Sex Work in Cyberspace: Geographies of Desire in Digital Frontiers of the United States

Danyelle Hamilton

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Sex Work in Cyberspace: Geographies of Desire in Digital Frontiers of the United States

Danyelle Hamilton
2015

Senior Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography

Adviser, Professor Yu Zhou
Abstract

This project follows the shifting geography of erotic companionship and the changing demographics of women who take on this kind of work. From origins in mining towns, urban centers, and Las Vegas brothels to home-based, online performances for audiences across the world, erotic companionship continues to be a primary form of employment, albeit informal, for increasingly diverse and continually growing numbers of women. Engaging frontier theories, scholarship on informal economies, and previous case studies with sex workers, I investigate the construction of a newfound digital frontier, one with new opportunities, informalities, populations, and governances. Illustrating connections between previous frontier zones in real space and those now found on the Internet, I expect that we acknowledge the persistence of patriarchy and capitalism, despite transgressing real space boundaries into what is commonly perceived as a digital utopia. By working with and interviewing cam models on MyGirlFund.com, this thesis calls attention to the expansion of informal economies, while also articulating the parallels and differences between real space and digital frontiers of sex work. In the end, I hope that by exploring the making of frontier, virtual, commercial sex work spaces, informal economies can be recognized as continually expanding, the myth of a digital utopia can be expelled, and the fundamental American frontier metaphor can be questioned.
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Acknowledgements

To Joseph Nevins, for persistent encouragement and understanding within and outside of the classroom.

To Yu Zhou, for continually challenging my research and me, and advising this thesis with carefulness and consideration.

To the models of MGF, for responding to my questions with courageousness and candor.

To my mother, for her never-failing strength and unwavering support.
Chapter One

The Significance of Cybersex: The Next “Frontier” of Erotic Engagement

“What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely. And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”

— Frederick Jackson Turner (1893, 38)

The first period of American history, as Turner sees it, closed with the Census of 1880. In this official document, the United States government declared the frontier, the west, closed, no longer in existence. In Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” he is responding directly to this formal declaration of closure. Despite what he saw as the official, tangible closure of the frontier, Turner concludes the power of the frontier over America and its people has, and arguably continues to have, lasting impacts that transcend both time and space, history and geography.
For the purposes of this paper, I wish to activate and highlight Turner’s frontier metaphor as a tool to help conceptualize the role of and work done by the Internet in regards to informal employment. While Frederick Jackson Turner, a historian by trade, is certainly mistaken in many regards, this allegory can be a useful concept in articulating geographic changes in American culture, digital and beyond. Despite the lapses, falsities, and romanticism in Turner’s argument, including a failure to recognize indigenous communities, women, children, family structures, racial minorities, urban spaces, government subsidies, and religious sects, this conception of the frontier as a social space remains useful (Yen 2002, 1222).

In his 1893 essay, Turner argues that the settlement of the frontier, the enormous expanse of “open,” “free,” or “uninhabited” land that extends westward from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, is the cultural representation of America, one that distinguishes, more specifically, America from Europe. In this way, the frontier is critical to the construction of the United States and American nationalism, character, and life more generally. The abundance of assumedly free, unsettled land and the vast array of opportunities, both economic and social, that it provides initiated the settlement process that continues to set America and the American people apart as great, according to Turner.

The frontier, working with Turner’s conceptions and more modern manifestations, is a transitional or liminal space that presents its constituents with new opportunities, whether they be social, economical, or political. The frontier joins people together who may not be from the mainstream or who would not otherwise have
encountered one another. The frontier is liminal in terms of its rules, regulations, and code of conduct making it a kind of gray area that is both dynamic in terms of its population and opportunities and flexible by nature of the regulatory schema, or lack thereof. This space is one where individuals and society can transgress cultural divides, come together, be transformed through new opportunities, and ultimately create a new culture within this unity (Turner 1893, 35). In the end, Turner also claims that the new culture is one created around the idea of the individual and the influence of individualism.

Indeed, some scholars have already begun to apply Turner’s frontier model to the Internet, reiterating ideas of profound changes on technology, industry, economy, and society in a space that is under-regulated, dynamic, and flexible (See Rod Carveth and J. Michael Metz 1996, Edward Brent 1996). More recently, the frontier metaphor has been applied to illustrate the “dangerous wilderness” of cyberspace, characterized by pornography, hacking, and malicious e-mail, as well as the difficulty in navigating its highly technological space, the dot-com boom, website investors, and the idea of the Internet as free; these are all characteristics derived from the “Turnerian Western Frontier,” free and rich with economic opportunity, but dangerous and difficult to navigate (Yen 2002, 1223).

Central to Turner’s idea of the frontier and its applications in cyberspace is the notion of unregulated, lawless land or space. It is this lack of regulation that continually fosters the informal in frontier zones—this is where informal employment often takes place. One of the objectives in this paper is to utilize my understanding of informal
economies in order to explain sex work’s transition from real (previously) frontier zones to newly conceived virtual frontier spaces.

Before delineating exactly what the informal economy represents, it is first useful to outline some individual employment positions that may be considered informal. My interest in the informal comes from the work my mother does as the owner of Attention to Details Cleaning. In the past year, she has spent countless hours cleaning the living rooms of elderly couples, the lakefront condominiums of wealthy Chicagoans, and the hallways and stairwells of local apartment complexes. She takes pride in her business and the work she does, yet she remains worried and uncertain in regards to economic security, benefits, and protection. Her business is considered domestic labor, in that she often works in her client or employer’s private household. This means, in addition to working with harmful chemicals and performing manual labor, her work is largely invisible and isolated, excluded from many federal employment protections (like organizing and health and safety standards), and does not adhere to any regulations on overtime or work breaks. Not to mention, her self-started company does not provide her with retirement or pension plans or healthcare. So, despite the immediate influx of income and a brief respite from worrying over wages, her small business is informal, with its lack of protection and benefits, and fundamentally insecure.

While I recognize and understand some of the circumstances that led my mother into home and business cleaning, namely lack of access to resources and working class status, I became increasingly interested in the situations under which other informal economy workers were living and working—namely sex working women. I further refine my focus to consider webcam models employed through MyGirlFund.com (MGF).
In this paper, sex work is defined according to Murphy and Venkatesh (2006) as a person (of all kinds) who trades sex (of all kinds) for material goods (money, food, and so forth).

Inquiry begins simply by asking what are the origins of MGF and related websites and how did they come to be? Does virtual space represent a new frontier of sex work? In articulating the transformation from commercial sex in real space to commercial sex in virtual space, I then ask, does this virtual, frontier space create different divisions, pressures, and geographies in the informal economy? Frontier spaces typically offer new or better opportunities, and I would like to know whether or not this is true of MGF and other virtual, commercial sex work sites. Do these sites offer women working in this informal sector new economic opportunities and autonomy or are they largely analogous to what real space offers?

In order to explain the transformation from real space sex work to virtual commercial sex work, I will explore and expand upon the research of scholars who have theorized about women’s work in informal economies in the Western world, the occurrence of sex work here, and how virtual space is altering the economy. The primary form of informal employment I situate my argument around is that of virtual commercial sex work. In order to develop an in depth analysis, research needs to be further narrowed, which brings the project to MyGirlFund.com.

*About MyGirlFund.com*

On July 11, 2013 an MFG press release entitled “College Girls Are Paying Tuition Bills With Their Social Networking Skills on MyGirlFund” notes an enormous
increase in college-aged (18 to 22 years of age) women joining the website near the start of summer. Of the 6,000 models, as they are often called, at the time one quarter of them were between the ages of 18 and 22, with 500 more joining at that time. I was struck by the masses moving into (cam) modeling, and, like the article’s author, MGF, and the content’s readers, I would not have immediately expected sex work in such places and among such demographics.

MyGirlFund is a US company and website founded in 2007 that functions as part online community, part adult social network, part erotica-based business. The primary users of MGF, distinctly divided by the website, vary in designation between Models/Girls and Contributors/Guys. In this way, the site is immediately gendered, casting distinct roles for men and women, allowing only models to be female and encouraging only contributors to be male (see Figure 1 and 2). For either party, the website is free to join. However, due to the mature nature of most of the content commonly exchanged, users must be 18 years of age or older and able to present both current and accurate forms of identification and contact information as part of the registration process. Girls and guys, as the website refers to them, make a username when registering, which largely allows all website users to remain completely anonymous. While both parties are capable of creating a profile, only women are allowed to receive donations, as they are called, from contributors.
Figure 1. MGF employs different sign-up interfaces for “girls” and “guys.” The above screen is for “girls” to sign up as models, encouraging them to “Flirt, Play and Have Fun!” (MyGirlFund.com 2014).
Figure 2. The interface above is designed for “guys” to sign up. This page includes a blue, instead of pink, border and notes that the girls are both “REAL” and “hot” (MyGirlFund.com 2014).
Contributors can make donations and send funds through use of credits they buy within the website for one dollar each. While they are referred to as donations, money or credits are often, but not exclusively, exchanged for suggestive, nude, or pornographic messages, photographs, and videos featuring and created by the model herself. In addition to pre-made content, models may also agree to engage in a live, one-on-one video webcam chat session with a contributor. Models determine the value of their videos, photos, webcam sessions, and anything else within the website’s regulations. Models set goals primarily to encourage guys to contribute to their fund, with targets ranging from buying a new computer to paying this month’s rent to going on a vacation for a birthday celebration. The range of goals and content offerings begins to shed light on some economic diversity of models represented on the website.

Girls can “cash out” as often as they choose, requesting the credits guys contribute or donate to them by check or direct deposit. Just after registration, models receive 65 percent of the contributions sent from the guys. According to MGF policy, every $5,000 grossed earns models a 2.5 percent increase in their share of the contributions. While models can and do list a variety of content from which to gather contributions, the site adamantly restricts sharing personal information and meeting in person.

Despite the lack of personal contact, some models and the website’s founders would emphasize the “girlfriend” aspect (casual conversation and sending non-pornographic photos) that the website aims to imitate rather than the live “sex cam” or porn chat aspects that other adult websites like OnHerCam (founded in 1996), iFriends (1998), streamate (2003), or ExtraLunchMoney (2013) predominantly utilize. Without a
doubt, many of the site's models do offer live, one-on-one sexually explicit webcam shows and pornographic content, like videos and photos. Still, the virtual girlfriend concept sets MGF apart from other adult websites. Stefan Patrick, MGF Director of Business Development, affirms, “[Guys and Girls] interact on a daily basis, sharing their lives, reciprocating affection and exploring desires just like they would in a real world romantic relationship. Virtual or not, it's a true girlfriend experience” (“MyGirlFund’s Member Survey” 2013). The site name, as one may guess, is both a play on the model’s MGF financial account or collection of contributions and the idea of a virtual girlfriend.

