Camming

Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry

Angela Jones

References to Internet websites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor New York University Press is responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper, and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability. We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the greatest extent possible in publishing our books.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Also available as an ebook

CONTENTS

8

For Black Models Scroll Down

Sexual Racism and the Camming Field

On August 1, 2015, a popular performer named Sunny Olivia started a wave of controversy when she performed for approximately 3,300 viewers in a Nazi officer's uniform, in front of a giant Nazi flag. While many customers questioned the performance, some people posted racist and anti-Semitic comments. Vocativ, an online news service, reported that Olivia made approximately $30,000 in tips before MyFreeCams shut down the performance.[1] Immediately, customers and other cam performers began protesting the performance and calling out Olivia for her use of racist imagery. Many performers and customers took to Twitter using hashtags such as #shamemfc and #suspendOlivia. While debates over free speech dominated the August 2015 Twitter war, to learn more about this particular incident I also turned to various web forums, specifically to hear what other performers thought of Olivia's performance.

The Twitter debate revolved around those defending Olivia's artistic choices and supporting free speech even when the content was in poor taste, versus those rebutting the free speech argument by calling her a racist promoting hate speech. The web forums, however, revealed something different. While there was some degree of free-speech debate, the performers posting on the web forums were familiar with Olivia's brand, which she had built around shock value and not performing traditionally erotic or sex-focused shows. One poster brilliantly summed up the controversy and the sociological significance of the moment:

> I think there's probably a lot of undue extrapolation going on from both sides of the argument. . . . Olivia's supporters will look at her wearing Nazi garb and reciting Nazi speeches before playing a pop song and dancing and laughing and say, it's art! She's clearly making a nuanced comment on Nazism! The plight of the Jews! The futility of war! The human condi-

tion and how we process atrocities! Our responses to authority and our willingness to follow orders! How society has trained us to react with Pavlovian fervor to scant iconography! Olivia's detractors meanwhile will look at the same thing and say, she's racist! She's a Nazi! She's exploiting human tragedy! She hates Jews! She's encouraging hate speech! None of which is really the case on a fundamental level. Without knowing Olivia's intent, all we have is a video/live feed of her wearing a Nazi uniform. There's no real way to ascribe meaning to her performance without undue extrapolation.

For what it's worth, I don't think she's racist, but nor do I think her "art" has any substance or intellectual weight behind it. Nothing about anything I've ever seen her do suggests to me that she's a satirist. I think she just enjoys dressing up and through her years as a cam girl has learnt that the more controversial the character she dresses up as, the more attention it will get. She knows that there will be as much negative attention shone on it as positive and she knows that her fans will blindly support anything she does and defend her "artistry" and she knows that the more vocal her detractors are, the more her fans will step up and support (read tip) her. In short, I think she's a poor artist but an incredibly smart business woman. She knows how to manufacture a shitstorm in which dollar bills get blown directly in to her bank account.

I think I decided long ago that Olivia's brand of entertainment isn't for me. I can't really fathom what her regulars get out of tipping what they do for what she does on cam, the artistic merit of which eludes me. But I can't help but respect her as a business woman. She carved out a strange, strange niche for herself, hooked big tippers, and now courts controversy for monetary gain. And it works for her.

This cam model made clear her belief that Olivia's performance was not a nefarious plot to promote a neo-Nazi platform. Olivia was making money. As other performers stated on the board, "Olivia is [just] a troll," and taking to Twitter and wasting energy calling her a racist and campaigning to have her suspended (which did not work) may have missed the more significant point here.

Let's return to the Vocativ report that Olivia made $30,000 for this short performance and that 3,300 people logged in to see it. While I was not able to substantiate these claims, let's assume she profited well

Figure 8.1. MFC cam performer Sunny Olivia performing in front of a Nazi flag.

from the performance, and not just from that day's tips. This incident generated much publicity for Olivia's already unconventional brand. We should also ask ourselves, What does it suggest that a performer on an erotic website could profit so much from a Nazi-inspired performance— that so many people were not only interested in watching but that she'd be rewarded handsomely for it? This was not just a story about a racist performer named Olivia. It was a microcosm of a much broader story about the entanglements of neoliberal capitalism and White supremacy.

