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“I’m Not Just a Sex Robot”: Perceptions of Stigma in Online Sex Workers

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Psychology

Bridgewater State University

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate online sex workers' perceptions of stigma. Due to the increase in OnlyFans creators associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, these creators' perceptions of stigma were of particular interest. Fifteen participants were interviewed, and themes were developed using thematic analysis. Three themes were identified, corresponding with findings regarding societal, interpersonal, and internalized stigma: 'Persistent Judgement,' 'Strengthened and Severed Ties,' and 'Levels of Shame.' Much of these findings echoed past research, but participants experienced unique manifestations of stigma as well— notably, participants reported navigating strict censorship on social media and often faced the misconception that online sex work in particular was 'easy money.' However, every participant had a support system of some kind with whom they could confide in regarding their sex work. Additionally, these participants were not ashamed of their work; they did not look down on other sex workers, and many felt pride in their occupation. Acceptance among friends, some family, and participants themselves could point towards changing attitudes, but U.S. policy is still overwhelmingly against sex work; policy changes will need to accompany these social changes for sex work to be truly destigmatized.

*Keywords:* sex work, online sex work, stigma, OnlyFans

### **“I’m Not Just a Sex Robot”: Perceptions of Stigma in Online Sex Workers**

‘Dirty work,’ as first described by Hughes (1958), is a profession or set of tasks within a profession which plays a necessary role in society, but which is underappreciated or, often, viewed with contempt by that same society at large. Some forms of ‘dirty work’ derive their disgust from workers and outsiders alike with a physical unsanitary element, as is the case with professions such as garbage collection; others do so from a perception that the work is somehow morally tainted or beneath socially accepted, ‘clean’ work (Hughes, 1958). Sex work, here broadly defined as any exchange of sexual services for monetary compensation, is an example of the latter. Contributing to sex work’s moral weight even within the context of ‘dirty work’ is the taboo nature of sexuality—even non-monetary sexual relations are ascribed moral weight, with monogamous, heterosexual sex upheld as the virtuous comparison point to which all expressions of sexuality are compared. Sex work, in our society, lies at the intersection of these two sources of degradation, representative of both socially devalued work and socially unacceptable sexual practice (Mavin & Grandy, 2013).

Despite—or, perhaps, because of—the stigma around sex work, the sex industry was augmented by the widespread availability of the internet, which allowed for sexual services to be advertised online. Full-service sex workers who perform their services offline, as well as venues for in-person indirect forms of sex work (e.g., strip clubs, for exotic dancers), can advertise their services online (Döring, 2009). For the former, online management of their sex work allows sex workers to improve their working conditions, using the internet to screen clients and maintain databases of harmful clients (Campbell et al., 2019). Based on analysis of both arrests for street solicitation of full-service sex work and numbers of online reviews of sex workers, Cunningham and Kendall (2011) demonstrate that the introduction of the internet to the sex trade has resulted

not in a movement of street-based sex workers to the online sphere but an expansion of the overall market, with more sex workers entering the industry and working online from the start. In line with Cunningham and Kendall's (2011) analysis of the expansion of the full-service market, the internet has also enabled indirect sex work. Alongside augmenting the markets for pornography production and distribution, the internet has made live erotic webcam shows possible as well (Döring, 2009).

In a sense, the ease at which sex work can be arranged and conducted online has contributed to the normalization of the profession, as MacPhail and colleagues' (2015) examination of the Australian male escort advertisement scene on the internet suggests. In giving the average person easy access to sexual services, they argue, the industry has been pulled forward from the margins of society. The wide demographic variety of male sex workers, too, runs contrary to older stereotypes about men in the industry—MacPhail and colleagues' (2015) sample was diverse in age, income, and achieved education, giving less credence to the stereotype that male sex workers are young, working in desperation, and vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of older clients. MacPhail and colleagues refer to this normalization of male sex work as a “silent cultural revolution” (2015, p. 492), with society as a whole shifting from viewing sex work as a social problem to viewing the industry in a similar light as any other market.

When considering MacPhail and colleagues' (2015) findings, however, it is crucial to recognize the particularities of their sample. They examined male sex workers exclusively, for one—the stigma against whom, they emphasize, stems not only from the sale of sex being a cultural taboo but from homophobia as well (MacPhail et al., 2015). Further, the location of their sample was Australia, where, as acknowledged in MacPhail and colleagues' (2015) article,

several regions have decriminalized or legalized sex work. These conditions allowed Australian sex workers to unionize and receive legal protection from the dangers typically associated with their profession (MacPhail et al., 2015). This is a much different context than sex work in the United States, where policies outlawing consensual sex work remain in place in most of the country, even tightening in recent years.

