



# My Body of Work: Promotional Labor and the Bundling of Complementary Work

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## Abstract

What if certain types of work allow workers to earn higher incomes when bundled together? Using qualitative interview data on the careers of sex workers in California, the author argues that workers can attempt to increase overall earnings by taking part in promotional labor: a specific type of labor in which workers strategically bundle complementary forms of work with differing status and income levels to increase overall income. Because of a sharp decline in adult film production beginning in 2007, adult film performers relied on escorting to make up for lower wages and fewer filming opportunities. However, these sex workers still performed in adult films, despite filming being more time intensive and less financially lucrative, to promote themselves as high-end escorts. The author concludes that promotional labor is a mechanism by which workers and firms in general mitigate labor uncertainty by using the cross-promotional benefits of different types of complementary work.

## Keywords

gig economy, independent contracting, complementary work, bundled work, sex work

In recent years, a great deal of media and scholarly attention has been paid to the rise of the “gig economy” and the ways labor is increasingly typified by bundles of low paid and precarious odd jobs (De Stefano 2015; Horowitz 2011). This growing segment of the labor force faces similar issues to the struggles independent contractors in general face in their efforts to make a living through intermittent contracted work (Ashford, George, and Blatt 2007). Given the amorphous schedules, low pay, and few labor protections of gig work, it becomes necessary for workers to combine different jobs and income streams together to add more hours and to earn a living from these combined wages (De Stefano 2015).

However, what if specific types of work allow workers earn greater incomes when bundled together than the sum income of each individual type of work? In this article, I put forth and analyze a type of labor, which I term promotional labor, to explain how workers strategically bundle complementary forms of work with differing status and income levels. In doing so, I argue that workers can do low-paid work as promotional labor in an attempt to raise overall earnings. In the following sections, I draw from three theoretical research streams on work and labor: (1) the bundling of work and the process by which certain types of labor and jobs can be strategically bundled together, (2) status and work and how high-status work can lead to an earnings discount for workers, and (3) the complementarity of work and how

certain types of labor can actually increase demand and serve as a loss leader for other types of labor. By connecting these three theoretical areas, I demonstrate the different aspects of promotional labor that make it a unique and important type of labor.

I explore the concept of promotional labor through the case of two specific types of sex work: adult film performers and escorts.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 2007, the California adult film industry experienced a sharp retraction in filming because of the proliferation of Internet adult film piracy and free online pornography (Tarrant 2016). With this technological shock in mind,

<sup>1</sup>I define escorting as a form of prostitution in which clients contact men or women through either an agency or online postings for sexual services, and the escorts travel to the clients' private residences or hotels. Although some may look at the term *escort* cynically as a euphemism for *prostitute*, Weitzer (2009) highlighted the high degree of stratification in prostitution and the better wages and working conditions for escorts compared with street prostitutes.

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performing in adult films has become an increasingly “bad job,” with lower pay, few work opportunities, and no health insurance or retirement benefits (Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000; Tarrant 2016). Working as an adult film performer, however, continued to serve an important promotional role for escorts, and escorts strategically bundled performing in adult films with their escorting work to increase their overall earnings (Berg 2016). By detailing how promotional labor applies to the case of adult film performers and escorts, I build the general case that promotional labor is a useful concept for understanding the strategic labor decision-making processes of nonstandard workers, standard workers, and firms.

## **Bundled Work**

Workers do not do not accept jobs, gigs, or tasks randomly, and workers can strategically bundle different types of work together to increase earnings and advance their careers. At their most basic level, jobs are assembled bundles of tasks, and how these tasks become bundled together is contingent on both internal and external organizational pressures (Cohen 2013). With regard to the hiring process for competitive open-ended jobs, such as working in elite high-end restaurant kitchens, the actual role and tasks of the person being hired are negotiated through the hiring process and are contingent on how the person relates to and fits in with the established group (Tan 2015). More important, certain tasks within jobs are more desirable than others, and when good or bad tasks are allocated in systematic ways, this can lead to inequality in how workers experience their job (Chan and Anteby 2015). It is not enough to simply consider the process by which certain tasks and jobs get bundled together; the differing attributes that are inherent to certain tasks and how tasks with different attributes get bundled together must also be addressed.

With regard to nonstandard work—typified as short-term work arrangements in which the employer has limited control over the employee (Ashford et al. 2007; Broschak and Davis-Blake 2006)—highly skilled workers use nonstandard work arrangements as a source of flexibility to build skills in separate areas in order to have consistent income (Ashford et al. 2007; Bailey and Kurland 2002; Evans, Kunda, and Barley 2004). By bundling different types of jobs together with different skill sets, it is possible for nonstandard workers to develop a well-rounded “human capital portfolio” (Carnoy, Castells, and Benner 1997), and these workers can actively develop and bundle marketable skills together and earn more than their salaried counterparts (Barley and Kunda 2006; Kunda, Barley, and Evans 2002).

More than simply learning new skills in differing areas and earning more income, nonstandard workers can strategically accept jobs in order to advance their careers. Nonstandard workers, and independent contractors more specifically, have no specific organizational guidance in how to progress in their careers, leading to a question on how

these workers progress in their careers when continually working with new jobs and new groups of people while being hired for the same skills (O’Mahony and Bechky 2006). To resolve this career progression paradox, one must understand that independent contractors actively engage in stretchwork, or accepting new work that extends a worker’s skill in a new direction, in order to develop new skills (O’Mahony and Bechky 2006). Independent contractors can advance their careers by accepting certain types of work that build their skills in specific ways.

Although the strategic bundling of work is more obvious in nonstandard work because these workers actively accept disparate short-term jobs in order to build a career, the bundling of work occurs in standard work as well. However, it is not enough to simply understand that workers strategically bundle work, but also the specific and unique attributes that make certain types of work more or desirable than other types of work. More specifically, it is important to understand how the attribute of status, and the differing statuses of jobs and tasks, has important implications for worker compensation when coupled with the ability to bundle jobs and tasks of different statuses together.

