



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

NAVIGATING THE SOCIAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEM IN DIGITAL SEX WORK IN BRAZIL

Lorena Caminhas
Maynooth University

Introduction

This paper examines how social media ecosystems have become a fundamental workplace for digital sex work, causing a series of ruptures and changes in the industry. Focusing on erotic content creation in Brazil, which includes camming and various forms of erotic content production, the study explores how the ecosystem shapes labour practices and establishes a particular governance over sex labour.

Social media have been adopted by various professionals and has become central to the way they organise and carry out their work (Bishop, 2023; Baym, 2018). In recent years, they have gained increasing importance for sex workers, especially those engaged in digitally mediated sex work (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023). These platforms are crucial for the sale of erotic content and are a key intermediary between workers and consumers. More and more sex workers have established careers as erotic content creators.

The phenomenon goes beyond social media popularity and is tied to sex platforms' economic models where sex workers monetise content (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023). Sex platforms - such as camming, fan-based and subscription-based platforms - drive their traffic through link-sharing on social media and offer limited opportunities to promote workers within their own infrastructure (Benjamin, 2024). In addition, sex platforms define themselves as social media, mimicking their usage formats and aesthetics. OnlyFans, a key platform for erotic content monetisation (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023), exemplifies this model, relying on social media followings for traffic. Erotic creators must cultivate and maintain an audience, making social media integral to content production and distribution.

In Brazil, digital erotic content creation has grown exponentially, combining international and national sex platforms. For instance, two large national platforms, Camera Prive, founded in 2013, and Privacy, founded in 2020, share space with OnlyFans. Especially

Suggested Citation (APA): Caminhas, Lorena. (2025, October). *Navigating the social media ecosystem in digital sex work in Brazil*. Paper presented at AoIR2025: The 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Niterói, Brazil: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

due to the COVID pandemic, these platforms have had a strong presence and boosted the erotic content creation in the country (Faria & Lemos, 2021). Brazilian sex workers face pressure to cultivate a social media following and to channel it to their paid profiles through links to sex platforms. A complex combination of different social media has become the only way to make erotic content creation sustainable.

Despite a growing body of research on sex and social media, including sex workers (van der Nagel and Tiidenberg, 2020), the role of social media as a workplace remains partially explored. Existing studies highlight issues related to the inequitable governance of sex (Are, 2024) and deplatforming and discrimination on social media (Blunt & Stardust, 2021), exploring the precariousness and inequalities for sex workers (Tiidenberg, 2021). The focus here is on the broader implications of social media, rather than on their specific functions and roles within erotic content production that have disrupted this industry. Little attention is paid to how these platforms have inaugurated a whole ecosystem that has become a workplace for digital sex workers.

I contend that by analysing the practices and narratives of Brazilian erotic content creators, it is possible to unveil the social media ecosystem behind digital sex work and its specific consequences for labour dynamics and governance practices in this field. Brazil is seen as a local reality that reflects and enables understanding of broader contexts.

Methods

The findings are part of an ethnographic study on Brazilian platform-based erotic content creation (2021-2024) and received ethics approval. The research consists of two main phases. The first involves ethnographic fieldwork on Brazil's most popular sex platforms—OnlyFans and Privacy—and on social media (Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and Telegram). The second phase comprises in-depth interviews with 16 Brazilian erotic content creators.

Interviewees included cisgender women (n=6), cisgender men (n=7) and transgender women (n=3). Most were white (n=10), with three identifying as brown, two as black, and one as caboclo (a Brazilian identity of mixed Indigenous and white heritage). Participants were initially recruited via social media, using gender diversity as a criterion, followed by snowball sampling. All interviewees were anonymised with pseudonyms.

Interviews lasted one to two hours, covering three thematic axes: work trajectories, work dynamics, and platforms as workplaces. Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), identifying eight themes. The paper explores two: *ecosystems as workplaces* and *working in an ecosystem*.

Findings and conclusions

The findings reveal the emergence of a social media ecosystem as the main workplace for erotic content creators, shaped by specific patterns of use that integrate multiple

platforms. They also highlight the work challenges for erotic creators due to the ecosystem's governance.