In recent years, the U.S. Congress passed the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (2018), commonly known as FOSTA-SESTA (“Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act-Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act”). This bill amends the Communications Act of 1934 to make websites liable for sex trafficking and prostitution enabled through their services. The bill makes no distinction between trafficking and consensual ‘prostitution,’ using the terms interchangeably. In Reynolds’ (2020) analysis of news reporting about sex work and sex-related crimes, specifically those mediated through Craigslist, in the thirteen years leading up to the passage of FOSTA-SESTA, sex work was continuously framed as a moral issue in need of eradication. The term ‘sex worker,’ considered more value-neutral than the term ‘prostitute,’ only began to appear in major news outlets around 2010. Much media coverage from Reynolds’ (2020) sample perpetuated the idea of consensual sex work as a crime in itself, frequently reporting on and glorifying police stings to catch sex workers in the act. Other articles, reflecting excessive reporting on sex trafficking and violence against sex workers, took a stance that would consider ‘consensual sex work’ an oxymoron. Women and girls—sex workers of other genders rarely being acknowledged—were assumed to have been forced into the industry, victimized by clients, their managing ‘pimps,’ and by websites such as Craigslist which allowed sexual services to be advertised. Some articles even referred to Craigslist itself and its founder as a ‘pimp’ (Reynolds, 2020). Ironically, in the years leading up to FOSTA-SESTA, reporters would

condemn sex workers for their work in the same breath as they would begin an article with sensuous description of workers' clothing. Even articles detailing the experiences of genuine trafficking victims would fall back on this tendency to emphasize sex appeal (Reynolds, 2020). The subjects of these articles were simultaneously treated as morally bankrupt—or helpless victims, depending on the context—and as mere sex objects.

It is crucial to note that the conclusions drawn by reporters and lawmakers alike do not correspond with the input of sex workers themselves. After fifteen years of interviews with sex workers, Blanchette and colleagues (2021) found that the sentiment that sex work, even entered consensually, was more exploitative than other socially degraded jobs (e.g., domestic work, manual labor) was simply not commonly echoed by sex workers. In addition to sex work often being more lucrative than typical low wage 'unskilled' labor, participants in Blanchette and colleagues' (2021) research felt more power as sex workers compared to their past employment and their perceptions of workers in other fields. With regards to FOSTA-SESTA, a sex worker-led survey conducted in 2020 found that the effects of the law on sex workers were far from protective. Through censorship, the bill pushed sex workers out of the safety strategies and communities they had developed, creating danger rather than mitigating it as workers were forced to find ways to continue their work without these strategies (Blunt & Wolf, 2020).

### **Interpersonal and Internalized Manifestations of Stigma**

Blanchette and colleagues' (2021) findings, that sex workers overwhelmingly found their work both personally empowering and financially beneficial, do not mean that sex workers have had no problems with their work. The job in itself, like any job, comes with stressors, stemming from aspects of sex work such as the social, intimate nature of it. For instance, exotic dancers must be receptive of clients' needs and desires from an interaction (Mavin & Grandy, 2013),

escorts often must not only provide sexual services but companionship as well (Koken, 2012), and the social nature of sex work is such that job satisfaction can depend on the mutual respect between workers and clients (Pitcher, 2018). Beyond these intrinsic stressors, however, is an abundance of job-related stress connected to the stigmatized status of sex work. It is this stigma, not the aforementioned social demands, that makes many sex workers feel they must hide their involvement in the sex industry from their loved ones (Koken, 2012; Pitcher, 2018) or struggle to imagine a smooth transition from their current employment to a ‘mainstream’ job (Koken, 2012; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Pitcher, 2018). Among escorts involved in prior research, the idea that their history with sex work would prevent them from entering other careers if revealed to potential employers frequently came up (Koken, 2012; Pitcher, 2018).

The cost of this stigma can be staggering—in escorts’ personal lives, Koken (2012) found that participants who hid their careers from those they were close to had less social support as a result, leading to lower job satisfaction than those who fully ‘came out’ as sex workers and were met with support. Participants in Koken’s (2012) and Pitcher’s (2018) samples were acutely aware of the stigma against their field, believing that the public saw only the worst qualities of their work portrayed in the media (Pitcher, 2018) and wishing to advocate for themselves and other sex workers (Koken, 2012). For the exotic dancers interviewed in Mavin and Grandy’s (2013) study, however, stigma drove them against one another. Coping with stigma often entailed making downward social comparisons with other dancers, portraying themselves as above those who, for example, intended to work as exotic dancers indefinitely rather than temporarily.

Even online, indirect sex work is not immune to the effects of stigma. Online indirect sex workers often find themselves at the receiving end of verbal harassment (Campbell et al., 2019)



as well as ‘capping,’ short for ‘capturing,’ where clients may record and redistribute a sex worker’s content without consent or compensation, and ‘doxxing,’ where someone uncovers another internet user’s—a sex worker’s, in this case—personal information and reveals it to the public (Jones, 2016). Particularly, harassment and doxxing highlight the stigma against sex work and how it persists even in the indirect sphere. For harassment, clients and uninvolved parties alike would not be compelled to harass online sex workers if they did not believe that sex work warranted this type of response. Doxxing demonstrates not only individual bad actors’ intent to violate sex workers’ privacy, but the fact that stigma against sex work is prevalent enough that revealing a worker’s involvement in the sex industry is a viable threat to their safety. Notably, doxxing is also no simple task for the perpetrator. Whether information is gathered through outright hacking or thorough searching through ‘legitimate’ means (Jones, 2016), the perpetrator must be motivated by significant disdain for a sex worker. The prevalence of doxxing in the erotic webcamming communities Jones (2016) examined implies that the disdain can stem from nothing more than the very fact that a sex worker is a sex worker.

