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Who to Tell?: An Analysis of the Disclosure Experiences of Online Sex Workers

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Abstract

Online sex workers are people who provide erotic labor online for a cost, often by posting sexually explicit content of themselves on platforms such as OnlyFans. Little literature exists on the experiences of online sex workers disclosing their occupation to others. This study analyzed the disclosure experiences of 15 online sex workers who identified as women or non-binary. Participants were interviewed about their life experiences pertaining to online sex work. The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Most participants took protective measures to manage the stigma of disclosure. Family, non sex workers, and sex workers were identified as the audiences to whom disclosure occurred. Within each of these audiences, finding and maintaining safety was important for many participants considering disclosure. There were several notable similarities in the disclosure experiences of online sex workers and LGBTQ+ identities. It is argued that the online sex work community must increase its political presence to limit the stigma that they face. To do this, allies must provide safe spaces for them to disclose their occupations.

Keywords: OnlyFans, sex work, online sex work, invisible stigmatized identity, disclosure
Who to Tell?: An Analysis of the Disclosure Experiences of Online Sex Workers

Online sex work is a highly stigmatized profession where workers provide sexual services online for compensation. In a nation fraught with traditional values, navigating the disclosure of this or any identity that society and law typically deems to be immoral can be difficult. Lowman and Louie (2012) found that in public opinion polls from 2009 to 2011 between 45% and 52% of Canadians believed that “adults should be allowed to engage in consensual prostitution.” Invisible identities are a salient aspect of one’s identity that may not be immediately apparent to others such as sexual orientation, occupation, or mental illness. Those who possess invisible identities must make the decision to come out or not. Then if they decide to come out, they must choose to whom to disclose their identity. With LGBTQ+ identities and online sex workers being similarly stigmatized; it would stand to reason that analyzing the LGBTQ+ coming out literature may help us better understand the coming out experience that online sex workers face. Corrigan and Matthews (2003) and Corrigan et al. (2009) used LGBTQ+ coming out literature to analyze other stigmatized identities such as those who have mental illnesses, but none have used this breadth of literature to understand the coming out experiences of online sex workers. Using the LGBTQ+ coming out literature as a guide, the aim of this qualitative study was to analyze the disclosure experiences of women and nonbinary online sex workers.

Online Sex Work

The term online sex work is subjective with many, sometimes contradictory, definitions; what is sex work to one person may not be sex work to another. Online sex work can encapsulate many things. Jones (2016) describes adult webcam modeling as a “digital peep show”. Online sex work on platforms such as OnlyFans or PornHub include sharing explicit images or videos.
(VanWinkle, 2019). Furthermore, online sex work can also include phone sex or any other act that can provide sexual pleasure to another virtually. For the purposes of this paper, online sex work was self-defined by the participants in this study, meaning that an act is online sex work only if the individual doing the act believes it to be online sex work. This definition can account for internal realizations later in time without undermining the autonomy and self-identifications of the participants of this study.

Though this paper intends to compare the experiences that LGBTQ+ individuals experience with the experiences of online sex workers, it does not intend to conflate the two identities. There are clear differences between online sex workers and LGBTQ+ identities. These differences include but are not limited to: the onset of this identity, the choice to have this identity, the permanency of this identity, and what the identity entails. The stigmas of being an online sex worker and having an LGBTQ+ identity are parallel but not the same, as one is an occupation and the other is an identity.

The common thread between the two identities is the pervasive and similar stigma that involves stereotyping, loss of status, ostracizing and potential violence against either of these groups (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Simpson & Smith, 2020). This stigma severely limits one’s ability to disclose their identity. This study aimed to provide a more nuanced understanding of how one with a stigmatized identity navigates the disclosure of said identity. Additionally, it should be noted that there seem to be only minimal gender differences in the coming out process (Barber, 2000). This allows for a more generalized comparison of sexual minority people and online sex workers, meaning that for the purposes of this study, analyzing gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender literature regarding the coming out process will be helpful in gaining a greater understanding of coming out with an invisible stigmatized identity.
Coming Out

There is a myriad of different definitions for the term coming out, but not all are suitable for investigating the disclosure of stigmatized identities. Though many prefer not to define this important term, some common definitions of coming out can include being public about one’s LGBTQ+ identity (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003), internal realization of sexuality (Barber, 2000), or an instance in which one discloses this part of their identity to another (McLean, 2007). Corrigan & Matthews’ (2003) definition of coming out is too narrow and it fails to capture the nuances between being completely closeted or fully out. Barber’s (2000) definition better describes an internal realization rather than coming out and thus would be unable to capture the complexity of interpersonal relationships in the context of coming out. Working with that definition the individual is already out even if only they know their identity, regardless of disclosures to another. For the purposes of this paper, a definition in line with McLean (2007) will be used because it best encapsulates the interpersonal dynamics that this paper analyzed. Coming out will be defined as a disclosure of an identity to another. This disclosure can be intentional or unintentional. Additionally, it should be noted that even though this term is most commonly used with LGBTQ+ identities, it can apply to any invisible stigmatized identity, thus making it an appropriate term to describe an online sex worker disclosing their job.

Why Coming Out Can Be Hard

Coming out can be difficult for people with LGBTQ+ identities, due to the immense stigma that they may face when disclosing their identities (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018; Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Corrigan et al., 2009; Mosher, 2001; Schope, 2002; Willis, 2011). Twenty-seven states in the United States offer no LGBTQ+ employment or housing discrimination protections, 25.1% believe that homosexuality is never justified and a further
27.3% believe that homosexuality is somewhere in between being justified and not (Equaldex, 2022). The primary reasons that people do not come out is a fear that whomever they come out to will react punitively or discriminatorily in ways such as economic sanctions, violence, harassment, loss of prestige and/or social disapproval (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018; Corrigan et al., 2009; Mosher, 2001; Willis, 2011). Additionally, other costs to coming out can include social avoidance by others, employment discrimination, self-consciousness, and self-fulfilling prophecies regarding one’s status as a person with an LGBTQ+ identity (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Willis, 2011). People with LGBTQ+ identities may often conceal this part of their identity because they feel that their identity is irrelevant or inappropriate, out of deference for others (e.g., aging grandparents), and most notably concerns that people in power may use their identities against them (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018; Corrigan & Matthews, 2003).