The Olivia controversy is an interesting springboard for analysis of how the system of White supremacy shapes sex markets. In the camming field, White supremacy is institutionalized. White supremacy does not just dictate the behaviors of consumers such as those who tipped Olivia, global White supremacy structures the entire market; this is how Olivia knew she could exploit and use Nazi imagery to make a profit. As the aforementioned poster said, "I think she's a poor artist but an incredibly smart business woman." Olivia was undoubtedly not the first capitalist to exploit racism for profit, and she indeed won't be the last. What also came up in the web forums was that some performers questioned to what extent participants in the camming field, including cam site owners,

moderators, and performers, exploit racist discourses in service of profit. The answer is—to whatever extent they can under the law. If a behavior or action is legal, and there is a market for it, capitalists love it—even if it's racist. White Supremacy and capitalism are bedfellows.

Sexual Racism

Sexual racism shapes the structure of desire in the camming field— the structure of cam sites, the cultural scripts deployed in the field, and interactions between performers and customers. As political scientist Sonu Bedi puts it, sexual racism is "prioritizing an individual as a possible romantic, intimate partner on account of their race in a way that reinforces extant racial hierarchy or stereotypes."[2] When customers select performers based solely on nationality or race, they are motivated by sexual racism. As urban sociologist and sexualities scholar Jason Orne describes, sexual racism is not only about the individual choices people make when using racial factors to select sexual partners. Sexual racism is established by larger structural and cultural forces. According to Orne, "sexual racism is a system of racial oppression, shaping an individual's partner choices to privilege whites and harm people of color. It manifests itself on three levels: structural, cultural, and interactional."[3] As Orne argues, sexual racism takes three interdependent forms; I analyze how each form operates in the camming field.

First, structural sexual racism occurs at the level of the sexual field. In this chapter, I analyze how the camming industry and cam sites structure interactions between cam models and customers in ways that sustain sexual racism. Second, in my analysis of cultural sexual racism, I examine how cam models' performances and customers' desires draw upon highly racialized sexual scripts created within cultures, which under global White supremacy privilege Whiteness. Further, I show how the bodies of people of color are often exoticized and consumed for their otherness. Third, I also analyze the ways sexual racism operates at the interactional level in the camming field, and I argue that when individuals draw on racist cultural scripts in their sexual interactions, they reproduce the system of White supremacy. Sexual racism in the camming field is best understood as a complex interplay between structural, cul-

tural, and interactional forms of sexual racism. It is the dynamic nature of sexual racism that buttresses its power and permanence.

My focus on sexual racism and how it disadvantages cam models of color fills a gap in the growing body of scholarship about sexual racism online. Contemporary research on sexual racism online has tended to focus on gay communities and sexual and romantic interactions between men.[4] The focus of this existing research has been on how people who are seeking partners on the Internet use website filters to select only people who are their "type"; people use the language of personal preference to legitimate their racist cleansing of eligible matches.[5] On cam sites, just like on dating apps and websites, customers can use such filters. These filtering mechanisms allow customers to search only for certain nationalities or races of models, which is a form of sexual racism. In applying the framework of sexual racism to my case study of the camming industry, I contribute to the burgeoning research on racism online and in sex work.

Sexual racism is a factor that thwarts the success of Black women in the camming field. I empirically show how the financial outcomes of Black performers are affected by the institutionalization of sexual racism in the camming industry. Drawing from statistical analyses of models' success as measured by a website-generated "camscore" with the independent variables of race and nation of origin and qualitative data from the study, I demonstrate the intricate ways that one popular webcam site, MyFreeCams, perpetuates race-, class-, and gender-based inequities. This line of inquiry is crucial because the analytical framework of sexual racism has not been applied in the sex work literature. Even in the best of the literature on sex workers, race is usually a footnote in a larger narrative about class and power dynamics between sex workers and customers. Placing race at the center of analysis addresses a longstanding oversight in the sex work literature.[6]

MFC Is Not a Black Girl Site

Marginalization of Black women on MFC was the subject of many threads on popular web forums and thus my selection of the site for this case study was informed by reports of racism made directly by models. One model on a webcam forum said:

> I do not see Black women banking on MFC. And I see a lot of great personable Black women! I don't think it's because they don't have the drive or the motive to do MFC, I think it's because MFC caters to men who like tiny White women.