In Jones’ (2016) investigation of erotic webcam forums, she also found an attitude among webcam models that these three notable dangers are normal and practically intrinsic to being an online, indirect sex worker. The consensus in these forums was that it is the responsibility of individual sex workers to prevent doxxing by keeping their personal information thoroughly hidden and that capping and online harassment were a matter of accepting and ignoring the issue. This reveals a tendency among users of these forums to blame sex workers who find themselves dealing with these risks, believing that those who are bothered by these behaviors do not have the willpower to continue webcamming, which Jones (2016) discusses as a manifestation of individualistic attitudes. Within the context of sex work as a stigmatized profession, the

normalization of harassment and—as presented by doxxing—potential exposure to danger among even webcam models themselves also shows a tendency to internalize the idea that they, as sex workers, are inviting this disrespect by simply doing their work.

While the webcam models Jones (2016) investigated show this tendency to normalize manifestations of anti-sex work stigma, other forms of online sex workers distance themselves from the label of ‘sex worker.’ Nayar’s (2017) sample of ‘sugar daters’, investigated via comments found on the sugar dating platform SeekingArrangement (recently renamed Seeking), is an example of this. In these arrangements, ‘sugar babies,’ often young women, provide both emotional and physical intimacy to their often older ‘sugar daddies’ (or, sometimes, ‘sugar mamas’), who give either monetary or material gifts in exchange. Nayar (2017) found that these sugar daters struck a balance between authentic intimacy and structured financial exchange, avoiding the former due to the unpredictability of romance but also avoiding the latter as to establish sugar dating as something different than sex work. In fact, some sugar babies in the sample explicitly stated that they avoid going about sugar dating in a way that made them feel like escorts. Sugar daters on both sides of the arrangement sometimes looked down upon sugar babies who explicitly valued the monetary exchange over the intimacy (Nayar, 2017).

### **COVID-19 and the Popularity of OnlyFans**

OnlyFans, a website allowing content creators to offer exclusive content to paying subscribers, has seen success even in the era of free, unlimited access to pornography online. It offers consumers a degree of control over the content received and direct connections with creators, something a pre-recorded scene on a ‘tube’ site cannot (Bernstein, 2019). It has been around since 2016 (Bernstein, 2019), but grew in popularity with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 (López, 2020). Due to lockdown measures taken when COVID-19 was

declared a pandemic, many people lost their jobs and needed a way to make money from home. As so many people were losing their previous jobs, OnlyFans and similar websites saw a dramatic increase in creator sign-ups (López, 2020).

An *Insider* article (López, 2020) reported on the circumstances of a former full-service sex worker and a woman who worked as an exotic dancer at night, both of whom became OnlyFans creators after the pandemic made their in-person work too unsafe. They were just two of the many sex workers who came to OnlyFans from the need for something to replace their in-person sex work. Sex workers, however, were far from the only people who needed to find remote sources of income as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Cunningham and Kendell (2011), again, found that the emergence of sex work's online sector introduced new workers to the sex industry—with this in mind, it is not a surprise that the necessity for remote work, combined with the newfound popularity of OnlyFans, undoubtedly influenced people who had never done any form of sex work to sign up. Regardless of how many new sex workers have entered the field, the extent to which OnlyFans has increased its userbase due to the pandemic has pushed online sex work into the public consciousness.

With this in mind, the increased exposure the average social media user has to online sex workers may have had an effect on those workers' experiences of stigma. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of intergroup contact experiments shows that contact with outgroups has a significant negative effect on prejudice, an effect found across studies regarding group difference including that in race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability. More recently, research regarding electronic contact with outgroups, such as Boccanfuso and colleagues' (2021) experiment involving simulated contact with transgender people, has shown promising results in reducing prejudice in participants who scored high on self-report measures of such. However,

these experiments often involve structured contact between groups, where equal status is created and participants often work with outgroup members towards a common goal (Boccanfuso et al., 2021; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), conditions not always present on social media platforms where the general public is likely to be exposed to online sex workers. While these results on structured intergroup contact are encouraging, less structured exposure to members of another group may have a weaker or even counterproductive effect. For example, Lebrecht and colleagues (2009) found that training white adults to differentiate between African American faces reduced their implicit racial bias but merely being exposed to the same faces did not. Similarly, Ben-Ezra and colleagues (2017) found that participants exposed to a video clip showing a person with Tourette syndrome in a neutral light reported higher levels of stigma towards people with the disorder than did a control group.

If the prevalence of online sex work due to OnlyFans' popularity has made the average person more likely to make contact with a sex worker, online sex workers right now may be perceiving minimal stigma, feeling accepted by society for their work. Conversely, if OnlyFans' popularity has merely made sex work more visible without creating those connections, online sex workers may be experiencing high levels of stigma today. Using data from a qualitative, interview-based study regarding the experiences of online sex workers, this thesis aims to answer the question of how online sex workers in the COVID-19 pandemic era experience and perceive stigma against their field, originating from society, from the people they interact with daily, and from within themselves.