Online sex workers can also face a considerable amount of stigma that can make coming out difficult. Like LGBTQ+ individuals, online sex workers can be “othered,” a process that involves projecting negative stereotypes onto a group in order for another group to hierarchically distance themselves emotionally from their target group (Jones, 2016). This allows dominant groups to perpetuate prejudice against minoritized groups. This creates a stigmatized environment where violence and harassment are acceptable reactions to one’s occupation; sexual harassment, cyber bullying, and outright hostility are unfortunately all tolls that sex workers must face (Taniguchi et al., 2020; Waling & Pym, 2017). Online sex workers may also face employment discrimination, which is notable because most online sex workers are financially reliant on other employment in addition to sex work. Due to the incredible stigma that exists, Barton (2007) describes the creation of a work persona as a method that protects personal privacy, exhibits control, and manages the stigma of sex work. However, even with the
protection that a persona offers, this hostile social environment that sex workers find themselves in leads to a fear of doxing, which is the publicizing of an online sex worker’s personal information (e.g., full name, address, place of work, etc.); it is essentially a forced outing (Jones, 2016).

**Benefits of Coming Out**

Research with LGBTQ+ populations have shown that there are many benefits to coming out for both the individual and for society. Coming out can be helpful to the individual on a personal level. It takes a substantial amount of energy to maintain a false heterosexual image (Schope, 2002). Voluntarily choosing to come out involves a recognition that hiding one’s sexual identity was at least somewhat damaging and that the disclosure of a long-held secret could intently improve the life of whomever chose to come out, despite the societal risk of doing so (Moser, 2001). Coming out of the closet and being open with one's identity has been shown to reduce fear of harassment, anxiety, and depression, as well as increase self-esteem (Legate, et al., 2012; Schope, 2002). Additionally, the diminished stress that results in coming out can lead to better relationships with one’s partner, improved job satisfaction, and improved family relationships (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018; Corrigan et al., 2009; Corrigan & Matthews, 2003).

In terms of societal benefits, coming out with an LGBTQ+ identity can also benefit society by normalizing minoritized genders and sexualities (Schope, 2002). Increased interactions between heterosexual and queer individuals diminishes the prejudicial attitudes held by heterosexual individuals, for example, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD, 2019) did a survey of 2031 non-LGBTQ+ American participants and found that those exposed to LGBTQ+ identities in media were more accepting and supportive of LGBTQ+
identities than those who did not have this exposure. Furthermore, a survey done in 2013 asked if society should accept homosexuals and 33% of participants said “no.” The same question was asked in a survey done in 2019 and only 21% of participants said “no,” showing an improvement in society’s acceptance over time (Equaldex, 2022).

Interpersonal disclosures increase the opportunity to create and strengthen supportive relationships, reinforce one’s identity, and help eliminate the stress related to maintaining a false persona (Ragins, 2008). Further, coming out and embracing one’s LGBTQ+ identity can both politically and socially benefit those who share similar identities. By coming out one may lend their voice to a cause that helps create a more equitable society by supporting political candidates that wish to see oppressive laws overturned or by assisting advocacy groups that can help provide knowledge, resources, and support to disadvantaged identities (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Ragins, 2008). Additionally, public outness is necessary for mass demonstrations such as pride parades and civil disobedience as was seen in the Stonewall riots, both of which can increase political power and can help inform policy and social changes that can lead to an ultimately more egalitarian society (Schope, 2002).

As with LGBTQ+ individuals, there may be benefits for both the individual and society itself when someone who works as an online sex worker chooses to disclose their occupation. Contrary to popular belief, online sex work is not always exploitive and misogynistic; online sex work can be empowering if an online sex worker can balance the pleasure and dangers (Jones, 2016). When online sex workers come out, they may help combat this misconception. Additionally, with the recent rise of platforms such as OnlyFans, online sex workers have similar status to social media influencers (VanWinkle, 2019). This increased visibility coupled with a disclosure of identity may lend itself to increased political power and activism for a stigmatized
group. It stands to reason that if coming out can be beneficial for helping stigmatized groups such as LGBTQ+ identities (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Corrigan et al., 2009; Ragines, 2008), then it should also be able to help online sex workers.

**Coming Out Audiences**

The context and audience can be massively important for coming out. People may choose to come out to some people and not others based on internal subjective criteria, such as passing a test, or it feeling safe to come out, or they may come out in specific social and/or temporal contexts, selectively choosing when and where they are out or closeted (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018). Mosher (2001) identified three different audiences that people may come out to: the familial audience, the heterosexual audience, and the gay, lesbian, or bisexual audience.

**The Familial Audience**

Within the familial audience, people with LGBTQ+ identities are most likely to come out to a sibling, with about three-quarters of LGBTQ+ people out to a sibling (Schope, 2002). This is true because of the perceived closeness to one’s sibling, the lesser economic sanctions that siblings could cause (compared to parents), and to “test” the familial reaction to coming out (Mosher, 2001; Schope, 2002). Coming out to parents whom one is dependent on, whether it be economically or emotionally, can be riskier, causing more anxiety when coming out (Schope, 2002). Despite this, a little over two-thirds of gay men are out to their parents, with both young and middle-aged gay men having relatively similar rates of openness with their parents (Schope, 2002). Furthermore, increased religiousness and adherence to traditional values in a family significantly impacts the decision to come out, with people who grew up in religious households being about two times as likely to be closeted toward their parents than their non-religious
counterparts (Schope, 2002). Despite the considerable risks of coming out to a familial audience, many with LGBTQ+ identities still come out to their families, to alleviate the pressure of living with a concealed part of their identity if they believe that their parent would not completely reject them (Schope, 2002). In addition to these benefits, coming out to a parent can also strengthen the parent-child bond, in that their acceptance of their child’s identity can be a powerful showing of trust and openness (Corrigan et al., 2009; Mosher, 2001; Schope, 2002). As it is with LGBTQ+ individuals, online sex workers must navigate the disclosure of an identity that some would call taboo, because of this, coming out can be fraught with difficulty, especially within the familial context.

