

# Online Prostitution Among Millennials: A Consequence of Westernized Lifestyles?

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**Abstract.** This study employs critical ethnographic methods to explore the motives and models of online prostitution among millennials. The purposive selection of informants who have been practicing online prostitution for at least two years revealed that economic needs, a desire to follow trends, lack of family affection, trauma with a partner, and a high appetite for frequent premarital sex are among the reasons for entering online prostitution. Additionally, the study found that being a single parent and the westernized lifestyle of the millennial generation are contributing factors to entering online prostitution. Two models of online student sex workers were identified: the "ayam kampus" mode, a private sex service, and the online booking "BO," a common sex service that includes in-person sex services, sex chats, video calls, and sex videos. While informants considered online prostitution to be wrong in terms of religion and norms, it was viewed as better than following the popular culture trend of Friends with Benefits (FWB). Lastly, informants were found to be open-minded but subjected to cultural deculturation. The results suggest a need for interventions that address the underlying economic and social factors that lead to online prostitution among millennials.

**Keywords:** Online prostitution  $\cdot$  millennials  $\cdot$  critical ethnography  $\cdot$  cultural deculturation  $\cdot$  economic needs

# 1 Introduction

Information technology and telecommunications make it easier for anyone to access information on the internet, browse cyberspace, and interact through social media. Youth have led this technological revolution in the use of social media platforms and applications that are now present in their dynamic lives (nine out of ten US teenagers aged 13–17 according to the Pew Research Center, 2018) [1]. This generation has the potential to take actions outside the norms of society because it transacts information and communicates through social media every day. Adolescents to adults bring about social change and break the barrier between age and maturity. Many children and adolescents become adults before the period of normal stages. They learned of sexual activity through online

media because criminals had produced child sexual abuse material and child exploitation material offline and vulgar, then distributed online.

Criminals are also leveraging the internet and the digitization of the media in their modus operandi, as well as improving their technical skills to reach people in cyberspace [1]. One of the most popular cybercrime cases is online prostitution. Nowadays, online prostitution is not only an online crime, but also a profitable business trend. Various applications on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Line, We Chat, Tinder, Web Cam, Telegram, and other social media have not escaped this mode of crime.

Web Cam, which previously received less attention, has become a popular online prostitution business tool because it is considered minimal risk [2]. People involved in online prostitution can exchange porn without having to meet and contract diseases such as HIV and other diseases. This trend was also favored by many sex workers during the Covi-19 pandemic. It was found that as many as 26.4% of Commercial Sex Workers (CSW) in 4 metropolitan areas in Indonesia: Jabodetabek (Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, Bekasi), Bandung, Yogyakarta, and Bali, switched to using chat sex facilities, call sex, and video call sex services during the Covid-19 pandemic [3].

Opportunities in online prostitution pose a serious challenge for every country due to the practice of prostitution involving adolescents and children. This age group actually dominates social media compared to other generations. In Sagar's research report, et al. in the UK in 2015, around 5% of the student population participated into Commercial Sex Workers (CSW), with an estimated 20% having considered participating in online prostitution circles [4].

Sex among students and millennials occurs in many countries, including Indonesia. The lifestyle of premarital sexual relations is indeed a trend among millennials. Based on a study conducted by Agustin on 153 student respondents aged 18 to 23 years, it was found that 10.46% had or were undergoing premarital sexual relations in the form of Friend With Benefit (FWB) or friendship relationships without emotional ties [5]. In addition, based on the 2013 Indonesian Adolescent Reproductive Health Survey (SKRRI), many young men and women aged 15–19 have had premarital sexual relations. Adolescents who were respondents had experiences such as dating (72%), kissing 92%, groping (skinship) 62% and premarital sex intercourse 73.6% [5].