## Method

### Research Team

This thesis draws from the dataset of a larger study with broader research questions exploring motivations, benefits, and tolls of online sex work. The larger study was developed by the professors and students of an undergraduate research course, but much of the data collection and analysis was conducted by a smaller group of five students, including myself, and three professors. This smaller team was all white; our professors were all women, while the student group consisted of three women, one man, and one non-binary person. The gender breakdown of our team resembled that of the sample, consisting mostly of women with a few exceptions, but our racial breakdown differed; the sample mostly consisted of white participants but, unlike our research team, did contain some participants of color. None of us had personal experience with sex work, online or otherwise, and we often needed to consider how our own perspectives influenced how we interpreted the data. Occasionally, our perspectives differed as we discussed our interpretations of the data—one member of the team seeing an experience as empowering while another interpreted it as degrading, for example—and we needed to consider how our own perspectives may have affected our interpretations.

I, the author of this thesis, am a white non-binary person. Like my research team, I had no personal experience with sex work of any form. I, however, was familiar with the community of sex workers that exists on the internet; as an outsider, I have seen and sometimes helped to amplify the voices of sex workers asserting their rights on social media, and I was familiar with and supportive of sex workers' advocacy for destigmatization and decriminalization of their field prior to conducting this research. Further, I witnessed firsthand the increase in OnlyFans'

popularity in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though I did not know any online sex workers personally.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited first through personal contacts and then through snowball sampling. Towards the end of the recruitment effort, we advertised the study via research team members' social media accounts as well, though this strategy did not lead anyone to participate; as a result, the only participants were the initial contacts and those who were recruited by other participants. The inclusion criteria for participants included being 18 or older and having some experience with online erotic labor. We also restricted this study to female and non-binary participants because of our research collaborative's interest in conducting research through a feminist lens; because of our focus, we wished to center the perspectives of women and non-binary people. The recruitment materials and initial intentions specified OnlyFans as the platform in use, but participants in practice used a variety of online sex work platforms, including those similar to OnlyFans as well as camming websites such as MyFreeCams.

Participants ( $N = 15$ ) were interviewed between April and July of 2021. Eleven participants identified as female and four identified as non-binary or gender non-conforming. All were designated female at birth. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 33 ( $M = 24$ ,  $SD = 3.44$ ). Participants were asked to self-identify their race or ethnicity; ten identified as white or Caucasian, one as Asian, two as Hispanic/Latinx—one participant specifying Brazilian, and one Mexican—and two as mixed-race, both specifying Black and white. One participant self-identified as both white and Hispanic/Latinx. All but one participant currently or previously used OnlyFans, ten as their primary online sex work platform; the one remaining participant used a website that was primarily designed to facilitate phone sex. This website offered similar features

to OnlyFans as well, such as the option to sell photographic content. Six participants had experience with some degree of in-person sex work: two participants were dancers at strip clubs, two had experience with erotic or nude modeling, one was transitioning to acting in mainstream pornography, and one had been a full-service sex worker in the past. Following data collection, the research team gave each participant a pseudonym based on a gemstone.

### **Interviews**

An interview guide (see the Appendix) was developed consisting of demographic questions and questions regarding participants' history with online sex work, their motivations for entering the field, the benefits and tolls they experienced while performing online sex work, and their interactions with subscribers and clients. Several of our questions were developed directly from our research questions, such as those which asked broadly about motivations, benefits, and tolls of online sex work. Others stemmed from past research; for example, we were informed by Jones' (2016) investigation of erotic webcam forums when we asked about participants' experiences with doxxing, harassment, and theft of content. Through discussion amongst the members of the research team, the interview guide coalesced to form nine basic questions, with optional follow-up questions. The short interview guide was developed to better suit our data collection format of semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Interviewers were encouraged to probe for more information or ask original questions when appropriate, as well as to allow participants to speak for as long as they wished when responding to any question. This study received Institutional Review Board approval.

Potential participants were contacted by email to determine if they were interested in being interviewed. If a potential participant replied with interest, an interviewer sent the participant a written consent form and arranged a date and time for the interview to take place. Interviews

were conducted over Zoom, as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and, for some participants, physical distance prevented in-person interviews. Once a date and time were arranged, the interviewer sent the participant a Zoom link (<https://zoom.us/>). The interviewer configured their Zoom settings in advance to save recordings to the cloud, to record audio only, and to generate a transcript. In the interview, the first thing the interviewer did was receive the participant's verbal consent to participate in the study. Upon initial verbal consent, the interviewer began by asking participants demographic questions, soon transitioning into questions related to participants' experiences with sex work. While our interview guide was not written with intent to prompt life history narratives, participants often gave detailed histories of their time as sex workers and discussed their backgrounds. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent, but never video recorded, even if the interviewer and/or participant had their cameras turned on during the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to data analysis, interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were first automatically generated from the audio file, either through Zoom's transcription technology or through a third-party software, Otter.ai (<https://otter.ai/>). Members of the research team then edited the auto-generated transcript for accuracy and redacted sensitive information such as the participant's name and exact location. Another researcher then double-checked the completed transcript, making edits where necessary.