**Heterosexual Audience**

People with LGBTQ+ identities are most likely to come out to their close friends, regardless of their friends’ sexual or gender orientation, with as many as 93% of people who are gay or lesbian being out to a straight friend (Schope, 2002). However, outside of the context of close friendships, people with LGBTQ+ identities often do not tend to come out to a heterosexual audience. Coworkers, employers, neighbors, and classmates are less likely to be aware of one’s LGBTQ+ identity than one’s family or close friends (Legate, et al., 2012; Schope, 2002). Potential stigma from others and the ability to stay anonymous in potentially dangerous situations is a driving factor to stay closeted toward the heterosexual audience (Moser, 2001). However, given the myriad of benefits of coming out, many people with LGBTQ+ identities opt to selectively disclose their identities to certain people so that they may operate with two different personae, a heterosexual persona that can move about freely in a homophobic world and their authentic self (Moser, 2001). The concealment of one’s identity often comes at the cost of
living with psychological and emotional distress and the potential to face stress-related illnesses (Ragins, 2008)

Paralleling a LGBTQ+ identity coming out to a heterosexual audience, selective disclosure and stigma can also be seen in online sex work. Sex workers often use pseudonyms and personas to help them conceal their identities, set boundaries, and to sell idealized versions of themselves (Barton, 2007). Just like those with LGBTQ+ identities, online sex workers can find themselves living a double life, with neither their work persona, nor their public persona, being able to fully express their authentic self. This follows the pattern of other invisible stigmatized identities where one hides an aspect of themselves such as having a mental illness, having a criminal record, or being a member of a minority religion, for fear of stigma and the benefit of blending in. The effects of living a double life can be harmful to an individual leading to psychological stress, role conflict, and the fear of being outed by another (Ragins, 2008).

Sex work has also been impacted by heterosexist patriarchal attitudes around women’s sexuality (Jones, 2019). Much of the literature on women’s sexuality has de-emphasized women’s pleasure and instead emphasized men’s pleasure (Jones, 2018a). Given that most online sex workers are women, societal expectations that are placed on women’s sexualities are also placed on sex workers, creating a disconnect between online sex workers experiences and the typical narrative surrounding sex. Online sex work can experience great pleasure and agency over themselves with their jobs, pushing back against oppressive aspects of culture by authentically existing as themselves (Jones, 2018b). However, online sex work is a relatively new field of work that the general public may not understand. Of course, it should be noted that an online sex worker’s race, class, and gender may color their experiences, with more disadvantaged identity’s having less opportunity (Jones, 2015). Not only will an online sex
worker have to face the potential stigma that others may hold toward the occupation, but they may also have to explain their incredibly nuanced profession to the lay person, creating more emotional labor for the online sex worker and adding a further barrier to coming out.

**Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Audience**

Coming out to someone with a similar stigmatized identity can serve to build community or further unify a preexisting community (Moser, 2001). Participation in the LGBTQ+ community helps provide valuation, a sense of well-being, and social support for LGBTQ+ identities that may not be found in one’s family (Moser, 2001). A similar sense of community and understanding can be found in online sex work. Jones (2018b) found that even when one exists with a highly stigmatized identity, such as a BBW (big, beautiful women) there is community in sharing that identity with others and community can lead to happiness and joy.

This three-audience framework can be beneficial for gaining a more nuanced understanding of any stigmatized identities. A more generalized three audience framework would be: the family, those who do not share this identity, and those who do share this identity. For online sex work, the three audiences would be familial, non-online sex workers and online sex workers.

**The Present Study**

Using the literature on LGBTQ+ individuals coming out as a guide, the aim of this qualitative study was to analyze the disclosure experiences of women and nonbinary online sex workers. This study explored the similarities and differences of coming out with an LGBTQ+ identity and disclosing one’s occupation as an online sex worker, and how different types of interpersonal relationships can affect one disclosing an invisible and stigmatized part of their
identity. Additionally, this study intended to show the largely unexplored nuances that go into someone who works as an online sex worker disclosing their occupation.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling starting with personal contacts and through advertising on social media. Participants had to be 18 years old or older, identify as women or nonbinary, and have experience participating in the field of online sex work. Participants ($N = 15$) ranged in age from 18 to 33 ($M = 24.00$, $SD = 3.44$) and participated in interviews between April and September 2021. Fourteen of the participants had used OnlyFans, ten of whom indicated that it was their primary form of online sex work. The remaining participant primarily did phone sex and occasionally exchanged erotic pictures for compensation. All participants were assigned female at birth; eleven identified as women and four identified as non-binary. Ten identified as White (one participant mentioned that they were Brazilian but “white-passing”), two as Hispanic/Latinx (one specifying Mexican), two as mixed race (participants specified Black and White), and one as Asian. Fourteen of the participants identified their sexuality as bisexual or pansexual and one participant was questioning their sexuality. Eleven participants identified as non-religious (one noted that they grew up Catholic, another specified Baptist), three identified as spiritual, and one identified as Catholic. All participants were given pseudonyms based off gemstones.