Women, Sex Work, and Informality

In some way, the active engagements of women in these virtual sex work communities may be viewed as entrepreneurship ventures, similar to my mother’s business. By and large, informal sectors (also known as the informal economy, grey economy, submerged economy, secondary economy, shadow economy, among others) are hard to define both globally and on a country-by-country basis, primarily because they are unregulated and known by so many different names. Since informal economies are unregulated by nature, formulating concrete statistics and gathering information with which to study this sector proves elusive. Typical informal jobs in the west can include the aforementioned domestic laborers, street vendors, home-based workers, and anyone paid in under the table cash transactions.

The ability for the informal economy to encompass such a range of constituents, activities, labors, and spaces is primarily because its definition, “unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are
regulated,” is incredibly broad (Portes et al. 1989, 12). This lack of regulation has consequences on working conditions, labor status, and/or general management, meaning anything from under the table cash payments, deficient or nonexistent benefits, below minimum wages, safety hazards, health risks, illegal or taboo work, and tax fraud, to name some possibilities. These kinds of working conditions are often found among smaller firms or the self-employed, primarily because these smaller institutions remain under the radar and can more easily evade governmental regulations. The lack of regulations associated with informal work can be both negative and positive for employees; it offers people more autonomy but also provides them little visibility and protection.

Without a doubt, women are disproportionately represented in the informal sector; one reason being that a significant portion of the work women do involves social, reproductive, and domestic labor (International Labour Organization 2002). It is further recognized that children, minorities, and immigrant workers are also most prevalent in informal markets. A number of studies have highlighted and established the role of migrant and minorities in the informal sector of predominantly advanced economies (See Sasseen 1994, Husband and Jerrard 2001), and the International Labour Organization documents a disproportionate frequency of both women and poor in this sector (International Labour Organization 2002).

This project focuses on commercial sex work, which is commonly associated with the informal economy. In general, people might also conjure other illicit (although sex work does not have to be illegal) activities, like selling and trading drug or gambling and bribery, when considering the informal economy. These common associations may come
from the fact that many studies have focused on illegal, often dangerous informal work that remains at the margins, predominantly in developing economies.

Defining the informal economy, who works within it, and what exactly their work looks like is not the only topic of debate. Foundational literature on the subject has often been organized into two schools of thought. Neema Kudva (2005) writes a succinct summary of the work of Rakowski (1994), whose study divided discussions of the informal sector into two categories: structuralists and legalists. The structuralist standpoint is that the development of capitalism inevitably leads to uneven labor markets, thereby creating the informal economy. In contrast, the legalist perspective holds that informality is a sensible approach and views informal workers as entrepreneurs (166).

Regardless of the difficulty in defining and prolonged debates, academics studying this field offer some helpful steps to improve our understanding of informalization, or the phenomenon of increasing participation in informal employment. One recent study by economist Edgar Feige estimated two trillion dollars worth of activity in the informal sector in 2012, which is double what Friedrich Schneider estimated in 2009 (qtd. in Koba 2013). With such rapid development and immense growth, research on the informal economy has not kept up. Marty Chen, American scholar and social worker, calls for additional methodological research regarding places of work in the informal sector in efforts towards rethinking informalization today, as well as a constant collection of labor statistics to contribute towards a model global archive (Kudva and Benería 2005). MGF represents a special area in the informal economy and the ever-increasing number of users on MGF suggests a need for inquiry into the network as an informal workplace and new frontier of sex work under Internet.
The spread of neoliberal policies, through dominance in the political economy and incentives for adoption, and consequent changes in markets has also had and continues to have numerous consequences on the employment of women (and men, though the difference gender makes is profound) across the globe, especially those in the informal sector. Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman, professors at Princeton, (2003) see new era neoliberal policy changes contributing directly to the increase in self-employment and micro-enterprise:

“The present era registers a visible increase in income inequality, a persistent concentration of wealth in the top decile of the population, a rapid expansion of the class of micro-entrepreneurs, and a stagnation or increase of the informal proletariat. The contraction of public sector employment and the stagnation of formal sector labor demand in most countries have led to a series of adaptive solutions by the middle and lower classes” (Portes and Hoffman 2003, 41).

Lourdes Benería, Cornell professor, summarizes the regressive tendencies of neoliberalism writing, “Instead of improving labor conditions in the poorer countries, globalization has lowered those of higher income countries” (Jain and Elson 2011, 72). This deterioration of labor markets, welfare rights, and labor rights often leads to the creation and expansion of informal economies, such as commercial sex work or my mother’s housecleaning business (See Cebula and Feige 2011).

In the past, though, some scholars insisted informal sectors have generally not been recognized as present in the US and among other advanced developed economies or at least remain only marginally studied (Portes et al. 1989). This is primarily because focus remains on Third World countries or economic activities of the poor and poverty-stricken. Informal economies are further, almost strictly, related to and explained by
Third World countries despite these sectors being geographically located in the US or other industrialized nations.

Today, however, thanks to more recent studies by the likes of Friedrich Schneider of the University of Linz and similar scholars, it is known that the shadow economy (per capita) is high in predominantly industrialized, developed countries (Schneider 2013). It remains a common trope, in spite of this, to reference informal economies by way of Third World immigrant communities in the US. While these are both relevant and crucial areas of study, informal economic activity does span a range of social classes (Portes et al. 1989). Most recently, Sassen has come to revisit her conceptions of the informal economy. She too notes a change in the social classes present in this sector:

“Much of the economic informalization that has appeared in major global cities in North America, Western Europe, and, to a lesser extent, Japan is actually linked to key features of advanced capitalism. In this regard, they are new types of informal economies… And it helps explain a mostly overlooked development: the proliferation of an informal economy of creative professional work in these cities—artists, architects, designers, software developers, and so on” (Sassen 2009, 66).

Furthermore, those analyzing US labor markets have failed to study small-scale, informal activities, because these ventures were considered nonexistent or insignificant in the past, despite their rapid growth (Portes et al. 1989). This is especially the case, as the Internet continues to facilitate growth in various types of informal work. Mark Graham, associate professor at the Oxford Internet Institute, notes the influence of a changing Internet, writing, “The rapid growth of online freelancing, digital work, and microwork is undoubtedly changing the landscape of digital work: creating jobs in people's homes and
internet cafes… These changes could be seen as an important moment in the trajectory of global development” (Graham 2014).

The growth of online, virtual employment is moving ahead alongside expansion of informal economies. S. M. Miller, sociology and economics professor at Boston University, (1989) further finds the informal, much like others conceive of the Internet, as a force against hegemony, underscoring the radical potential for new informal sex work spaces. By mere mention, the informal economy indicates an overturn. He explains, “Attention to informal economies re-connects economies to society, to concrete individuals in specific settings…The search for a fuller understanding of the wide range of activities that are somewhat economic is necessary for overcoming the damage resulting from the artificial separation of economy from society” (Miller 1989).

For this reason, the work of this paper is both a step towards acknowledging the role of and growth in informal economies in cyberspace, an effort to fill in the gaps I believe were left when scholars insisted informalization in the US and other advanced economies was irrelevant, and, as I will argue, an assertion that cyberspace is the new frontier of sex work. Combining conceptions of these two spheres, the Internet and the informal, I envision MGF as a new frontier, a new space of sex work with wholly new opportunities and populations. This project is especially interesting and important primarily because it is theoretically relevant to these topics, as it addresses informality and the fundamental American concept of the frontier.

This project is therefore situated in larger, ongoing debates regarding the precariousness of women’s participation in what can be called old informal economies, in contrast to what I am calling a new informal economy on a new frontier, and the
prevalence of sex work. And if sex work has always been part of the informal economy, then MGF represents a new form of informal economy. Coverage on the constantly evolving geography of cyberspace will further support my suggestion that the Internet has allowed a different group of women to participate in the sex industry, subsequently generating a more flexible labor structure and home-based space for sex work. In order to understand this new space, I am also going to analyze the power dynamics of MGF and similar sites through the work of feminist geographers on both real and virtual labor.

While not entirely central to my claims, the debate regarding women’s participation in sex work helps to situate my research along a continuum of conversations and offers readers a starting point to consider their positionality. Moreover, the debate, divided into two sides, presents little room for nuance and overlap, which are central concepts to understanding the multitude of reasons women engage in sex work and the spaces and sites they access to continue this work.

One side of the debate suggests women may be exploited by structures of supply and demand. In this scenario, men create a demand through their desire for pornographic products and women fill the supply with their bodies. Donna Hughes lectures on this overarching system, noting, “Men hold the important decision making positions in all social, political and religious institutions that organize and control society. Through this institutional power, men construct culture, pass laws, and enact policies that serve their interests and give themselves the power to control women and children in public and private spheres” (Donna Hughes, November 2000). On the other side of the debate, however, it may be more of a challenge to imagine that sexualized images and interactions with women can be productive, radical, and empowering. On the
FeministSA.com blog on December 11, 2012, activist Yeshe Schepers explains that censorship in the realm of pornography can have a negative impact on women’s sexuality, instilling feelings of shame, guilt, and confusion for those who may, for example, enjoy sadomasochism or consuming pornographic content. While this is representative of just one positive aspect heralded by those in the pro-sex debate, it speaks to a larger discourse on women’s freedom to choose and express. I maintain that some women truly prefer sex work, at the same time that they can be, and often are, coerced both directly and structurally.

The dialogue found above begins to hint at explanations for a growing cam model constituency, i.e. evolution of the Internet, increasing demand for pornographic products, or the opportunity to explore one’s sexuality, and introduces new questions into this old debate. With that, I want to know—how and why cyberspace, specifically MGF and the like, has become the new or next frontier for sex workers? This question is important to answer, primarily because it helps to shed light on a group of people (the focus here being women) working in a sector of the economy that is considered to be underground and unregulated but growing rapidly—the informal economy.

These examples of informal labor are often referred to as “women’s work.” This is not to suggest that only women perform domestic labor or that the work done is feminine by nature, but that it highlights the distinct binary that exists in labor markets and practices (Jarrett 2014). Women have long since endured inequality, limiting access to only a narrow field of employment opportunities. Even still, after years of improving upon women’s rights, expectations remain for women to be both caretakers and income-earners, especially under economic downturn or recession. Overcoming the stereotyped
and idealized role as caretaker has initiated dialogue regarding women’s role in private and public spaces. Kim England and Victoria Lawson, University of Washington professors, remind us that waged work has long been separated from the private/home and that “the concepts of ‘work’ are shaped by the gendered sites where it is performed” (Nelson and Seager 2005, 78). The feminization of occupations is due in part from this historical spatial segregation, but also from the “embodied nature of work,” which “influences the gendered construction of spatial (and social) divisions of labor, and vice versa” (Nelson and Seager 2005, 83). Recall the MGF web interfaces in Figure 1 and 2 and the options offered to women as opposed to men; women coming to the site are directed towards becoming a model, and men are targeted to be consumers of the women’s body.