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2013). We applied open coding to the first completed transcripts, where each researcher read through the transcripts and marked any pieces of data potentially relevant to our research questions regarding online sex workers' motivations and experiences of benefits and tolls. At this stage, the



only criteria for coding were that a passage related in some way to the research questions and felt important to take note of. We met as a group to discuss our preliminary codes, reading through the transcripts together and stopping to point out passages we had coded. We discussed the meanings of our data, settled disagreements, and kept track of trends within and between participants. Given that we conducted this research as a team it was necessary to reach agreement and consensus on coding. To facilitate coding by multiple members of our team, we developed a codebook as a method of organizing and keeping track of trends. This process differs from the strictly reflexive open coding described by Braun and Clarke (2013). We tested our developed list of codes for relevance and reliability through further discussion of disagreements, attempting to apply the codes to our data; we did not use statistical tests to establish interrater reliability. We agreed upon and defined 45 codes. Two examples of defined codes are *stigma*, defined as “passages in which a participant expresses their experience concerning the systemic prejudice against sex work,” and *empowerment*, defined as “passages in which participants express that they have gained a sense of pride, self-worth, and/or self-sufficiency through their online sex work.”

We developed themes by categorizing our codes by common threads between them, often across the pre-existing categories of “mechanics,” “motivations,” “benefits,” and “tolls.” As our codes often could be applied to the same concept in a variety of contexts, a single code could be applied to multiple themes, with different instances of coded passages deemed relevant to different themes. For example, *platform utilization* refers to the different ways online sex workers use not only their preferred content-sharing platforms but other social media platforms as part of their work. This code is included under several themes, including *Sex Work is Work* for

its use to describe daily work tasks of sex workers and *Navigating the Online Sex Work Scene* for when it describes the online work environment participants navigate.

For this thesis, themes were developed in a similar but distinct way to the themes for the larger project. Using the defined codes as a starting point, I sorted those codes deemed relevant to online sex workers' perceptions of stigma into three groups based on whether they related to stigma on a societal, interpersonal, or internalized level. From this structure, I referred back to the data and collected passages relevant to experiences of stigma on all three levels. I then looked for more specific patterns across those passages, which then became the themes for this project.

## Results

The manifestations of stigma that our participants discussed varied across three domains: societal stigma, stigma present in participants' interpersonal lives, and internalized stigma. On a societal level, participants reported the sense that society at large was not on their side. They discussed both the practical implications of navigating a cultural and institutional climate which degrades their profession and the sense that the average person would see them, as sex workers, in a negative light. This is the first of my themes, entitled *Persistent Judgement*. Interpersonally, our participants discussed how being sex workers has affected how they navigate relationships of all types, including family, friends, partners, and certain acquaintances. Participants discussed who in their lives they have and have not told about their work as well as who has supported them and who has shunned them. This theme is entitled *Strengthened and Severed Ties*. As for their internal experiences, our participants reflected on the differing amounts of shame in their work that they began with and, in many cases, how that shame disappeared and even morphed into pride. This is the final theme, entitled *Levels of Shame*.

### **Persistent Judgement**

Even absent of direct expressions of stigma from specific people in their lives, several participants expressed the sense that society in general was against them. Emerald, a 33-year-old white cisgender woman who exclusively used OnlyFans at the time of her interview, discussed this in terms of a ‘general consensus’ among the general public:

Gosh if I could change one thing, it would be um, the general, uh consensus or feeling against um, onli-, you know, sex workers. Um, that's- that's kind of the really crappy things, people make you feel like, you're like, beneath them somehow, or what you're doing is trashy, or demeaning, or you know, [clears throat] ‘You have no self-worth,’ yada, yada, yada, whatever things they want to spew at you.

Emerald’s quote above names no acquaintances of hers, nor does she reference any specific experience she has had with others’ stigma at all. Instead, she calls out an attitude held as a default in our society—that sex workers are lesser for the work they do and that *they* are the ones devaluing themselves, not being devalued by others.

This perspective held by Emerald and other sex workers in our sample is further validated by participants’ reports of their interactions with others, including strangers. As our participants operate online, they are often vulnerable to verbal harassment from anyone who feels compelled to say something negative about their work. Take the following quote from Malachite, a 25-year-old Asian nonbinary person who used OnlyFans along with similar platforms:

Um, that just the stigma, I feel like sometimes I'm like, so inside my own bubble, which is very like, safe and supportive, but then, when I venture outside of it, and I see like, how much like hatred like, other people have toward us, and like, disrespect toward us,

and like, you're just trying to like, pay your rent but then there's these people telling you that you're like, a terrible whore and you have like no morals.

The 'other people' Malachite mentions are still mentioned abstractly, and they do not discuss a specific incident, but their statement reveals that this sense of persistent judgement is grounded both in their actual, present-day experiences and their perception of societal stigma against their work. The judgement Malachite and other participants feel is not simply an assumption or an extension of old, outdated societal views—the stigma that participants face lingers in society today.

Societal stigma is not always as vague as this persistent feeling of judgement reported by many participants, however; our participants described several concrete experiences with societal stigma. These experiences make the four subthemes under this theme: *Structural Suppression*, the 'Easy Work' Misconception, *Jeopardizing Futures*, and the 'Sex Robot' Phenomenon.