The phenomenon of student sex workers is also supported by the emergence of a lifestyle of FWB sex behavior among millennials. This lifestyle is "imported" from countries that have a sex culture through mass media and new media [6]. In the UK, the practice of sexual and sexual identity has become a leisure and entertainment lifestyle known as Swinger Clubs and Swab Clubs [7]. In FWB, couples are free to do anything, such as having another pair and approaching another pair [8]. This relationship is not based on feelings of love and only promotes sexual satisfaction [9]. This will certainly increase the spread of venereal diseases, HIV, or other viruses, as well as undermine the moral values of existing in the community. Various online sex lifestyle phenomena among millennials, it is important for this research to reveal what the motives and models of millennial online prostitution practitioners in Indonesia look like so as to prevent and reduce the number of deviant sex behaviors among young people. This reduction in the number of deviant sex behaviors will certainly practically reduce the number of diseases caused by promiscuous sex.

The actions of the perpetrators of online prostitution, so the approach of Alfred Schutz's theory is used, which has grouped human actions into two types of motives, namely: (1) Motives of purpose (In order to motive); (2) Motives of the cause (Because of motive) [10]. "Because of motive" or motive because it is related to the background or past so that it is used as a reason for doing an action. Meanwhile, in order to motive is a retrospective view of the factors that are the purpose of a person performing certain actions, such as social goals, economic goals, religious goals, and others. This of course can be novelty in the study of online sexual behavior among millennials generation, because several studies that have been conducted do not look at the future goals of online prostitution and talk more about the motives of the perpetrators.

# 2 Methodology

This research uses critical ethnographic methods that have the capability to try to dismantle the political content in unjust cultural divisions, thereby entrusting marginalized, exploited, and subordinated groups due to power relations [11]. Critical ethnographic research as conventional ethnography is ideographic, that is, it describes existing cultures and traditions, not nomothetic that generalize [12]. In the general view of Indonesian society, perpetrators of online prostitution are marginalized [13] and inferior groups [14]. Critical ethnographic methods can reveal the true motives of online prostitution perpetrators with an emancipatory and humanist approach so that comprehensive and fair results can be found. The informants of this study were determined purposively, namely the perpetrators of online prostitution in Indonesia aged 18 to 25 years, who have been perpetrators for at least 2 years. Interviews are conducted online and are directly accompanied by field observations and recorded using a diary. The data obtained were then analyzed and ethnographically written, and the source and data triangulation was carried out to determine the level of validity. In source triangulation, the answers of an informant were compared with the answers of other informants and also people involved in online prostitution, besides that the informant's answers were also compared with the results of field observations and other research results.

# 3 Results and Discussion

Sex workers are often a dynamic topic of debate, both in academic and public settings. Discussions around morality, law, and exploitation often create discursive spaces. In this study, online prostitution perpetrators were divided into 2, namely: student sex workers and non-student sex workers. The two have different characteristics, different motives, and different models of prostitution. There is a similarity in online prostitution, where perpetrators are free to determine what kind of services are provided without having to be victims of human trafficking, although there are also pimps who expand from offline using social media.

Teenage online prostitution practitioners are a very mature age in utilizing social media because they have grown up and lived in it. Prostitution is not only a profitable and free job; However, during a deeper analysis of some other statements, we found that the statements of sex workers are influenced by rationalization. The rationalization gene

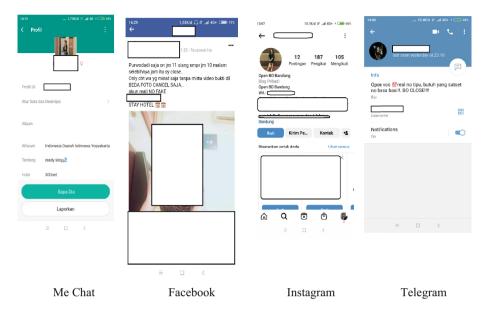


Fig. 1. Some Content of Online Sex Workers on Social Media

is generally one of the most used ego defense mechanisms [15]. In the rationalization of such actions, researchers use the action approach of Alred Schutz.