Working from these concepts and towards an understanding of the Internet as a new frontier and the geographical and social divisions of sex work in cyberspace requires a preliminary look at why women end up here in the first place, keeping in mind that unequal workplaces and low wages represent just two reasons women might enter into sex work. Referring back to the International Labour Organization report, it offers many more explanations for the feminization of the informal economy, including commercial sex work:

“More and more women have been entering the labour force, but they very often end up in jobs at the lower end of the informal economy – because they tend to be less well equipped in terms of education and training, have less access to resources, still face various forms of direct and indirect discrimination and bear the brunt of family responsibilities. Women are much more likely than men to leave and re-enter the labour force at different times over their life cycle, but because they do not have access to lifelong learning, they often end up in informal jobs” (International Labour Organization 2002, 32).
Institutional constraints can be the lack of educational and training resources or discrimination in the workplace that the International Labour Organization reports, and while important to consider, these debates on defining and dividing the informal economy leave out a significant factor. The group of people participating in this sector encompasses a population outside of prevailing themes, the most marginalized or the creative/entrepreneurial/professional. This project illustrates first the frontier as a space that fosters informal employment and sex work in particular, second the Internet as fostering the flexible and independent, and third virtual space as broadening the constituency of informal sector workers by way of commercial sex work.

Finally, a necessary disclaimer. This project is a small, subtle piece of a much larger mission that involves alleviating stigma against sex workers and sex work. Conversations inclusive of the labor performed by sex workers, including street hustlers, elite escorts, camboys, pornography actors, strippers, performers, dancers, webcam models, phone sex operators, prostitutes, call girls, houseboys, and others, works towards demystifying the work performed in this industry.

As I continue on, I want us to keep in mind that defining sex work is incredibly difficult, as both sex and work are fluid terms, incorporating a multitude of practices, approaches, and affiliations. Moreover, the process of defining can be generalizing and problematic, in that it adheres labels and prescribes roles. In researching such subjects, there is a fear that one may contribute to the social stigmas, assumptions, and biases already used against marginalized communities. Some characteristics, drug-addicted, poor, trans, and so on, supposed to define sex workers remain mere assumptions, vary on an individual basis, and change with time and place. Katsulis reminds us, “Transactional
sex exists on a continuum, engaging people from all walks of life at different points of their life cycle, and represents a strategic response to change life circumstances. Moreover, transactional sex is not always formal or commercial in nature, and many of those who engage in such activities do not consider themselves to be sex workers” (Katsulis 2008, 146). For example, some women and men may negotiate romantic encounters with their boy/girl friends, husbands/wives, significant others and not consider it to be sex work. The subtleties of sex, sexuality, and romantic and/or erotic relationships are difficult to articulate and one should be wary categorizing such individualized experiences.

With this in mind, I have used great sensitivity in my interactions with the models on MGF. And while I encouraged interviewees to speak towards their self-identification as a sex worker, none of the women chose to elaborate on this question and thereby did not refer to themselves as sex workers or the work they do as sex work. However, for the purposes of this paper, and with their permission, I will continue to use this terminology.

Chapter Narrative

In the next few chapters, and with the help of these previously mentioned scholars and the young women on the MGF website, this project focuses primarily on answering the central question asked previously, which is determining whether or not, and how, commercial sex work in virtual space is representative of a new frontier of sex work by way of its informality. In comparison to Sassen’s suggestions, are the women participating in this potentially new frontier similar to the creative professionals Sassen assumes are working in new informal economies? In other words, are there parallels
between new informal economies and new frontiers of sex work, which is itself a form of employment within the informal economy? Is there an occurrence of more autonomy or additional opportunities here and can this explain the influx of women coming to MGF to participate in sex work? Or is it true that virtual space is mirrored after the same patriarchal, capitalist structures present in real space and therefore not truly a new space without the limitations of before?

This project and its central questions are divided into five chapters, the first of which functions as an introductory note to brief the community of the case study, relevant background information, and theoretical framework. The next chapter, chapter two, operates similarly, as it outlines a kind of historical geography of commercial sex work and erotic companionship in the United States, situating the discussion above into a larger scheme. In this chapter, I cover historical accounts of previous frontiers of sex work in mining towns, urban centers, and legalized brothels and how they are and have been indicative of a shifting geography of labor. I review major transformations in the industry, predominantly based on schemes of regulation and zoning, and the subsequent geographical changes that result to further understand sex work’s spatial organization and transitions towards the digital. Drawing on research that focuses around the prevalence of women in commercial sex work and its location in the informal and now virtual, I also want to keep in mind one of my supplementary questions, what are the parallels between real space sex work frontiers and those found in the virtual realm? This question will help lead into my next concern: what are the origins of MGF and similar adult paysites?

In the third chapter I begin to answer this question, following from the origins of real space commercial sex work to the Internet and the likes of MGF. Then, I begin to
consider the internal structure of MyGirlFund.com and why and how women decide to get involved in this kind of employment. What about MGF, for example, attracts women to working in virtual sex economies? Answers to this question are useful in that they articulate the benefits that form a new frontier. Because female sex work is largely assumed to be involuntary through rhetoric of human trafficking, the movements of these women are stifled and relegated to brothels, particular zones of cities, or, as I argue, into a more tolerant (cyber)space (Hubbard 1997).

It is also in chapter three that I begin to introduce the comments of women who contributed to my surveys on the MGF girl’s forum. Data regarding the contributors’ real space geographies and their site(s) of work in virtual space are useful to compare to historical accounts and answering questions like, has there been, alongside the development of the Internet, a demographic shift in who represents sex workers virtually? Where are they coming from? Have MGF models found more autonomy and control over their labor conditions in virtual commercial sex communities, which have led them away from previous frontiers into this new, virtual frontier? The subjective position of autonomy further necessitates input from the models in order to place their sentiments against the realities of virtual space. Lisa E. Sanchez (1997) writes extensively on the relationship between sex work and structures of violence, although this work does not consider virtual commercial sex workers. This chapter applies some of Sanchez’s work, including her insistence on the importance of women’s narratives in understanding spatial constructions.

In the fourth chapter I trace the position MGF holds and the work the site does, examining how this website and these women are illustrative of larger political economic
occurrences, i.e. shifts in women’s employment, expansion in informal economies, and increasing involvement of virtual space. Despite virtual spaces allowing an escape from the violence of patriarchal workplaces and offering additional employment opportunities, digital space remains an oppressive space. This chapter continues to draw out similarities between frontiers in real and virtual space, with the addition of blog and website postings that challenge the utopian, autonomy-building characteristics of MyGirlFund.com that MGF administrators emphasize.

The fifth and final chapter functions as the conclusion and operates primarily to reintroduce the necessity of this research project, the initial problem and question I hope to answer, which is how virtual space has created a new frontier, informal economy for sex work. This chapter further aids the reader in conceptualizing the primary findings, notes from the interviewees, and supporting arguments. In conclusion, one will see that digital space is incredibly divisive and unequal; websites negotiate democracy in vague, incomplete, and sometimes-nonexistent terms; and corporations, commercialization, and commoditization dominate the Internet (Fuchs 2011). Therefore, while virtual space may be seen as an accessible frontier providing new opportunities within the informal economy, it remains structurally disadvantageous for the women pursuing employment here. This chapter finishes with a few of my suggestions and recommendations for further research in this field of study.
Chapter Two

From Gold-Dusted to Digitized: A Historical Geography of Sex Work in the United States

“If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression.”

— Michel Foucault (1978, 6)

For the purpose of my project, this historical geographical account will begin in the United States. Sex is undoubtedly important in American culture, as we find ourselves consistently enraptured by stories of sex and infidelity. Recognizing that paid erotic companionship has existed in many different places for many, many years, we must begin to situate the emergence of adult paysites among a larger field, starting thousands of years ago. With each year or each shift in the geographic location of sex work, a new kind of economic space is created.

For this reason, finding a place to begin telling the story of the “world’s oldest profession” (Kipling, 1888) is not easy, but it turns out a majority of adult sites like MGF are situated within the United States. One statistic estimates about 68 percent of membership-based adult sites and 42 percent of free adult websites exist within the United States (Zook 2007, 103). Because so many of these websites tend to be created, based, operated, and used within the United States, it seems most fitting to begin the historical geography of sex work with its formations and transformations in the borders of this country, despite sex work’s historical presence across the globe.
Figure 3. The map above illustrates the geography of MyGirlFund.com’s audience, indicating where the site’s visitors are located (Alexa.com 2014).
The long history of sex work in the United States is complex and convoluted, but for the sake of this paper, it begins on the frontier, the one initially imagined by Turner. It goes without saying that men and women both traded sex for material goods before the gold mining boom on the frontier, yet history indicates an enormous increase in documented accounts of sex work, particularly from working class women at this time.

The discovery of gold in the mid-nineteenth century in states along the western coast of the United States set fire to the desire for mineral wealth and the movement of men. Occasionally wives and children trekked across the length of the country to accompany their husbands and fathers, but for the most part patriarchal organization of families relegated men to travel. This relocation to mining towns and securing work in the mines helped to fulfill their longing for wealth and maintained their breadwinner status. The predominance of single men and the general exclusion of women from mining work, associated with their perceived incapability, created an enormous demand for the company and companionship of women. At the same time, this demand for companionship could be perceived as an opportunity for women to gain independence and hold a job, even with their exclusion from mining work.

Popup mining towns, complete with saloons, dance halls, and game lounges for the recreation of mining men, also housed many of the women who came to the frontier (Johnson 2000). Despite the lack of employment for women in the mining industry, they were able to find work serving the desires of mining men. It was not just the restriction of women from mining work, however, that led them to prostitution on the western frontier. Julia Laite explains that Chinese, Hispanic, and French women also participated in
prostitution here because of “their exclusion and displacement elsewhere, which, of course, is one of the best explanations for why women engage in prostitution in all contexts” (745). For example, a similar (male) demand is created for sexual services where there is both a strong military presence and fewer women participating. World War I prompted some initial prohibitions against prostitution to prevent the spread of disease and initiated a kind of zoning mindset that remains in many places today (Pyle and Ward 2003). It is gendered segregation in terms of employment and prohibition that restricts these forms of employment and exasperates demand. It is also this kind of gendered segregation that draws women to frontier spaces in search of new employment opportunities and freedom from the bounds of traditional motherly and wifely duties.

