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“I’m not just made for men”: How Online Sex Workers Manage Misogyny

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Abstract

Online sex work, or erotic labor, refers to sexual services that are provided via the Internet for compensation. Views of sex work range from empowering and agentic for sex workers, rife with violence and victimization. Various frameworks (Jones, 2016 Vance, 1984; Weitzer, 2010) examine the balance between these extremes; but often lacks nuance. I examined female and non-binary online sex workers' experiences with misogyny and how they cope with it. Zoom interviews were conducted with 15 participants ranging from 18 to 33 years old. Using an intersectional feminist lens and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020), two overarching themes were identified: 1) Lemons, which encapsulates two themes representing unpleasant experiences with misogyny and 2) Making Lemonade, which includes two themes representing how online sex workers coped with misogyny, or 'turned lemons into lemonade.' Results suggest that experiences are complex, and I labeled the *dual spectrum dynamic* and *micro/macro dynamic* to capture these nuances. These two frameworks show how empowerment and oppression are operating on individual spectrums simultaneously, as opposed to one trumping the other, and that micro factors such as empowerment, validation, and agency are operating under larger macro systems such as misogyny and/or capitalism.

Keywords: online sex work, female, non-binary, misogyny, coping strategies

“I’m not just made for men”: How online sex workers manage misogyny

Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power.

–Anonymous

Online sex work is not a new phenomenon, though it has recently become a hot topic in mainstream media. Online sex work, or erotic labor, refers to services of a sexual nature that are provided via the Internet for compensation. Through recent news media stories featuring online sex workers, the topic has made its way into mainstream conversations (Bernstein, 2019; Connors, 2021; Jennings, 2021; Marie, 2021; Sauers & Rutherford, 2021; Seligson, 2020; Zen, 2020). The increased relevance of online sex work could be a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which caused millions to look for ways to generate income during quarantine. With online sex work within the social consciousness, there has been a reemergence and transformation of the feminist debate; female empowerment through sexual agency positioned against the viewpoint that the sex work industry serves the patriarchy, is rife with violence, victimization and is rooted in misogyny defined as the dislike, contempt, or ingrained prejudice toward women (The Oxford English Dictionary). Misogyny (specifically for the purpose of this discussion) also includes interactions perpetrated by males towards women that suggest that women have less rights than males or are due less respect and/or outright endanger the woman’s physical and/or mental health.

Though online sex work is entering social consciousness through media exposure, the topic remains underrepresented in scientific research. Most of the research on sex work explores in person, or direct sex work, such as stripping or prostitution. Some of this discourse dissects the dichotomy of empowerment and oppression, while other discourse explores the interplay between the two. There is limited research on how this empowerment/oppression dynamic exists within the online platform, specifically focusing on the effects of misogyny and male

entitlement. The primary aim of this study was to explore female and non-binary online sex workers' experiences with misogyny and how they cope with misogyny through their work. It would be remiss to explore the dynamics of online sex work without also exploring societal attitudes toward female sexuality. It should be noted that due to the history of societal oppression of female sexuality, the scientific literature that exists is limited and women's sexuality is often pathologized. Because online sex work is a burgeoning field, using literature regarding societal attitudes towards female sexuality provides a foundation for understanding how these attitudes translate into perceptions and experiences of people involved in sexual commerce.

Different Avenues of Online Sex Work

Over time, the expansion of the internet made its mark on sex work, leading to various avenues for sexual commerce (Jones, 2020b). Not only has the internet become a way to advertise in-person sex work, it has also become the primary tool for platforms such as camming sites, and subscription-based sites, like OnlyFans (Jones, 2015a; Jones, 2015b; Jones, 2016; Nayer, 2016; Recio, 2021). Camming websites are interactive websites where creators can perform various erotic services, ranging from conversations to strip teases. These websites originate in a public chat room-style platform where clients can interact with live models. Clients can pay for memberships to request private shows or more intimate services (Jones, 2015a). Jones (2015a, 2015b, 2016) has conducted extensive research on adult camming, which she describes as a legalized alternative to traditional and criminalized sex work. More recently on the scene, subscription-based sites like OnlyFans have emerged as a popular platform. OnlyFans, specifically, is a site where individuals can create content, such as pictures or videos, which can be viewed by consumers who subscribe to their page for a monthly membership fee. Content creators utilize various social media platforms to navigate the online realm, to promote their

content, as well as network with other sex workers. Understanding how to navigate the online platforms is one of many job skills sex workers need to be successful in an industry rife with stigma.

Women's Sexuality in Patriarchal System

Since this study explores how female and non-binary online sex workers experience and cope with misogyny in their work, it is helpful to understand how female sexuality is perceived within a patriarchal society. Jones (2019) notes that sexuality is socially constructed. She highlights the influence that scientific research has on this construction, thus on the societal perceptions of female sexuality. Simply put, scientific research sets the foundation for our knowledge and lays the groundwork for how people think about, feel about, and express sexuality.

There are numerous markings of androcentrism that place men at the center of societal norms and ideologies, and throughout history that viewpoint has resulted in the oppression of women's sexuality, presenting the female perspective as an afterthought, or perhaps a response to the conditions of being male. One example can be seen in Sigmund Freud's phallogocentric ideologies, that gender differences are rooted in sexual anatomy and that from birth, females have innate feelings of inferiority and "penis envy" (Lips, 2017). Consider also, that female gonads were referred to as female testicles until the 17th century, when they were finally renamed ovaries (de Beauvoir et al. 2015). In more recent history, the misnomer of the vagina accentuates society's lack of attention to and knowledge of women's bodies. Most commonly, the female genitalia are referred to as the vagina, which is the inner, muscular canal that connects to the uterus, consequently the part that brings males most pleasure. Using this term essentially ignores the existence of the vulva, the external organs of the female genitalia where most women receive

pleasure (Pearson, 2015). None of these examples alone stand as sufficient evidence of the ways in which sexism leads to the oppression of female sexuality. As we connect the dots, however, it becomes clear that the male perspective has been the yardstick in measuring scientific study of the human experience including sexuality.

Women's Sexuality in Research

Whether it be the study of psychological development, or the biological study of sexual differentiation, much of the representation of women's sexuality in scientific research remains pathologized. Jones (2019) provides empirical evidence of the hegemonic portrayal of sexuality in scientific research, highlighting how pleasure is missing, there is a focus on heteronormativity, and there is a lack of an intersectional lens. Additionally, scientific literature directs more attention toward men's sexual pleasure than women's, while women's sexuality is medicalized and associated with pain and anxiety. The scant research there is on the vagina, for example, tends to portray it negatively, as a passive receptacle, sexually inadequate, disgusting, vulnerable, and abused (Braun & Wilkinson, 2003).

In addition to medicalization and pathology, societal policing influences perception of the female body and sexuality. It has become women's responsibility to manage their virtue through their bodies, especially by closely guarding their sexuality. While becoming their own sexual gatekeepers, women often face conflicting societal messages. Women are 'damned if they do, damned if they don't,' judged harshly for not being sexually appealing, but equally so for being too sexy. Women must make the decision to either refrain from tempting men and/or surrender to men, whose sexual urges are deemed innate and uncontrollable (Vance, 1984). Vance (1984) explores the vital questions about the nature of women's sexuality, questioning whether it is

innate, or merely in response to men's sexual dominance. These questions are the essence of societal pressures reverberated in many women's minds. Vance (1984) asked,

If sexual desire is coded as male, women begin to wonder if they are really ever sexual. Do we distrust our passion, thinking it perhaps not our own, but the construction of patriarchal culture? Can women be sexual actors? Can we act on our own behalf? Or are we purely victims, whose efforts must be directed at resisting male depredations in a patriarchal culture? (p. 7)

Navigating a patriarchal system becomes even more problematic for women who exude sexuality, and they must reckon with fierce societal judgment. Online sex workers must contend with this judgement; thus, their experiences provide an opportunity for researchers to gain a better understanding of how conflicting societal messages and pervasive patriarchy and misogyny influence their experiences.

Is Online Sex Work Empowering, Oppressive, or Both?