In my study, cam models generally acknowledged that, overall, Black models did not do well on MFC. A typical comment on various web forums was that "MFC is not a Black girl site." One performer stated, "I agree with MFC seeming to be mostly in favor of petite White women, though I do see a few Black girls earning on there. Compared to the amount of White women who bank, the 3–4 Black women I've ever seen in the top half of the first page really isn't a lot." Interestingly, many of the models in this study, including Black models, adhered to neoliberal ideas about success on MFC (and other websites). Many argued that it was not racism, but Black models' failure to craft entertaining shows that explained their lack of success on sites such as MFC. Put another way, despite the recognition that Black women were not among the top earners on MFC, the explanation for this most often fell back on neoliberal ideas about the importance of rugged individualism. A Black cam model posted:

> I think that it helps if people stop pigeonholing themselves. I am *so* much more than my skin colour. I think that Black women will make it to the top when they stop thinking of themselves as Black and start thinking of themselves as business people like any other business person. I was super shitty on MFC up until now. Was it because I was Black and didn't stand a chance? No, it was because I was absolute shit at the MFC system. I didn't understand it. I hated free chat and didn't like the environment. Then yesterday I had another $200 day when before I was going days with making nothing or $2 max on MFC. My skin colour didn't suddenly change my attitude did. . . . I am not my skin colour. I am not my hair. I am not my weight. I will make top dollar because of my mind and my abilities. I am Black and I am sure I made more money yesterday than some of the White girls on this site did. I have gained a ton of weight, but I'm sure I made more money than some of the little pixie girls did yesterday. There will *always* be something that we are told will hold us back or hold us down but that's bullshit sweety; so, pay it no mind. What *will* hold you back *every* time is your mind. Your outlook on life. You are not your skin.

Many performers said that success hinges upon having a positive attitude and being skilled at your craft. Neoliberal capitalism teaches workers that lack of success is the result of individual pathology. This rhetoric blames the poor for poverty—not the economic system designed to ensure poverty through the exploitation of alienated labor. In the camming field, a cam model's lack of success on MFC or elsewhere is often blamed on laziness or poorly designed shows. According to this logic, it is not that MFC is not a Black girl site; if Black women on MFC do not do well, it is because they are doing something wrong. I explore models' assertions that MFC is not a Black girl site. Specifically, I answer the following questions cam models posed: (1) Are Black models less likely to succeed on MFC financially? (2) If Black models do not earn high wages on MFC, how do we explain their poor outcomes on the website?

Measuring Success on MFC

Success on MFC is measured using a "camscore." A model's camscore is listed publicly on their profile. The camscore is a number generated by the site that reflects the money made by the model based on the ratio of number of hours spent online to the amount of money made in tips—models that spend the least amount of time online but generate the most money in tips have the highest camscores. The camscore is a number that is used to quantify success on the website. Unfortunately, there is no publicly available information about the actual algorithm site moderators use to generate this score.

In addition to the camscore, all of the models on the site create public profiles for themselves. On their personal profiles, models provide basic information: their name on the website, gender, body type, ethnicity, hair color, eye color, weight, age, city, country, sexual preference, and so on. I used data provided by the models about their identities to test for statistical correlations between cam models' identities and camscores. Independent variables included race, nationality, age, education background, and sexual orientation. To examine sexual racism in the camming field, I focus only on my analyses of the variables race and nation of origin, and the dependent variable—camscore. Given that cam models create manufactured identities, a limitation of my quantitative data is that data on cam profiles can be falsified. To

address this issue, I excluded data from the sample that I knew was falsified (e.g., a top-grossing model reported her age as 109) and I later use qualitative data to probe the trends I found using the statistical analyses. Collectively, I use this data to answer whether Black models are generally not successful on MFC.[7]

Who's Successful on MFC?