While demand remained for gold products, the frontier’s supply was limited. This is often the case of frontier-like spaces, where the once prized flexibility and dynamism that provided alternative employment, newfound social situations, and lack of regulation is quickly dismantled, transformed, and shifted to the latest location. The gold and mineral mines dried up, further restricting employment options, and the boom mining towns shriveled alongside. Already excluded and relegated to the realm of prostitution, the women seeking work alongside mines and mining towns could no longer generate an income with such wavering demand. Men and women of the frontier migrated away from gold-dusted ghost towns and onwards to bigger towns and cities. The massive resettlement of miners and their associates highlights the move to more urbanized areas, prompting, according to Laite, the rise of third-party organized prostitution.
**Industrial Urbanization and Spatial Exclusion**

Following a linear trajectory of time, the late nineteenth century is constituted by a shift from smaller, agriculturally based towns to larger, urbanized, industrialized towns and cities. Urban areas offer constituents mobility, by way of tighter, more close-knit spatial organization, and exposure to many more kinds of people and activities. While high-class citizens were generally accustomed to mobility and leisure, the urban working class became the leisure economy’s newest participants, and sometimes suppliers (Brents et al. 2010). The sheer volume of people in cities created newfound fields work and leisure, and it did not take long for mining town madams or working class women to situate themselves in the city.

The urban landscape quickly became an immensely diverse place for both exploration and exploitation, as a newly distinct, fringe crowd often populates frontiers. Today, urban landscapes and frontier spaces maintains similar characteristic. The diversity of the city, both in terms of population and activities, has also managed to keep alive a character of corruption. Urban spaces (most notably New York City) were, especially around the turn of the nineteenth century, and still are often criticized for fostering misdeeds such as prostitution, and it is these debates that lead to the likes of prostitution policies, strict zoning regulations, and other forms of spatial exclusion that further shift and transform spaces of sex work (Howell et al. 2008).

“From 1870s to the turn of the twentieth century… even as late as the 1950s, laws in… various localities in the United States and Japan regulated the public disorder of prostitution through zoning, medical, and brothel regulations. This created boundaries between poor vice districts and ‘respectable’ upper-class neighborhoods” (Brents et al. 2010, 44).
There is a residue left behind from these earlier attempts to confine prostitution and other forms of commercial sex work. From the creation of brothels, to the relegation of certain people to a single (red-light) district of a city, sex workers have and continue to experience a direct form of spatial exclusion (“Storyville” 2015). The kinds of spaces reserved for sex workers are often those out-of-sight, unsupervised locales, which explain the occurrence of sex work on the frontier.

One study from 2011 also aims to explain the prevalence of street-based sex workers. Scholars surveyed an enormous number of sex workers and their third-party pimps in an attempt to estimate the size and structure of underground commercial sex economies in eight major United States cities. While their research focuses primarily on street-based sex workers like the ones mentioned above, the resultant discoveries share some overlap with sex workers who are employed online. Characteristics of conventional street-based sex workers are generally associated with third-party facilitators, like pimps or brothels and their owners (Levitt and Venkatesh 2007). The women recruited into these places tend to be younger, come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and are more likely dependent on drugs. The race of women conventionally recruited by third parties varies, as geographic location is a determining factor for the marketability of different kinds of women (Dank et al. 2011). The study further notes a variety of reasons from women workers on why they chose to start trading sex. These reasons, not to be considered as singular or unrelated, include financial necessity, desire for a supportive social network, homelessness, recommendations from friends and family, funding and community to sustain drug use, and as an extension from previous, related employment (Dank et al. 2011, 216).
In the later pages of this paper, I argue that cyberspace is yet another resultant frontier space, like mining and rural brothels, formed from socio-spatial exclusionary practices towards sex workers and the occurrence of innovative economic opportunity and alternative social situations.

**Progressive Era Prostitution Prohibition**

Exclusionary practices became most widespread in the Progressive Era of the United States in the early twentieth century. Characterized by social and political reform and activism, the Progressive Era normalized the kind of high-class stigmas against the working class, especially sex-working women. The criminalization of prostitution spreading across the country around the 1920s resulted in the loss of work and wages, yes, but also the loss of job flexibility and mobility that working class women found in sex work (Brents et al. 2010). Because of their illegal status sex workers could no longer move freely through streets or at clubs, avoiding detection meant they now moved covertly or less frequently.

Stripping one’s mobility in such a way has immense consequences on the lives of these workers including a destruction of social networks, unfamiliarity in new and transient locations, and decrease in earnings, as one’s customer base becomes no longer accessible (Katsulis 2008). Sex workers’ status as criminal, depraved, and alien subsequently affects their safety as well. Violence from customers, dangers of constant clandestine movements, and the addition of police surveillance and violence jeopardizes sex worker safety as individuals and as a community. By nature of the participants in this early informal economy of sex work, not entirely unlike those today, these Progressive-
Era laws were directed at working-class and immigrant women and offer further explanation to the shifting of the sex work frontier.

_Vice Tourism in Nevada_

As safety and security becomes more of a concern, designated prostitution zones and third-party participants like brothels attract sex-working women to their establishments, touting protection, dependability, clientele, and even guaranteed room and board. By far the most infamous location for the brothel business, aside from early mining towns, is in counties throughout the state of Nevada. Nevada is the only state with a legal prostitution system and remains the center of this industry primarily because regulating prostitution is not among the powers of the federal government. Instead decision making plays out on a state-by-state basis. While this is telling as far as the geographies of legal prostitution, it does little to address the spatiality of illegal commercial sex work.

The states on the westernmost side of the United States have long been known for their opposition to centralized government power and generally liberal politics. This offers one explanation for the westward alignment of sex work. It is here, in Nevada, that sex and all its relevant constituents have been mainstreamed, but this was not always the case. There was a time in the history of America when prostitution and commercial sex work was prevalent across the land. People even held different moral positions on sex workers and their labors, most notably before the Progressive Era transformations.

Even before the brothels, Nevada, and more importantly Las Vegas, had a thing for gambling and the resultant tourism industry that arose around it. An economic
clustering effect has since taken place in this area, drawing in activities that are also found to be illegal in most other places, “turning deviance into leisure” (Brents et al. 2010, 2). The emergence of brothels in the twenty-first century is directly related to a rise in the tourism industry in the post-industrial, consumerist-cultured United States: “In an economy with widening income disparities, the wealthy and the not so wealthy seek escape and adventure in their leisure time, and the poor find jobs providing it” (Brents et al. 2010, 3). It would seem the frontier of sex work found its way back to the west, this time through tourism instead of mining.

*Benefits in Brothels and Bars*

The basis of this movement can be explained both on a national level, as noted above, and also on a more individualized level, emanating from the expiations offered by women in the sex work industry. In one valuable study of Nevada’s brothels, three scholars explain that women employ themselves through sex work, because it is not perceived to be drastically unlike other forms of labor; in some cases, sex work is preferable to other kinds of work for reasons regarding flexibility, stability, and income. Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck found that one-third of the women working there were never previously engaged in any kind of sex work. Instead, they note, these women came directly from other non-sexual, service related positions; these women simply had experience working with and/or for people. In addition, sex work is not the only kind of work Nevada’s brothel women perform. They explain, “Selling sex is often one form of labor among a variety of jobs” (156). Just about seventy-five percent of women who participated in the study worked both non-sex work jobs alongside their brothel
arrangement. Brothel owners are flexible in this sense, permitting working women to hold outside jobs, sometimes working just one or two days a week, and to come and go as they please. The boundaries and distinctions between sex work and what those in the industry like to call “straight work,” or traditional non-sex work labor, are vague, porous, often misrepresented, and illusory. So, one must draw upon numerous sources and the aforementioned narratives of workers themselves to attain a truly rounded sense of the industry.

Another contemporary study to incorporate into this analysis regarding the workplaces of sex workers comes from Susan Dewey and Patty Kelly. Their work focuses on the accounts of sex workers in a variety of locations throughout the world, and one such place is a topless bar in upstate New York. Here they find almost all of the dancers employed had worked outside the sex industry, many of them leaving low-wage jobs in the service industry to pursue performing for higher pay at the bar. Much like the women working in mining towns, these women have been spatially excluded from high-pay employment opportunities and likely seek this kind of work to compensate for the consequences of this exclusion. Interestingly enough the women Dewey and Kelly worked with indicated that it was the jobs they previously held that they found to be “exploitative, exclusionary, and without hope for social mobility or financial stability” (Dewey and Kelly 2011, 75). Women working in this particular part of the sex industry find a position providing better wages, flexibility, a supportive social network, open-mindedness, and a sense of permanence.

In these cases, coming from entirely different geographic locations, there is a slight variety in reasons for participating in sex work. The women in upstate NY for
example, did not mention homelessness or drug use as a reason for making the transition into sex work. Nonetheless, there are both negative and positive driving forces to the decisions sex workers make regarding their employment, having to do with autonomy, income, or otherwise.

Post-War, Post-Fordism

Many changes in the geography of sex work can additionally be attributed to the realities of post-war America. After the production and assembly of goods was moved largely to developing countries, a majority of developed nations came to rely at least partially on an economy fueled by services. What is important here is that service industry workers must now accommodate jobs in workplaces that are often smaller and decentralized. These peripheral workplaces are not just smaller and less rationalized; they are also more likely to be short-term positions with little to no room for advancement.

“Since the 1970s, political institutions… have embraced neoliberal economic policies supporting free markets, decentralized and small government institutions, low public spending, and low taxes. This kind of political economy has encouraged a proliferation of a wide range of business to meet market demands, including sex-related businesses” (Breference et al. 2010, 5)

This is the result of a transition from factory assembly lines to flexible manufacturing systems. Stephen Maddison, lecturer at University of East London, asserts that sex work and sex workers can be representative of or a product of post-Fordism, “expressions of creativity and sociality,” “communities of interest,” “inter-dependence and co-operation,” and “new technological possibilities” (Maddison 2013, 107).
However, he makes a distinction, citing altporn, which features members of stylistic subcultures and independent directors, as ambassador of post-Fordist representation:

“We can see the work of altporn entrepreneurs as expressions of the post-Fordist multitude: emergent expressions of creativity and sociality, arising from the articulation of communities of interest, where inter-dependence and co-operation is expressed by user-generated content and interactivity in forums, blogs and reviews, as a function of new technological possibilities” (Maddison 2013, 104).