## **Status and Work**

Status is a key feature of markets and exchange relationships when the quality of a product or good is uncertain, and consequently high-status affiliations are valuable because they serve as a way to signal high quality in uncertain markets (Podolny 2005). For example, wineries see great value in associating with high-status appellations—or areas of land known for producing high-quality wine—to increase the price of their wines, because there is underlying uncertainty about the quality of the wine for consumers (Benjamin and Podolny 1999). In the world of venture capital, entrepreneurial start-ups sometimes turn down financing offers with better terms in order to accept worse financing offers from high-status firms (Hsu 2004). It seems counterintuitive to accept worse financing offers until one considers that the long-term success of a new start-up is highly uncertain, and associating with high-status venture capitalists is a signal that the entrepreneurial start-up is of high quality (Hsu 2004).

The benefits of high-status affiliations are not limited to firms, and status plays a role in hiring and salaries in labor markets as well. Research also highlights the long-term monetary value of status for standard workers when trying to receive raises or move between jobs (Bidwell et al. 2015; Podolny 2005). For example, part of the value for workers at a firm such as Goldman Sachs is the signal that they are high-quality hires at a high-status firm such as Goldman Sachs and the subsequent career advancements to which association can lead (Bidwell et al. 2015). Generally speaking, high-status firms can treat their high status as a nonpecuniary employment benefit for workers, and firms can leverage their high status to hire workers (Rider and Tan 2014).

Nonstandard workers and independent contractors are well suited to take advantage of high-status affiliations. Given the employment uncertainty and employment flexibility inherent in independent contracting, these workers are particularly attuned to finding their next job (Barley and Kunda 2006; Feldman and Bolino 2000). One way independent contractors find work is through the networks in which they are embedded, and scholars have touched on the importance of reputation networks for promoting the work of independent contractors (Bidwell and Briscoe 2009). However, these reputation networks are not as simple as having recommendations that a contractor does a good job but also the status of previous jobs as a signal of quality (Podolny 2005).

Like standard work, independent contractors know high-status affiliations are valuable and are willing to accept high-status affiliations as a non-pecuniary benefit of a job. For example, in the world of fashion modeling, models, who are a type of independent contractor, accept payment in non-pecuniary forms such as clothing from high-status fashion magazines knowing that the real value for the model is the status affiliation by appearing in high-status fashion magazine (Mears 2011). Taken to the extreme, workers in high-status areas, such as women working in the VIP sections of nightclubs, can be compensated simply through the symbolic benefits of participating in high-status work (Mears 2015). In both of these cases, workers are willing to work for little, if any, monetary compensation for the opportunity to be associated with high-status work.

Whether to firms, standard workers, or independent contractors, high-status affiliations are valuable as a signal of quality and competence. Lawyers and investment bankers are able to leverage their high-status affiliations into career advancement or higher pay (Bidwell et al. 2015; Rider and Tan 2014), and fashion models hope to parlay their work in high-status fashion magazines into large contracts with high-profile fashion houses (Mears 2011). Importantly, in each of these cases, the status benefits for workers are limited to specific jobs when working with firms of different status levels. In addition, we know that both standard workers and independent contractors have the ability to strategically bundle different jobs and tasks together (Cohen 2013; Kunda et al. 2002; O'Mahony and Bechky 2006). Given the ability to bundle work at different status levels, it is also important to consider how these different types of work might relate to one another when combined.

## The Complementarity of Work

Complementary goods, or products that increase demand for other products and vice versa, are a foundational concept in microeconomics for explaining suppliers' pricing strategies (Telser 1979). The presence of complementary goods can shape markets and consumer adoption of products. For example, the success of the VHS standard for videocassette recorders was due largely to the ready availability of videos

that could be purchased and played on VCRs (Schilling 1998). The availability of a complement can increase the overall desirability of a product because the demand for each product builds off the other.

When a supplier offers complementary products, the supplier can also take part in loss-leader pricing by pricing one product below marginal cost in order to encourage sales of the complementary product above marginal cost (Hess and Gerstner 1987). With regard to supermarkets, managers may use loss-leader pricing as a short-term promotional strategy to draw people to the store with the assumption that shoppers will also purchase other products that generate profits (Lal and Matutes 1994). In sum, suppliers of complementary products are able to use strategic pricing as a promotional tool in order to boost sales and profits (Telser 1979).

Different forms of labor can also be complementary. In his analysis of the impact the Internet and music piracy had on the music industry, Krueger (2005) argued that music recordings and music concerts constitute complementary forms of labor for musicians, in that albums increase the demand for live concert performances, and live concert performances increase the demand for albums among top performers. The illegitimate online reproduction of digital music then forces musicians to make up lost revenue through its complementary nondigital product: live concert performances (Krueger 2005; Mortimer, Nosko, and Sorensen 2012). Despite the loss in revenue from albums, performers still produce albums to promote their live concert performances.

Broadly speaking, complementary types of labor may offer a unique way for workers to leverage their skill sets and promote themselves. Through promotional labor, in which workers use one form of labor as a high-status loss leader to promote their lower status core business, workers may mitigate employment uncertainty by using pricing strategies that promote their work. In the following sections, I explore how an exogenous shock in the form of free online pornography led to a sharp decline in U.S. adult film production and, more important, the different strategies adult film performers used to cope with this changing labor market.