### ***Structural Suppression***

Participants feel the effects of the legal suppression of sex work, even when the particular forms of sex work they do are completely legal in the United States. Take, for example, this comment from Amethyst, a 24-year-old Hispanic white cisgender woman using OnlyFans and similar platforms, regarding violence towards sex workers and the traditional response of the criminal justice system:

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 and even if they did on the police report, it would say 'no human life lost' because that's how they label sex workers when they die by johns' hands. Which is terrible, I think, ugh.

Jade, a 26-year-old white cisgender woman who used OnlyFans exclusively at the time of her interview, adds additional context with her statement:

And so, um, the fact that online sex work is... in a way, you can conceal your identity if you want to, I don't choose to, but you can, you can kind of keep your... your private life private. Um, you are more protected by the law, which- it's a shame, you shouldn't be, but, you're doing legal transactions when you're online. So for me, it's just a safer way to do sex work and to support yourself in the way that you choose.

As Jade says, since our participants operate online, they are a reduced risk for physical violence and their work is legal in the United States. For both Jade and Amethyst, however, this comparatively lower risk for violence and legal consequences is not comforting. Jade feels her advantage over in-person, full-service sex workers is unfair, and Amethyst perceives no meaningful difference in how she would be treated by law enforcement versus how full-service sex workers would be treated.

What is particularly relevant to our sample regarding legal restrictions is social media censorship, with many social media platforms severely restricting or outright banning sexually explicit or even suggestive content on their services. Participants often named Instagram as an egregious example. Malachite discussed their experiences on Instagram during their interview:

The thing is Instagram hates sex workers, I don't know if anyone knows this, but like, even just like—I think they have a filter for anything that looks like nudity, even if it's like artistic nudity, um, even some people, especially like, if you're like, bigger than like, a size 10 then like, you're going to be flagged more for some reason. Um, because they're also fatphobic and then, um, if you have—like, if you say, like 'link in bio' that's also like, a red flag for Instagram...

Malachite's statement reveals that Instagram's moderation relies heavily on algorithms searching for images that their software identifies as nudity, casting a wide net that takes down art and some photos that do *not* contain nudity. On this subject, Malachite also said, "there's even times [...] where you're just wearing something equivalent to like, a bikini and it's gotten flagged before." This example illustrates the wide reach of Instagram's automated censorship, restricting even content generally considered socially acceptable in a social media context—like Malachite's example of a bikini—to ensure that sex workers cannot easily promote themselves on the app.

Malachite's first quote on the subject also discusses keywords that Instagram recognizes as associated with sexual content—they point out the phrase 'link in bio', often used by sex workers to redirect followers to their OnlyFans accounts. Citrine, a 26-year-old mixed race genderfluid person who primarily used OnlyFans, touched on this subject as well when she described having two Instagram accounts—when discussing her account dedicated to sex work, she said, "I can't even say sex work [account] because Instagram is real fucking uptight about that. Um, I would say my sex positive one." Essentially, Citrine describes not even being allowed to name her profession on Instagram, risking censorship and potential removal from the platform otherwise.

### ***'Easy Work' Misconception***

Participants' own accounts of the tasks that they perform as sex workers indicates that online sex work takes a lot of time and effort. When asked to describe the work they performed, they detailed aspects including the time and effort they put into marketing their content, the physical effort that can go into recording a video or performing live, the process of editing photos and videos after taking them, and the emotional labor that interacting with clients can

entail. The effort that online sex workers put into their work, however, is not often recognized by society. When they struggle with aspects of their work or face burnout, they often do not receive sympathy because of the misconception that their work is ‘easy.’ Garnet, a 23-year-old white cisgender woman who used OnlyFans and worked as an erotic model, describes this problem:

It's like with anything, like with any job you don't want to go in some days, like it's stuff like that, but I feel like people don't give you the same sort of, um, respect that they would at a normal job, they're like, oh, it's just- it's just sex work, you're just- you're just playing with yourself, you're just having fun, like, you should like this, and it's like, you don't want to do it every day, like sometimes you're just not in the mood or you just have things going on...

Garnet’s statement describes the issue with a comparison to any other work—no matter how much one likes their job, there will be days they do not want to work for one reason or another. This logic, however, is not extended to sex work. Garnet said that others see her work as “just playing with [herself],” ignoring not only that the physicality of sex work can be tiring but also the multifaceted nature of online sex work. In Garnet’s case, her work involved social media promotion, preparing for photoshoots by applying makeup and choosing outfits, and negotiating with photographers—it went far beyond “just having fun.”

Our participants spoke not only about complete outsiders’ misconceptions of the intensity of their work—several also discussed new or aspiring online sex workers holding that same misconception, aiming to become online sex workers *because* they believe it to be an easy way to make money. Emerald, when discussing being approached by new online sex workers looking for free advice, commented on this tendency:

There's a lot of people that get into this that think that it's easy as well. Um, they think they're going to make a quick buck off of it. They think that they don't have to try really hard, they think that they can do it in their past time and—and that's not the case either, and then they get on there and then they fail, and they get frustrated and it's like, 'Well, it—it's real work. It's—It is a—more than a full-time job,' And having a job or children or anything on top of it makes it even harder and, and so it—it frustrates me a lot when people come to me and think that it's going to be something easy, um, that they can make quick money and I'm like, 'That's not how it works.'

