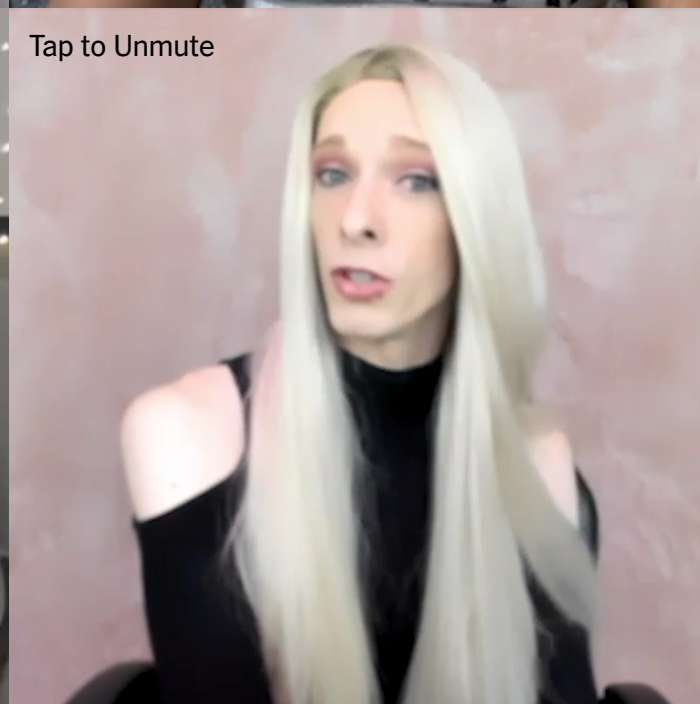
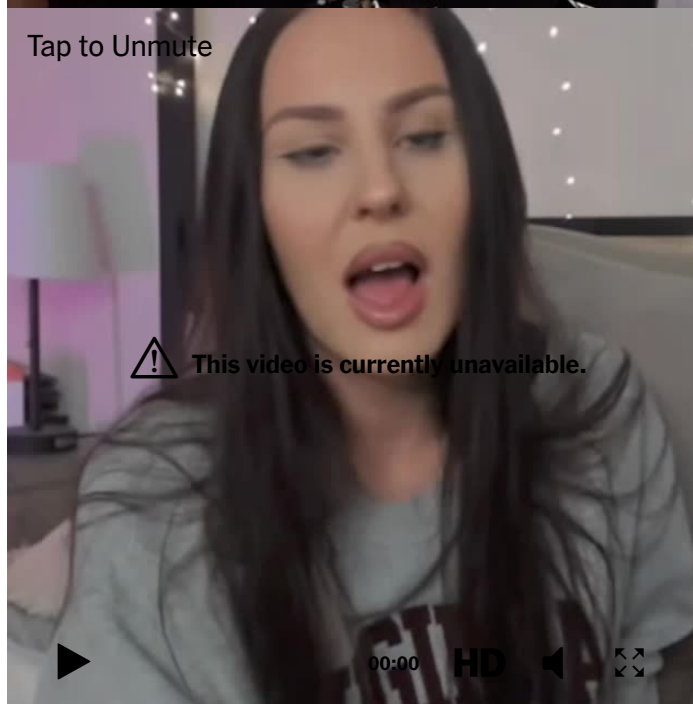