## Research Methods

### The Case

Given that the purpose of this research is theory building, I use an inductive case design to examine and understand promotional labor in an organizational context (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). I use the labor market of sex workers in the California adult film industry as my case. Sex work is a compelling area to understand how workers strategically bundle together different types of work because of the particularly amorphous structure of a sex worker's career. Sex workers rely on a variety of labor strategies to manage the extreme precarity of making a living from sex work (Berg 2016;

Escoffier 2007), and these efforts demonstrate labor strategies that may be more subtle in more conventional contexts. More so, there are multiple different types of sex work that can be bundled together, and although sex work is, overall, considered very low status work, there is a high degree of status stratification among different types of sex work (Weitzer 2009, 2010). With regard to different forms of prostitution, escorting is safer, is higher paid, and affords more independence to workers compared with street prostitution (Weitzer 2009). In addition, adult films historically provide levels of fame and income that do not exist in other types of sex work (Abbott 2010), although this may be changing with the recent declines in production (Tarrant 2016).

Sex work is an example of nonstandard work that frequently takes the form of independent contracting. Whether it be performing in adult films on a project-by-project basis or working as an escort with an amorphous clientele and schedule, sex workers are often hired for extremely short term work arrangements with no employment benefits (Abbott 2010; Bernstein 2007; Tarrant 2016). This short-term project-based independent contracting in the adult film industry is similar to the labor arrangements in other cultural industries, such as Hollywood (Bechky 2006; Faulkner and Anderson 1987; Menger 1999, 2006). Overall, sex work presents a compelling case of workers' using a variety of strategies to bundle together different work with different attributes in order to make a living.

With regard to the California adult film industry, the industry is largely split between straight adult film production and gay adult film production (Thomas 2010; Weitzer 2010). From the 1970s through the present, the straight adult film industry has centered in Southern California, while the gay adult film industry is centered in San Francisco (Thomas 2010; Tibbals 2012), although productions have become common in Las Vegas and Miami (Tarrant 2016). Even as gay and straight production companies have become subsidiaries of larger companies through the late 2010s, most notably under the pornography conglomerate MindGeek, the gay and straight industries remain largely separate in terms of production (Mann 2014; Wallace 2011). Although some male crossover performers appear in both straight and gay films, crossover performers from the gay industry are stigmatized within the straight industry because of the perceived risk that they could introduce HIV into the straight industry (Schieber 2018).

There are two general career arcs within the industry: (1) performers who are looking for quick money are in the industry for only a short period of time, and (2) performers who take part in certain strategies to lengthen their careers (Abbott 2010). Performers who seek longer careers must often make connections in the industry by signing with established agents and begin working for more prestigious companies to establish their legitimacy as serious performers. With regard to earnings, women typically earn \$300 to

\$1,000 for an individual scene, depending on the status of the studio and the sex act performed, while men typically make half that amount per scene (Abbott 2010; Snow 2013; Tarrant 2016). Men in the gay adult film industry typically make a similar amount per scene compared with women in the straight industry, but there are fewer opportunities to perform in the gay industry (Escoffier 2007). These men then tend to take part in a network of complementary sex work, such as stripping and escorting, to earn a livable wage (Escoffier 2007).

A great deal has changed in the adult film industry since Escoffier's (2007) analysis of networks of sex work. When Escoffier was conducting his work, the adult film industry was in the midst of huge growth as online pornography became common through the late 1990s and mid-2000s (Voss 2015), but beginning in 2007, the adult film industry saw large declines in both revenue and production as free online pornography became common (Attwood 2010). At the same time, these technological shifts decreased the barriers of entry to escorting. In escorting, both male and female escorts increasingly rely on the Internet to find clients and advertise their services (Cunningham and Kendall 2011). This shift toward escorts' using the Internet not only makes it easier for researchers to examine how escorting works (Logan 2010), but it makes it easier and less time consuming for people to work as escorts (Cunningham and Kendall 2011; Weitzer 2009) and for escorts to more effectively advertise exactly what services they offer for what price (Logan 2016). Technology has made escorting much more efficient.

### *Data Collection*

Between 2013 and 2016, I conducted 38 open-ended, in-depth interviews with industry stakeholders in the gay and straight California adult film industries. I interviewed performers, directors, producers, and people working in other roles within the industry, as described in Table 1. It is common for those involved in the industry to work in multiple roles, such as performing, directing, and producing, and several respondents had worked in various roles within the industry. Although the focus of the study is on the labor decisions of sex workers, my interviews with producers, directors, and other organizational actors were necessary to bring diverse perspectives in the organizational hierarchy to further validate and reinforce the statements by the sex workers (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). In addition, respondents in other roles within the industry tend to have longer careers within the industry and were able to provide firsthand accounts of changes they observed over time. The year respondents entered the adult film industry is indicated in Table 1. By speaking to members of both the gay and straight adult film industries, I am able to compare the experiences and strategies of people in both industries.



**Table 1.** Respondent Information.

Name	Profession(s)	Industry	Sex	Year Entered Adult Film Industry
Holly	Performer/escort	Straight	Female	2011
Rachel	Performer/director	Straight	Female	2007
Elizabeth	Performer	Straight	Female	2013
Diana	Performer	Straight	Female	2010
Angela	Performer	Straight	Female	2012
Julie	Performer	Straight	Female	2012
Heather	Performer	Straight	Female	1997
Erica	Performer	Straight	Female	2009
Jessica	Performer	Straight	Female	2013
Christina	Performer/escort	Straight	Female	1984
Megan	Performer	Straight	Female	2012
Lily	Performer/escort	Straight	Female	2010
Chase	Performer	Straight	Male	1992
Patrick	Performer	Straight	Male	1972
Craig	Performer	Straight	Male	2012
Tim	Performer	Straight	Male	2012
Nick	Producer/director	Straight	Male	1987
Nate	Producer/director/performer	Straight	Male	2001
Cari	Producer/director	Straight	Female	2011
Travis	Producer/director/performer	Straight	Male	2002
Aaron	Producer/director	Straight	Male	1994
Kelly	Makeup artist	Straight	Female	2005
Thomas	Industry lawyer	Straight	Male	2004
Joshua	Industry journalist	Straight	Male	2002
Bruce	Performer agent	Straight	Male	1998
Ryan	Film crew	Gay and straight	Male	2010
Michael	Producer/director	Gay and straight	Male	2003
Adam	Performer/director	Gay and straight	Male	2007
Kevin	Producer/director/performer	Gay	Male	2003
Matthew	Performer/escort	Gay	Male	2008
Joseph	Performer/escort	Gay	Male	2010
Samuel	Performer/escort	Gay	Male	2007
Sean	Performer/escort	Gay	Male	2008
Will	Performer	Gay	Male	2011
Jake	Performer/escort	Gay	Male	2008
James	Public health	—	Male	—
Gregory	Public health	—	Male	—
Andrea	Public health	—	Female	—