MFC and other cam sites advertise and report that models can and do earn high wages. As demonstrated in chapter 3, webcam performers' wages are likely far lower on average than webcam sites report. In my sample, the mean camscore was 5,691. Most of the camscores fell below the mean value, and extremely high camscores were less common. Only 27 models had camscores above 20,000 and the lowest camscore in the sample was a 34.8. While the cam-site owners and studios advertise and tell models that they can earn over $10,000 a month, this data also suggests that high incomes can occur but are not typical. The Horatio Alger myth dies hard on MFC, and this story becomes even more telling when we control for race and nationality.

I examined the frequencies for the categorical variables of race and country of origin. Models in this sample were from an extensive list of places: the Bahamas, Bermuda, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, French Polynesia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Iraq, Japan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Mexico, New Zealand, Panama, Philippines, Poland, Romania, the Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. However, the modal category for race was Caucasian, and the modal category for nation of origin was the United States. Descriptive statistics showed the mean age of models was 25.91. This data suggested that despite the diversity that exists in the industry, MFC was dominated by relatively young White women, mainly from the United States.

Among models that had high camscores,[8] White women were overrepresented. There was only one Black model among those in the high camscore range, and no Hispanic models. There were, however, 11 models who identified as Other or Various Ethnicities, as well as four

Asian models in the high camscore range. Among models with low camscores, a disproportionate number were women of color. For example, all the models from Colombia in the data set had low camscores. Models from the United States, followed by models from Canada and the United Kingdom, were overrepresented among the models with high camscores. Crucially, my statistical analyses showed that race had a significant impact on camscore, when controlling for nationality, such that, while models from the United States tended to have the highest camscores, for Black models race mitigated any potential advantage they might have gained from their US nationality.

This data empirically showed that models' perceptions of MFC were correct. Black cam models were significantly less likely to be successful on the site. While I initially set out to explore the claim that Black models were not successful on MFC, the data showed even more than this. Not just Black women, Latina women, as well as women outside of the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, also had lower camscores. Now we must turn to an explanation of why these disparities exist. The explanation is not that White women from the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States are just better cam models. It is also not that Black women and other women of color just do not work hard on MFC. A critical analysis of sexual racism in the camming field does explain these disparities.

Sexual Racism in the Camming Industry

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has discussed what he calls "color-blind racism"—when racial inequities are perceived, mainly by Whites, to no longer be a problem: "Instead, whites rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks' imputed cultural limitations . . . and the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of White privilege."[9] Racial inequalities are ostensibly explained away by individual choice and preference, not by structural forces. Here, one could argue that models of color, particularly Black models, are less successful because consumers, particularly in the United States (where traffic is disproportionately driven from), prefer White models. Feminist scholar Siobhan Brooks argues:

> Racism against Black women in this industry [stripping] is usually viewed as normal because, like other appearance-based industries (such as modeling or acting), the sex industry is based on ideas of customer taste and preference. Thus, if Black women are not desirable, it is the objective result of consumer taste within a free market—not structural anti-Black racism operating within the psyche of the customer or club management.[10]

Like Brooks, my experiences in the stripping industry provide me with an inside perspective from which to better understand the ways that structural racism shapes sex markets. Consider this vignette:

> Like most of the dancers I worked with, I hated mandatory meetings. The managers would drone on about lateness and calling out on weekdays (when most dancers didn't want to work but were required to), but this one meeting was different. The manager informed us that the owner had taken over another club on Long Island (a suburb about 40 miles outside of New York City). The room was filled with excitement as the manager explained that selected dancers would be chauffeured from Queens by limousine to the club. The managers presented this as a unique opportunity to make "real money." We were told that this was an upscale gentlemen's club and that we'd need long gowns and that this club would not tolerate any "ghetto dancers." They explained their use of this all-too-familiar racist euphemism as indicating that you couldn't dance to rap music, or that you couldn't throw up pole tricks and do floor work. Dancers of color knew exactly what this really meant. Due to de facto racial quotas, a limited number of Black girls were to be selected. Given that I was told that I looked "ethnic" and not Black, I was told I could go. When I got there, the club was patronized almost exclusively by affluent White men. I only worked there for a few nights because I did not make good money there. I realized that in this industry, as a woman of color, if you worked in a White gentleman's club, you were tokenized and if you weren't interested in playing the token/fetish card, you'd be ghettoized to either clubs catering solely to Black men or to racially diverse working-class clubs. I did well outside of upscale White gentleman's clubs, and I loved the diverse middle/working-class club where I worked. However, I also acknowledged that institutionalized White supremacy meant that I also didn't really have much of a choice.