Acknowledging the negative influences of ingrained misogyny does not imply that women's sexual experiences are formed only within those parameters. Existing literature explores empowerment and oppression related to female sexuality, and this elicits contrasting viewpoints among feminist conversations. Research on these dynamics reveal multiple models (Jones, 2016; Vance, 1984; Weitzer, 2010) illustrating the delicate balance between positive and negative aspects including, but not limited to, experiences with sex work.

One theory, the *polymorphous paradigm*, posited by Weitzer (2010), scrutinizes these contrasting viewpoints. He explains first the *empowerment paradigm*, which says that sex work requires agency and can be validating and empowering. Using this model, sex work is seen as

any other form of work, as an “economic transaction” (Weitzer, 2010, p. 6). In direct contrast is the *oppression paradigm*, which says that any form of sex work, whether prostitution, erotic webcamming, stripping or telephone sex, is innately exploitative. Those who view sex work using this lens claim there is too much risk for violence against women, drug addiction, and sex trafficking; the only solution to combat these issues would be to eliminate the entire industry. By positing the *polymorphous paradigm*, Weitzer (2010) captures the existence of both, describing the balance between negative and positive factors of sex work, such as occupational arrangements, power relations, and work experiences of sex workers. In this model, experiences with exploitation, choice, victimization, and agency are all described as factors, like variables, which are experienced in relation to many other circumstances.

Jones (2016) expands on Weitzer’s (2010) *polymorphous paradigm*, adapting it to online sex work. She suggests that online sex workers benefit from increased feelings of safety due to the physical barriers of operating via the Internet. The absence of physical risk tips the scales in favor of increasing the ability for sex workers to experience pleasure. If, then, sex workers are experiencing more pleasure, they are able to offer embodied authenticity to clients which, in turn, increases the sex worker’s income (Jones, 2015a; Jones, 2016).

Another model that explores this division is the pleasure and danger framework. Vance (1984) posited that women’s sexual experiences vary by person and by time, that pleasure and danger happen simultaneously and must be kept in balance. She describes different perspectives of women’s sexuality; pleasurable experiences such as exploration of the body, curiosity, intimacy, sensuality, adventure, excitement, and human connection. In contrast, she reveals dangers that sex workers must contend with such as violence, brutality, coercion, rape, and exploitation (Vance, 1984).

These models consider sex work as inherently a fragile balance between two extremes; the level of sexual liberation or empowerment depends on the level of danger or exploitation. Feminist scholars have often chosen one side of this debate or the other. Vance (1984) suggests it is crucial not to abandon these contrasting ideals, but instead to delve into understanding female sexuality, especially sexual autonomy. Understanding online sex workers' experiences with misogyny offers insight into how they experience and construct their sexuality, thus how they cope with the misogyny that they encounter along the way.

Online Harassment

Online sex workers must contend with misogyny in different forms and intensity, and while there may be less concern for physical risk, online harassment can be extremely problematic. Many online sex workers must contend with capping, in which clients will record content without permission from the creator, reposting or selling it on other sites (Jones, 2016). Some describe this as part of the job, while some describe it as free advertisement. Others are fearful that their stolen content could be used to expose their identity, break their anonymity, or that someone could be profiting from it (Jones, 2016). In addition to capping, online sex workers must be diligent in protecting themselves from doxing, in which their identifiable information such as names or addresses can be obtained by hackers or clients. In this case, online sex workers can easily be subjected to stalking or threats of physical violence (Jones, 2019).

Harassment over the internet is not always an intentional violation. In a societal context, there is evidence that men often misinterpret women's intentions, which increases the chances for harassment and boundary violations (Wegner & Abbey, 2016). Waling and Pym (2017) explain that such behaviors from men are off-putting or disappointing but are considered normative for heterosexual males. Harassment may also emerge from intentional or malicious

roots. Even from behind a screen, men attempt to assert their dominance, highlighting their privilege and entitlement. While there is some research on specific violations such as capping and doxing, there is a gap in research as to how confrontations with misogynistic behaviors translate for online sex workers, and how that influences their experiences and perceptions of their sexuality. From this arises the question of how concepts such as consent, boundaries, male entitlement, and gendered differences intersect in the experiences of female and non-binary individuals who are engaging in sexual commerce.

The Present Study

This study examined how online sex workers experience and cope with misogyny and how misogyny influences their experiences of agency and/or pleasure while providing sexual content. Previous literature has revealed the inaccurate and antiquated portrayal of female sexuality in scientific research and how heteronormativity and misogyny perpetuate the oppression of female sexuality. This study aimed for gaining a better understanding of the individual experiences of female and non-binary online sex workers and how they operate in a patriarchal system, to contribute to the literature on online sex work and sexual agency in relation to misogyny.

Method

Reflexivity

The data analysis of this qualitative study is influenced by my positionality as a 34-year-old, low income, able-bodied, cis-gender, heterosexual, White female. I view positionality in qualitative research not as limit or bias, but as a lens. As a cisgender woman who has experienced various forms of sexual harassment and abuse from men throughout my life, my

desire to recognize and illuminate abuse and misogyny influenced the development of my research questions as well as my analysis. My perspectives based on life experiences influences my curiosity about the juxtaposition between empowerment and misogyny. Though my perspective is that of a White woman, race is especially salient for me, as a mother of bi-racial children. My socioeconomic status, living below the poverty level, influences my perspective as to how capitalist systems affect individuals' experiences and decisions. Inequalities surrounding gender, race, and class, are of specific concern in my personal life, and that translates into the areas of passion and interest in my work; therefore, I strive to illuminate these specific inequalities through my research.

It is important to acknowledge and interpret the language I use throughout this paper. First, regarding the consumers of content— participants used the terms 'fans', 'clients' or 'subscribers'. 'Subscribers' was often used by OnlyFans content creators. I used 'client' or 'consumer' interchangeably; I used 'subscriber' for subscription-based relationship consumers. Also, I acknowledge that misogyny can be exhibited by a person of any gender, overt or covert. Based on responses from participants, all the experiences with misogyny were perpetrated by cis-hetero males, thus in my analysis, I will be referring to encounters with misogyny as encounters with male clients.

Second, throughout the analysis, I speak of misogyny and the impacts of female sexuality as an overarching societal problem. For those who identified as non-binary or genderfluid, when it was appropriate or salient, I included if and/or how their gender identities were influenced by misogyny as well.

Participants

This qualitative study explored the experiences of fifteen participants who were recruited for virtual interviews via Zoom. We used the snowball sampling technique through initial personal contacts and social media advertisements. Research members shared an infographic on their personal social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram), which stated the inclusion criteria and asked for voluntary participation. Inclusion criteria for the study were that participants were 18 and older, identified as female and/or non-binary, and engaged in online sex work. All participants were asked to refer others who are interested, by giving potential participants contact information for the research team member.

The present study focused on data collected from bisexual, pansexual, and straight cisgendered women and non-binary participants ($N = 15$; 11 cisgendered women, 4 non-binary; 7 bi-identified, 4-pan-identified, 2 pan/bi identified, 2 straight but questioning). The participants were on average 24 years ($SD = 3.4$; range 18-33). Participants' self-identified gender was 11 female and 4 non-binary—all were designated female at birth. The participants' race/ethnicity was reported as 67% White ($n = 10$), 13% as Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 2$), 13% mixed race ($n = 2$), and 7% Asian ($n = 1$). Education level was reported as 40% some college ($n = 6$), 40% held college degrees ($n = 6$), 13% in college ($n = 2$), and 7% high school level education ($n = 1$). Socioeconomic status was self-reported as 72% working class ($n = 11$) while 27% identified as middle class ($n = 4$). Participants all reported living in the United States but were from various U.S locations (6 from Massachusetts, 1 from each of the following states: Texas, North Carolina, New Jersey, Colorado, Washington, Arizona, California, Florida, and Nevada.) All fifteen participants had some experience with OnlyFans or another subscription-based platform, either currently or in the past. Other types of online sex work consisted of 20% Seeking Arrangements (now known as Seeking.com) ($n = 3$), 13% stripping ($n = 2$), 33% camming ($n = 5$), 7% erotic

modeling (n = 1), 7% phone sex operator (n = 1), and 7% Pornhub (n = 1). Participants were assigned pseudonyms after the interview, using various gemstones, such as Amethyst and Opal, to protect their confidentiality.

