



## Book Review

# Kurt Fowler (2023) *The Rise of Digital Sex Work*. New York: New York University Press

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ISBN: 9781479824205

The Internet and other technological developments have significantly altered how providers, creators, and customers engage with sex work. Rather than existing primarily in hidden away spaces or niche markets, sex work in the digital era is a burgeoning and easily accessible phenomenon. OnlyFans, for example, is considered a ‘global business’ and has grown exponentially with over three million content creators (Mann 2023). As more people gain access to online platforms, traffic and time spent on these platforms also continue to rise.<sup>1</sup> In light of this context, *The Rise of Digital Sex Work* offers a comprehensive and nuanced examination of sex work in the contemporary digital landscape.

Drawing on interviews with a primarily white, middle-class, and privileged population of sex workers, Kurt Fowler explores these workers’ motivations and practices as they relate to sex work in the digital age. First, he challenges Ronald Weitzer’s ‘oppression paradigm’ (2011), arguing instead that several nuanced turning points construct the pathways into digital sex work. These diversified pathways are enabled by technological capabilities to disseminate information, thereby making sex work more available and accessible. Second, Fowler suggests that technology and digital culture increase providers’ potential emotional labor by ‘charging for time’ that may occur on- and offline, which subsequently increases their potential value to clients. This increased accessibility to providers and the numerous ways in which providers and clients can interact via texts, emails, and other means of communication allow providers to adopt new roles, such as through a ‘girlfriend persona’. Third, Fowler argues that while digital technology offers providers a heightened level of self-provided security, it also introduces new risks, such as worsened social stigma and threat of exposure.

Fowler’s book underscores how digital technology has radically transformed the agency and choice available to sex workers (see also Orchard 2021). Fowler notes that the digital era does not align neatly with the sex work paradigms commonly articulated in the literature. Sex work is neither inherently oppressive nor empowering (Weitzer 2009, 2011). Instead, Fowler emphasizes a contextual framework to understand sex work that accounts for the intersections of providers’ circumstances and broader socio-cultural contexts. For example, becoming a provider may be understood in this contextual paradigm as indicative of capitalism’s failures and a lack of job opportunities rather than as evidence of individual shortcomings or as a means to support other forms of deviance (such as drug use)—which is common in the dominant discourse (Cimino 2017). In this sense, sex work—and, indeed, its growth and expansiveness to online spaces—speaks to the structural and cultural context of expanding neoliberalism, which also corresponds to increased digital access. Whereas contemporary social structures sometimes create pathways into sex work as a means of survival, especially among those most marginalized (Footer et al.



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2020), Fowler shows how the expansion of technology allows privileged providers to *choose* this work rather than engage in it out of necessity. Among this privileged population, sex work is another viable and available financial option that results from providers' agency, self-determination, and, thus, entrepreneurial spirit.

Most notable about *The Rise of Digital Sex Work* is its focus on sex workers with a high degree of privilege and power. Fowler offers a rare glimpse into the perspectives and experiences of white and middle-class providers who willingly enter this work out of desire to engage in it, and, in some cases, with ease and already existing financial stability or well-being. While this focus enriches the discourse on sex work, it may not represent fully the experiences of less-privileged groups who engage in sex work to survive and because of a dearth of other employment options (Cimino 2017). Fowler highlights the paradox wherein privileged digital sex work providers simultaneously seek to destigmatize their profession while also benefiting economically from their position atop the "whoreocracy" in the underground economy. The calls to destigmatize this line of work by privileged providers may result in the legitimization of particular forms of sex work in which they engage, while leaving behind street-level providers without access to digital spaces or who do not enter sex work with similar levels of agency and choice. Still, Fowler's building of a contextual paradigm is an important expansion of the literature on sex work that is likely relative beyond the privileged providers he interviewed.

Fowler's research raises broader questions about the role of technology and the Internet in facilitating entry into additional forms of behaviors labeled deviant or criminal, the impact of digital spheres on agency and decision-making, and the interplay between stigma, privilege, and cultural and structural contexts related to other deviant acts. The implications of this work extend beyond sex work, in particular, prompting further inquiries into the changing nature of deviance, the impact of technology on marginalized communities, and the potential for technological advancements to either broaden or constrain opportunities for different groups. How, for example, does an emphasis on a neoliberal and entrepreneurial spirit in broader socio-cultural contexts impact the changing nature and perception of deviance with respect to sex work, as well as other activities? How does racial and class-based privilege influence agency, choice, and the mediating effects of technology on whether behavior is considered legitimate or deviant? Who has access to these technologies, and how do multiple pathways into this line of work enhance the self-determination described by Fowler?

*The Rise of Digital Sex Work* offers a comprehensive examination of the complexities of sex work in the digital age. For providers with a relative amount of privilege, digital technologies broaden their ability to be successful or, as Fowler notes, to access, become well-versed about, and ensure safety and security as sex workers. How these same technological developments impact providers with less privilege remains to be determined. Do they gain as much legitimation as providers with privilege? Does technology similarly diversify their options for employment and means for safety? Or does technology reframe their present work but still within a narrow set of opportunities? Nevertheless, *The Rise of Digital Sex Work* sheds light on a demographic that is often overlooked within the existing literature and adds context to the interworkings of digital technology and stigmatized underground economies.

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<sup>1</sup> 2023 Year in Review, PornHub Insights (<https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2023-year-in-review>)

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