#### 3.1 "Because of Motive" of Online Prostitution Practitioner

All informants interviewed stated that they were not victims of human trafficking and committed online prostitution with their own knowledge and will. So far, online prostitution leads to women, even though there are also many men involved in this activity. For example, the position of men who are always hidden in online prostitution transactions so that this has caused a lot of criticism from feminists [16]. Even this study has not found the social media accounts of male online sex workers (except transgender). Here is some documentation of online sex worker content on several social media in Indonesia:

Based on Fig. 1, there are similarities in the modus operandi of sex workers in marketing themselves through social media, namely by giving information on their social media accounts that they openly open sexual services. These online prostitution practitioners have different motives and different strategies in their operations. There are two types of online prostitution perpetrators who are encountered, namely with a stealth mode known as "ayam kampus" and a more blatant mode known as BO or online boking. For the ayam kampus mode, the main requirement is usually to have the status of a female student, while BO has the status of a student or female student. This "ayam kampus" mode is known to be more exclusive because of its relatively more expensive rates. For one-time direct sex service, the rate is at least Rp. 5,000,000, with the condition that you must use a safety device or condom, if you don't use a safety device or condom, then the rate can be more expensive depending on the agreement. The only social media used is whatsup and other direct chat social media. The exclusiveness of "ayam kampus" is

indeed maintained because they do not want their identity to be known by anyone except customers and fellow "ayam kampus".

According to Long, in the hierarchy of the sex business, we can call the private sex business an "elite" sex business, compared to the street sex business. The business is gaining demand in mainland Europe and is changing the trend of street sex services, sex in nightclubs, barwives into private sex [15]. Jeal and Salisbury said that private sex workers in medical terms are also less risky than women who work in street sex businesses [17]. However, the reason informants choose private sex services is because they maintain more privacy and higher bargaining power. If they open public services, let alone students or college students, then their identity is easier to know and the rates are cheaper and the demand for sex services varies.

Therefore, the target market and users of this "ayam kampus" service are officials, ranging from University officials to public and government officials, as well as entrepreneurs in the "ayam kampus" operating area. A strong reason for choosing the elite segment is not only because they get paid more, but because customers will maintain privacy with each other regarding their respective images so that all feel safe and comfortable. In general, people cannot tell which are "ayam kampus" and which are not because in their daily activities they are good at role-playing. For example, when they are on campus, they wear closed clothes, wear hijabs, look like their friends generally do. According to Erving Goffman, this is referred to as the "front stage", which shows self-concept, self-appearance, equipment used to express oneself, that is where society judges what is displayed [18]. This "front stage" also applies to content uploaded when offering on social media or in other words, the "front stage" is the ideal play for performers.

Student sex workers of other types are known as "BO" (online boking) because they are active on social media in offering sexual services, both in person services and through chat sex and video call sex. The BO type is the same as online sex workers in general because they also actively offer themselves through social media. Moreover, they sometimes know each other online prostitution perpetrators so they can recommend their friends if they are unable to serve customers as stated in the following statement:

[ada teman yang tahu aku kerja begini mas, kalau sama teman sendiri tidak ada masalah mereka tahu, yang penting keluargaku tidak tahu, kan kita sama-sama BO dan kadang juga rekomendasikan teman ke pelanggan kalau kita pas tidak bisa melayani] (there are friends who know I work like this, if you are with your own friends, there is no problem they know, the important thing is that my family does not know, right we are both BO and sometimes also recommend friends to customers if we can't serve) [19].

Online prostitution practitioners are also not only known to others, but also peers. Even peers who know their friend is a perpetrator of online prostitution also do not try to remind their friend because they feel that they have had sex with their partner and are sympathetic and reluctant to give advice because they think it is a personal matter for fear of offending their friend. This shows that the lifestyle of friendship is also the reason for deviant sex behavior to remain in society. They consider that having sex before marriage is common, including online prostitution.