Procedure

Participants who showed interest in the study during recruitment provided their email address and they were assigned a participant number to ensure confidentiality. Participants were sent an email with the consent form, a description of the study, and a list of available times to meet for an interview; a Zoom link once there was an agreed upon time. To prepare for the interviews, Zoom settings were adjusted by the interviewers to enable audio recording and audio transcript generation only. This ensured the audio recording and transcript of the interviews could be saved onto a BSU protected cloud account. With these settings, no video was recorded, whether or not camera status was on or off during the recording of the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were given the option to choose the camera status for themselves and the interviewer. Upon verbal consent, interviewers obtained payment preference and information for participants' \$25.00 compensation. Payment options consisted of Venmo, PayPal, Apple Cash, and personal check. All payment information was given directly to the mentor through email for payment within 48 hours.

The interviewer began with an icebreaker question, followed by ten demographics questions aimed at understanding the experiences of female and non-binary online sex workers, their motivations for engaging in online sex work, and possible benefits and tolls of their work (For the list of interview questions, see Appendix A). Interviews lasted between 1-2 hours. While

we initially did not intend on collecting life history narratives, it became common that participants shared substantial details from their lives.

During the debrief at the end of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, they were reminded of the purpose of the study, and they were asked to refer potential participants if possible. Upon completion of the interview, participants received an email that consisted of contact information for the interviewer, the mentors of the research group, and the Bridgewater State University Institutional Review Board. This email also included relevant resources that may be helpful or enjoyable for participants who engage in online sex work (See Appendix B for a list of these resources). Audio files and transcripts were saved to a protected cloud account.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) and was comprised of three overall steps: transcribing, coding, and theme development. Transcribing required listening to the audio recording and following along with the Zoom generated transcripts to ensure they were verbatim.

Coding data was a multi-step process of individual open coding, then group coding through building group consensus. During this process, the group developed a codebook that contained code titles and definitions. An example of a code is Validation, defined as “Passages in which participants express receiving compliments, praise, or positive feedback from clients or other sex workers as a benefit to online sex work.” The codebook also included examples and/or anti-examples of these codes (using passages from participants) to support how these codes are or are not applied. The codebook originally consisted of 49 codes and was revised to 44 codes.

After applying finalized codes to all 15 interviews, passages were coded for topics related to misogyny and emotional labor (such as Control/Autonomy, Empowerment, Disregard for Boundaries) and were collated into a document in preparation for theme development.

The goal of the theme development stage was to ensure that the themes were distinctive enough to highlight nuances within the data, but also broad enough to include commonalities. Due to this complexity, I chose to use a thematic map to aid in visualizing the similarities and differences and how these themes were related in the overall study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As part of this process, two overarching themes, Experiences with Misogyny and Coping with Misogyny, which were later renamed as **Lemons** and **Making Lemonade** (respectively), were established to structure the analysis of the study. **Lemons** encapsulates two themes, *Disregard for Boundaries, and Safety Concerns*. **Trauma** is a subtheme of *Safety Concerns*. The second overarching theme, **Making Lemonade**, includes *Agency* and *Community and Personal Connection*. **Agency amid Racial Fetishization** is a subtheme of *Agency*. (See Figure 1 for Thematic Map).

Results

Several themes were revealed in which each participant had at least one experience with misogyny, though most described multiple encounters. Notably, these encounters range significantly in type and intensity. Additionally, each participant shared various ways in which they coped with or managed misogyny in the online sex work realm. By using Weitzer's (2010) polymorphous paradigm as a lens for interpreting the results, I use two overarching themes to structure the analysis in a meaningful way. The first overarching theme, titled **Lemons** encapsulates two themes that best represent the unpleasant experiences with misogyny described by participants: *Disregard for Boundaries, and Safety Concerns* with **Trauma** as a subtheme

because it was a specific, yet common aspect of *Safety Concerns*. The second overarching theme, **Making Lemonade**, includes the ways that online sex workers coped with misogyny, or ‘turned lemons into lemonade’ described by the themes, *Agency* and *Community and Personal Connection*. There is also a subtheme of *Agency* titled **Agency Amid Racial Fetishization**, which highlights specific nuances of agency depending racial identity.

Notably, emotional labor (managing participants’ own emotions, as well as managing emotions of clients) and intersectionality (consideration of various social categories such race, gender, class, etc. and their influence on experiences) are woven throughout the analysis. Emotional labor and intersectionality influenced both how participants experienced misogyny as well as how they developed their coping strategies.

Lemons

This overarching theme organizes the wide range of unpleasant experiences with misogyny that were described, and how these experiences manifest in online sex work. Some participants described these encounters as a nuisance, an inevitable aspect of living in a patriarchal system, or just part of the job. Other participants described more insidious or threatening encounters with misogyny, from verbal abuse to physical abuse, and even sexual assault.

Disregard for Boundaries

Most participants had their personal or professional boundaries pushed or ignored by clients. Disregard for Boundaries is a theme which many participants revealed male entitlement in the following forms: male clients felt they did not have to pay for content, they asked for a deal on services, demanded services, stole content (and in some cases profited from it), binged

content without subscribing, expected and/or demanded responses, and/or expected authenticity and exclusivity. Jade, a 26-year-old White female, illustrated how common it was for male subscribers to shift their tone and attitude toward her when they felt ignored.

It can be draining to read messages over and over again, that are like... 'hey, baby,' like, 'blah, blah, blah,' they start off really positive. And then they're like, 'fine, you whore,' like when they don't reply. For me, that happens every single day.

Jade went on to explain that she had posted her boundaries clearly on her profile for all to see — she only responds to direct messages on her OnlyFans page, not her Twitter page. When these potential clients disregard her boundary by send messages her to Twitter anyways, she does not respond. When potential clients feel ignored, they retaliate with abusive language and disrespect. She went on to express, “just the realization that... men in particular are... very abusive and can be very demeaning.” This further illustrates how common these responses are, and Jade emphasizes how they are usually perpetrated by men.

Many times participants described boundary violations as ‘just part of the job,’ therefore online sex workers commonly expressed the necessity for maneuvering these encounters. In revealing the learning curve that comes with navigating misogyny, participants often discussed being ‘scammed’ as one example of how their boundaries were violated. Amethyst, a 24-year-old White female, provided a prime example of male entitlement to online sex workers’ content.

Um and then there's like a whole like lieu of people who love to scam... If there is a chargeback it comes directly out of your bank account... So I was negative \$300 in my bank account, because this person decided to like scam me and take all this money back, which sucks.

Similar to this example, many participants described an air of entitlement in male clients' unwillingness to compensate participants for their content. Participants' responses to this boundary violation were often feelings that their work was undervalued, and that people, male clients especially, did not appreciate the amount of time and effort that goes into creating content. Participants who talked about being scammed, spoke as if they were not surprised, instead disappointed and/or irritated. Scamming came in many forms, but participants usually said they were not compensated properly for their work or were tricked into providing content before payment, so they did not get paid for their content.

Participants gave other examples of boundary violations such as being pushed, badgered, or pressured to adjust or expand their boundaries. There was a slight range of responses to this kind of pressure from male clients, some found it empowering to assert their boundaries, however, some participants described feelings of discomfort as they tried to resist certain advances. Garnet, a 23-year-old White female, described feeling dehumanized when she was consistently pressured to perform outside of her boundaries.

Like I've spoken to so many, like, photographers and like, told them my boundaries like... 'I'm only comfortable with doing this like I'm not like super comfortable with that,' and they just don't listen... they don't really care, or like, see you as a person who, like, actually thinks or feels certain things...