I initially contacted respondents through e-mail and then asked respondents for referrals to other people in the industry I could speak to. Many respondents said they felt comfortable sharing their contact information with me and speaking with me only if another person within the industry vouched for me. This was due to concerns about stigmatization and unwanted correspondence. Because this is a referral sample, these interviews do not represent a full population of sex workers or adult film performers and cannot be used in a statistical sense to generalize demographics. Rather, I use the interviews to identify common discourses and strategies regarding careers and labor decisions within the California adult film industry. To protect anonymity, I use pseudonyms

throughout the article, and I leave out any information that could be used to identify respondents.

I conducted the interviews either in person or over the phone, depending on availability or the respondent's preference. Interviews lasted about an hour, with the shortest interview lasting 30 minutes and the longest interview lasting three hours. Before each interview, I provided respondents with a study information sheet explaining the purpose of the project, and I received verbal consent to conduct and audio-record the interview. Respondents had the option of ending the interview at any time.

During these semistructured interviews, I asked respondents about the impact of piracy on the industry, how they

view escorting, and the motivations performers have to escort. Specifically I asked if they have witnessed a change in the amount of escorting since entering the industry, their own opinions about escorting, and reasons why they believe performers choose to escort. In order to not lead responses, I did not bring up performers' using adult films as a promotional tool unless the respondent mentioned it, although every performer independently mentioned the promotional aspect of adult films. I conducted these interviews with members of the gay and straight industries, and both men and women who escort. Throughout the interviews, there were overwhelming similarities in the reasons members of the gay and straight industries gave for escorting.

### Data Analysis

I transcribed and analyzed my interviews using the qualitative data analysis software Hyper Research. I analyzed and coded the data using an iterative process, going between the literature and the transcripts, identifying key themes in the ways respondents described their work and labor decisions. Through the coding process, common discourses regarding respondents' labor experiences emerged, and I used these similarities to identify general concepts from the interviews. I then identified links between these concepts and abstract theoretical themes discussed in the literature that relate to organizational labor decisions. The results of this coding process are located in Table 2, with representative quotations included to show how respondents discussed these concepts. These representative quotations in Table 2 are in addition to the quotations included in the text in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of respondent responses.

There was one methodological difference when conducting interviews between the two industries. Specifically, women, men, and director/producers in the straight industry were more hesitant to talk about escorting. All respondents in the straight industry talked about how common escorting is, but they also talked about how people look down upon and stigmatize women for being escorts. On the other hand, escorting within the gay adult film industry seemed much more accepted, if not celebrated (for example, "The Hookies" are gay escort awards and closely tied to the gay adult film industry), and this came through in interviews as performers talked at length and in detail about their own experiences escorting. For the purpose of this research, this uneasiness with escorting led people in the straight industry to talk about escorting in more hypothetical terms, even if the performer was in fact an escort or had friends who escort. I further analyze these differences in response later in the article.

### The Internet and Bundled Sex Work

The California adult film industry experienced a tumultuous beginning to the twenty-first century. Initially, online pornography led to an enormous increase in adult film production, and

there was a feeling of prosperity and growth in the industry as producers began to take advantage of the Internet as a medium to sell their product (Tarrant 2016). Michael, a producer and director who began filming in the industry in 1999, states,

There was so much money to be made in the early 2000s. You could throw up a picture of a naked girl on the Internet and make money. Now there's so much free content . . . it's really hard now.

There was a veritable gold rush in the pornography industry in the early 2000s as the Internet made it much easier to distribute and sell pornography.

Web sites subsequently began offering free online content, and production plummeted beginning in 2007. Diane Duke, the former head of the adult film industry trade group The Free Speech Coalition, estimates that industry-wide revenues decreased by 50 percent between 2007 and 2012 (Tarrant 2016). In addition, every respondent I spoke to detailed the negative impact free online pornography and the illegal online reproduction of adult films had since 2007. Sean, an escort and performer in the gay adult film industry, describes this phenomenon:

The Internet has made viewing porn much easier, but it has also made being able to steal porn much easier. Porn DVDs used to be priced high . . . now you can join, for 10 dollars a month, a plethora of websites and have an unlimited supply of porn at your fingertips, as well as free sites. . . . The Internet has been, essentially, what killed the porn industry.

When I asked respondents what they thought the biggest challenge facing the adult film industry was, every respondent in both the gay and straight industries talked about the decline in work due to free Internet pornography.

This technological shift creates a paradox for the industry. Although more people than ever are viewing pornography, fewer people than ever are paying for pornography (Tarrant 2016). Like other creative industries such as traditional film and music, adult films are an infinitely reproducible digital good, and the Internet has made it essentially costless to copy and transmit cultural goods online (DiMaggio et al. 2001). More so, it is difficult for adult film performers to switch careers, because of the stigma performers experience for having been adult film performers (Tarrant 2016). This creates a tension within the adult film industry, with performers seeing fewer filming opportunities with lower pay, in addition to possessing a skill set that is not easily transferrable to a more traditional labor market.