While they are indeed more flexible and cost effective, they offer workers far less stability and security. For this reason, those working in the sex industry, precarious for a host of other reasons as well, must themselves be adaptable. Changes in the industrial landscape are thereby indicators of a shifting landscape of sex work, as the commercial sex sector finds new spaces to inhabit, new frontiers to forage.

*The Rise of Virtual, Commercial Sex*

New spaces to inhabit are not the only means of making sex work— work. Adopting innovative methods, practices, and marketing strategies offers both sex workers and their potential third-party proprietors an outlet or an edge on the marketplace. “Brothels with the capital to do so are beginning to adopt marketing strategies that are more like mainstream businesses. The nature of the product sold involves… providing individualized, interactive… experiences” (Brents et al. 2010, 435). With any small or independent business, growth depends on the differentiation between the products offered from one seller to the next. The Internet provides businesses with an easy way to promote this differentiation, as well as reaching new markets, providing streamlined and affordable advertising, and creating the illusion of being open twenty-four seven.
In addition, as people who make a living by selling their bodies, themselves, to consumers, sex workers must be aware of and keen on the desires of the consumer culture at the time. Yasmina Katsulis, in her work regarding sex workers in Tijuana, notes that body modifications, enhancements, and other cosmetic work were generally a top priority for those women (2008, 66). Altering physical appearances, however, might not be the only way that workers conform to consumerist desires. In the advent of the Internet and in today’s wifi world, consumers are increasingly drawn towards technological innovation. For these reasons, some seasoned sex workers find it beneficial for business or their livelihoods to increase their digital presence. This accounts for some increase in cybersex work.

Drawing from previous research done with women in sex work communities adds further historical depth with which to contrast their contemporaries. In the next chapter, I will focus further on how and why MGF women choose to explore sex work, so as to help explain the creation of MGF and the overall expansion of sex work into cyberspace.
Chapter Three

“Women’s Work:” The Makeup of MyGirlFund and Why Women Seek Sex Work

Subject: RE: Getting discouraged

“@A – I promise, it’s like that everywhere, for everybody. We have good days, good weeks, good months, good years, and we have bad days, bad weeks, bad months, and bad years. I’m tellin’ ya, ain’t no rollercoaster like a sex work rollercoaster bc [because] a sex work rollercoaster don’t stop LOL.”

— Gwen V., MyGirlFund Model (2015, personal communication)

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the embodied nature of sex work necessitates communication with those bodies, those women, these models, in order to gain a true sense of this informal employment experience on the frontiers of cyberspace. I had little difficulty accessing the interior of MGF, because, as a young woman my body is in high demand on MGF.

Methodology

Using a combination of participant observation and semi-structured online surveying, I hoped to capture diversity of membership websites like MGF attract, how they differ from traditional demographics of sex workers, and whether or not they seem to be representative of a new frontier of sex workers. I spoke with individuals representing differing subgroups of sex workers, in terms of their education, class, sexual orientation, and geographic region. By nature of the website’s restrictions, the women using the MGF interface are cisgender females above the age of eighteen. Beyond these unavoidable restrictions, I relied on traffic to the website’s “girls forum” page for

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answers to my questions. The only people I corresponded with were the models themselves, not customers, administrators, or other researchers. Because MGF prohibits sharing one’s location, legal name, or other personal information, surveys were conducted only on the MGF forums. The models’ comments and responses to my surveys are viewed by the website’s administration, so models must consider the risk of account closure or expulsion from the site. In this case, they may practice self-censorship and avoid criticizing the site’s policies, organization, or administration.

The models’ self-censorship and self-protection are some concerns to keep in mind alongside the role of the researcher. Researchers conducting studies of sex workers and their environments must also consider their role in such communities. As such, I decided to register as a member of the website, allowing me to survey the models and the website’s user platform more intimately. Many models from MGF and other adult websites manage their own webpage or start forums on popular sites for webcam models. These forums, tight-knit and unique in their own respects, offer firsthand accounts of their experiences. It was through these websites and MGF forums that I became acquainted with the inner workings of so-called webcam model work.

While pursuing answers to my survey questions, I was straightforward about the intents of my project and the eventual incorporation of their comments. The survey data gathered may not be representative of the entire MGF model community nor the virtual, commercial sex work scene, but it does provide a valuable case study that sheds light on the organization and implication of this type of sex work. In all I spent fifteen months (2013-2015) observing MGF. I collected surveys over the course of February and March
2015, with over a dozen models participating. All survey responses remain confidential, as models are signified by their username.

Who are the Models?

Communicating with the models through use of the forum aided in my understanding of how their individual identities and geographies led to their employment on MGF. Monitoring the website over many months, it became apparent that the vast majority of women using the site are in their early to mid-twenties, they live in a variety of places, isolated, rural places, urban areas, on the fringes of larger metropolitan areas, or in college towns. A handful of participants are mothers with one or more children, and many of them have an associates or bachelors degree and are currently saving or pursuing their next degree. For most of the women I surveyed, MyGirlFund.com was their first exposure to commercial sex work. One model that participated said she had tried exotic dancing almost a decade ago and still one more said she had previously worked at Victoria’s Secret. Moreover, every participant felt that MGF gave them the choice to decide what kind of content or services to offer. At the same time, they all felt MGF offered them more independence and freedom than other forms of employment, including different forms of commercial sex work.

The women working on MGF characterize a different kind of class formation than has commonly been found in commercial sex spaces. Unlike the minorities and immigrant workers representing a majority of informal economy workers cited by the International Labour Organization, the women present on MGF do not fall into the
typical category of women working in the informal sector, especially sex workers. This suggests that they are indeed, within themselves, representing a new frontier.

The women of MGF denote a new informal economy and they are coming from differing spatial geographical configurations and class formations (models generally coming from families with higher incomes and pursuing costly degrees) than the poorer, more marginalized groups of women known to practice street-based sex work. They do not come from marginalized immigrant communities or the Third World, they are not homeless minors, they do not openly admit to drug addiction or reliance on a pimp. Initially, in most regards, these women seem less disadvantaged. They seem to exercise more autonomy, individualism, and control over their labor environments than traditional informal economy workers, further hinting at the formation of a new frontier. However, my investigation would also suggest that the same capitalist, patriarchal structures present in real space create a similar foundation for virtual spaces. Thus, women are subjected to the same kinds of exploitative environments.

The nature of this new frontier, made up of these unseen demographics of women, is characterized similarly to frontiers that have come before it. Women coming from a wider range of geographic locations means that MGF, and by virtue the Internet, is spatially more expansive, bringing in people from a broad spectrum of locations, not just urban zones, as sex work has previously been. The MGF frontier offers these models more privacy than street-based sex workers and perhaps even more autonomy, as many of the women mentioned in the surveys. However, this space remains less regulated than before, as authorities attempting to control the flow and progression of sex work have yet to establish sound means of perpetrating sex workers online on sites like MGF. Other
similarities on this frontier include a similar bias on gender (predominantly female) and age (roughly between 18-28) and no room for advancement within the given career path.

“Another Such Economy”

Regardless of professional advancement, there are a few reasons to explain the non-stop surge of women joining MGF to become webcam models. For one, MGF, unlike street prostitution, touts a more approachable attitude and encourages and supports autonomy in models. Stefan Patrick, Director of Business Development, offers some highlights regarding the purposes and policies of MGF. He writes, “The young women joining our site appreciate the total autonomy we grant them. They are free to set their own prices for the content and interaction they chose to provide. They work when they want to from the privacy of their own homes” (“College Girls Are Paying Tuition” 2013).

One might be hesitant to accept the words of Patrick as true, because how might this businessman truly know what sex working women need? In spite of these reservations, it would seem that MGF models tend to agree with the sentiments of Stefan. Much like the women who seek work in the brothels of Nevada or the topless bar in upstate New York, women on MGF view the time they spend on MyGirlFund.com as part of a larger continuum of employment. MGF model Hermione B. briefly chronicles her story:

“I moved to the country a few years ago, to a small homestead,” she explains, “just a few acres of woods and pasture, a small farmhouse, a barn, a chicken coop, and a small garden plot. I live in the country, as in… the nearest town is over 30 minutes away. Living in the country and milking a cow twice a day turns out does restrict your employment possibilities, so I made do with different economies—trade and barter, DIY, etsy [.com], farmer’s markets, thrift stores. I think MGF is another such economy to add to the list” (2015, personal communication).
Hermione finds the work she does on MGF to be just “another such economy,” similar to that of selling her handmade, homestead wares at a farmer’s market or Etsy.com, an online marketplace for crafters and collectors. Other MGF models, including survey respondent Red, consider employment on adult paysites to be “like any other privately owned business.” Red writes:

“I definitely [have] more independence and freedom [than other employment options] to work how I want. But being a successful camgirl still requires a lot of work. You may end up working A LOT MORE than a regular 9-5. It really is like any other privately owned business built by an individual. The success of your business depends on how hard you are willing to work” (2015, personal communication).

Hermione further states that MGF provides her with additional employment opportunities that compliment her homesteading, country lifestyle. Hermione isn’t the only one using a combination of e-commerce sites, networks for the online trading of goods and services. Survey respondent and MGF model CosmoGirl indicates that MGF is “a huge part of my income, but I also run my own etsy shop, which is another huge part of my financial life” (2015, personal communication).

Not only do these women find employment on MGF to be incredibly similar to other, more standard forms of income generation, they often find the website to be better, more ideal in many ways. Painter explains that she finds more independence on MGF than with other forms of employment and that she can choose exactly what she wants to offer.

“I love it. I am allowed to stay in my comfort zone and I have never felt pressured to do anything that I would not do normally. I usually talk to guys anywhere from 30 min-3 hours before they buy content. It can be time consuming, but I think it makes the process of buying videos more enjoyable for the guy and it makes me
feel better "knowing" who bought my content,” she continues, “I can work a couple hours a week and make more money than I do working 30 hours a week waiting tables. However, it's not something you can put on your resume… It can be challenging but it is definitely the best job I have ever had.”

Like the Nevada women mentioned before, Hermione, Red, CosmoGirl, and Painter also appreciate the flexibility of MGF. Employment on the website allows them to work on their own schedules, in between milking cows or caring for children, and earn income from additional jobs as well. babykittgirl, another MGF model, indicates a similar appreciation for flexibility, both in time and in services provided, “I choose my hours and setting. I have creative control, and I am in charge of everything I do and say” (2015, personal communication).