While Brooks and I are writing about exotic dancing, our insights apply here as well. Through the lens of colorblind racism, Black women are less successful on MFC and as webcam models in general because Black bodies do not have high exchange values in the market. As sociologist Ashely Mears explains, "An invisible hand of racism guides the market, which producers understand as a rational, efficient force against which they have no power. Within our contemporary laissez-faire racial ethos, the seemingly natural force of the market ensures the invisibility of racism."[11] From the perspective of neoliberal capitalism, the lack of success Black women and women from outside of the United States experience on MFC is not the result of structural racism, but of capitalist market forces and individual consumer preference.

Despite these neoliberal explanations, the reason I did not do well in the affluent White strip club was not because I didn't perform well. Cam models of color and models not from the US do not have lower camscores solely because of poor choices or not having outgoing personalities—nor is this solely a reflection of consumer preferences. Instead, another way to read this data is that cultural, structural, and interactional sexual racism shape experiences on MFC, in the camming industry, and in sex markets more broadly.

Cultural Sexual Racism

Race and nationality play a role in the monetary success of webcam models. In camming, bodies of color have lower sexual capital. Cultural sexual racism affects perceived attractiveness, which shapes a performer's overall sexual capital in the field. Orne writes:

> There are cultural components as well [to sexual racism]. . . . What images are around? What understandings of race construct our definitions of what is happening? What kinds of beauty are favored? How do we determine who the hottest people in the room are?[12]

The institutionalized system of White supremacy affects what "looks" are valued in the marketplace. Mears's ethnography of fashion modeling and analysis of racial discrimination against Black fashion models is instructive for the analysis here: "Beauty is desired because it is idealized

and unattainable, two criteria that are fundamentally incompatible with historical representations of non-white women."[13] For Black women modeling clothing or performing erotic sex acts, their bodies will generally be held to a normative standard of beauty that idealizes White aesthetics such as fair skin color; straight hair texture, color (often blonde), and length (long); eye color (blue, green, hazel, etc.); and body shape (thin).

Participant observation on MFC also suggested that Black models with higher camscores seemed to adopt what Mears calls a "look" that adhered to a US-centric feminine White aesthetic—that is, as it was coded here, Black women *appeared* to have achieved longer hairstyles through the use of chemical straighteners and weaves, wore colored contact lenses, and had thin physiques. Among cam models with high camscores, I observed no Black women who had natural hair—that is, not chemically treated or with weaves/extensions. The only Black model in the top-earning camscore range was very light-skinned, thin, had incredibly long hair, and green eyes. I observed Black women with short hair and larger physiques only in the low range of camscores.

White women have more sexual capital because they have a look that is culturally idealized, whereas Black women's bodies and aesthetics (not that these factors are monolithic) are devalued. Brooks has analyzed "racialized erotic capital" in sex work, a term she coined "to suggest that erotic capital is affected by variables such as weight, skin color, speech patterns, gender presentation, and hair texture."[14] Race conditions a cam model's sexual capital; having lower sexual capital decreases earning potential. Koken et al., who conducted a comparative analysis of male and female escorts, write that among their sample

> [t]here was general agreement among the women that a racial hierarchy stratified the sex industry, placing white women on top and women of color—particularly African-American women—at the bottom. . . . [W]hile white women's fees ranged up to $1000 an hour, no woman of color in the sample charged more than $500. . . . Thus it appears that the value of being white translates into a real business advantage.[15]

Here, in their sample of escorts, we see how the prostitution market is racialized and adversely impacts the wages of women of color. In

camming, too, lower sexual capital is conditioned by racist cultural discourses about "look," and the lower a model's sexual capital the less they make in tips.