It is then no surprise that adult film performers might leverage their nonstandard flexible work arrangements to bundle different types of work together to keep their earnings steady in the face a sharp decline in production. It would make even more sense for performers to adopt a type of sex work that is not infinitely reproducible through technology—paid sexual relations in person on location as an escort—in order to supplement their adult film income. As

**Table 2.** Representative Quotes of Themes and Concepts.

Theme	Concept	Representative Quotations
Bundling of work	The rise of the Internet and the decline in production	“There’s a huge proliferation right now of illegal downloads of porn. It’s so prevalent. It started in late 2008 and it’s still going strong ‘till this day. I mean, god knows how many porn tube sites are out there, they can just watch everything for free, people are going through torrents, so basically the biggest thing is trying to stay alive. . . . The ones that are prospering the most are the Internet based sites that have been around are being much more tech savvy. The original DVD stalwarts of the day are kind of taking a dip, some have not really acclimated but some are actually joining forces with Internet based companies and trying to see how they can get their stuff out there.” (Adam, performer/director)
		“I’m seeing a lot more desperate behaviors on my sets because in the old days people could maybe miss work on Monday and not really worry about it because there was always a scene on Tuesday and another scene on Wednesday, and another scene on Thursday, and 2 scenes on Friday. . . . Now there’s no work. In the old days, a girl could go 2 or 3 years on the circuit and pretty much work 2 or 3 years pretty consistently and make 10 to 15 thousand a month. Now I think the average life span of a girl is maybe 3 to 6 months.” (Travis, director/producer/performer)
		“I mean, the industry, production has shrunk so much. At one time, there were probably 200 plus shoots going on in the San Fernando Valley a day. Now it’s less than 50. Production has dramatically downsized, and so models have a lot more opportunities to engage in more risky outside industry sexual practices than they used to.” (Nate, director/producer/performer)
	Bundling as necessary to make ends meet	“I feel like if you do porn and you don’t escort then you’re very, I’m trying to think of the right words so I don’t sound like a dick. I think you’re fucking stupid. The people who perform and don’t escort are really, really spoiling an opportunity to make a lot of money. I make way more money escorting than I do in porn, like three times more money. I feel like it’s financially irresponsible to not embrace that I can make that much money and not go for it.” (Matt, performer/escort)
		“Escorting is very prevalent. In fact, one of my old friends that I used to shoot, she says that she makes most of her income through her clients.” (Cari, director)
		“Escorting is easier and you’re getting the same if not better money. A lot of the girls in the industry are extremely sexually active and a lot of them will do a scene and then they’ll go see a client and make like \$3,000 in a day. It’s crazy. So if you have the body and mentality where you’re very sexually active, and your body can have lots of sex, it seems like a good idea.” (Jessica, performer)
Status and work	Status differentiation among types of work	“A lot of performers are really successful in the industry and they also escort, but it serves as a stigma where it’s like, ‘Oh, she’s not doing well enough in the industry so she’s escorting now.’ It’s like the performer is downgrading, but it’s really not the case and that’s not how I think it should be looked at.” (Diana, performer)
		“I think some performers see escorting as crossing another boundary, another level. So, it’s a way for certain guys, in their eyes, to retain some sort of integrity or validation or whatever. I don’t know what they’re holding onto, but it’s a way to sort of separate themselves from the rest of the guys who do it.” (Samuel, performer/escort)
		“I think people in the industry look down on it or make girls feel bad about it or make them feel dirty about the whole thing, which I think is ridiculous because it’s virtually the same thing as a shoot, just no cameras involved.” (Holly, performer/escort)
	Changing acceptability of escorting	“The older women, from what I see, look down their nose at escorting. They say, ‘I would never do that.’” (Thomas, lawyer)
		“I’ve seen a dramatic increase in escorting over the years. It used to be, 5 or 6 years ago, girls would be like, ‘That girl does privates? I don’t want to work with her.’ The attitude has completely changed. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that most girls that get in the industry now don’t get in strictly to shoot scenes. A lot of them are already escorting by the time they get recruited off of Web sites such as Backpage or other escorting sites, and they see this as a was to enhance their escorting careers. Again, with the downsize in production, that’s what’s happened.” (Nate, director/producer/performer).
		“Back then, you didn’t have the females escorting the way they do now, and people in the industry tended to stay together more because every time you have sex with someone outside the industry you run the risk of bringing and STD into the industry and giving it to everyone else. Back then everyone was so tight knit we were much more conscious of our behavior outside the industry than people are now.” (Aaron, director/producer)

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Theme	Concept	Representative Quotations
Complementary work and promotional labor	Using complementary work as promotion	<p>"Porn is marketing. You have a huge audience. People want to see you. People want to touch you. It's a way to market your self. The bigger the porn star you are the more you get to charge as an escort." (Samuel, performer/escort)</p> <p>"I realized the escorts that did porn were the one's making more money, so I contemplated going into porn for about a year. . . . So basically, you do porn to advertise, to promote your services as an escort." (Joe, performer/escort)</p> <p>"It's a big financial thing. I've had guys willing to pay \$10,000 for an hour! To have sex with me! So I think financially it's a very, very, easy way to make money, and there's some girls who do porn just to say they're a porn star so they can charge more when they escort." (Angela, performer)</p> <p>"Now the girls use movies to get a higher rate escorting. You can charge a guy \$1,000, \$1,500 bucks an hour, I don't even know what the rates are, but if you're making that same amount of money to show up for 8 hours on a set, you're going to escort." (Chase, performer).</p>
	Increased earnings and client opportunities due to promotional labor	<p>"My rate for escorting is \$400 an hour. I have friends that don't do porn and they escort and they can only get \$200, \$225 and hour. People will pay me \$400 because they've watched me in their house 100, 200 times and they dreamt and had fantasies about me and they'll pay me money to see them because they know that I' a huge fantasy to them." (Matt, performer/escort)</p> <p>"You may not be making more per hour or per client, but you'll have more options for clients, and you can charge a little bit more. Your status will be raised; you'll be more like a celebrity. You're more well known, you're more of a name, and the idea of spending an hour or a night with a porn star is a lot more thrilling than spending a night with a guy nobody's ever heard of." (Joe, performer/escort)</p> <p>"There's really a sense in porn that 'This is an advertisement' now. This is a change to the industry though. This is a new format. Everything changed so quickly that the girls who weren't already escorting did it because they had to. . . . If you get your name out there, then you're a porn star. So instead of just being a hooker that can get 3 or 4 hundred dollars, or even a high priced escort that could get maybe \$1,500, you can now get 5 to 10 thousand dollars." (Kelly, makeup artist)</p>