MGF model Painter says she was drawn to work on MGF because of the ability to work from home and make quick, easy money. “I get to explore my sexuality and decide who I want to work with,” she adds, “I really stumbled upon this site. I looked into other cam girling sites but they looked complicated and I didn't like the frequency of advertisements. MGF is clean and fairly easy to navigate” (2015, personal communication). While not all of these women have children, mothers can undoubtedly benefit from a job that allows one to choose their own hours and work from home. CosmoGirl finds employment on MGF beneficial for both her and her children, noting “I can stay home with my kids AND work at the same time! It’s a lifesaver… I can also work from my phone so that means while I’m taking a bubble bath or out shopping, I’m still working!” (CosmoGirl 2015, personal communication).

Moreover, Hermione’s spatially limited employment opportunities were alleviated by those found in the more accessible virtual realm. And like the New York women, who
took their experiences from previous service industry jobs to use them in a different kind of (sex) service job, Hermione also takes her previous skills selling her handcrafted goods on Etsy.com to selling her immaterial goods on MyGirlFund.com. Her technology skills from other websites further allow an almost seamless transition into working on MGF.
Figure 4. A “word cloud” of the most mentioned words and phrases on MyGirlFundReview.com, a website that boasts “insightful interviews, money making tips, and different profitable ways of looking at the same social network that you all know and love” (MyGirlFundReview.com 2015).
From Social Networks to Sex Work

Stefan Patrick also seems to think that young women are flocking to join the website as models, because it is akin to “what many are likely already doing on social media sites like Facebook, tumblr and Instagram” (MyGirlFund.com 2013). He goes on to liken the “social networking setting” of MGF to that of Facebook, implying that young people today are incredibly proficient at social networking and do not have difficulty learning something new if it can mimic other technological tools and interfaces of today.

While hesitant, many of the models and I would tend to agree with Stefan. Take Betty, for example, who says she values the website’s structure in that it provides her with “direct, safe interaction with the customers, the ability to build actual working relationships with them, and the thrill of impromptu custom sessions” (2015, personal communication). She adds, referring to her independence on MGF as opposed to other forms of employment, “I’ve only just started, but it's already wonderful to not have to fit into someone else's ideals (unless I want to hehe)” (2015, personal communication).

Patrick is correct in many ways, as he hints at the growing technology-related skills of today’s Internet users. Beginning sometime in the mid-1980s, the rise in personal computer use combined with increasing Internet accessibility and availability has caused an immense impact on the structure of commercial sex work (Cunningham and Kendall 2011).

“The increasing use of Internet-based sex work in recent years… has altered the street-based sex market. The Internet has allowed sex workers to advertise services to a larger clientele... The Internet’s accessibility and ease of use in facilitating the sale of sex is luring sex workers into the sex trade who may otherwise have never entered; displacing streetwalking sex workers in their 30s and 40s; causing the market for commercial sex to expand; and reducing the need for pimps” (Dank et al. 2011, 218).
The consequences for street-based sex workers is little discussed and deserves more attention, however, this project does not allow for an in-depth analysis on streetwalkers and instead remains focused on virtual commercial sex work. However, the scholars above assure their readers that the Internet is not really displacing sex work on the streets but instead is creating a new venue to sell sex and thereby expanding the underground (informal) commercial sex network (Dank et al. 2011).

The Internet as a new venue is analogous to the conception of virtual space as a new frontier for sex work, like the mining towns, red light districts, urban centers, and brothels that preceded it. These preliminary spaces were frontier zones for sex workers because they offered new places of development and possibilities, operated as transitory spaces, and presented a sense of dynamism and fluidity. They were also frontier zones that resulted from spatial exclusion and oppressive zoning laws. In a similar way, the Internet and MGF are frontiers for sex work(ers) as well.

New technologies and growing bandwidth means that more distant geographic places can be pulled together, providing a larger customer base. Furthermore, the flexibility of virtual space increases economic possibilities for sex-working women by allowing women the freedom to come and go from virtual commercial sex work as they please. The third-party pimps associated with street-based prostitution are notoriously violent and are known to be one of the main reasons keeping women in the prostitution circuit. Not only do women have more choice over when they enter and leave the field, virtual space further reorganizes space and time by allowing women the twenty-four hour marketplace mentioned before. Model webpages can remain live at all hours of the day, and they can even log on through their mobile devices during the more fragmented times
of day. Much like before the advent of the virtual, the Internet frontier remains largely unregulated, allowing for a dynamism and variety of products and services to be exchanged. As some of the women mentioned, the MGF frontier also involves a diversity of gender and sexual relationships (non-monogamous, queer, etcetera) between and among the audience and the women, lending them a sense of sexual expression.

Among these seemingly beneficial reasons for joining MGF and the like, it must also be recognized that these women are likely offered few other options in terms of skilled labor or high-pay employment. This deficit of other options is not a result of individual mistakes but is instead representative of women’s historical and continued exclusion from places of work that offer upward advancement, managerial positions, better wages, and benefits.

Exploring reasons as to why women previously joined real space commercial sex markets and/or transitioned into previous frontiers sets a historical stage with which to compare conceptions of this new frontier. Then, incorporating the sentiments of women pursuing virtual sex work today emphasizes where these women come from, why they decide to join, and the independence they feel they have or have not gained from it. Independence remains a key question with regards to informal employment and allows me, as a researcher, and my audience to investigate the nature of this new frontier informal economy.
Chapter 4

Labor and Power on the Internet: Consumer Culture in Cyberspace and the Cooptation of Autonomy

“Women’s tactics of resistance to violence and social control are admirable. Tactics of resistance help women to negotiate within the rigid confines of their social space, but they present little challenge to power and authority of sex, money, and law. The importance of hearing the multifaceted voices of women in the sex trade is... that they highlight contradictions in the micro practice of power in the everyday life.”

— Lisa E. Sanchez (1997, 576)

Comments and stories from women employed through sex work like the ones alluded to above shed light on what Lisa Sanchez calls the “felt reality of their embodied practice” (Sanchez 1997, 576). In chapter one, Nelson and Seager refer to the embodied nature of women’s work, whereby the role of caretaker, mother, and sex worker, for example, involve direct use of a woman’s body. Sanchez accounts similarly, adding that women in these kinds of work are also spatialized, or possess the nature of space, because the labor necessary to complete the job requires direct bodily input. Recognizing the spatialization of women’s work is important because of existing power relations in regards to women’s bodies, employment, and the like. Sanchez writes:

“Domination of women’s personal (bodily) space and of the material and social space of the local sexual economy is one of the primary strategies of power employed by customers, perpetrators of violence, and the state within that context. The lack of control women have over the material and spatial environment where sex trade practices are carried out is one of the key ways in which they are disempowered to make decisions about their own body and left vulnerable to violence” (Sanchez 1997, 576).

For this reason, I feature a handful of the responses, narratives, or casual comments some of the women working on MGF disclosed to me. Through their stories,
this paper gains not only an understanding of the work they do, how they relate to it, and how this new frontier is constructed but also a sense of the existing power structures of online adult communities.

Perceptions and Realities of Power

Certainly all the women mentioned above, survey respondents and otherwise, find real incentives and advantages to both sex work and e-commerce, as it provides them with employment opportunities they would not otherwise have. Mark Graham, professor at Oxford whose research focuses on the Internet and information geographies, asserts the Internet does create new job opportunities for the people who need them most, as mentioned previously.

In many ways, MGF offers models freedom and flexibility, features of frontier zones, as I have shown through their accounts. They perceive selling immaterial labor on the Internet as an opportunity to explore employment options. It offers them more privacy than traditional methods of sex work, flexible work hours, an outlet for sexual expression, and other incentives, such as working from home or while on the go, that vary by individual. Unlike brothel work, topless bar employment, or most commonly conjured street prostitution, there also seems to be little third-party interference when working on the web. In more recent cases, researchers (Murphy, Venkatesh 2006, for example) have generally found fewer women in the commercial sex industry working with facilitators. Weitzer (2009) contends, “the traditional conception of a third-party pimp, often male, who controls the activities and finances of a sex worker does not ring true in all situations of commercial sex.” Indeed, in some cases, pursuing sex work is a voluntary decision and
is not the result of coercion by street pimps, for example. The Internet provides one quick, relatively easy way to seek out sex work as a form of employment and also tends to involve much higher incomes than street-based prostitution, parlor work, and the like.

“Sex workers on the streets are more prone to drug addictions and more willing to take less money for sex work. Street-based dates are also more opportunistic and service-based, which tends to involve lower prices. Online dates, in contrast, garner higher prices in part because sex workers advertise their prices ahead of time, which forces johns to more or less accept the requested prices” (Dank et al. 2011, 218).

The accounts of these scholars characterize MyGirlFund.com, as models do not necessarily offer sexual services and are encouraged to list prices for their content or rates for live chat sessions on their profiles. On MGF model Charlotte’s profile page, she details her content offerings and the price she requests for each: “Room Tour (12 minutes)—25 credits, Pet Ferret Feature (16 minutes)—25 credits, Summer Selfies (15 photos)—10 credits” (MyGirlFund.com 2015). babykittygirl prefers MGF over other adult paysites and explains that the guys know what to expect. She writes, “I like the site layout and the guys here. A lot seem to know that freeloading just isn’t going to fly here” (2015, personal communication). By freeloading, I presume that babykittygirl means most men on the site do not request content or services without paying. For street-based sex workers articulating and receiving a set price may be more difficult in the presence of a client because of intimidation or threats of violence. Because of this, it may seem that MGF models hold more power in delineating content prices and payment options.

As far as the risks associated with soliciting sex work on the Internet, Dank, Khan, et al. noted some women mentioning fear of law enforcement posing as potential clients online. This concern is largely related to that of street-based sex workers, as
authorities routinely target their work. On MGF, the models are protected by the site’s privacy policy, which promises to protect the identities of the women and enforces this through the use of username and no outside or personal contact. In fact, uneven, sometimes nonexistent, law enforcement is another feature of the frontier, one that can make the idea of sex work seem safer and more approachable.

The frontier nature of MGF also means that new people, those who would not otherwise have encountered one another, are interacting together and generating new opportunities for socializing and working. The combined community of men and women on the website makes it both a place for social networking with other women and previous clients and an ideal market for buyers interested in pornographic content or a virtual girlfriend.

Difficulty in finding employment that pays a living wage or that offers flexibility to women who are pregnant, have children, or are in school has led to an increasing number of people to the Internet’s frontier informal economies. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, this difficulty in accessing employment is an important point in regards to women and is largely a failure of current markets and economies to fully and flexibly employ women throughout all stages of their life. In their explorations within this alternate economy, some models have noted a sense of camaraderie among other young women who find themselves in similar circumstances. These communities help to heal the damages of disjointed social structures that many of these women experience, from exclusion in other workplaces, zoning laws in their cities, and stigma against sex workers.