**Interviews and Procedure**

Potential participants in this study were originally contacted via email. If the participant expressed interest and met the criteria of the study, they were sent an email that contained an
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electronic copy of the consent form and potential dates for the interview. Once a date and time was agreed upon, the interviewer followed up with a Zoom link for the interview. This meeting was set to record the audio of the interview and create a preliminary transcript of the interview. Upon entering the Zoom meeting, the interviewer would review the consent form, answer questions about the interview, and obtain verbal consent from the participant. Next, the participant would be asked to answer a set of demographic questions. Then, the interviewer began the semi-structured interview, wherein questions allowed participants to freely share their experiences of online sex work. The nine questions that were asked were specifically designed to gain data on the benefits, tolls, and motivations of online sex work. Interviews covered topics such as the participants’ sex work history and their experiences, both positive and negative, in relation to sex work. Interviewers were encouraged to probe participants with optional follow-up questions for more details when necessary. See Appendix A for the interview script and question list. Interviews ranged from approximately 60 to 120 minutes. This study received Institutional Review Board approval.

This study used data from another project that analyzed the benefits, motivations, and tolls of online sex work. Because disclosure was not a primary research question of the larger project, no questions directly asked about disclosure experiences of online sex workers. However, because these interviews provided a safe space for participants, they divulged information far above and beyond the scope of the questions asked, and disclosure experiences emerged as an unanticipated yet interesting topic for analysis. In particular, questions 1E and 5F tended to provide more nuanced and relevant information on participants’ life experiences regarding disclosure.

Data Analysis
Following the completion of an interview, interviewers downloaded the audio files and transcripts produced by Zoom. To prepare for coding, interviewers modified and cleaned up transcripts; identifying information of the participants was deleted from the transcripts to protect participants’ confidentiality. After the initial round of transcribing was completed, the transcript was then transferred to another team member to double check the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive coding was used in the first four interviews to examine the patterns in the interview data and to ensure that the coders’ individual perspectives, insights, and experiences could help inform the voice that participants would be given. From this point on, a modified version of codebook coding was used. The codes that were developed during reflexive coding and with additional discussions based on the interview data gathered from the other eleven interviews led to the development of more specific and well-defined codes. These were collated into a code-book of 49 codes by a team of researchers. These codes were created by collectively comparing multiple researchers’ codes, dropping unneeded ones, and synthesizing themes from multiple perspectives into broader and further defined themes. For this project, codes such as authenticity, performativity, anonymity, selective disclosure, boundaries, disregard for boundaries, support system, community support, and stigma, along with the contexts in which these codes were recorded. After these codes were recorded they were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the audiences that online sex workers disclose to and the processes they go thorough to disclose (or not disclose) their occupation. When modified to apply to online sex work, these audiences ended up following Moser’s (2001) three audience framework. On an inductive-deductive scale this project leans more deductive as its themes were informed by LGBTQ+ literature; I had seen the three-audience framework and it made sense to use for this
project after an initial analysis of the data because these audiences clearly applied to online sex work.

**Results**

Data analysis revealed important themes around *how* and *to whom* the participants chose to come out. Since online sex work is a stigmatized profession, methods for managing that stigma emerged as an important theme in how online sex workers disclose their occupation. In terms of audience, the three-audience framework borrowed from Moser’s (2001) proved useful, as online sex workers disclosed to one of three audiences: their family, non sex workers, and sex workers. Across all these themes, we see the importance of anticipating safety and acceptance when participants chose to disclose, and the benefits of having the space and opportunity to share their experiences to a supportive audience.

**Managing the Stigma of Disclosure**

All participants recognized that on a societal level, online sex workers are stigmatized. Amethyst, a 24-year-old white Hispanic woman, summed up the issue succinctly: “the general population thinks, I am a second-class citizen. People would have no problem raping, murdering, dismembering, xyz to my body... if they so choose.” Due to the intense stigma, many online sex workers are willing to go to great lengths to keep their identities hidden from those who know them or who hold power over them. When Amber, a 20-year-old nonbinary native Mexican, recalled her previous job’s background check, they said,

It was still like nerve wracking because I was like, ‘Well, what if they like find, like, my online stuff, and then they're not gonna hire me because of that,’ or like, I don't know, even though I use like, a different name and all of that. It's just, I don't know, it's just like,
I have to take extra precautionary measures to make sure that like, um, the people that I want to find out or that I'm comfortable with finding out, like, I'll be able to tell them by myself. [Interviewer: Right] And then other people that like, I know that I um don't really want them to know, I have to take precautionary measures for that as well.

Precautionary measures to ensure anonymity were fairly common among the participants. These measures included meticulous management of social media. Take Topaz, a 23-year-old white woman, for example; she said she was “double, triple checking who could view my story just to make sure, like, none of my family members were on it, none of my brother's friends were on it, um, and just like, other certain people.” Participants censored identifying features such as their face or tattoos and created an online work persona to ensure that they did not inadvertently disclose their occupation to those who know them.

The creation of an online persona for sex work was considered essential for maintaining anonymity and thus safety for most participants. Emerald, a 33-year-old white woman, outlined why she thought people should use personas:

You probably should use an alias because people are insane. And the way that these bullies are now, you know, they will come at you, and people will, you know, don't like you so they're going to try to report you to your employer, or get you fired or, you know, send you hate mail, track you down, anything like that so, I think it's important just to protect yourself.”

The personas that participants used ranged from simply creating alternate names to manufacturing personalities that would benefit them in the online sex work industry. Even when participants described their persona as being beneficial beyond personal safety (e.g., Peridot used
hers to safely explore kinks), the primary purpose of an alias was to prevent disclosure. The few who did not use an alias had already disclosed their occupation to people they know and thus did not fear backlash from those close to them.

**Audience**

Participants disclosed or feared disclosing their identities to the familial audience, the non-sex worker audience, and the sex worker audience. The familial audience consists of parents, siblings, grandparents, and close relatives. The non-sex worker audience consists of those who are not online sex workers and are not covered by the familial audience such as friends. The sex worker audience consists of other online sex workers. Though disclosure to all audiences was informed by stigma, participants’ approaches to each audience had several unique aspects.