Holly, a performer and escort, states when asked how common escorting was among women in the adult film industry:

Escorting's what gets the girls through. . . . I'd be more surprised when a girl doesn't escort. For most girls that get into this business, it's not a matter of who's doing it and who's not. It's a matter of when.

Whereas the market for adult films has diminished, the market for escorts has remained stable. Unlike films, a live experience cannot be copied or stolen. This distinction is important and is applicable to other industries as well. As the marginal cost of copying and transmitting digital creative goods approaches zero because of technological advancement, and the revenues from these products then becomes lower, workers may invest more time and effort into bundling their work with live labor that is comparatively scarce because it can only be experienced in person.

### Status, Escorting, and the Adult Film Industry

Although performing in adult films and escorting are both types of sex work, it would be inaccurate to assume that

people who work in one necessarily work in the other. In fact, escorting has traditionally been stigmatized within the adult film industry, and it is common for performers to engage in boundary work in an effort to enforce status differentiation between the two types of sex work. Producers in the industry since before 2007 speak in detail about these differences, with Travis, a producer in the straight industry since the early 2000s, stating,

When I first got in the business if you asked a girl "Hey, do you escort? Do you strip?" They were upset. They'd say "F you, I'm a porn star, not a hooker." . . . Now it seems to me that it's porn and escorting. The reason they do it is because the business got creamed and a lot of the work has dried up.

When it was relatively easy to make a living by simply performing in films, escorting was viewed as an unacceptable or low-status way to make a side income. This leads to tension among sex workers, because on the surface escorting and adult films are both types of sex work. As Diana, a performer, states, "The escorting issue frustrates me because you would think as an industry that is always stigmatized, those within the industry wouldn't stigmatize other types of sex work, but they do." Within the straight adult film industry, there was, and still is,



active status differentiation and boundary work to distinguish certain types of sex work. In addition, escorting, a form of prostitution, is illegal. Moreover, performers in the straight adult film industry also view escorting as a potential way for HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases to enter and spread within the industry (Schieber 2018). Whereas women adult film stars once viewed escorting as low-status work not worthy of their time for these reasons, escorting has become increasingly necessary to make a living despite the stigma.

In contrast, escorting has always been relatively accepted within the gay adult film industry compared with the straight adult film industry. This is because men in the gay adult film industry have significantly lower incomes compared with women in the straight adult film industry, and it was always necessary for these men to make an income outside of performing (Abbott 2010; Escoffier 2007). Adam, a performer in the gay and straight industries, talked about how escorting has historically been a norm in the gay industry and how this differs from his experiences in the straight industry: “Escorting was much more of a norm on the gay side. It’s actually celebrated to escort. Nobody sees it as a bad thing or a controversial thing. On the straight side it’s become a lot more normal now.” However, even with this comparative acceptance of escorting within the industry, performers still talked about how escorting is viewed as lower status work compared with performing in films. Samuel, a performer and escort in the gay adult film industry, talked about the relative acceptance of escorting in the gay adult film industry, but also the status differentiation between escorts and adult film stars, stating, “There’s a difference between if you’re a porn star and escort or if you’re just a porn star. . . . I have friends in the industry with the mentality that they would never escort, that it’s beneath them.” Even though escorting is more common and accepted in the gay adult film industry, there is still status differentiation between the two types of work. Within the field of sex work, there is a level of glamour and fame afforded to adult film stars that is not afforded to escorts.

Throughout the interviews with respondents from both industries, it was striking the extent to which women performers were guarded about talking about escorting and spoke about the stigma women face among peers in the adult film industry when working as escorts, whereas male performers in the gay industry talked at length about the acceptability of escorting. This led to performers in the straight adult film industry speaking about escorting in more guarded and hypothetical terms. Joe, a performer and escort in the gay industry, spoke about these differences in gendered terms, stating,

I think sex in general is different between men and women. . . . There’s even more of a stigma for women who escort because women aren’t even allowed to enjoy sex in our society, our culture. So I think women keep it even more on the down low.

As Joe walks us through, it is possible, if not likely, that these differences in acceptability and stigma are due to broader

cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality, and the result of the persistent sexual double standard experienced by men and women in the United States (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Risman and Schwartz 2002). Because of cultural expectations, women are concerned about being labeled as sexually promiscuous, whereas men are, to some extent, expected to be sexually promiscuous (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009).

The status differentiation between performing in films and escorting is important because it, in part, drives the desirability of these two jobs. One explanation for why adult film performers continue making films despite the state of the industry is that adult films do, in fact, give performers a level of fame, if not notoriety, that is unachievable in other career paths. If a person wants to be known for something, even if that something is commonly stigmatized, being an adult film performer offers that path. Escorting does not. However, this is not simply a story about status, and in the following section I will unpack the financial considerations that make performing in adult films a lucrative option when bundled with escorting.