This also illustrated that misogyny was not just from clients, but it can occur from those within the sex work industry. Garnet provided insight into the how persistent pushing of her boundaries by others had an influence on her future decisions and required a lot of emotional labor. First, she had become less willing to work with new people, and said, "I mean by nature there's just a lot of creepy people in the industry and things like that, so you really have to be

careful” Secondly, the effort by others to break down her boundaries became something that, “after doing it for a couple of years I’ve just kind of gotten to the point where I’m just like, tired of dealing with it”. Garnet’s conversation about her boundary violations gave a complex look into the multifaceted nature of the theme overall themes of *Disregard for Boundaries*. She showed the taxing effects and emotional labor that is required to maintain boundaries, as she described she grew ‘tired of dealing with it for years.’ She also illuminated the fact that misogyny is something that is assumed and accepted as ‘the nature’ of her work. This spoke, again, to the learning curve, that female and non-binary sex workers must be prepared to establish and defend their boundaries. Garnet highlights existing misogynistic parameters that are in place in patriarchal societies. Women often are responsible for managing inappropriate or predatory behaviors of men, and it was no different in experiences of online sex workers. Garnet was confronted with a choice; to limit who she works with, thus limiting her earning potential, or expend vast amounts of emotional labor in managing pressures to work outside of her comfort zone. Participants often found themselves reckoning with choices like this, where misogyny and capitalism collide. Most participants clearly had common reflections about their boundary violations, however, experiences with boundary violations varied in types and intensity.

Safety Concerns

As participants expressed a range of verbal abuse, dehumanization, and boundary violations, they consequently expressed concerns for their emotional and physical safety. Emotional safety was often connected to participants’ feelings about boundary violations as they reflected on their emotional responses to these violations; however, emotional safety concerns explore overall feelings of psychological safety and emotional well-being. Though previous

research suggests online sex work as providing a safe physical barrier, some of our participants still referred to concerns for physical safety, like threats of violence, doxing, and stalking.

Concerns for emotional safety were prevalent in participants' accounts of their interactions with clients. Peridot, a 27-year-old White female, explained her own concerns for emotional safety after a client refused to compensate her for her time, a boundary violation rooted in male entitlement.

I gave a bunch of my time away for free, you know, I shared myself with him for free, uh, you know, I just feel a little violated... Um, that is probably the worst experience that I've had, and it wasn't even really that bad.

Peridot highlighted that she 'gave her time away for free' suggesting feelings of vulnerability from 'sharing herself'. Giving her time away felt harmful beyond the monetary loss of compensation. For Peridot, concerns for emotional safety were expressed through feelings of being duped or taken advantage of, which can have a negative impact on sex worker's emotion and/or psychological well-being— this influences participants' willingness to trust themselves and others. We can also see emotional labor at work as she gauged the amount of vulnerability and unpleasant emotions that she was willing to yield. She concluded her thought by invalidating her own experiences with boundary violations when she said, "Um, that is probably the worst experience that I've had, and it wasn't even really that bad." Invalidating negative experiences and/or trauma was a common form of emotional labor among participants. Often discussions around safety concerns were instantly reframed as: 'but it's not so bad' or 'it could have been worse'. This invalidation is evidence that the online sex workers must manage their emotions to face some encounters of misogyny.

Physical safety was still a concern for participants, despite the physical barrier. At the time of the interview, Turquoise, an 18-year-old gender fluid individual of mixed race, was building strategies and networking to reach their long-term goal of expanding into mainstream porn. Turquoise described the harsh reality of navigating the online industry as a non-binary person ‘with a female body’.

I don't know if I want to use my actual name. Um, I don't know if that really puts me in a lot of danger or anything. Um, I've definitely had people threaten to find me and have sex with me before because of the job that I have....

Turquoise’s decision on how to create a marketable persona relied heavily on their concerns for physical safety. In this example, Turquoise explained the process that goes into choosing a name, which was meant to ensure anonymity and would assist in protecting their physical safety. Not only did Turquoise allude to their concerns for the dangers of migrating from online sex work to mainstream porn, but they also described the impending threat that all online sex workers face of being doxed.

Quartz, a 24- year-old White female, also referred to both the importance of anonymity and fears of being doxed when she described the looming concerns for physical safety.

Um, I also have to consider safety a lot, because sometimes guys are like trying to turn your relationship into something more like a sugar Daddy relationship type thing or like you know something like that, and a lot of times they will like really pester you for your location and stuff like that, or like your real name.

Quartz uniquely expressed the dynamic and laborious task of protecting anonymity, while still allowing for enough authenticity to keep her client interested. Participants often talked of the

intimate connections with their clients in a positive light, and this excerpt from Quartz is a reminder that intimacy can be seen as a double-edged sword. While intimate connections can be lucrative, it can also produce conditions where online sex workers must be wary of being doxed or stalked. This is another example of how emotional labor is used to evaluate various experiences with misogyny.

Some participants reflected on their experiences of being doxed, in which their identifiable information such as names or addresses can be obtained by hackers or clients (Jones, 2019). In some instances, their encounters revealed overlapping concerns for their physical and emotional safety, as well as consequences of such severe disregard for boundaries. Crystal, a 21-year-old White female, described the taxing experienced of being doxed, in which she had to cancel all her accounts and her physical safety was threatened to the extent that she had to file a police report.

Um, so, after I got doxed, it was kind of like, I didn't feel comfortable going back to it 'cause I was, you know, afraid I felt really, like violated, I didn't really- I didn't know if it was something I'd like ever come back to... And then I just came back to it, because, you know, I remembered how much fun I had doing it.

After being doxed, Crystal described her concerns for emotional and physical safety as she worried about being doxed again. She explained how being doxed obstructed her openness and confidence in the online realm, and her fears had become a barrier to engaging with the online sex work community. Many participants referred to the support they received from the online community, but because of this threat to her safety, Crystal's potential for benefiting from this support was significantly decreased. Being doxed and feeling violated also robbed her of the

original enjoyment and financial independence she felt, which threatened her feelings of empowerment and autonomy.

Trauma. Sexual assault or trauma was commonly mentioned among participants in the individual interviews, and this had a strong relation to their concerns for safety. In some cases, participants spoke of their own experiences, while multiple participants described the commonality of sexual assault and/or trauma among online sex workers within the community. Additionally, there were two common ways that trauma was framed. Some participants referred to past trauma that occurred before engaging in online sex work. In these instances, various aspects of online sex work helped them to overcome trauma; that is, online sex work was a healing tool. Some participants described sexual assault or trauma as something that they anticipated or expected within the sex work industry, thus participants were either wary of it, or seemingly prepared to encounter it. Turquoise illustrated the feelings of inevitable assault, violation, and potential abuse that female and non-binary sex workers face, whether in-person or online.

Yeah, it just like, kinda sucks like, 'cause like honestly, like, most of the time I feel like I can't trust any dude in porn but like, I'm just going to anyway, like...I know that they've probably done something terrible. But like, I feel like that's ...the nature of like, being in porn with a female body- it's just fuckin'... getting fucked over all the time, you know?

This passage also strongly supports common sentiments among participants that sexual trauma is a part of the female experience. Most participants spoke as if sexual assault or harassment was something they will work around, whether engaged in online sex work or not. This attitude, again, speaks to the desensitization of sexual trauma for women and non-binary participants, and also the ways that women have taken responsibility to be preventative.

Some participants used the online platform to network for in-person jobs and collaboration is a large part of their job description. Garnet revealed that collaborators were not exempt from being a threat to physical safety. In addition to using the online platform as a means of selling content, Garnet also used it to market her erotic modeling and meet potential photographers. She illustrated misogyny and abuse that many online sex workers endure as she disclosed her experiences with sexual assault.

I was sexually assaulted over the summer at a shoot... like obviously there's like creeps and stuff but like I've never had anybody like physically, like, assault me like that, um, so that was definitely like a big thing for me.

After expressing the deep emotional impact of being sexually assaulted, Garnet illustrated the normalization of misogyny that exists in online sex work. She described 'creeps' as being somewhat tolerable, more like nuisances than threats. This comparison illustrated the range in intensity of the misogynistic encounters within this study, from tolerable nuisances to physical sexual assault. She continued to invalidate the traumatic nature of her own experience of sexual assault, which was a common strategy among participants when dealing with misogyny. As we saw with Peridot, who minimized her feelings of being violated, Garnet expressed feelings of luck for her assault only happening once, and for happening after so long after being in the industry.