**Family**

*Conservative Values hurt Online Sex Workers*

Participants who had grown up highly religious and/or surrounded by conservative values found their families unaccepting and feared disclosing their occupation to them. Pearl, 24-year-old white women, succinctly noted that “much of society is still like, ‘don’t have sex until you’re married, [laughs] let alone film it.’” These values may abstractly exist in larger society, but their effects are most impactful at the familial level. For example, Opal, a 24-year-old Brazilian woman, is an online sex worker who comes from a Christian Baptist family and grew up very religious. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Opal had to start working as a sex worker in order to survive. She expressed great fear around the prospect of her family discovering her
occupation and the subsequent shunning that she knew would come. When discussing this
tension Opal started to cry.

I have a brother who's a cop, who's a deacon, [I: Mhm] with two kids that go to a private
Christian school, whose wife’s sister owns the church that they go to. I was baptized by
my two cousins who own the church that they're a part of. [I:Wow] My dad is the deacon
and my mom's the treasurer of her church, so I come from a background, that if they
knew what I was doing I would be shunned. Like, I know for a fact my brother wouldn't
want me to see my niece and my nephew, like, I would lose so much over trying to make
a living for myself.

These traditional conservative values compounded with the COVID-19 pandemic put Opal in an
impossible position: survive and risk being ostracized by the conditional acceptance of a
religious family or fail to make ends meet and become destitute. When other participants
disclosed their occupation to more traditionally conservative family members, they were also
met with hostility. Emerald’s grandmother disowned her, and Ruby, a 22-year-old white woman,
said that her mother “Started bawling her eyes out, when she was shit-faced and was like, ‘I
didn't raise you to be like that,’” when she found out. Ruby went on to note a contradiction
between her mother’s words and actions, saying that she had been raised to rely on men for
money, a marker of a conservative mindset towards women. The pushback from family members
seemed to cause significant emotional distress. These values may cause even more severe harm
to online sex workers if they are dependent upon their family; the financial repercussions of
familial abandonment could leave an online sex worker destitute with no way out.

*Anonymity as a Mercy Toward Family*
When faced with the option of disclosing their occupation to their family, some participants opted to refrain from disclosure, not due to fear of repercussions, but to protect their family. They believed that disclosing was not worth the trouble that it would cause others. The focus here is not on the person who is disclosing and how they feel, but rather on the person who is being disclosed to and how they feel. As a prime example of this phenomenon, Topaz noted:

When I’m… around my grandparents, they don't know, they're few- they're some of the few people in my family that aren't aware of what I do and it's- it just kind of at this point, not that I’m embarrassed or ashamed at all, what I do, but it's just not something they need to know, that they would benefit from it all, it's honestly just… not going to harm if they don't know, but it might if they do, so, um.

Her focus here is not on herself and how she felt but rather on her grandparents and how they felt. She did not disclose her occupation, not because she could not, but because she did not want to upset her grandparents. In this case, not disclosing is a selfless act for others, rather than a defensive act for herself.

Interestingly, even after a disclosure, anonymity as a mercy toward family may still apply. Several participants expressed that even after disclosing their occupation, their parents remained willfully ignorant, refusing to accept what their child had told them. As a prime example of this, Amethyst said,

My mom knows. Um [sigh] my dad knows... that I am... a model. I have tried to tell him more openly. [I: Mm hmm] But I feel like he's more in one ear out the other, doesn't want to acknowledge it, so he just says '[name]'s a model’… leave it there [I: Mm hmm]. Um, when I told him I wanted to start working in a strip club after things open up, he said, “oh
so you'll be a cocktail waitress that's nice,” and I was like, “sure. [I: Mm hmm] I'll be a cocktail waitress dad.” So, like they know- but they know what they want to know.

When faced with this lack of acceptance, participants choose to let their parents believe what they wanted to believe, not pushing the issue or breaking their parents’ illusion about their child’s employment because it would allow their parents to feel better about the situation.

Even with family members that would not be hurt by the knowledge of their kin’s occupation, online sex workers may still opt to not talk about their occupation because they do not want their family to see them as a sexual being. As Garnet, a 23-year-old white woman, said, “Yeah, I mean, obviously, like, it's not really something that you can talk to your parents about.”

In some families, online sex workers are unable to seek support because it is taboo to talk about sex. This is not because the participant or the family thinks that sex work is wrong but because seeing family members as sexual beings is not accepted.

**Disclosure in Safe Power Dynamics**

When online sex workers decide to come out to their families, they tend to only disclose their occupation when they feel that they are safe in that power dynamic. This often manifests as a disclosure to siblings, as seen with Jade, a 26-year-old white woman:

My sisters, I think, are… my only family that I really openly talk about it with. And they love it. They're like, so… supportive, like, “girl power” about it. All their friends love it. Like, I feel like, um, they… are really proud of me.

Jade’s parents know about her sex work and do not approve of it, with her dad expressing disappointment in passing, making Jade’s sisters’ support all the more important. This safe and
supportive power dynamic allows Jade to openly talk about her life with her sisters and serve as a role model that they can be proud of.

With parents, there are two versions of safe power dynamics. The first is where a parent has proven that they will support their child no matter what. Topaz’s parents are a prime example of this; she said,

I just was always like, very forthcoming, especially with my mom. And she completely supported me doing whatever I was comfortable with. She… essentially was like, ‘I trust your judgment, and I know I raised you well, and I trust you to make good decisions for yourself.’

This is a safe power dynamic because her mom trusts her and her decisions. Her mother supports her, and she does not have to worry about being cut off and losing her family.

The other version of a safe parental power dynamic is where the parent no longer holds power over their child and cannot economically hurt their child if they disapprove of their child working as an online sex worker. When discussing disclosing one’s occupation as a sex worker, Malachite, a 25-year-old nonbinary Asian, gave a grave warning.

I would be really wary of doing it, if you like, live with your family and they're not supportive of it. [I: Mhm] Because I have heard about people who've been like, kicked out of their home before um, because they were like, financially relying on their family, but then they didn't um, support their sex work so, then they were like- cut off… [I: yeah] from them.