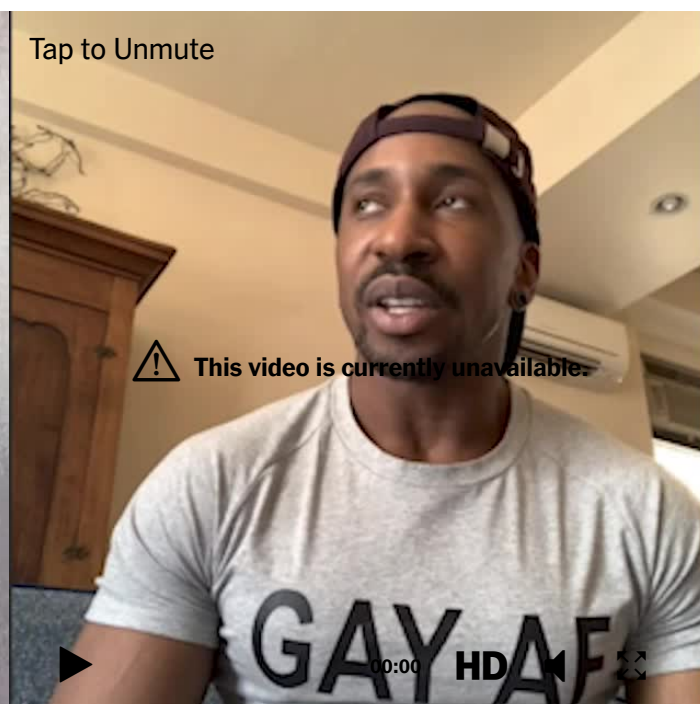
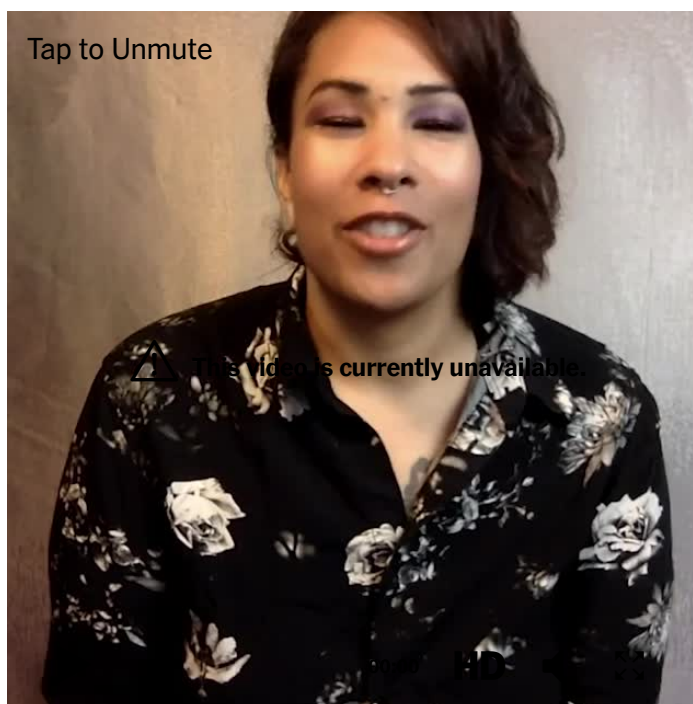