I mean it was... I'm lucky that it only happened once and that it took, like, years for it to happen, like, I know that it's unfortunately so prevalent, um, so, I'm not lucky that it happened to me, but I'm lucky that it, like, only happened once and after so long.

This invalidation reveals the desensitization, normalization and alarming prevalence of sexual assault that women encounter. Additionally, this example by Garnet echoed that experiences with misogyny were more common than not, before and during engagement in online sex work. Garnet, Peridot and Turquoise gave three vivid examples that represented how many participants endured trauma yet reflected on the experiences as if they were not very serious, they were expected, or that they should have known enough to prevent it. There can be serious implications for emotional and physical safety for online sex workers who are desensitized to violence and abuse in their work.

Making Lemonade

Making Lemonade outlines the various ways that female and non-binary online sex workers cope with misogyny and manage to flourish within these oppressive parameters. Managing misogyny looked slightly different for each participant depending on their positionality and experiences, though most participants' attitudes, and strategies were related to control and reclamation, independence, and autonomy, as well as building community and social connections. Most participants took pride in describing their skills used to navigate within the inevitable barriers of misogyny, in simpler terms, they told us how they 'deal with it'.

Agency

Agency was commonly discussed as feelings of control; participants felt control over deciding what type of content they wanted to produce as well as who they shared their content with. Additionally, many participants discussed feelings of financial autonomy in their ability to make money on their own terms. For some, there were clear and unwavering boundaries, for others, online sex work offered a safe space to expand and experiment with boundaries. The

online realm provided a safe place to experiment with control and agency, where many participants described self-discovery and self-sufficiency. Opal, a 24-year-old Brazilian female, revealed her experience with sexual assault before engaging in online sex work, and the detriment it did to her feelings of control. She shared how online sex work was a space for self-discovery.

I'm a victim of sexual assault and that makes you feel like you have no control over your body. Like, zero control. And it's something that I've always struggled with throughout my life... Um, and this brought a lot of it back to me... it teaches you so much about yourself, that it almost like, brings you back to yourself, and who you are.

Opal revealed sexual agency as feelings of coming back to herself, as if sexual assault had separated her 'being' from her body. By experimenting with online sex work and developing her strategies to navigate the online realm, Opal was able to learn about herself, allowing her to regain feelings of control over her body. She essentially was 'flipping the script', transforming her feelings of victimization into feelings of empowerment. She also revealed a common notion that was true for many participants. Sex work was commonly described as a healing tool from past sexual trauma, or in some cases, simply the conditions of being as women in a patriarchal society rife with misogyny. Amethyst gave a quintessential example of how gaining control and agency through sex work had helped her gain feelings of control after being objectified throughout her life.

I've been cat called every day that I've been alive, since I was 11 years old. Um that takes like a big emotional toll on people. ...Um so, like I've dealt with like lots of sexual assault in my life and like things like that, and like for a very, very long time, like, it was just like my body is not my own like I exist for other people.

She reinforced this experience of separation between body and 'being' as she said her body felt like it was not her own. In being objectified by others, Amethyst felt a lack of control and disconnected from her sense of agency. She went on to explain that she did not have control over the "ogling" or sexual harassment throughout her life, but that monetizing the inevitable experience gave her a sense of control and agency.

I can't stop people from looking at me or making those comments or thinking about me in nefarious ways, like, I have no control over that. But, I do have control over this person who is like, "oh hey let me see your tits" block, nope, only if you pay, you can see them if you pay for them. Um, really helped my self-esteem...I know that I have like value and like monetizing on it is just like a physical representation of... my own like physical value to myself.

Amethyst illustrated the idea that she can control the sexual script. She reframed the negative experience of being ogled (Lemons) and decided how, when, and for how much, she would allow it to take place (Making Lemonade). Amethyst showed the common occurrence in which participants simply made the best of a bad situation; however, I must caution this viewpoint could invalidate their feelings of agency, which can only be determined by the participants themselves. Amethyst was careful to make the distinction between putting a value on her body and having value for herself; she described her online sex work as a "physical representation of [her] self-value". The empowerment and self-esteem that she felt through this process was not about the money, or male sexual gratification, but about believing that she was worthy of boundaries and worthy of creating a condition that was safe and comfortable for her body and her emotional well-being. The feeling of control was commonly derived from introspection and self-realization. As we saw with many participants, power and control were not

always derived from the tangible strategies of managing misogyny, but instead through the meaning, significance, or representation of those strategies.

Agency amid Racial Fetishization. Positionality influenced participants' feelings of agency. Participants of color, specifically, had unique considerations when discussing their feelings of agency and emotional labor. Racial fetishization, or sexualizing a person's race, was a salient aspect of participants of color, which was not a consideration for White participants. The ways that fetishization occurred in their experiences differed, as did their feelings about it and strategies to manage it. For some, racial fetishization created a pressure to market themselves, or create a persona around how others saw them. Malachite, a 25-year-old, non-binary Asian participant, described how racial fetishization was not something that they had control over in regular society, and how that seemingly transferred to their online sex work.

Like as an Asian person I'm always going to like tag myself as Asian, like all the subreddits I post are for Asian people and, like, that can be um, degrading in itself because, especially if you've been fetishized your whole life it's like, 'okay now I'm like putting myself in this space where there's definitely people that are fetishizing me,' but I want their money.

Malachite illustrated the emotional labor that is involved in the decision between fetishization and compensation. They knew that intentionally allowing themselves to be fetishized could lead to feeling degraded, but the amount of money that they could make, or needed, was more heavily weighted. This shows how Malachite still had agency, but they had different factors to consider than participants who were not faced with fetishization. Participants of color often exercised control through weighing the benefits and disadvantages between fetishization and financial compensation.

While there was a level of exploitation in racial fetishization, there were also instances in which participants felt agency and empowerment through how they managed it. Amber, 20-year-old, non-binary Mexican participant illustrated different ways of coping with fetishization.

There's so many different ways to look at it. And one way, in some ways, it's empowering...like being like a fat brown woman... And I've never fully been comfortable with being fat. And it wasn't until I've gotten older and kind of like, until I started doing like sex work that I really started to, like, just get more comfortable with myself and in my body...it's definitely helped me look at myself in a different light, not only in just like... sell myself like as a product, but also as just looking at myself like...I have... a body that's like trying to take care of me at all times.

Amber spoke about how their race, weight and gender had always been a part of their identity that caused discomfort and displeasure. They transformed fetishization into a feeling of pride, viewing their body as caring for them through online sex work. Like Opal was able to 'flip the script', so were participants of color, who transformed possible feelings of victimization to feelings of empowerment.

Citrine, a 26-year-old, genderfluid bi-racial participant, reframed racial fetishization into a positive opportunity for building clientele.

No, I think that if anything, because people can't place me as mono-racial most of the time, or if they think I'm mono-racial, they can't really figure out what that is, it's-it's more of an advantage, although it's fetishizing as hell, but it ultimately ends up being an advantage because I'm intriguing to people, uh, in that way.

Citrine explained that while racial fetishization was a large factor in her experience, it was employed as an advantage in drawing in customers, whom she later identified as "by in-

large, are in their mid-forties or older and mostly all white...” Emotional labor, in Citrine’s case, was expended less in feeling fetishized, but more so in providing content for clients that were outside her typical ‘taste’. That is to say, providing content for clients that she would not normally date or be sexually attracted to, required Citrine to expend emotional labor.

Community and Personal Connection

Pleasure and enjoyment in online sex work was commonly derived from emotional and social connections. Participants described the connections they made with clients and other sex workers, and many participants described a sense of community. The connections to other sex workers with shared experiences was often an empowering and unifying experience that was a tool for coping with exploitation and negative encounters. Additionally, positive encounters with clients were highly valued by participants and were commonly described as a benefit of online sex work.