The self-concept constructed by subjects involved in prostitution is a positive self-concept, but the personal life of both subjects is not strong because even though they know that what they are doing is not in accordance with their conscience, they violate their personal values and choose to stick with their profession as sex workers [20]. Sex workers suffer from psychological problems, such as emotional problems due to lack of social support and negative work motivation; Mental problems arise because there will be a phase where they feel worthless, depressed, stressed, which can lead to suicide [17]. Some of them entered the prostitution environment due to past trauma, such as having sex with their partners several times, but they were let down.

Another psychological factor is the disconnection from family affection. One of the research informants explained that it was not actually an economic motive that was sought because it came from a wealthy family. Informants just want to find an outlet and fun. The informant wanted to make friends who could listen and pay attention, and finally felt comfortable meeting with a group of sex workers. These results have the same results as the results of studies conducted in several countries outside Indonesia that found several reasons for students entering prostitution. Economic factors [21], family factors due to divorced parents, lack of affection from the family, social lifestyle factors [22], traumatized with men, and have had sexual intercourse so as to have an abnormal libido [23], and social behavior disorder [24].

Economic factors became the strongest drive. This factor is divided into two, namely fully fulfilling primary needs, such as Putri and Syafruddin's research in Solok [25] and fulfilling certain lifestyles. Some informants candidly state that online prostitution is not really the top choice. However, because they had to become single parents during the Covid 19 pandemic, the choice became rational. Although the experience is diverse, there are some recurring themes. While there are some exceptions, financial hardship marks a lot of entry into the sex industry: for some, it's related to employment discrimination based on gender presentation or identity; For some others, their financial struggles are linked to difficulties in supporting children as single mothers [26].

Nevertheless, economic factors due to lifestyle influences are also strong among online sex workers. One of the informants in the "ayam kampus" mode stated that he first entered as a sex worker because he was embarrassed by the attributes used during college. She comes from a poor family who wants to follow peer trends and turns out to meet "ayam kampus" practitioners in a rented house. Originally, he wanted to be able to buy good clothes, good mobile phones, good motorcycles, and a lifestyle according to his friends on campus. The pimps in this mode are fellow "ayam kampus" who first became acquainted with the practice of prostitution, or final semester college students. The modus operandi used is like rental; If one cannot, then it is offered to the other. Their network is not only one university, but already to several universities in a region.

Deviant sex behavior does not only occur in metropolitan areas, but has entered areas with a strict religious social coraller system. Researchers from Indonesia point to the fact that even on Islamic campuses, the phenomenon of free sex has become a trend, even data found that 76.3% of students have had premarital sex [5]. This trend is one of the justifications for millennial age online sex practitioners, because online prostitution is considered more profitable than FWB and boyfriend rent, without them realizing it from HIV, AIDS, and other infectious virus.

#### 3.2 "In Order to Motive" of Online Prostitution Practitioners

In order to motive is different from because of motive. In order to motive is future goals or ideals expected from sexs worker in online prostitution are the main focus of research. The rise of online prostitution in the millennial age is dominated by lifestyle goals so that later they can follow the growing popular culture, especially in terms of fashion, namely being able to buy expensive things so that one can say "gaul" or "mbois". Lifestyle became the dominant motive. Millennial age sex practitioners demand themselves to keep up with the latest fashion and entertainment trends. They are stuck with modern social models. Some of them did not experience culture lag and culture shock, but experienced deculturation in various aspects because they became consumptive of foreign cultures. They have lost their identity and cultural identity with their local wisdom values due to the exposure of popular culture through advertisements, movies, songs, and other popular entertainment. They buy a lifestyle, not the necessities of life. Commodities are interpreted as a sign not their usefulness value.