When power dynamics are not safe, online workers must be prepared to be cut off, so many who want to disclose to unaccepting families must ensure that they are self-sufficient or risk their
family condemning them to poverty. Malachite also noted that because they were no longer
dependent on their family they were in a safer place “And as for my family- my family does not
know [laughs] and I don't want them to know. [I: Okay] But also, I'm like, financially
independent enough to be able to be fine if they do find out and disapprove.” The overwhelming
consensus among participants was to not disclose unless it was safe to do so or to prepare for
severe social and economic repercussions. Though especially potent with the familial audience,
safe power dynamics are needed to some degree for disclosure to any audience.

Non-Sex Workers

Proven Support and Safety are Needed

Online sex workers need allies for support, and often this means disclosing to close
friends. Take Peridot, a 27-year-old white woman, for example; only her partner knew about her
job at first, but after making a large sum of money in a short amount of time, she had to tell her
best friend.

I just think I was shocked, ‘cause one day in like, two hours, I made $200, and so I was
like, “I need to tell somebody this!” Like, this is exciting! And so I texted my best friend
and I just told her, I was like, “Hey, can I tell you something crazy?” And she's like
“Yeah, of course!” And I’m like, “You won't judge me, right?” you know, and she's like,
“No, no, no,” and so I told her, I was like, “Well, I just started - decided to do sex work,”
and I told her how I cam and all that stuff, and she was like, “What, no way, that's crazy,
give me details!” You know, so she was into it, she, she- that was very nice that she
supported me.
In nearly all cases, participants had disclosed their occupation to their best friend. These safe relationships are instrumental for an online sex worker’s wellbeing. They are able to exist as their true selves with their close friends and not go through the stress and isolation associated with living a double life.

Several participants mentioned that they had strategies to determine if someone was a safe person to come out. For example, Amethyst said that “You just have to test the waters, I guess, to like find out, you know.” These tests often consisted of gauging a person’s reaction to certain events. Citrine, a 26-year-old gender-fluid mixed-race person, made sure that their friends were leftist feminist and anti-racist to ensure that they were safe for disclosure, and Amethyst assessed others’ acceptance of more traditional sex work, such as stripping. Though this adds a lot of emotional labor for online sex workers, it is necessary if they want to safely be out. Their best friends are some of their greatest allies.

*The Shortcomings of Allies*

Unfortunately, disclosing that one is an online sex worker can be risky; even if they trust a friend that they disclosed to, allies can fall short in a myriad of ways. Allies have not been through the same experiences as online sex workers and therefore could never truly understand the experience of being an online sex worker. Garnet noted that her non-sex work friends were not good for practical advice about sex work.

I think that, um, for very like, specific, like, OnlyFans or shoot-related things I would, um, probably not, like, go to my friends immediately because, like, they- not a lot of them also do it, so they like, don't understand.
Due to the nuances that come with the online sex work experience, there is an additional barrier in the form of the emotional labor necessary to explain the occupation and the skill needed for a non-sex worker to understand specific situations. Additionally, allies may accidentally or unintentionally dox their online sex worker friends. Quartz, a 24-year-old white woman, said, "It bothers me when my friends tell people without my permission, because I don't always know those people, or how they will react, or how that will affect my, you know, interactions with them down the line.” This takes the power out of the hands of the online sex worker and opens them up to facing further stigma from sources they may not be prepared to face it from. This all stems from allies not really ‘getting it’. Emerald sums up this problem succinctly by saying,

Nobody really quite understands it like someone else who does it, so um, having a group of people you can talk to you… in the same industry is-is definitely, probably, the most helpful really because, you know, your friends and family can support you all they want, but they don't really get it until they've done it.

No matter how well-meaning an ally is, they will not understand until they have been through the same experience and have faced the same social pressures as those who have worked as online sex workers.

**Sex Workers**

*Close Friends Through Work are Shaped and Strengthened by Stigma*

Online sex workers tend to make close friends who are also online sex workers. Amethyst proudly proclaimed this sentiment by saying, “I love all of my friends that I've met through sex work, like I’d take a bullet for these bitches, like I love them to death.” Jade further echoed this sentiment by saying, “We talk every day, they're like, I consider them some of my
best friends, and I've never even met them. Um, and I can just go to them about anything.” Real and authentic relationships are formed from this job, and there is nothing held back in these friendships because both parties understand each other’s experiences. Online sex workers can talk to each other the same ways that they would a close friend. There is a closeness and a kinship among online sex workers.

_Competition is No Excuse for a Forced Outing_

Despite the tightly knit community that online sex workers have made with each other, there is still some animosity between online sex workers, and ideological or personal differences can create division within the community. Even when online sex workers are experiencing conflict with each other, it is clearly taboo to dox another. Peridot’s partner’s ex was a sex worker who learned of Peridot’s identity. Peridot’s partner’s ex took issue with Peridot dating her former partner and had decided to stalk and bully Peridot, using others to aid in this pressure.

They really, like, they attacked me really bad, I actually even went to Stripchat, um, uh, customer service and- and tried to have, at least, me blocked from the other girl because she was taking screenshots of my profile, um, definitely sharing my pictures, saying that I’m her ex-boyfriend’s new girlfriend, um, and, you know, some of them did know me in real life and started talking about real life experiences that they had… supposedly had with me, um, you know, and tried saying… personal things. They never really said my name- my actual name, which I’m grateful for.

Despite the bullying that Peridot had to endure, she was never doxed. The clear implication of these events is that it is taboo online sex workers to dox each other. Competition and personal vendetta may breed much animosity and split the online sex work community but forced
WHO TO TELL?

disclosure seems to be off limits. There is a clear understanding of the power that doxing has that many people who are not online sex workers may not understand. When an online sex worker discloses their occupation, it is impactful choice because they are opening themselves up to stigma.