Crystal expressed the positive influence that the sex work community had on her social life, and the opportunity for expanding her social circle through the online realm. She said, “it’s just like, really nice and supportive community. And just like a way to connect with people that you might not have connected with before, um, in just like a really new way. “Though her experience with being doxed caused her to shy away from engaging with the community as much as some other participants, Crystal revealed the community was a reminder of the like-mindedness and acceptance among other sex workers. She described feelings of reassurance and comfort in knowing that there are people who will not judge her, “and [tell] you what you’re doing is wrong.”

Others found that the sex work community offered a sense of comradery, where online sex workers could talk about their experiences with someone who understands. Emerald, a 33-year-old White woman, described the common experiences felt throughout the community, and the way that reclamation of power and control was a way to cope with misogyny.

... all of us have, you know, been sexually abused, at some point...Um, or have you know faced some type of something horrible um, in our lives of the sexual nature, and this is very much a way to kind of reclaim that... I've talked to a lot of people in this community...they- a lot of them have a lot of similar experiences and feel the same way.

The ability to find a sense of belonging in a stigmatized job was revered. By sharing stories and offering support to each other, online sex workers can make connections with each other, as Crystal described, “with people that you might not have connected with before, um, in just like a really new way.” Because of the sensitive nature of their work and their experiences online sex workers could make deeply meaningful connections with other sex workers within the community.

Ruby, a 22-year-old White woman, also explained the common experiences of sexual abuse among her friends and collaborators in the online realm. She explained how the shared experiences provided her, and others that she observed, with the knowledge to recognize and deal with trauma and abuse.

That's literally like... a lot of dancers have like, trauma, no doubt. And that's why, I feel like... Like, I relate... cause we're all very, like, openly...sexually open... Like, we're not like... afraid of talking about our sexuality. And that's like, really

big. It's not even trauma... I can see red flags. Because I've been through so many red flags.

Ruby described her ability to be 'sexually open' as well as the ability to cope with trauma by talking with people who shared that openness. Ruby was able to transform her negative experiences by sharing with and guiding others; there was a sense of community in overcoming sexual oppression as a collective experience. Again, in seeing that it was common for women to experience trauma of a sexual nature, online sex workers were able to relate to each other and not feel alone. Additionally, they were able to help others through warnings or mentorships, and because of this many participants felt empowered by being part of a community.

Community connection had very deep meaning for Turquoise who revealed their struggle with defining their gender identity. Though they were genderfluid, they did not identify with the label of 'transgender'; despite this, they felt a strong connection to the trans community and felt that the online sex work community offered them a place of belonging.

Like, I like the community, and I want to like, engage with these people lot...I don't think they would really want to communicate with me if it wasn't work. So like, I really want to continue to keep those friends and keep those connections.

Turquoise described that staying connected to individuals in the online community meant that they would be able to continue as a sex worker. Being without this connection meant that they would be without the support and connections to the industry that they felt was needed to succeed.

Positive personal connections were also often made with clients. Participants described genuine connections with clients. Quartz described a few clients that stood out in her mind as bringing her pleasure and job satisfaction.

Um, and honestly, I love the positive attention that I get. Like the customers are usually super, super nice. Some of them actually want to have genuine conversations like, one guy gave me his full recipe for tomato soup after we had finished the work portion and then this other guy spent 30 minutes talking to me about my D&D character and giving me like tips on how to play a cleric.

Genuine conversations, as Quartz explained, were a valuable and appreciated aspect of online sex work. Companionship was often much deeper than sexual gratification and spoke more to humanity and need for social connection. Jade gave an example of how being vulnerable and genuine with her subscribers had been beneficial for her emotionally and financially.

I told them when I- like, I attempted suicide last year and had to go, um, to, like, a... facility. And I was open with them about that. And I got [Laughs] a lot of money for one, um, obviously, because they felt really bad, but also just a lot of supportive comments... I don't ever feel alone, cause I can always go there ... they want to be there for me, um, whether it be emotionally or financially, and so that's really nice.

Jade was able to share her emotional struggles with her clients without the fear of being judged, but more importantly she felt supported by her clients. She described the benefits of that support and went on to describe her relationship with a specific client as a friendship that was mutually beneficial.

I was just like... 'you've made a huge impact on my life...you've been there to help me pay my bills. And like, that means a lot to me.' I feel like... it's a friendship at that point, um because he doesn't really ask for anything in return. Like I'll, of course, like, send a couple sexy pictures to like, feel like I'm doing something, but... for the most part, he's... just being a decent person...I feel like I've made some really genuine connections.

Jade's relationship suggested there were true feelings of genuine connection. Jade experiences illustrated agency and autonomy as an example of how power dynamics within sex work can be balanced and offer mutually beneficial experiences.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how female and non-binary online sex workers experienced and managed misogyny, and participants revealed a wide range of both. Previous research (Jones, 2016; Vance, 1984; Weitzer, 2010) suggests that experiences of sex workers are multifaceted and that most sex workers report aspects of both oppression and empowerment. Participants revealed the existence of both oppression (boundary violations, verbal abuse, and threats of violence) and empowerment (reclamation, agency, and autonomy), supporting Weitzer's (2010) *polymorphous paradigm*, that sex workers experience elements of both. Interviews from this study illuminated how previous literature lacks complexity and undermines individual perceptions. There is a gray area that is not fully captured. Each specific element (validation, objectification, etc.) of participants' overall experience has varied levels of both empowerment and oppression, based on individual perception. Some boundary violations were described as traumatizing, while others were described as a nuisance. Some participants internalized male entitlement, wondering how they could have been better prepared for certain scenarios, while others celebrated the ability to block unwanted customers. Unique experience cannot be reduced to generalized categories of oppression and empowerment, which the *polymorphous paradigm* currently uses. To build a clearer understanding of online sex workers' unique experiences, it would be helpful to use a dynamic lens that can easily capture these nuances.

Dynamic Models

What I have labeled the *dual spectrum dynamic* considers that empowerment and oppression are operating on individual spectrums simultaneously, as opposed to one trumping the other. Second, what I call the *micro/macro dynamic*, considers how micro, individual factors such as validation and/or agency are operating under larger systems with macro, structural factors such as misogyny and/or capitalism. Additionally, these dynamic systems are highly dependent on the amount and intensity of emotional labor and the positionality of each person.

Dual Spectrum Dynamic

The *dual spectrum dynamic* illustrates how each factor that contributes to an overall experience does not always directly relate to other factors. In other words, someone who has multiple or intense encounters with misogyny does not always have less enjoyment, pleasure or ability to cope. This differs from previously mentioned models (Jones, 2016; Vance, 1984; Weitzer, 2010) which describe overall experiences more like a balance scale; the necessity of balancing ‘bad’ with ‘good’. While the *polymorphous paradigm* does describe a variation in experiences as a “constellation” (p. 6) of factors, certain factors are still judged objectively, categorized as either oppressive (‘bad’) or empowering (‘good’). While he explains that people have different combinations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ factors, there is still a lingering element of dichotomous thinking, which still does not fully capture the complexity of experiences. This framework disregards personal perception. To illustrate, consider objectification and desire as two factors that contribute to an overall experience. The *polymorphous paradigm* might label objectification as oppressive and desire as empowering. This framework suggests the need for more frequency or intensity of desire to counter objectification for the overall experience to be empowering. The *dual spectrum dynamic* recognizes that the level of objectification will vary, as will the level of desirability. It is possible for someone to feel both objectified and desired

simultaneously. Evaluating the level of these factors (objectification, desire etc.) happens through unique individual perception. These evaluations depend on seemingly infinite factors such as previous life experiences, identity, positionality, as well as willingness and/or ability to expend emotional labor. My findings indicate that sex workers' experiences are not simply black and white, and they should not be synthesized into 'good' and 'bad' factors.

