership. Individual broadcasts ('shows') are free to watch, and it is the performers' job to encourage what are defined as *voluntary donations* ('tips') during their shows. While Chaturbate keeps half of the transactions, the provided services are never labeled as such. This construct not only helps Chaturbate to elude legalities but contributes to the narrative and practices of work that the sexcam platform sustains.

Broadcasting from what looks like domestic environments, or settings presented in that way, performers make clear that rather than working, they are having fun. The audience, then, can enjoy the experience because nobody is 'working'—deemed as a waged and not-fun activity—and performers cannot make demands about the conditions of their work and wages for the same reason. By explicitly labeling the work that happens on the platform as 'non-work,' Chaturbate perpetuates the abstraction of labor from other spheres of life and profits from the reproductive quality of the performed work—both structural capitalist principles. Tokens, through their fictitious nature, facilitate this double articulation.

Value

If Chaturbate performers have to pretend that they are not working, and money is not discussed, how do they get paid? There is not only one answer—and often, the answer is that they do not. There are many different strategies to encourage tips, being the most common to set up monetary goals that are matched with specific sexual acts. The audience collaborates to reach those goals in a tacit crowdfunding model. Other strategies include organizing contests or using bots and apps. However, the performers' earnings do not depend on single events but on their succession. Reputation is key for this reason, achieved for some through regularity and the construction of a fan base. As its slogan states (*the act of masturbating while chatting online*), Chaturbate not only offers sexual shows but interactions between audience and performers, including conversation and care. More than *affective labor*, Chaturbate is about *the laboring of affect*.

The audience buys and holds tokens, spend them, and start the cycle again. The incentives for doing so vary. Tokens not only sustain the platform but are for the audience a communication tool. Despite its fictitious nature, tokens carry and trigger affect, enable conversations, create a reputation, prompt smiles. Tokens allow the audience to be seen by the performer and the public, express and gain recognition, contribute to the room's ambiance, influence the show, and affect the performers' bodies. Tokens also have material incarnations through color, sound, and the possibility to remotely activate sex-toys used by the performers. If money is a source of social recognition, Chaturbate makes this statement literal by assigning different colors to users, according to how many tokens they have and how much they have recently

spent. The ability to chat is sometimes restricted to users with tokens, and users that tip are named and acknowledged during the show. As *voluntary gratuities* that express appreciation and allow recognition and interaction, tokens are the audience's affective currency.

Cost

Besides differences in their value depending on who uses them, tokens have different costs. Once purchased, the tokens' value within the platform is half of the original purchase price. In this way, tokens are a technology that allows the exchange of the same quantity for a different price. Although blatant, the difference between bought and cashed tokens does not stop at their fungibility—their interchangeability. At each side of the transaction, this difference is enacted through two distinct systems, systems that determine their liquidity—the ease of their conversion into cash.

As this investigation demonstrates, there are two different ecologies of associated payment services for performers and for the audience—and the platform connects them. Standard and recognized payment services are available for the audience (to buy tokens) but not for performers (to be paid). Performers have fewer options and must use less-reliable services, often with bigger associated fees. These differences—that generally precede the sexcam platform—disclose the infrastructural ecology of differential exploitation towards sex workers. However, the platform not only profits from connecting these two different markets but engages in similar discriminatory practices by, for example, valuing tokens differently depending on geographic zones.

Conclusions

Chaturbate is a platform built upon a domestic paradigm that signals the platform's services and how value is extracted there. The limit of this paradigm, yet entangled with it, is sex work. This compound determines who the client is on the platform and who provides the service, what is considered work and what is not, who has the right to wages and who does not. The lack of recognition—of work as sex work and of sex work as work—prevents workers from organizing or receive protection, allowing the sexcam platform to establish abusive practices with no consequences.

Despite their apparent simplicity and fictional nature, Chaturbate tokens are coins of many sides. On the sexcam platform, tokens are a technology that allows differential exploitation, taking advantage of deeply embedded systems of oppression. The interplay between the different values and costs of tokens, for audience and performers, is at the core of this technology. Marxist feminists have shown reproductive labor as structural to capitalism. The sexcam platform not only agrees: it is its business area.

References

- Bhattacharya, Tithi, ed. *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*. London: Pluto Press, 2017.
- Davies, Richard. *Extreme Economies: Survival, Failure, Future: Lessons from the World's Limits*, 2019.

Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland, CA : Brooklyn, NY : London: PM Press ; Common Notions : Autonomedia ; Turnaround [distributor], 2012.

Hart, Keith. "Heads or Tails? Two Sides of the Coin." *Man*, 1986, 637–656.

Jarrett, Kylie. "Devaluing Binaries: Marxist Feminism and the Value of Consumer Labour." In *Reconsidering Value and Labour in the Digital Age*, edited by Eran Fisher and Christian Fuchs, 2015.

Trenkle, Norbert. "Value and Crisis: Basic Questions." In *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, edited by Neil Larsen. Chicago, IL: Mcm, 2013.

Zelizer, Viviana A. Rotman. *The Social Meaning of Money*. New York: BasicBooks, 1994.