Take Claes or Bubbles, for example, two women who suffer from different kinds of physical and mental distress. Bubbles tells me, “Being a camera gal allows me the
freedom to set my own work schedule…and when I’m being tortured by my own body, I am allowed to make the call to stay in bed,” while Claes writes, “I decide when I work, I don't have to worried about being fired due to my disabilities if I can't work and I can just hang out and chat on those days and maybe make some new friends/potential customers.” For them, MGF offers autonomy and frees them from the restraints of traditional forms of employment, and, even if for a moment, the stresses of their disabilities. For them, Claes, Bubbles, and the others who speak of independence, they do not consider the larger, structural oppressions of women on account of systems that continue to perpetuate gender-stereotypical roles for men and women. This new frontier, then, allows women with disabilities to participate, offering them employment and independence that they may not otherwise have found. For them, they gain a sense of power in managing a business and seeing profits.

*Conventional Capitalism, Persistent Patriarchy*

Even with these initial benefits and appeal, there is a fear that existing unequal power structures in place within global labor markets today can replicate, and in some places have already been replicated, in virtual space. “Many concerns also exist,” Graham writes, “Not only are workers placed in potentially precarious positions, they also are potentially enrolled into new digital sweatshops with little opportunity to upgrade their positions” (Graham 2014). Truthfully, none of the women surveyed for this project indicated potential advancement as a bonus for being on the site. Modeling on MGF is likely to be a temporary position while they continue, for example, to pursue a college degree on the side. Mizz Amanda Marie says that she has completed some of her degree
in psychology and continues to save, while Painter is set to finish her bachelor’s in May and starts graduate school in the fall.

Furthermore, to what extent do the benefits these women perceive overcome or perpetrate gender insecurity and inequality? Put differently, the perceived independence and flexibility on part of the women is like a short-term gain compared to the long-term consequences of succumbing to the oppressive structures and maintaining the marginalization, subordination, and exploitation of women. The structure of the Internet and more specifically adult paysites like MGF are a part of the same oppressive forces that are present in real space. Paul F. Starrs writes, “Cyberspace has a recognizable geography, but it remains an elusive space, rather than a community… the formation of community requires contact and individual identity merging into shared goals” (Starrs 2014). In other words, Starrs appears to conclude that cyberspace shares many resemblances with real space, in that it is somehow recognizable. He goes on to equate the geography of cyberspace to a mirror in that it reflects similar evolutions in real space and abides by the will of its human creators.

Kylie Jarrett arrives at similar conclusions, writing that the online “practices of users generate normative models of activity, which ultimately manifest social structures… [and] various authority forms and figures that ensures a relatively static and centralized distribution of power” (2014). In all my time researching the site, for instance, I have not come across one female owner, administrator, or moderator. Jarret’s words are reminiscent of Starrs’ idea of the Internet as a mirror, reflecting real space structures. Therefore, cyberspace is more than likely to reproduce the same unfair structures that exist in real space and continue the exploitation of women. Despite the fact that many
share ideas of virtual space as a liberating and democratic utopia, the women on MGF remain governed by the rules of the website, created by and for men, and the wills of their male clients.

There is a difference worth noting between liberating and liberal here that is relevant to women’s work in the informal sector. Liberal empowerment may not necessarily be liberating. In this case, women may become entrepreneurs but will not necessarily challenge any gender inequalities or prevailing patterns of access to and control over resources (Cornwall et al. 2008). Likewise, virtual space may be a more liberal realm, but it is not necessarily liberating, because it too is mirrored after real space and likely assumes the same gender inequalities. Still further, MGF might offer these young women new opportunities in regards to entrepreneurship and employment, but the rules of the workplace are not of their own making.
Figure 5. Demographics of MyGirlFund.com visitors (Alexa.com 2014).
Autonomy Isn’t What It Used to Be

As mentioned in each of the previous chapters, independence, freedom to choose content, services, or products, and autonomy are heralded as the primary reasons for pursuing and praising MGF and other adult paysites as places of employment for women. However, the autonomy these women perceive is mediated by a capitalist production of the female body and the monetization and subsequent advertising and selling of one’s body. This is undeniably one instance that may, at first, be distinguished as liberating. Lois McNay, professor of Political Theory at Oxford University, would be one to refute claims of women finding autonomy and independence through adult paysites. They explains the concept of self as enterprise and the ensuing cooptation of autonomy by neoliberalism:

“The remodeling of… the self around an economized notion of enterprise subtly alters and depoliticizes conventional conceptions of individual autonomy. Individual autonomy becomes not the opposite of, or limit to, neoliberal governance, rather it lies at the heart of its disciplinary control…under neoliberal autonomy is reshaped so that it is compatible with governance rather than, on a classical liberal account, its absolute limit or the point at which governance falters…Any apparent increase in individual autonomy in fact represents an intensification of a certain disciplinary power” (McNay 2009).

McNay’s description of autonomy in the neoliberal age is harrowing to say the least. This account further adds to the distinction between liberal and liberating, noting that acting within a neoliberal framework inevitably shapes any of the radical attempts to escape it.

The consequences of neoliberalism’s cooptation of autonomy are immense, not just for sex-working women or the models on MGF. While these women may have a great number of choices to make with regards to the content they sell, i.e. setting prices or
choosing to offer pornographic content or not, or even minor input into general working conditions (by contacting support with suggestions), autonomy remains severely restricted. The lack of model or female administrators, the percentage of sales models get to keep (65 percent of every sale, to begin with), to whom and towards what the surplus funds (the 35 percent fee taken from every sale) from their content sales go to as far as website updates and services (like having a method of direct deposit for cash outs), the desire of their clients, and who is allowed in and on the website are all representative of limitations MGF puts on the models’ independence. Moreover, MGF possess the authority to suspend or close model accounts based on their behavior on the website and even what is said in private messages between model and client. Suspensions and closures are the likely punishments for breaking the website’s rules or thwarting MGF policies, but some models have reported account suspensions for reporting rule-breaking themselves, using the word “email” in a message, or even making a reference to another adult paysite.
Figure 6. Above is the “Online Cams User Guide” from one of a number of popular sex-related webcam review websites. These sites are aimed at men who frequent adult paysites (CamSitesReviews.com 2015).
There is even a Tumblr blog called “Change MyGirlFund” that acts as a way to air concerns about site management or share stories of harassment. According to a statement made on the site, Change MyGirlFund is “a safe place for you to submit stories and ask questions about MyGirlFund.” The administrators of this blog page encourage visitors to “tell about your experiences, warn girls about men that have hurt you, give us suggestions on what we can do to make the site a safer place for us,” noting that they intend to “get support's attention one way or another. We can't let them silence us anymore” (changemgf.tumblr.com). There is a glaring disjuncture between the words of Stefan Patrick, the administrator mentioned before who claims MGF gives the women “total autonomy,” and the women coming to support this blog. This disconnect begins to speak to the negativities shrouded behind the website’s claims of providing models with unlimited independence.

In Figure 6, yet another divide becomes obvious. CamSitesReviews.com is one of many websites that target the clients, almost entirely male, of cam models with suggestions on the best adult paysites and tips on how to use the websites. Please note tip seven and tip ten, which respectively read, “Women on cam sites are devious and will avoid performing some things if they can get you to stay on. Learn how to command women to do things you can only dream of today,” and “Lazy performers are such a bitch. Learn to quickly screen women and instantly tell which ones will perform well.” The language used in this text is incredibly disturbing, but it touches on the way clients perceive cam models and the expectations men have of their experiences with them. The patriarchal nature of MGF, similar websites, and the Internet at large becomes painfully comprehensible in the derogatory language, the male desire to “command” and control
women, and the extreme focus on the monetary value of women’s bodies. If this is the true nature of the same space that models articulate as fostering independence and openness then there is a certain kind of delusion to the liberal, utopian view of the Internet. And autonomy, camaraderie, and flexibility can only go so far, as Rosen and Venkatesh assert:

“The choice is limited by many outside factors that dictate the extent to which the sex worker is truly capable of making an informed decision. These factors include the specific power relations between the sex worker and his or her client—determined by race, gender, socioeconomic background—and the fact that one party is using her body to perform a work-related task during the exchange. We can see that agency is therefore contingent, as it is negotiated according to the desires, intentions, and power of each interacting individual” (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008).

Rosen and Venkatesh’s words ring true for women working on MGF. Models do remain in control of content, however they are entirely restricted to selling their bodies. They further have little choice to whom they sell to, as the website is structured in such a way that only men are permitted to join as contributors. Beyond the confines of MGF, even greater forces dictate the fields in which women are welcome and qualified to engage in. Unlike more traditional forms of employment, the assets of sex workers cannot multiply past a certain age, as their resources, both physical and financial, are confined to their bodies. In conclusion, mirroring the words of the models and the work of Rosen and Venkatesh, MGF models certainly have more autonomy than street-based sex workers yet they seem to rely on the work only as a temporary source of funding for larger, long-term goals like finishing up a bachelor’s or master’s degree.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: Frontiers of Fantasy and Fortune or Falsities?

The year is 2000. The Internet is a means for escort businesses to solicit their services and products (people) through online advertising. One can choose from lists of men or women posted by third-party organizers. As noted below, these “boys” are intended to be available in person and travel to meet their clients.

“Online Boys

Christian B.
22 years old. 5’11”, 170#, blonde hair green eyes, extremely defined, muscular, gymnast build, washboard abs, great pecs, arms and legs, model goodlooks. Versatile Top! I am extremely good looking and well built European American boy with an amazingly defined body. I enjoy what I do, have no attitude and am also well educated. So if you are interested in a singular experience with a very young, hot blonde adonis let’s hook up soon. Based in San Francisco, California. Available for Travel!

Matt
30 years old, 5’11” 170#, black muscled, masculine, 7.5 UC! Bottom! Goodlooking, easygoing, friendly, adventurous and very horny tight round butt. Based in Chicago, IL. Available for Travel!

Toby
19 years old. 5’9”, 145#, brown hair, green eyes, tan, smooth, 7! Based in Philadelphia, PA. Available for Travel!” (Pruitt 2005).

The year is 2005. The New York Times publishes an exposé called “Through His Webcam, a Boy Joins a Sordid Online World.” The article is a “dark coming-of-age story” about a 13-year-old boy named Justin Berry and his first webcam.

“By appearing on camera bare-chested, Justin sent an important message: here was a boy who would do things for money. Gradually the requests became bolder, the cash offers larger: More than $100 for Justin to pose in his underwear. Even
more if the boxers came down... How could adults be so organized at manipulating young people with Webcams?” (Eichenwald 2005).

The year is 2009. In Los Angeles, there is a federal investigation into the life of a man charged with pimping underage women through social networking websites, a disturbing and presumably prolific counterpart to recent technological advancements.