## Sex Work as Promotional Labor

Escorting and adult film performances are not simply two separate jobs that exist in a vacuum but are in fact complementary forms of work that increase demand for each other. Specifically, if a person is a famous porn star, he or she is in higher demand and can charge more money as an escort. In turn, working in adult films offers performers two types of compensation: financial and promotional. Matt, a performer and escort, talks about the second benefit, stating with regard to filming, “It keeps my name prevalent, front page, and it keeps people seeing my body and my work. It’s an excellent way to market yourself, and you don’t have to do any advertising because the studio does it for you.” For Matt, the advertising from films is a direct, nonpecuniary, benefit from performing in the films. The actual payment received for appearing in the film is an added benefit on top of the promotional benefits of the work. In this regard, the decrease in earnings from films due to the proliferation of free online content is palatable for performers because performers still receive the promotional benefits from appearing in a film.

As the Internet became a destructive force for adult film producers and performers, it led to a boon for escorts, making it easier to find clients and advertise oneself. With regard to male escorts, Rentboy.com was a common Web site for escorts to advertise themselves to potential clients, until it was shut down in 2015, and escorts subsequently moved on to using other Web sites (Logan 2016). Sean, an escort and adult film performer who no longer appears in adult films, talked about how he still uses his adult film star pseudonym to make searching for him on the Internet easier, stating,

I still use my stage name as well as pictures from scenes on my Rentboy profile. You’re able to cross promote if you put a stage

name and people are able to Google you and are able to see videos of you. A video is an affirmation that the person that you're looking at is the person that you're going to get.

Not only does being an adult performer increase the perceived status of the escort, but films serve as a prism through which consumers can observe the underlying attributes of the person they wish to hire (Podolny 2005). Escorting is a market typified with asymmetric information, and escorts who share more information about themselves in their advertisements, such as pictures of their face, are able to charge significantly more than escorts who do not share any such information (Logan 2016). In uncertain markets, such as escorting, where it is difficult to ascertain the quality or reputation of the escort being hired, promotional labor in the form of professionally produced pornography provides an avenue to establish one's legitimacy or quality to potential clients. Generally speaking, promotional labor is one solution to information asymmetries for nonstandard workers because clients have access to examples of the workers previous jobs in a complementary field.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact amount performers who escort are able to increase their escorting rates because of performing in adult films, but respondents stated that the increase is considerable. Male respondents who worked as escorts consistently stated that performing in adult films increased the amount an escort earned by roughly \$100 per hour, from about \$200 per hour for nonperformers to \$300 to \$400 per hour for mainstream performers. These hourly rates are in the range of Logan's (2016) analysis of Rentboy escorting data, although his analysis does not cover differentiation in rates by adult film performers. Respondents in the straight adult film industry described a significantly less structured market for female performers, where performers find escorting clients through their adult film agents and typically charge \$800 to \$2,000 per hour. However, very popular performers might negotiate extremely high amounts—in the tens of thousands of dollars—to travel to a client's residence for a weekend trip or longer.

More than simply increasing escorts' hourly rates, adult films also make it easier to find clients and increase the opportunities for an escort to have clients in a larger geographic area. Samuel, an escort who started performing in films later on, describes his increased opportunities after he started performing:

I travel a lot more. A regular escort probably makes most of their money locally. . . . I get offers from people in Minnesota or Kansas, and they would have never known who I was, they would have never researched who I was, except they knew I was in porn. And so they'll fly me out. I cast a wider net.

In Samuel's case, he saw his client base grow to include a much wider geographic area once he started performing in films. The benefits of taking part in promotional labor are not limited to the hourly rate increase for one's labor, but also having increased opportunities from clients seeking out one's labor.

In a way, promotional labor acts as a way to brand one's labor. Thomas, a lawyer who represents female performers and escorts in the pornography industry, discussed how more famous female performers sometimes escort under pseudonyms in order to purposefully charge less money. This is to preserve their higher status porn star names for people who infrequently pay extremely high premiums to have sex with a porn star but to still have regular lower priced bookings under pseudonyms detached from their porn star status. Essentially, adult film stars are able to practice price discrimination by marketing and branding themselves at different price points as a brand name versus a generic escort. Although only one respondent mentioned this practice, it highlights the subtle ways promotional laborers strategically brand themselves and charge clients.

One group is missing from this discussion of adult film performers escorting: male performers in the straight adult film industry. Although people in the straight industry talk about rumors of male performers' escorting with other men, and it is possible, if not likely, that male performers escort with men under pseudonyms, it is extremely stigmatized for a male performer in the straight adult film industry to work as a gay escort. This stigma is due to the perceived risk that a male performer working as a gay escort could become HIV positive and then put female performers in the straight adult film industry at risk of acquiring HIV (Schieber 2018). More so, if male performers in the straight industry do in fact escort under pseudonyms, then the promotional benefits of being a named porn star would be largely negated. Although it might be possible that some male performers escort with women, respondents indicated this type of market does not exist.

Although this research focuses on the relationship between performing in films and escorting, there are other forms of sex work that can be bundled together for promotional purposes. For example, through the 1990s, with the rise of home video formats and more accessible pornography, adult film performers took advantage of their relative fame by travelling to different cities and working as "feature dancers" for strip clubs (Escoffier 2007). Aaron, a director and producer in the straight adult film industry since the early 1990s, states,

In the 90s there were girls who would do free boy/girl scenes for a box cover because that box cover was what got them feature-dancing gigs. All the club owners back then, their big question was "How many box covers does she have?" That would determine her price as a feature dancer.

During this time period, performers would accept little or no payment in order to be put on the box cover of the movie being made, because box cover appearances translated into higher rates when being hired as a "feature dancer" at a strip club. More recently, the market for feature dancing has declined, but adult film performers now work as web cam models as a way to supplement income. It is common for performers to use their status as an adult film performer to increase their popularity, and earning, through camming.