Emerald's experience shows that even people interested in sex work can hold beliefs about the profession rooted in stigma, especially this belief that the work is easy. This leads to these new or aspiring sex workers not giving experienced sex workers the respect they deserve for their expertise.

### ***Jeopardizing Futures***

Many of the skills associated with online sex work are skills that could be transferred to other jobs—social media marketing, customer service, and photo and video editing are three examples of skills involved in many other careers. Because the stigma attached to sex work is as powerful as it is, however, our sample—consisting in no small part of people with career aspirations outside of sex work—cannot use the skills they have developed to make themselves stronger job candidates in the future. Conversely, they fear their involvement in sex work will interfere with their chances of being hired or accepted into higher education in the future.

Amber, a 20-year-old Latinx nonbinary person who exclusively used OnlyFans, discussed her fears around this subject in her interview:



I know that I can't really get any, like a super professional job unless I was like self-employed. Because if I were to get like a very high end or like super professional job, they might be more stringent about it. They might actually look at like, my previous past employee history and stuff like that. [...] Um, one of the previous jobs that I had actually, I had to get like fingerprinted and all that for—for them. Luckily, obviously, I don't have like a felony or anything like that. But 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...

Many participants echo sentiments of needing to be very careful in keeping their history in sex work hidden from future employers, but Amber believes herself to be locked out of certain careers completely due to her sex work background; she considers it inevitable that some future employers will find evidence of her prior involvement in the sex industry.

Emerald, when discussing her need to balance her sex work with a previous job she once had, connected this idea with the legal status of sex work:

It's a no-fault state, they can fire you for any reason. So, you know, I didn't want anyone at work to know when I was doing [sex work], um, in case it was misrepresenting their company in some way, and then they could fire me, um, 'cause we're not pr—that's not a protected thing here in this country. Pretty sure Canada—they have like, a cl—they have a law where—that protects sex workers where their employees aren't allowed to... like, fire them or treat them any differently, if they also do like, sex work. But... not here. We hate sex workers in this country. [laughs]

The information Emerald gave shows that this concern about future careers does not have to be inevitable—state- or nationwide protections could prevent someone's history in sex work from

interfering with their future careers. The United States, however, may need a dramatic shift in culture for legislation like that to gain traction.

### ***'Sex Robot' Phenomenon***

Several participants remarked feeling that their time and their personal needs are not respected as they work; they are dehumanized, reduced to 'machines' and 'robots' whose sole purpose is to provide sexual satisfaction. Clients attempt to steal content or demand free content, do not take kindly to delays in content, and generally speak to participants as if they are lesser. Malachite discussed this phenomenon:

I was talking about how like, being a sex worker's like very emotionally draining 'cause you could be like, oh my grandpa just died, sorry I'm not—I'm not going to post as much because I'm grieving. And then, like someone will be like, oh so sorry for your loss, but you're still so sexy and cute, remember and don't be too sad, and then—they'll like say something like, really like, sexually explicit to you...

Malachite's example was hypothetical, but it illustrates how much disregard they felt clients had for their emotions. They cannot imagine the most demanding clients being flexible with a sex worker even when said worker is grieving.

Amethyst summed up this subtheme well when sharing what she would like the world to know about her work: "I'm a human! I have feelings. I get burnt out. I'm not a sexy porn robot." When asked to tell the world anything about her work, she chose to assert her humanity, wishing to remind the world that she has needs outside of producing content. A 'sexy porn robot,' as Amethyst put it, may be able to perform without breaks and respond to every message perfectly, but this is an unreasonable expectation to place on a human being. If sex work were not so

intensely devalued by society, this may have been a given; Amethyst would not have had to say it explicitly.

### **Strengthened and Severed Ties**

Online sex work has affected how our participants navigate their interpersonal relationships; participants found approval from some people in their lives and disapproval from others, with both ‘approval’ and ‘disapproval’ encompassing a range of reactions. Online sex work has also created connections for some participants which thrive despite—or because of—the stigma surrounding their work. Notably, no participant reported having *no* support—whether from family, friends, other sex workers, or elsewhere, every participant had someone who knew they were an online sex worker and who was accepting of them and able to offer them support.

This theme contains four subthemes. The first two, *Friends and Foes* and *Is Blood Thicker than Water?*, address participants’ interpersonal relationships that existed before they became online sex workers. The last two, *Other Sex Workers Get It* and *Destigmatize Clients, Too!*, address those relationships forged within the sex work scene.

#### ***Friends and Foes***

This first subtheme addresses participants’ non-familial relationships—those with friends, partners, and other acquaintances such as coworkers and roommates. Overwhelmingly, our participants reported feeling supported by their friends and partners who they have told about their work. Occasionally, a participant reported having friends or partners who were also involved in the sex industry; more often, participants’ friends and partners were not sex workers themselves, but they were accepting of or curious about sex work. During her interview, Peridot, a 27-year-old white cisgender woman who primarily performed in live webcam shows, told the

following story about disclosing her involvement in online sex work to a friend and being met with support:

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.