Micro/Macro Dynamic

The *micro/macro dynamic* is an integrative model I use to describe how micro, individual factors such as empowerment, validation and/or agency are operating within a larger system with macro, structural factors such as misogyny and/or capitalism. Online sex workers' experiences are a combination of individual perceptions and social influences. Individual perceptions are determined by introspection and internal feelings and emotions. Social influences are determined by interactions with others, societal norms and expectations, and socialized behaviors. Participants exhibited various coping strategies for managing misogyny, and it is evident that online sex workers commonly feel agency. It is equally prevalent that participants encounter pervasive male entitlement and misogyny. Because of this, overall experiences cannot be limited to being 'either/or', instead it is 'both'. Thus, the *micro/macro dynamic* framework, attempts to avoid a binary mindset, allowing the realization that online sex work can be empowering and oppressive at the same time. The function of the *micro/macro dynamic* allows the individual to be the expert on their experience. Sexual agency can still exist in a realm that is rife with victimization. This model also can be utilized as a cautionary lens, as it suggests that with positive feelings of autonomy or agency, there is a risk of turning a blind eye to systemic patriarchy and capitalism, perpetuating oppression. The solution, then, is to recognize and

validate positive experiences that emerge, but to also recognize sexual agency as a steppingstone in the right direction, not the destination.

Contradictions Between Agency and Victimization

It is important to highlight one observation made in this analysis that may contribute to the disconnect between the empowerment/oppression debate. Participants described various instances of misogyny and oppression. In their descriptions of coping strategies, many confirmed existing literature regarding female socialization and cultural norms. Women in Western patriarchal society are commonly socialized that it is their responsibility to refrain from tempting men in order to avoid sexual assault (Fraizer, 2021; Vance 1984). This puts the burden on women, instead of addressing the problematic or predatory behaviors of men. Vance (1984) explained that women are expected to either refrain from tempting men and/or surrender to men because men's sexual urges are deemed innate and uncontrollable (Vance, 1984). According to Frazier (2021), violence prevention is focused on women's behaviors and bodies, suggesting being trained in self-defense and that they consider the implications of wearing sexy clothes. The online realm is full of this same pattern of scapegoating, victim blaming, and deferred responsibility. In many cases, coping with misogyny became the responsibility of the individual online sex worker; to find a way that they felt comfortable with addressing misogyny. For some, they decided they would use Internet anonymity as an advantage, blocking unwanted solicitation or abuse. For others, they decided to 'control the script'. Some figured, it happens anyways, so, their attitude was, 'why not profit from it? Additionally, confirming the premise that women are responsible for the predatory behaviors of men, participants expressed feelings of responsibility for being doxed or scammed; they felt they should have known better, or they were not paying enough attention. In contrast to these frequently reported examples of victimization and

internalized misogyny, many of the participants reported feelings of empowerment through reclamation, control, agency, and autonomy. This suggests that there is a disconnect--the participants report feelings of empowerment while describing oppressive and traumatic experiences. This supports the *micro/macro dynamic* framework in illustrating the experience of victimization and exploitation is happening within a patriarchal society (macro) yet there is still space for feelings of empowerment (micro) by the individual sex worker. This disconnect is not necessarily the problem, as human experiences are inevitably layered. However, the problem lies in trying to define and categorize reported experiences and distorting or dulling them in the process.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should investigate the previously mentioned disconnect between feelings of empowerment in oppressive conditions. This could contribute to understanding more about the empowerment/oppression debate and help in bridging the gap between viewpoints. The term “empowerment” has seeped into mainstream culture and language and is used in abundance, often with various meanings and strengths. It would be beneficial for further research to expand on the current understanding and meaning of empowerment to women. Future studies could also investigate how individuals make meaning of sexual agency and empowerment, especially when it is derived from experiences of the body and appearance. If a person’s appearance is measured by the male gaze, and empowerment is derived *only* from the sexualization of the body, it does not necessarily threaten the status quo, thus arguably still serves the patriarchy, and perpetuates the oppression of women. To illustrate, consider benevolent sexism, which is defined as attitudes toward women that seem positive on the surface, but are fueled by mistrust and disrespect, and a question of women’s capabilities (Glick & Fiske, 1997). When applying benevolent sexism to

empowerment from body sexualization, there can be negative consequences for women in the same way, such that it is perpetuating stereotypes and oppression. De Beauvoir (2019) makes this assertion as she observed that women have only taken what men will concede to them. She discussed how women do not consider themselves active agents, and assume the passive role bestowed unto them. This sentiment illustrates my curiosity regarding the potential danger of misdirected empowerment. It reinforces that the active male allows the passive female to believe that she has the power of choice. Even in the modern example of online sex work, there are patriarchal undertones that may be interpreted as ‘allowing empowerment’ through female sexuality, as long as it continues to suit cis-hetero-men. The amount of power and control women have over their body and/or sexuality may seem a tolerable level of threat to the status quo. If the source of women’s power stays primarily within the parameters of the body, it will not meet the same backlash from the patriarchy as political power or economic power. If future studies shed light onto the ways women and/or online sex workers make meaning of sexual agency and/or empowerment, it may reduce stigma and build a stronger understanding of female sexuality.

Additionally, while it was not included as the common themes of this study, there were multiple participants who referred to a specific demographic as their main clientele. Commonly the demand or audience for our participants were described as “older”, “white”, “hetero”, “cis-males”. Future studies should either include questions regarding who is creating the demand for online sex work, to explore how experiences vary depending on who the consumer is. This would be an interesting opportunity to explore misogyny and internalized misogyny among female and non-binary online sex workers.

Limitations

Self-selection bias was the main limitation of this study. Results are based on the accounts of participants who were willing and able to share their experiences. We did not include a question regarding why the participant agreed to the interview. Therefore, some limitations may be influenced by participants' reasons for participating. Most of our participants, (72%; n = 11) reported their socioeconomic status as working class, and often referred to financial motivation or financial benefits of online sex work. Therefore, those who agreed to interview could have been influenced by financial incentive. The level of financial success could influence the ability to generalize these findings to the entire population of online sex workers because our sample was mostly working class. Most of our participants used online sex work as a supplementary income, suggesting they did not generate enough income from this avenue to consider it their only employment. Their experiences with misogyny and coping strategies may differ from someone who generates enough income for online sex work to be their primary source of income. As previously mentioned, due to the length of the interviews and the rich data, the cathartic effect of interviews could have an influence on the results, with a possible emphasis on extremely good or bad experiences, swaying the interpretation toward empowerment or oppression.

As a qualitative research study, my positionality in relation to the research question is also a limitation in this study. As a self-identified feminist, I developed the research question to gain better understanding of the interplay between misogyny and empowerment, to explore oppression and encourage destigmatization. There is a flexible element of qualitative analysis that considers my interpretation as the researcher, and the data will reflect my interpretations. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight the advantages and disadvantages of thematic analysis, one disadvantage they mentioned specifically refers to this flexibility, leading to broad results or data

that can be interpreted various ways. To limit the bias of my analysis, I was transparent when describing my methodology, to give explanation to my analysis, which best fit my research question and goal for the study, to understand individual experiences.

Conclusion

Though this study offers in-depth understanding of a particular group of female and non-binary online sex workers, it barely scratches the surface regarding the overall experiences of online sex workers. The study of online sex work and female sexuality need to reflect the complexity of individual experiences, and dynamic models are a helpful framework to use for looking at those experiences. Individual and societal factors influence perceptions, and both viewpoints of empowerment and oppression are equally valid and equally important. It is less important for research to validate either side of the debate, and more important to recognize that it can be both. For the participants in this study, many experiences were common, however ironically, every experience was unique. As sex work evolves, so should research, to expose the oppressive nature of patriarchal norms and misogyny. It should highlight the implications of oppression for women, but also the empowerment, agency, and autonomy. To reiterate, Jones (2019) explains that sexuality is socially constructed. Based on this, it is the responsibility of social science to expand the literature on online sex workers and female sexuality, to highlight these nuances so society can more accurately construct knowledge and understanding of female sexuality. Normalizing female sexuality and destigmatizing sex work are a step in the right direction of a revolution against oppression, but it is only the beginning.