In each of these examples—escorting, exotic dancing, or camming—adult film performers bundle in work that is a live experience. This is not a coincidence. As opposed to an adult film that can be rewatched indefinitely, there is a natural scarcity to live work because it is location or time dependent. Even with the example of Web-camming, where a person may be able to entertain many people online, camming has an interactive live component whereby the worker engages in real time with the people watching. In each of these instances, adult film performers are able to build a brand and solidify their reputation using their labor as a porn star, and then use this brand and reputation to build a clientele or charge more money in more personal and less reproducible forms of labor. These underlying characteristics of sex work, in which complementary live forms of work can mitigate low wages from labor that is infinitely reproducible through technology or the Internet, have important implications for other types of labor more generally.

## Discussion

As changes in technology make it easier for workers to bundle odd jobs in uncertain labor markets, it is important to understand how different types of labor interact with one another when bundled together. More so, it is important to understand the strategies workers may use to maximize their earnings through bundled work. Although sex work is an unconventional case to examine broader labor practices, the unstructured nature of sex work and independent nature of sex workers—in addition to the technological shifts shaping the industry—make sex work an ideal lens through which to study how workers make strategic decisions about bundling certain types of work. Through these interviews, it is clear that sex workers use their flexible independent contractor status to strategically choose to bundle certain types of work in order to increase their earnings. Promotional labor serves as a useful theoretical concept to explain the process by which workers strategically bundle these specific jobs together.

The decline of the adult film industry through the late 2000s, and the ways performers coped with this decline, is partially a story of a technological shock making the distribution of adult films much easier but making remuneration through adult films much more difficult. Generally speaking, as technology makes digital cultural goods infinitely reproducible and transmittable, cultural producers are forced to rely on new strategies and avenues to be compensated for their work. Promotional labor is one such strategy. By relying on income from live, in-person performances that cannot be reasonably reproduced through technology, but by still using digital complements to promote these live performances, cultural producers leverage their complementary skill sets to maintain or increase their income.

Although the Internet makes bundling promotional media content with other types of work easier, promotional labor is not unique to media performances or to work facilitated by the Internet. Many types of labor necessitate face-to-face

interaction with specific clients, and these types of work can be bundled with high-status promotional complements to mitigate the uncertainty of attracting new clients. For example, lecturers or adjunct faculty members sometimes use their positions as part-time instructors at high-status universities or high-status professional schools to promote themselves and acquire clients in their private sector work (Johnson 2015; Rose Guest Pryal 2015). With regard to law, pro bono litigation is not simply an altruistic act to help those in need through free legal services but is also seen as a “source of professional legitimation” that may attract other clients (Cummings 2004:34). Few authors who self-publish books ever sell enough copies to make back their initial investment (Clark and Phillips 2014), but a dietician or consultant may be able to garner more in-person clients if he or she can claim to be a self-published author. These workers bundle together high-status, mass-audience, promotional work with their in-person, and private, client-based work to take advantage of the complementary nature of the two forms of work.

However, not all bundles of gig work are promotional labor. If a person drives for Uber and delivers packages for Amazon while authoring a book, there is no complementary relationship between the types of work that increases demand for the other, and it is simply a bundle of jobs. Promotional labor is not a synonym for gig work but a specific instance of gig work in which workers are able to take advantage of the specific characteristics of gigs that relate to one another. Future research may further elaborate on other ways specific types of gigs interact when bundled together given the increasing prevalence of independent gig-type work.

With regard to standard work, as researchers focus on job assembly processes (Cohen 2013; Tan 2015), it is important to understand the specific characteristics of certain tasks that make up jobs and how specific tasks relate to one another. By focusing in on the status characteristics of certain tasks, and the ways certain tasks might be complementary of one another, one can better understand the incentives that may guide how workers try to bundle certain tasks together. Assuming there is status differentiation between certain tasks within a firm (Cohen 2013), one might imagine workers strategically taking on certain high-status tasks that are not part of their original job description with little or no increase in compensation in the hopes that this labor may lead to upward mobility within the firm or increased opportunities to move to a new firm. Future research may analyze the status stratification of tasks within jobs, or the other characteristics of tasks more generally, and whether there are differences in compensation or competition for workers to strategically take on certain tasks.

Promotional labor occurs at the firm level as well. For example, the large accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers experienced an extremely public embarrassment at the 2017 Oscars, when two of their accountants handed the wrong envelope to the presenters for the best picture award, leading to the wrong movie’s being announced as the winner (Lang and Stedman 2017). It seems strange that a major accounting firm handles the vote tallies for an awards show in the first



place, except that PricewaterhouseCoopers receives reputational benefits from being tied to a high-status and highly visible event such as the Oscars. As the *New York Times* stated in an article after the incident, “And the Oscars, while not PricewaterhouseCooper’s most lucrative client, is perhaps its most important. The firm leans on its long history as Hollywood’s chief vote-counter to enhance its appeal in efforts like business development and recruiting” (Gelles and Maheshwari 2017). Because the purpose of having the Oscars as a client is promotional and not financial, the highly visible blunder is that much more damaging to the firm’s reputation. Future research may further examine the risks and benefits of taking on clients for purposes of promotional labor to attract more financially lucrative clients.

Promotional labor is an important concept because it builds on the understanding that workers or firms passively find work by being embedded in reputational networks by taking into account the status benefits of different types of work when bundled together. In each of these instances of promotional labor, workers and firms use complementary skill sets to bundle and promote different aspects of their work. Although the promotional form of work is low paid, it is higher status. The worker or firm can then leverage this status into higher paid but lower status areas of work, such as finding and maintaining regular clients, teaching lessons, or conducting live performances. Although there are a variety of reasons a worker may voluntarily partake in lower paid work, promotional labor provides one explanation for how lower paid work can counterintuitively lead to increased earnings for a worker or firm.

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## Author Biography

**David Schieber** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research interests lie at the intersection of work and organizations, health, gender, sexuality, culture, and economic sociology. His dissertation studies workers in the California adult film industry to better understand these interests and how they relate.