“The FBI in Los Angeles is looking for more underage victims of a man accused of recruiting a 17-year-old Florida girl into a prostitution ring on MySpace. Christopher Tyrone Young, aka “Staydown,” was arrested in San Diego Tuesday night on a federal sex-trafficking charge. Young allegedly befriended the minor in MySpace in March, and began talking to her on the phone, eventually convincing her to take a bus to Las Vegas to become “a star” (Perry 2009).

These are the stories we hear about frontiers of sex work on the Internet over the years, stories that remain focused on escort service advertising, child pornography, and human trafficking. An obvious lack in research and information exists regarding both voluntary participation on behalf of the sex working individual and the kinds of people pursuing online commercial sex work. It is through the accounts of the women on MGF that I aid in broadening the scope of research on who participates, where they come from, and the new spaces and frontiers they are creating as sex workers employing themselves on the Internet. I also mean to show here that sex work has indeed existed on the Internet for some time, even in the form of adult paysites, but these instances, snapshots into the history of Internet sex work, are void of the women I have communicated with.

Imagining the Frontier

It is primarily through these interactions that I discovered not only a newfound group of women working on a new frontier, but also the answers to my original inquiries:
What are the origins of online commercial sex work and how is it similar to real space sex work in the informal economy in terms of autonomy? How is the Internet a new frontier for the informal economy sex workers? Does this new frontier (re)present new opportunities, geographies, and social divisions?

From the women and the research, I now know that the likes of MGF and similar websites are the result of an increase in the use in personal computers, the rise of Internet ventures and online business advertising, and the continued and combined social exclusion of women from work and sex workers from workplaces. While the women themselves have changed, the reasons for forging into this new frontier are much the same as they have always been—flexibility, expression, creativity, and social connectivity.

These spaces of virtual commercial sex work represent a frontier zone for sex workers in terms of offering a new site for work-related development, operating as temporary space of employment, and presenting a sense of dynamism and fluidity in relation to sexuality and relationships. Some of the new possibilities in this frontier space, which differ from the real space counterpart, include providing an escape from violence and abuse sex workers can face on the street, less intervention by third-party pimps, more flexible work hours, the ability to come and go as they please, the opportunity to work from home, a larger customer base to tap into, higher pay than traditional street-based sex workers, unregulated, relaxed rules, and perhaps even sharpening basic technological skills as far as website layout and design.

The virtual sex work frontier, however, remains similar to sex work in real space based on principles of spatial exclusion and zoning, for what likely pulls college-aged
students, mothers, and pregnant women into this kind of work, work many of them attest to never before participating in, is the unavailability of flexible employment that pays a living wage in an advanced capitalist economy. It is largely characterized by the same patriarchal ideas that govern women’s roles in society, which certainly contribute to the lack of employment options for mothers, as suppliers and sexualized, monetized bodies. And those who create and rule the frontier zone, the site’s male administrators and clients, control the autonomy that is heralded as the single most important reason for joining as a model.

The women themselves are also different from those found in real space sex work zones, in that they are generally pursuing a college degree or professional certification alongside their work on MGF. Likewise, the vast majority of models are in their early to mid-20s and work what they consider to be similar forms of income-generating positions, such as selling goods on Etsy.com or working a part-time job in their college towns. However, this does not consider all of the women using the site as a form of employment. Certainly, some women are in their 30s and early 40s and still some use MGF and similar commercial sex work websites as their primary forms of employment. In this way, webcam modeling is a temporary position to earn extra money throughout college for most, while the rest rely on online commercial sex work to make a living. They continue to explore commercial sex work and its extension online not out of necessity, but out of partiality. As Sassen said, they are the creative professionals, exploring selling sex and one’s body as a performance, complicating the ideal image of motherhood, complimenting a waitress’s wage, and interrogating the demure with digital dances and dildos.
Herein lies the primary distinction in the argument I wish to make, an argument that is neither one nor the other, but more multi-faceted much like the women with whom I have had the pleasure of hearing and learning from. There are certainly women who join voluntarily, creating this new demographic of women who are seeking out sex work as a short-term job to compliment their time spent working towards a degree. Take, for example, each and every woman I interviewed on MGF, who spoke about her feelings of independence in this kind of employment.

In contrast, there are also some women, those in sex work for the long-term, who may be exposed to so few options of employment based on larger systems of disenfranchisement. In this case, the term voluntary must be broken down to expose the oppressive structures, which push women, and other marginalized groups, into certain kinds of work—the more dangerous, exploitative, criminal, interim, and menial kinds of informal employment—even though they may not consider undercover oppressors, such as the workings of capitalism and patriarchy. The suggestions that follow in the next section are largely intended to address concerns of independence online and leave the reader with a slight sense of optimism and direction.

Reimagining Freedom on the Frontier

The realities of this frontier space, at first perceived to be a newfound workplace with many additional opportunities, are indeed patriarchal and capitalist but remain concealed behind perceptions of income and autonomy. Understanding the underlying structure of MGF, one frontier space of informal employment, is applicable to conceptualizing the foundations of other virtual workplaces and social communities.
Along those lines, knowing the dynamics of a burgeoning space is beneficial in the sense that it becomes a guide towards imaging and building workplaces that are both inclusive of the needs and desires of all kinds of people, sexual, economic or otherwise, and also provide options for advancement, a place to make suggestions, and overall the space for autonomy.

Some scholars have done work that provides a foundation for the kind of radical reimaging necessary to build these spaces. As mentioned, MGF models may assert a sense a freedom, altering conventional conceptions of sex workers, yet, Maddison argues, “the organisation of exchange and immaterial sex still equates affect and desire with money in a manner consistent with the logic of capitalist valorization,” and, “the experience [of “alt” or alternative forms of pornography] is remarkably similar to that of consuming other kinds of online porn.” Besides, Christian Fuchs’ work on web surveillance has already established the commercialization of the Internet.

“Internet’s domination by commercial interests and profit-oriented companies, it is an advertising machine that confronts users permanently with ads in order to motivate them to buy commodities and to surveil their usage behaviour in order to present even more targeted advertisements and to stimulate ever more commodity purchases. Commercial Internet platform operators therefore consider users primarily as the consumers of advertisements and commodities and reduce them to this status” (Fuchs 2011, 143).

It would seem, then, that most Internet users have been conditioned into the role of consumer. In the case of MGF, profiles for women act more as advertisements for a certain commodity, in this case the models themselves, and allow the men to uphold their online consumer persona (note again Figure 6, which makes at least two references to the dollar value of “performers” on live cam sites).
Even in those communities attempting to escape the capitalist underpinnings by experimenting with alternative forms of pornography, employing political messages (see work by the East Van Porn Collective, an alternative, radical, queer art collective, including *Made in Secret: The Story of the East Van Collective* 2005 or *BikeSexual* 2005), activist agendas, or members of alternative subcultures (SuperCult, founded in 2000, and SuicideGirls, founded in 2001, are some of the first alternative pornography sites), or on this new frontier of sex work that invites liberalizing forms of sexual expression and new opportunities for women sex workers, the mere commercialization of sexual acts, some argue, fulfill capitalist desires. In order to escape these restrictions, one must first be able to reimagine an autonomy that exists outside of neoliberal, capitalist production. While I cannot provide answers to questions of autonomy within the parameters of this research project, I can imagine a frontier space for sex work that is inclusive and liberating, yet critical and radical.

One scholar offers their more specified advice for reimaging sex and autonomy on the Internet as a starting point for women like the models I surveyed. Maddison (2013) explains his advice for the future, noting that we “need to resist the competitive structure of the entrepreneurial voyeur of porn, and displace conventional forms of capitalist valorisation with forms of association and solidarity that aren’t organised to commodify immaterial sex.” Here, I would agree with Maddison’s notion that we should indeed be able to explore sexualities, even virtually, without imbuing such acts within a system of commodification. This is certainly a task that requires an immense upheaval of traditional modes of imagining both virtual space and real space and acting within them.
At least for MGF, steps towards reimagining autonomy on the frontier should start with a move towards inclusive, non-oppressive virtual spaces, which involve allowing both men and women to be either contributors or models and allowing non-cisgender individuals to participate as users, or generally restructuring the site to incorporate more fluid conceptions of gender. In this way, the new frontiers and informal economies of sex work might have a chance at inviting egalitarian ideals.

Again, Fuchs’ research becomes extremely pertinent. He argues, “Users generally have no right to participate in the formulation of the terms of use and privacy policies of Facebook and other corporate web 2.0 platforms. They, however, have to agree to these terms in order to be able to use the platforms” (Fuchs 2011, 143). For websites with a primarily commercial character, it would be useful to incorporate the input of users to improve upon privacy policies and terms of use. In the future, allowing models to be both contributors to policies such as these and moderators or administrators on the site might lend them a greater sense of autonomy and legitimacy, as they too become creators of the workplace.

While informal work and liberal attitudes in virtual space may not challenge oppressive structures alone, perhaps potential remains within online communities attempting this kind of reexamination of autonomy that Maddison speaks of. These communities, often constructed by or from user participation, can take many forms. Jarrett notes a particularly anarchic forms, insisting that, “The social cooperation of users… involved in digital media are always in excess of commodification and the capitalist labor process. This excess is potentially disruptive” (Jarrett 2014). These sentiments relate women’s work in informal economies to the user-production of digital
media, in that it too is often invisibly or privately constructed. Virtual space provides the means to connect geographically diverse groups of people, forming potentially radically disruptive organizations and actions. Social exchanges in virtual space are not necessarily external to capitalism, but they can and do provide alternative conceptions of accumulation, exchange, and wealth. MGF, one such user-produced market, strengthens the informal economy by way of extending what it means to be informal—creating new informal economies and incorporating the idea of creative performances (recall the sentiments of babykittygirl and Painter who applauded MGF as a creative outlet and space for sexual exploration and expression). Certainly, these are the creative, beneficial elements that must remain as attempts towards reimagining are made.

*Opportunities for Further Research*

Devising alternative ways of navigating informal employment and autonomy on the Internet is one step towards developing the utopian space that so many have in mind. In addition, continuing this kind of research will further foster our understandings of virtual space. Additional areas and topics to build upon the research I have done here might include exploring online commercial sex communities that employ a broader range of people, men, women, transgender, or otherwise. A comparison amongst a variety of different commercial sex work websites would be helpful to capture the type and range of services each website claims to provide and the construction of each websites as a selective, site-specific virtual community. It would further be useful to conduct interviews in convenient virtual spaces, but instead one that could function outside of the
selected website of study, so as to reduce the pressure for sex workers to self-censor; this in turn may produce more candid or honest responses and insights from the interviewees.
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