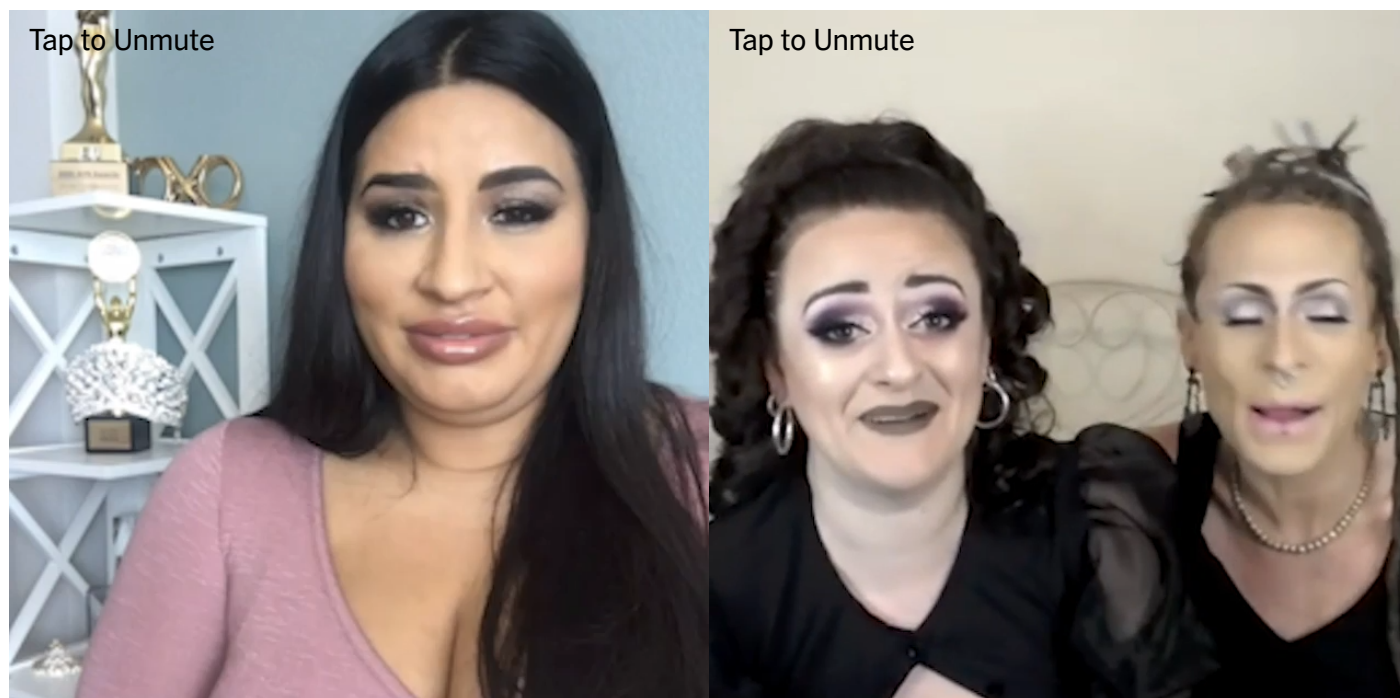
Sex Work Comes Home

More of us are making and watching sexual performances online now. Fewer of us are paying.

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By Gabrielle Drolet Videos by **Shane O'Neill**





While working as a stripper in Oregon, Kelpie Heart had long thought about taking her work online. Then the new coronavirus pandemic led to bar closures, and she found herself out of work.

So, for the last month, Ms. Heart has begun streaming performances from home, doing one live show a week.

As 16 million people in the United States have applied for unemployment benefits in the last three weeks, a rush of people like Ms. Heart have sought new work performing in sexually explicit live broadcasts. And, as nearly half the world is under some form of stay-at-home orders, people who do this work are also seeing a large growth in customers.

Ms. Heart is streaming on CamSoda, one of many webcam or “camming” sites that stream live online broadcasts. Generally called “cam models,” these people might strip or dance on camera while viewers message them. The performers work for tips, to accommodate laws that regulate sex work.

Daryn Parker, the vice president of CamSoda, said there had been a 37 percent increase in new model sign-ups this March, compared to last March. For the same period, Bella French, the co-founder and C.E.O. of ManyVids, another camming site, said that there was a 69 percent increase in new model sign-ups.

This growth is met by a recent influx of new viewers. At CamSoda, the number of new viewers to the site has doubled this year when compared to early 2019, according to the company.

But this growth isn't always translating into more money for the models. Mileena Kane, 24, a popular cam model for CamSoda, said people think she's making easy money right now. While she has noticed new viewers, her earnings are static. In Ms. Kane's experience, new viewers aren't tipping as much as they typically would. Each site makes money by taking some percentage of the tips.

"I'm meeting a whole bunch of people more frequently than I normally would, but there's not much more money," said Ms. Kane.

Life as a Cam Model

Before the new coronavirus pandemic, some models also partook in other forms of sex work, like stripping, pornography and escort services. Others worked at bars in the evening and cammed when they had the time; some held office jobs.

Now, many have one job. And for models who cam full-time, the work can be all consuming. Ms. Kane cams for 12 hours a day, almost every day of the year, she said, and only took two days off last year. Though this schedule is physically exhausting, she said it's worth it.

"That's just something that comes with being an entrepreneur," Ms. Kane said. "I'm trying to work as hard as I can while I'm young so I don't have to later."

For Ms. Kane, who calls herself a "camholic," falling in love with the job depended on making it her own. During her long streams, she prioritizes her comfort: She wears pajamas, eats snacks and dances.