Structural Sexual Racism

The website owners and moderators have played a role in structuring racial inequalities that then propagate class-based inequalities on MFC. As Orne writes, "structural sexual racism has to do with the availability of partners within the environment. How segregated is the community, city, or space? . . . Are the circuits segregated?"[16] The structure of the website and the creation of the camscore embed sexual racism into the cam site. The camscore is the default category used to sort models' profiles on the homepage (figure 8.2).

Customers can elect to change this filter, but doing so would require navigating from the main page and that the customer be aware that they even have this option, which may not be widely known. It is likely that the website founders and moderators created this scoring system to publicly rank models because once a public ranking system is employed, it creates a competitive climate in which, in theory, models are motivated to work harder and invest more time in preparing entertaining shows—as models also receive monetary bonuses for high camscores. The camscore creates a status system among models and could in theory help motivate models to make more money, legitimately benefiting both them and the website owners. However, it is crucial to take seriously the consequences of making the scoring system public and using it to sort profiles; why aren't profiles displayed at random? By creating this ranking system and making it public, the website operators also reinforce racial inequalities on the website—again, customers must scroll down to find Black models. As one model on a web forum declared, "I would love to see more Black models on the first couple of rows on MFC; it seems like if you are not skinny and White you won't make it very far." The camscore system on MFC institutionalizes a structure of desire that privileges White women, placing them on the top of the homepage. As a Black model on a popular web forum said:

Models are *NEW* for [7 days ▼] (53 new)

Display Type: (On Homepage)
◯ Avatars, Small (optimized for touch devices)
◯ Avatars, Large (optimized for touch devices)

◯ Animations at [50 ▼] per second.
◯ Still Previews   Overlay Avatar: [No ▼]
⬤ Avatars   Overlay Preview: [No ▼]
◯ Text List

⬤ Small Images   ◯ Large Images

Show Room Count: [No ▼]   Topics: [No ▼]

Sort models by:
⬤ CamScore   ◯ Order Logged In
◯ Number of People   ◯ Newest on Site
◯ Alphabetically   ◯ Random

Show which models:
⬤ All Models   ◯ Public Chat
◯ Friends/Bookmarked ◯ Mobile Feeds

Paging: ⬤ Dynamic Scroll ◯ Multiple Pages

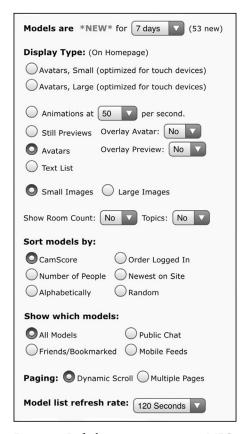**Model list refresh rate:** [120 Seconds ▼]

Figure 8.2. Default customer settings on MFC.

MFC can be quite discouraging . . . maybe there's not that many Black models because of the cam score thing? It's one reason why I left! Yeah, this just makes me not want to cam anymore, but I have to, it is my only source of income. I want Streamate to hurry up and approve my profile so that way I don't have to deal with too many rude freeloaders.

Importantly, the sexual racism that this model experienced was compelling her to leave the site and move to another site with no camscore system. The issue with the camscore system is that a model's score dictates their placement on the website and Black models have lower camscores than their White co-workers because of cultural sexual racism.

A lower camscore means a lower position on the website—and a lower position on the website means decreased visibility. With 1,200 models online, and over 80 rows of avatar pictures on the homepage, a model with a high camscore who thus appears on the top of the page has a great visibility advantage. In addition, we must not forget—the camscore is a reflection of earnings. This means having a lower camscore has consequences not just on the website; it means the model is earning a lower wage and thus the camscore has real-world consequences. A low camscore literally places the model on the bottom of the status hierarchy. Once in this lower position on the website, a vicious circle develops. We know that rising tides do not actually lift all boats; those with the highest camscores remain on top, and so those with the lowest camscores remain on the bottom. The imagery here should be striking—as being on the bottom of the page both symbolically and structurally reproduces racial and class-based inequalities. The camscore system has a ghettoizing effect. Feminist porn studies scholar Mireille Miller-Young has discussed the ghettoization of Black women in hip-hop pornography; Black women here, too, are ghettoized on MFC. The causal mechanism for the ghettoization of Black women on this website is not individual—but structural. This *is* structural sexual racism.