**Discussion**

Online sex work is a stigmatized profession where meticulous management of one’s social media and the creation of a persona is considered by many to be necessary. This is because of the potential rejection, aggression, abandonment and discrimination, that online sex workers may face. Online sex workers will often not disclose to families with traditional conservative values because of the potential social, emotional, and financial costs of disclosure. They may also avoid disclosing to their families as a mercy to them, sparing their kin from possible negative feelings about their work. Familial disclosures almost always happen in safe power dynamics, whether these dynamics are accepting parents, siblings with less power over them, or parents that they no longer rely on. When disclosing to other non sex workers, online sex workers will need proven support and safety, often ensuring this by testing the waters and disclosing to those they trust, like their best friends. Even still, allies don’t always ‘get it’ and they may fall short. With fellow online sex workers, disclosure led to close friendships that have been strengthened by shared experiences. These friendships provide both emotional and practical support. Even when two online sex workers are experiencing conflict, they understand the power of disclosure and seem resistant to outing one another when they know each other’s identities.

Online sex workers face similar forms of stigma when disclosing their occupation as those who have LGBTQ+ identities face when disclosing their identities. Like with LGBTQ+
identities, online sex workers, faced the prospect of employment discrimination if they decided to publicly disclose. Fears about being treated as a second-class citizen are all too common when it comes to disclosure. When people with either identity chose not to publicly disclose, they mainly do this by selectively disclosing their identity to some and not talking about their identities to others. This compartmentalization of oneself can lead to one living a double life, unable to disclose their complete identity to many, which can cause psychological stress, role conflict, and the fear of being outed by another (Ragins, 2008).

The patterns that the participants followed regarding living a double life was consistent on literature relating to other stigmatized identities such as having a mental illness, having a criminal record, or being a member of a minority religion, and LGBTQ+ identities (Ragins, 2008). However, the effect of a double life has more effects than the standard psychological distress that comes with concealing one’s identity. The added wrinkle of their persona being intrinsically connected to their double life makes the double life monetarily beneficial and may even allow for a safe exploration of themselves as sexual beings. To be successful in the online sex work industry involves using social media to advertise their work. Effective use of social media and marketing themselves or their persona is crucial, but it can also be a risk to anonymity. Increased exposure to gain more clients also means a greater risk for accidental disclosure. This tension must be navigated by people who work as online sex workers if they wish to stay safe and successful. In addition to the tension between navigating safety of anonymity and the risks of advertising, an online sex worker also must navigate the tension between the enjoyable aspects of a persona and the detriments of living a double life.

Familial responses to online sex work and LGBTQ+ disclosure are strikingly similar. Unsurprisingly both groups are less likely to make their identity known in conservative
households due to the potentially intense and life altering backlash that they may receive. Both identities also may attempt to spare their families, from their identity. Both identities tend to come out in safer family dynamics, this can manifest as coming out to a sibling, coming out in families with longstanding histories of acceptance, or families where the person coming out is no longer dependent on their family. Coming out in a safe family dynamic is in both identities a matter of keeping ones self-safe.

Both online sex workers and LGBTQ+ people are likely to disclose their identities to their best friends who usually do not share the stigmatized identity. In both cases these friendships are incredibly important to the person with the stigmatized identity, and provide a space in which one can be their true self and not live the double life that they normally live in. Getting to this point, of course, takes trust.

Sharing one’s true self with others like themselves has, in the case of online sex workers, formed a tight-knit community, that shares some similarities with LGBTQ+ individuals. Most notably these communities and the friendships that are formed in and shaped by the stigma that keeps individuals from disclosing to others. In these spaces individuals are able to be their true selves, and do not have to live double lives, they are surrounded by people who ‘get it’. There is an acceptance and a reasonable expectation of safety in theses spaces. Because of this understanding in both the LGBTQ+ community and in the online sex work community, it is extremely taboo to forcibly out someone.

Though there are many similarities between LGBTQ+ individuals coming out of the closet and online sex workers disclosing their occupations there are also a few major differences. The first and most apparent difference is that an LGBTQ+ identity is an identity whereas online sex work is an occupation. The onset of these identities, the permanence of these identities, and
what the identity entail are all different. It is important to note that even though there may be social pressures that make sex work the most viable option for survival, working as a sex worker is still a choice in a way that an LGBTQ+ identity is not.

Additionally, differing from LGBTQ+ experiences, there is very little activism going on to help protect and bolster online sex workers. Only a handful of participants mentioned that they had or wanted to do any sort of political or activist work to help limit the stigma that makes disclosure so difficult. There is the existence of promotional messaging chains among workers, but aside from this there were no mentions of any organized efforts to create systemic change to benefit the workers within the industry and society at large. In fact, the lack of workers’ protection provided on OnlyFans and from the federal government served to make life more difficult for online sex workers. The abuses that online sex workers can suffer are exacerbated by the stigma against them disclosing and can only be remitted by activism. The lack of activism work in online sex work is a large departure from those with LGBTQ+ identities, who have a longstanding tradition of political activism and organizing efforts to bring about equality (Schope, 2002).

Though OnlyFans and online sex work has been in the pop culture consciousness for the duration of the pandemic, this work is still largely invisible while simultaneously being highly stigmatized. Traditional discourses regarding sex work and sex workers rights tend to revolve around in person sex work, usually prostitution, and ignore online sex work. For example, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver recently had a piece on sex work and how it needs to be decriminalized that entirely ignored the existence of online sex work, therefore leaving their viewpoints and lived experiences out of this important conversation (Last Week Tonight, 2022). Because of the invisibility of online sex work there is an additional barrier to disclosing their
occupation. An online sex worker must face the stigma of disclosing their occupation while simultaneously having to explain their occupation to someone who may reject them anyways, adding to the emotional labor that is necessary for one to disclose a stigmatized part of themselves in the first place.

**Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research**

All data was collected between April 4th 2021 and September 11th 2021; as such, the data we gained was uniquely colored by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many participants had to rely on OnlyFans for their livelihoods in order to stay safe from both economic pressures and physical dangers. Additionally, there was a large number of people who were suddenly working as online sex workers. Participants described OnlyFans, the main website that our participants used, as oversaturated with online sex workers. This over saturation brought hardship and could color the disclosure experiences of some of participants. However, there was also an influx of clients in this time leading to some online sex workers becoming more financially stable, this may have also affected online sex workers disclosure experiences. The hardship or prosperity that was brought on by the pandemic affected the participants personal lives by changing their employment or living situations, adding another factor to their disclosure experiences.

Additionally in this time, OnlyFans briefly announced that they would be no longer supporting sex work on their platform, though this decision was reversed due to public backlash from both sex workers and users of the platform. The intense stigma against online sex work and the effects of the pandemic may have affected all aspects of this project from recruitment, the interviews, and the analysis of this data.

Interestingly, all of our participants identified as bisexual or pansexual, except for one who was questioning her sexuality. Additionally, four of the participants identified as non-
binary. The United States Census Bureau (2021) tells us that in the general population we can expect to see 4.4% people to identify as bisexual and 0.6% people identifying as transgender (the survey was not more specific than this), suggesting that LGBTQ+ identities were overrepresented in our sample. Future research should investigate the proportion of people who are gender and sexuality minorities who are working as online sex workers, why they were drawn to online sex work, and their experiences as gender and sexuality minorities in the field of online sex work.

The patterns of disclosure identified in the literature review for LGBTQ+ identities were mostly followed by online sex workers. These patterns of disclosure may continue to hold up with other invisible stigmatized identities that may not be shared by one’s family, such as those disclosing that they have been sexually assaulted or have had an abortion. Further investigation of invisible stigmatized identities is needed to better understand the lived experiences of those who have an invisible stigmatized identity. Furthermore, the generalized three audience model of family, those who do not share my identity, and those who share my identity, may be helpful in analyzing the lived experiences of other invisible stigmatized groups, such as having a mental illness, having a criminal record, being a member of a minority religion, having an abortion, or surviving a sexual assault.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the disclosure experiences of women and non-binary online sex workers. Throughout the analysis of the interview data, it became apparent that the generalized three audience framework, family, those unlike me, and those like me, was valuable in better understanding disclosures of invisible stigmatized identities. Because of this model, we were able to notice several similarities in the disclosure experiences of online sex
workers and LGBTQ+ identities. Additionally, 14 out of our 15 participants identified as LGBTQ+. Perhaps due to the similar stigmas the two communities face LGBTQ+ people would have an easier time handling the stigmas of disclosure because they have experience with disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity or perhaps those who have navigated sexuality outside of the heteronormative mainstream may be more comfortable with online sex work.

This research highlighted the importance of online sex workers having the space and opportunity to share and disclose their experiences; with each audience, anticipating acceptance and safety contributed to coming out. To push back against stigma that online sex workers face and to create safe disclosure environments, the online sex work community must increase its political presence to earn protections and normalize their jobs. This could include forming a sex workers’ union and promoting policies that support all sex workers (both online and in-person) as well as comparable internet-based occupations, such as influencers, streamers, and YouTube personalities. For example, increased access to high-quality healthcare is critical for sex workers and entrepreneurs who participate in the online gig economy. Furthermore, discrimination based on sex work participation should be illegal; employees should not be fired or not hired based on the stigmas their employer or potential employer has around online sex work. The elimination of employ at-will or an expansion of the protections for an employee’s off-duty activities would lessen the potentially detrimental economic impacts of disclosure. Finally, allies are critical partners in political action. To start, allies must provide safe spaces by creating online spaces where sex workers can freely talk without fear of stigma and destigmatizing the job through awareness-raising. Other content creators (e.g., influencers) could use their platform to advocate for the rights of online sex workers and content creators as a whole. Simply having good faith conversations about online sex work and showing oneself to be a safe person to talk to is the
simplest and most immediate way to help lessen the stigmas of disclosures for online sex work and invisible stigmatized identities at large.
References


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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gd8yUptg0Q


Appendix A

Question list

Icebreaker Question

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Now I’m going to ask you a few questions about your background.

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 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
1. 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.
   
   **If needed:** At what age did you begin online sex work?

D. How have your experiences changed since you began online sex work?
   
   **If needed:** Have the online platforms changed?
   
   **If needed:** Has your work routine changed?

E. Do you use an alias, or an online persona?
   
   **If yes,** what kind of factors went into creating your persona?
   
   **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?
   
   **If needed:** Do you market your online sex work on other public platforms – Instagram, Snapchat?
   
   **If needed:** Are there things that you do to prepare for work?
2. 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

3. How would you describe the benefits of your work?

4. 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?

-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

5. 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 doxxing, capping, trolls? (explain terms if needed- see below)
“capping”, or “capturing”, in which images or videos are recorded without permission, “doxxing”, in which workers’ identifiable information is hacked by clients (commonly referred to as “trolls”) and used to harass or stalk them (Jones, 2016).

- **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?

- **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?)

- **If needed**: Are there things that you do to wind down after work?

E. Tell me about some things you like to do to take care of yourself?

F. How would you describe the impact of your work on your social life?

G. 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**

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

**Follow Ups:**
WHO TO TELL?

A. What are some examples of positive experiences with subscribers?

   -If needed: Fetishes, Increased Self-image, Body image

B. What are some examples of negative experiences with subscribers?

   -If needed: Fetishes, Challenging, Discomfort

7. Can you talk to me about the competition in the industry?

   Follow Ups:

   A. Racial/gender/sexual orientation/weight/age/ableism biases?

   B. How does that impact you?

   -If needed: your sense of self/your body/ your work/ your income?

Final Question

8. Do you feel there are any questions that I should have asked, but I did not?

9. If you could tell the world anything about your work, what would you want them to know?