Allie Awesome, a cam model, works around 60 hours a week, she said. Her workday begins right after waking up, when she looks through her social media notifications and checks in on her customers. (She declined to give her age, as did many of the subjects in this article, because doing so, they said, could lower their tips or jeopardize their safety. Many of these subjects are using their professional names.)

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And as social distancing leaves her stuck inside, she has found herself working more than ever. Though she tends to work directly with individual customers through Discord, a chat app favored by video game players, she's now using other platforms more, including

Chaturbate, OnlyFans and Skype.

Though she's working especially hard and acknowledges that sex work and the stigma attached to it can be difficult, she said she feels privileged that she's able to work from home. "There has been a shift," she said, "but it isn't like I've suddenly had the rug pulled out from under me and I'm unemployed, you know?"

The Economics of Camming

Sex online, in general, seems through the roof. OnlyFans, a website where people subscribe to see the kind of pictures and videos that can't be displayed on Instagram, reported a 75 percent increase in overall new sign-ups — 3.7 million new sign-ups this past month, with 60,000 of them being new creators.

Subscription business though is very different than gratuity-based revenue. On sites like CamSoda, tipping is usually tied to "rewards" for viewers. For example, if someone tips a certain number of tokens — the websites often create their own currencies, and in this case, each token is worth 5 cents — the model may take off an item of clothing or perform a sexual act.

Many cam models do also supplement their income through subscription sites like OnlyFans or Patreon, where they sell photos and videos.

Ms. French, who used to be a cam model herself, created ManyVids to allow for various revenue streams for models. For example, there is a separate store section, where models can sell items of clothing they've worn. Remi Ferdinand, 30, who works as a stripper and a cam model, said it's one of her favorite platforms for that very reason.

Most of the established cam models who spoke with The New York Times painted a coherent picture: Over time, they've built up stable connections with their regular viewers, which is what carries them through difficult financial times.

But some, like Betsy, 32, and Raie, 33, a British couple who cam together on Chaturbate, said that even though they've seen a large number of new audience members recently, they haven't been getting tipped more.

"I think people are not only hoarding toilet paper, they're hoarding money, because no one knows when their next paycheck is coming," Raie said.

The couple has been together for nearly 10 years, have been married for six and have been camming for three. Though Raie usually does freelance work outside of sex work as a chef and a makeup artist, both jobs have come to a halt as a result of the pandemic. The couple

now relies on camming as their sole source of income. Regardless, they feel relatively secure because they stand out from other cam models given that Betsy is trans and Raie is cisgender.

Ms. Ferdinand, who was also doing sex work during the 2008 recession, feels stable and happy as she works from home. Still, she's unsure about the future. "Anytime there's a financial issue, anything that's considered a luxury type service is always the first one to take a hit," she said.

An Influx of New Cam Models

Cecilia Morrell, a cam model in Toronto, said that such a sudden increase in new models makes it difficult for pre-existing ones to stand out.

"There's a large amount of people that are looking to jump into this industry for the first time, and that saturates the market quite a bit," Ms. Morrell, 21, said.

Valentine, a sex worker in Portland, Ore., is concerned that people who have never been involved in sex work and start camming may not consider the sociopolitical context of that work.

"Sure, do it, create an OnlyFans, start camming — but that means you have to support sex workers all year round now," said Valentine, who declined to give her age. "You can't just dip in and out of it because you think it's easy and then trash us in the end."

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Valentine said that people joining the field should expect privacy breaches, potentially dangerous interactions with clients, and laws that are not designed to protect them. She said she hopes that those who are joining the field now will educate themselves about what they're getting into.

Even now, as systems are put in place to help Americans whose work is affected by the coronavirus pandemic and related recession, anyone who earns money from "live performances of a prurient sexual nature" is expressly forbidden to apply for disaster relief from the Small Business Association's Economic Injury Disaster Program.

As many joke that taking the plunge to be a cam model is their best option right now, models like Valentine hope that, at the very least, more conversations will spur a more nuanced understanding and respect of the work.

“The idea that all sex workers make a lot of money is not true — or that we’re just simply just showing our bodies and we have no integrity and we have no brain behind us,” she said. “It’s really so much more than that. We’re all people.”