Interactional Sexual Racism

Sexual racism is also interactional. It is crucial to examine how individuals draw on racist cultural scripts in their interactions with other people. Individuals do not cause sexual racism, but sexual racism does shape people's interactions on a micro-level. Sexual racism shapes customers perceptions of the personalities of cam models, and thus the types of shows the client will experience. The assumptions customers make are not theirs; they are learned in and produced within culture, and they no doubt disadvantage Black women. Consider the words of one Black cam model who posted on a discussion board:

> So, it's pretty obvious that almost at any given time out of the 1000+ girls on cam (mfc), only about 30 or so are Black. And of those 30, there are about 15 of us who are American and Black. . . . I like to focus on my room and not worry about who's better or worse and that works for me,

but I can't lie, it is a little discouraging that I rarely ever see more than 2 Black girls in the entire contest. . . . I also am a natural submissive, but I notice people associate Black women with domin[ance] and aggressi[on]; so, oftentimes, I find myself femdomming more which is ok, but its not what comes natural for me. Being a fetish can be fun and it can stand you apart from others, but it can also be frustrating sometimes when you get constant N words and you're pretty for a Black girl quotes. . . . *Australian and UK Whites love black girls!

In the United States, Black women have long been stereotyped in popular media with the Sapphire trope,[17] which portrays them as aggressive, loud, rude, and overbearing. As this model explained, she has a submissive personality but must often perform in ways that enact this racist cultural trope. Moreover, even though she is submissive, there are customers who likely assume she is not and as a result do not click on her avatar/room. At the interactional level, sexual racism shapes how customers talk to cam models; this model, for instance, must put up with clients calling her "N words" or telling her she is "pretty for a Black girl." Her statement that "Australian and UK Whites love Black girls!" illuminates how sexual racism is always contextual and shaped by different cultural scripts globally. While models did not use the language of sexual racism, their comments animate the theory.

Having designed a platform on which cam models and clients interact, MFC established the camscore system and set up filtering options for its customers (see figure 8.3). Those who run the site have created an environment that nurtures sexual racism, even if they did not themselves create racist cultural scripts.

This filtering system on MFC allows clients to eliminate from their view models from particular regions. This function would allow, for example, a customer the ability to filter many bodies of color from their view by electing to hide Africa, Asia/Pacific Islands, and Central/South America. Alternatively, the filter could allow customers who are seeking only bodies of color to filter out countries dominated by White folks. Given widespread migration and globalization, the idea that any filter can cleanse all Black, Latinx, Asian, White, or other bodies from view is as naïve as it is disturbing.

Filter By Region:	Show on Top	Hide	Only Show
Africa	☐	☐	☐
Asia/Pacific Islands	☐	☐	☐
Australia	☐	☐	☐
Central/South America	☐	☐	☐
Europe/Russia	☐	☐	☐
North America	☐	☐	☐
United Kingdom	☐	☐	☐
Unknown Region	☐	☐	☐
			Clear All

Figure 8.3. Filtering options on MFC.

Customers participating on an open section of a webcam forum talked openly about their use of MFC filters. One customer, who identified himself as a person of color, was talking about the difficulty he had finding Black women on MFC. Another poster made a recommendation: "Not sure if you're looking specifically for models in the U.S., but I have noticed that quite a few beautiful women of a darker complexion are in Colombia, and can be easily found by filtering by region to show Central/South America." The original poster stated that he found some brown-skinned women from Central/South America very attractive, but then went on to say:

> My only complaint is the language barrier. I actually recently filtered out *all* non-native English speaking countries because although I find a lot of models from all over the world pretty and even interesting, if the level of communication isn't there I find the interaction boring.