Ecosystems as Workplaces

Erotic content creators rely on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and Telegram to build and sustain their audiences. Interviewees emphasised that a significant part of their work involves "feeding" social media, constructing a network that directs traffic towards their paid content. As Nina explains, "one finds my Instagram and starts following me, and then does the same on Twitter and so on. One thing leads to another, and one thing increases the other." This dynamic positions social media as a central node in the trade.

Creators must navigate these platforms strategically, as Alice notes, "social media are different and you have to feed them differently." Each platform serves a distinct function within the erotic content economy, collectively generating audience flow. These roles are not predefined but are shaped by creators' practices, leading to established usage patterns. Nathan illustrates this process: "On Twitter and Instagram, I post censored previews and messages about my subscriptions," while "on Telegram, I have groups where I share more explicit previews. My WhatsApp is only for people I trust and who buy regularly." Such differentiation provides a rationale for the ecosystem and dictates platform-specific strategies.

Working in an Ecosystem

Operating within a social media ecosystem creates structural imbalances for erotic creators, especially as they need to cultivate and maintain a fanbase and navigate multiple platforms' content moderation policies.

Building an audience is crucial for success. Thomas explains, "I already had a fanbase before I started selling erotic content. You need this if you want to succeed." Maintaining this audience is equally essential, as bans and deplatforming can have severe consequences. "If you get banned, you have to build a following from scratch, which is twice as hard", Thomas adds. This uncertainty forces creators to infer platform guidelines to avoid account suspension.

Daniel describes the unpredictability of moderation: "Platforms take down our profiles for no reason." To counteract this, creators develop personal strategies for compliance. As Daniel explains, "you need to be careful about the links in your bio and how you set them up. I've learned to never post semi-nudes or provocative content." Marginalised creators experience even stricter moderation, as Camille notes, "people have do's and don'ts for social media that do not apply to social minorities. It is a thousand times harder for us because I get banned even if I never post sexual content."

As a result, thriving as an erotic creator is tied to the social media ecosystem and its processes of marginalisation. It becomes part of the work to engage in decoding the governance of the ecosystem at a deep level.

The findings show how the integration of social media and sex platforms is reshaping digital sex work, influencing how it is organised, performed, and governed. Social media not only facilitate cross-platform practices but also enforce a rationale for engaging with multiple platforms. However, this ecosystem creates structural imbalances, forcing them to adapt and to navigate multiple digital spaces. It also positions digital sex work at the intersection of multiple opaque regulatory forces. These dynamics highlight the need for further research into the impact of social media integration, particularly in marginalised sectors such as sex work.

References

- Are, C. (2024). Flagging as a silencing tool: Exploring the relationship between de-platforming of sex and online abuse on Instagram and TikTok. *New Media & Society*, 0(0), 1-19.
- Baym, N. (2018). *Playing to the crowd: musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection*. New York: New York University Press.
- Benjamin, M. (2024). Negotiated authenticity: An ethnographic study by an onlyfans girl. *Sexualities*, 0(0), 1-18.
- Bishop, S. (2023). Influencer creep: how artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds. *New Media & Society*, 0 (00), 1-18.
- Blunt, D., Stardust, Z. (2021). Automating whorephobia: sex, technology and the violence of deplatforming. *Porn Studies*, 8(4), 350-366.
- Braun V., Clarke V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3-26.
- Easterbrook-Smith, G. (2023). OnlyFans as gig economy work: a nexus of precarity and stigma. *Porn Studies*, 10(3), 252-267.
- Farias, C., Lemos, V. (2021, July 6). OnlyFans: de imagens sensuais a sexo explícito, brasileiros contam como ganham dinheiro se exibindo. *BBC Brasil*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-57673831>
- Tiidenberg, K. (2021). Sex, power and platform governance. *Porn Studies*, 8(4), 381-393.
- Van der Nagel, E., Tiidenberg, K. (2020). *Sex and Social Media*. Leeds: Emerald.