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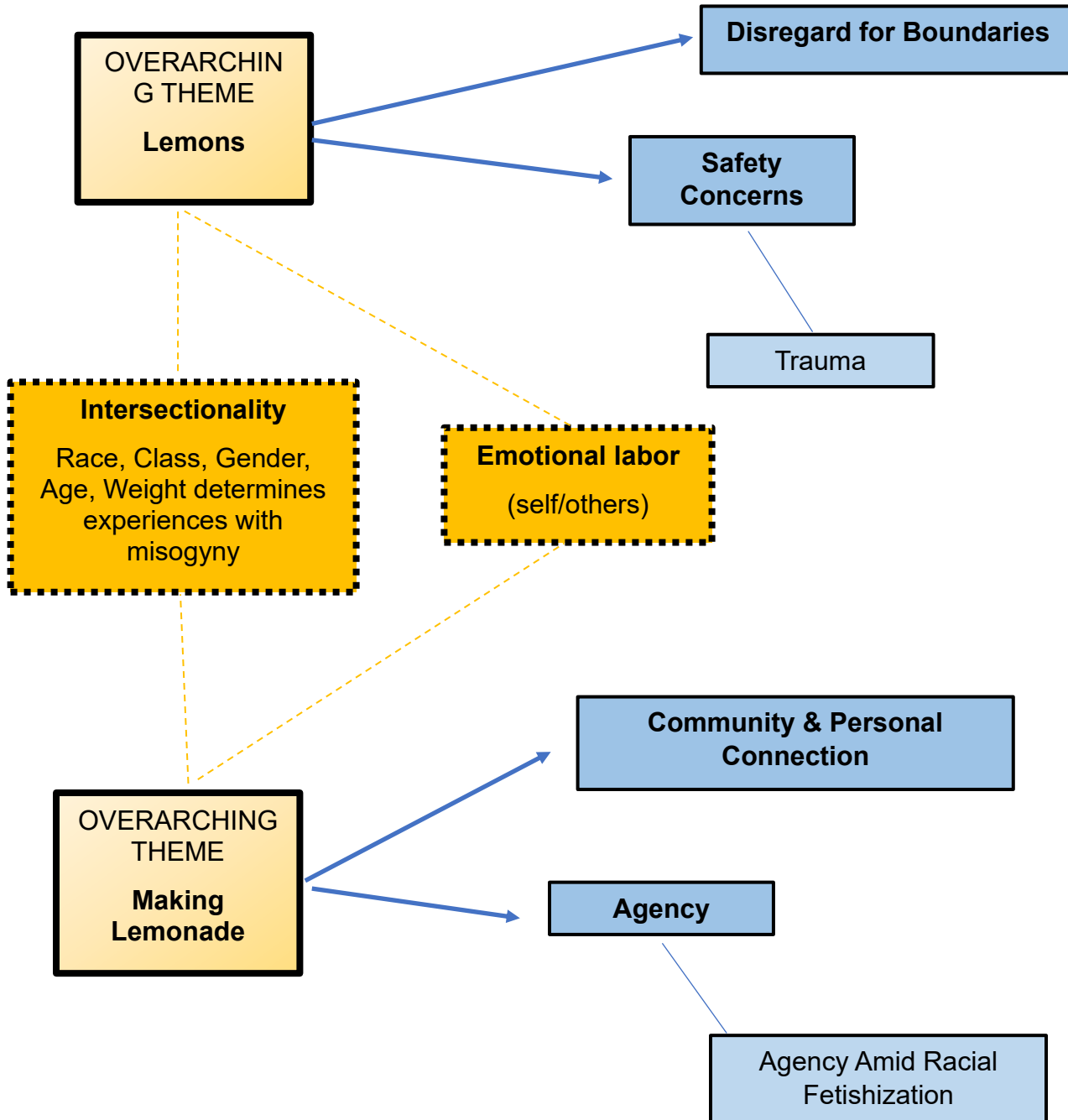
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Figure 1

Thematic Map



The thematic map was created to build a stronger understanding of how themes and subthemes relate and how they fit together in a meaningful way.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

This is a list of the interview questions with suggested follow-up questions or helpful alternatives to assist interviewer in asking questions. Interviews were semi-structured, the expectation was that interviews would be conversational, and the participants would share what they felt was important and salient to their experiences.

Icebreaker Question

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Demographic Section

1. Can you tell me the sex you were assigned at birth?
2. Can you tell me what gender you identify with?
 - a. Follow-up: What are your preferred pronouns?
3. Can you tell me how old you are?
4. What State do you live in?
5. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?
6. Can you tell me about your sexual orientation?
7. Do you currently practice or identify with any particular religion? Did you practice or identify with any particular religion growing up?
8. How would you describe your current relationship status?
9. Do you have any children?
10. Can you tell me a little bit about your educational background?
11. Can you tell me about your socioeconomic background growing up? Were you financially comfortable? Can you tell me a little bit about how that has changed as you've become an adult? If you had to put a label on it, would you say that you're working, middle, or upper class?

Sex Work Background

12. Can you walk me through your experience with sex work from when you began until now?

Follow Ups:

- a. How do you define online sex work?
 - (Alt. What does online sex work mean to you?)
- b. Can you tell me about your "why" for doing online sex work?
 - (Alt. What motivated you to begin online sex work?)
- c. Tell me about your early experiences with online sex work.
 1. **If Needed:** At what age did you begin online sex work?
- d. How have your experiences changed since you began online sex work?
 1. **If Needed:** Have the online platforms changed?
 2. **If Needed:** Has your work routine changed?
- e. Do you use an alias, or an online persona?
 1. **If Needed:** what kind of factors went into creating your persona?

2. **If Needed:** How would you say it has helped you?
- f. What does your work mean for you financially?
- g. Do you have other employment besides online sex work?
- h. Can you describe the typical things you do in a week to support your online sex work?
 1. **if needed:** Do you market your online sex work on other public platforms – Instagram, Snapchat?
 2. **if needed:** Are there things that you do to prepare for work?
13. I'm going to ask you about both the positive and negative aspects of your work. Would you say your experience has been more positive or negative?

Possible Empowerment

14. How would you describe the benefits of your work?
15. What do you find is most beneficial for you about online sex work?

Follow Ups:

- a. What do you like most about your work? If you had to name a favorite thing what would it be?
- b. How do you feel while you are engaging in online sex work?
- c. Can you tell me about your feelings of personal control?
 1. **If needed:** Regarding your body, content, finances, pleasure, commitment
- d. How has the way you view yourself changed throughout your experience with online sex work, if it all?

Possible Toll of Online Sex Work

16. What do you find to be personally problematic for you with your online sex work?

Follow Ups:

- a. What would you change about your work, if anything?
- b. Have you had any negative experiences while engaging in online sex work? Can you explain?
- c. Have you had any experiences with doxing, capping, trolls? (Explain terms if needed- see below)
 1. **-If yes,** can you describe what that was like for you?
- d. Do you ever experience burn-out? What happens when you experience burn-out?
 1. **If needed:** Have you ever felt like there are things you need to do to take care of yourself after working? (What kinds of things?)
 2. **If needed:** Are there things that you do to wind down after work? Tell me about some things you like to do to take care of yourself?
- e. How would you describe the impact of your work on your social life?
- f. How would you describe your support system? Do your family and friends know about your work? How do you decide who to tell?

Experiences with Subscribers

17. Tell me about your experiences and interactions with your subscribers?

Follow Ups:

- a. What are some examples of positive experiences with subscribers?
 - 1. **-If needed:** Fetishes, Increased Self-image, Body image
 - b. What are some examples of negative experiences with subscribers?
 - 1. **-If needed:** Fetishes, Challenging, Discomfort
18. Can you talk to me about the competition in the industry?

Follow Up:

- a. Racial/gender/sexual orientation/weight/age/ableism biases? How does that impact you?
 - 1. **If needed:** your sense of self/your body/ your work/ your income?

Final Question

- 19. Do you feel there are any questions that I should have asked, but I did not?
- 20. If you could tell the world anything about your work, what would you want them to know?

Appendix B

Resources for Participants

The following links were provided in a follow-up email to participants after completing the interview. These resources were meant to be helpful and/or fun. All resources were obtained from google searches prior to interviews and were reviewed by the BSU IRB.

Resources:

<https://swopusa.org>

<https://sexworkersproject.org/resources/>

<https://www.nswp.org/resources>

<https://harmreduction.org/issues/sex-work/>

Tips, Tricks & Interesting Articles (Not Safe for Work-NSFW)

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