Here we can see how sexual racism shapes customer behavior at the micro-level. Clients do use these filters to cleanse from their view entire nations based on ethnocentric and racist stereotypes. This customer filtered out *all* non-native-English-speaking countries. The idea that

models in Central and South America cannot speak English well or at all guided his behavior. This customer was making an evaluation of entire populations of people based on limited experiences with cam models who did not speak English well enough to meet his standards. As I noted earlier, it was not just Black women who did not perform well on MFC. Models from outside the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States also had low camscores. Models from Central/South America had exceptionally low camscores and sexual racism can help explain why. When some customers assume that all models from predominately Spanish-speaking countries cannot speak English "well enough," and filter these models out as a result—that is sexual racism. This example is also a reminder that White supremacy functions globally, and harms people of color throughout the world. Examining sexual racism requires that scholars and activists think transnationally.

Sexual Racism and Strategic Branding

Cam models are aware of the sexual racism that permeates their field, especially Black performers on cam sites like MFC. Cam models frequently remarked that they must market themselves in ways that take sexual racism into account. A Black model on a popular web forum said:

> Being a minority means that I can't really follow the same formulas that work for a lot of girls on cam. I have to first convince users to come into a Black room in general, which can be a task in itself when a lot of them are not used to looking for us as an attraction. Then from there I can start.

Cam models of color must develop strategies to counteract both structural and cultural sexual racism. Performers said they sometimes change their location and race on cam sites. If a model who resides in Colombia lists that she is from the United States, she is much less likely to get filtered out. As examined in the previous chapter, models discussed strategically manufacturing identities. Here we see that models of color, as a form of strategic branding, must often manufacture identities that allow them to manage sexual racism. A performer who posted on a web forum underscored this point:

> There are probably a lot of members who remove the Black checkbox from their list of models showing. Personally, I've experimented with this a little. . . . I'm a bit of a lot of things; so I could technically say a lot of those checkboxes. I wouldn't say I'm White . . . but I have had my ethnicity set as various, Black, Asian, and not specified. I got the most traffic when I had it set to Asian—that's another kind of fetish that's also pretty gross but plays out differently to the Black fetish. I didn't get as much when I had it set to Black, and what I did get was mostly the Black fetish types who wanted a stereotype. I keep it at various now because that's the true one anyway, but that's why I don't blame the other models for changing it. I have seen a lot of Black models listing themselves as Asian and I feel like it's sad but this is exactly why.

Being multiracial allowed this model to manufacture her cam identity in a way that would not compromise her embodied authenticity but that gave her a unique vantage point, what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has called the "outsider within" perspective from which to observe sexual racism in camming.[18] As she said, it is no surprise that some Black models might often use various strategies, including changing their racial marker to a non-Black identity, in order to navigate sexual racism in the camming field.

Conclusion

This case study of one popular cam site—MyFreeCams—identified a problem that occurs across the camming field. While other websites may not use camscores, they do have filters and thus also provide a structure for sexual racism. As digital media scholar Safiya Umoja Noble discusses in *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, too often people see digital platforms as neutral technologies, incapable of discrimination. Noble's research has shown that, in fact, algorithmic oppression is widespread across the Internet.[19] The camscore on MFC is further evidence of algorithmic oppression online.

The presence of sexual racism in the camming field means that bodies of color have lower exchange values and that women of color earn less than White women for performing the same labor. The benefits of camming presented in this book are thus highly racialized and, for

some models subjected to sexual racism, not even felt. Sexual racism ensures different experiences and different financial outcomes for cam models based on race and nationality. Sexual racism ensures that White women, who overwhelmingly attribute their success to their talent, are most likely to be figuratively and literally on top.

Color-blind racism maintains racism in general—it operates at a very subtle level and often is buttressed by the invisibility of its existence to those who benefit from it. White privilege is also at work in the camming field. This privilege is invisible to those who have it—many of the highest-grossing models on MFC and in the field more broadly (almost all White) may not realize that the women of color at the bottom of the page buttress their position at the top of the page. The success of many White models is not just about their successful accomplishment of embodied authenticity—it is also a reflection of the privileges of Whiteness under global White supremacy.