In the process that Karl Marx called "commodity fetishism", the appearance of goods sold in the market actually hides the origin of the creation of the goods that must go through various processes of exploitation at the level of production [27]. This gives rise to hyper reality towards its consumers, who will lose the original reality and be replaced with pseudo-reality or media-formed reality. The findings in this study are the same as some of the findings of other researchers. In addition to meeting economic needs, there are also those who make commercial sex workers a lifestyle [28]. Lifestyle shows how people organize their personal lives, public behavior, and effort to make themselves unique following evolving trends. Lifestyle can also be interpreted as everything that has characteristics, specificities and ordinances in the life of a particular society. David [28] explained lifestyle as patterns of action that distinguish between one person and another, lifestyle is how a person wants to be perceived by others, so lifestyle has a lot to do with how to form an image in the eyes of others, related to the social status he holds. To reflect this image, certain status symbols are needed, which play a very important role in influencing their consumption behavior.

The lifestyle of online sex practitioners leads to hedonism. Nurbaity stated that the cause of the subjects' hedonism (pleasure or enjoyment) behavior was due to the influence of advertisements from various mass media and electronic media, television shows that emphasized hedonism, the influence of group friends, low religious beliefs, and the influence of parenting [28]. There are two lifestyles adapted by online sex workers. First, they are trying to keep up with current trends so they have to meet their costs by opening sexual services. Second, The unhealthy lifestyle practiced by online prostitution practitioners, such as smoking, drinking alcohol, and consuming drugs. Some of them have stopped being online sex workers because they are married and do not want to return to the world of prostitution for fear of being known by their husbands or families. The point is that online sex practitioners feel that the profession being done is not right and are afraid of being known by the family. However, they are not afraid of being known by peers because their friends also do the same.

The strong economic drive of online prostitution practitioners to meet primary needs and lifestyle needs is a major problem. A rehabilitation model has been carried out, namely in one of the largest prostitution in Indonesia, namely Gang Dolly. The empowerment of commercial sex workers ex-Gang Dolly Surabaya still depends on the Mayor's policy, fear is that they will return to being commercial sex workers if they do not already have economic independence [29]. With the fact that economic and lifestyle motives as the goal of online prostitution practitioners, it is clear that economic needs and disconnections of local wisdom values in online prostitution practitioners occur and internalize in self-concept. The disconnection of these values can result from the loss of family affection and a good social environment. A good family is the first place where intensive interpersonal communication occurs and entrusts the formation of values. Intrapersonal communication as an initial level in the communication process shows a strong role in the individual through his subjectivity in shaping and achieving value objectivity [30].

Student sex practitioners are already comfortable in the circle of online prostitution because all already have regular customers so that it becomes an economic source to fulfill their lifestyle. Their customers at least once a month contact them because they feel that they are suitable for the services provided. The sex activities that occur are certainly not based on feelings, and are predicted to become a traumatic burden for women in the future [16]. Nevertheless, practitioners of online prostitution think that it is better than following the FWB and boyfriend rental trends that occur in Indonesia, because it also provides direct sexual services, but does not benefit materially.

# 4 Conclusion

Systemically, the rise of online prostitution among millennials in Indonesia is due to the ease of transacting pornographic content on social media and weak enforcement of electronic transaction laws in Indonesia. The motives of online prostitution practitioners are economic motives, hedonistic lifestyles and peer associations, lack of affection from parents and family, having had sexual relations and then being abandoned by their partners, and experiencing local cultural deculturation due to the exposure of popular culture in new media. Meanwhile, the purpose of online prostitution practitioners is the social-economic motive and meets a certain lifestyle because it follows the growing trend of popular culture in terms of fashion and fun. They are disconnected from local cultural values due to loss of interpersonal communication with the family and a good social environment. There are two models that are online student sex workers, namely with the "ayam kampus" mode and the online booking "BO". The "ayam kampus" mode is a private sex service and BO is a common sex service that includes in-person sex services, sex chats, video sex calls, and sex videos. In general, this research carries methodological implications because various studies that take the theme of online prostitution didn't see perpetrators as victims, so they cannot describe the phenomenon of online prostitution from the perspective of perpetrators and victims at the same time. The limitation of this research is that it did not find online prostitution perpetrators who were victims of human trafficking so that it cannot describe the condition of student sex offenders more fully and could become a further theme for researchers who are concerned with the development of the phenomenon of online prostitution.

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