Peridot's hesitance to reveal her work at first and her need to ensure her best friend would not judge her for being an online sex worker reflect the persistent sense of judgement previously discussed, with the default attitude towards sex work assumed to be non-acceptance. With this being the expectation, the enthusiastic support from people like Peridot's best friend is invaluable.

Some participants, however, reported tension in their social lives related to their sex work, having lost friends after becoming online sex workers or having people in their lives criticize their choice to enter the field. Emerald described a circumstance in which she has lost friends over becoming an online sex worker:

Um, my guy friends who have girlfriends, being uncomfortable with me now being their spouses' friend. That happened a few times, which was pretty shitty. It's like, 'I'm married. I'm not interested in you, and never have been, but yeah I'm glad that you have a toxic relationship where your girlfriend feels threatened by now, and now you can't be my friend anymore.'

The disapproval Emerald faced here came from her friends' partners, not from her friends themselves, but it still reveals that those friends were unwilling to support her in the face of disrespect from their partners. Depending on how 'toxic' these relationships really were, the ex-friends in these situations may have felt they had no choice but to comply with their partners' demands, but it is also possible that these friends *did* have the power to defend Emerald but decided to value their partners' objections to her work over their friendships with her.

### ***Is Blood Thicker than Water?***

Participants often described negative reactions to their online sex work from their families, ranging from uncomfortable, avoidant acceptance to outright criticism from family members. Some participants anticipated negative reactions from their families and hid their work from them entirely, and one participant was even disowned by a family member.

Begrudging acceptance often takes the form of relatives, often parents, reframing participants' work in a way that makes them more comfortable. Amethyst described an interaction with her father: "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'll be a cocktail waitress, Dad." Ruby, a 22-year-old white cisgender woman who, alongside her work on OnlyFans, also works as an in-person exotic dancer, reported a similar interaction with her father: "And my dad's like, 'Yeah, you're doing so good! Like, so glad you're not dancing anymore! You're on the right track!'" Amethyst's experience reveals that her father refuses to acknowledge her daughter's involvement in the sex industry, choosing to rationalize a quite unambiguous statement—Amethyst telling him that she plans to work in a strip club—in a way that allows him to not see her as a sex worker. Meanwhile, Ruby's father has convinced himself

that his daughter is no longer involved in the sex industry, revealing his disdain for the occupation as he praises her for ‘leaving’ it.

Jade reported a different, but related, experience with her father: “I did have my dad mention [my online sex work], and his disappointment in it, in passing, and then like, quickly moved on.” Unlike Amethyst’s and Ruby’s fathers, Jade’s father does not try to deny or rationalize Jade’s involvement in sex work—he explicitly stated that he was disappointed in her. The information Jade shared implied that her father’s pushback started and ended there, however—he did not react to her work in a more extreme fashion, such as by cutting her off.

Explicit disapproval from family, discussed more substantially than Jade’s father’s passing remark, took a few forms. Turquoise, an 18-year-old mixed race genderfluid person who used OnlyFans and acted in mainstream pornography, described their mother’s disapproval:

My mom isn't really supportive because she, honestly, she's just like, she's not good at the internet like, she doesn't understand the internet or how to use it. And so, she thinks everything like that is dangerous and she's just like, very worried about it all the time. She also doesn't like it because like, my mom and I are definitely on two different sides of the sexuality spectrum. Like, so like, I'm a very sexual person and she's very not. And so like, she's like, I don't know, but—I—but—you know, she doesn't try to stop me she's like, you know, well, I don't support it and I don't like it, but I can't do anything about it because it's your life and you're an adult and I can't -I'm not going to stop you from making that decision, like, that's your decision.

Turquoise’s mother’s reaction is unique in that it is, on the surface, related more to their mother’s discomfort around the Internet and a personality clash between the two of them than about their mother’s negative attitudes towards sex work. As Turquoise and their mother exist in a society

where sex work is stigmatized, however, their mother's reaction cannot necessarily be taken in a vacuum—it is possible she would not react so negatively if her child were involved in any other potentially hazardous job, or if they worked any other job that she could never see herself working at.

For other negative familial reactions in our sample, the connection to stigma was clearer. Emerald discussed the negative reactions she faced from certain parts of her extended family:

My grandmother disowned me, um, over it. Um, and my dad's side of the family, never really cared much for us anyways. So, this [laughing] just was like, a nail in the coffin of like, 'Oh now she's—now she's a prostitute,' or whatever it is that they think that I'm doing, [laughing] or who knows.

Emerald's grandmother's reaction was the most extreme negative reaction in our sample—no other participants were outright disowned by family members for their sex work. She did not elaborate on her relationship with her father's side of the family, if she still has one at all, but they, too, reacted wholly negatively to her work, even if it seemed to serve to confirm their existing disdain for her. A less extreme negative reaction was reported by Crystal, a 21-year-old white cisgender woman who primarily used OnlyFans, whose family found out she was an online sex worker when she was doxxed:

My brother was really mad at me and was just like- like, 'why are you,' you know, 'doing this, like, doesn't make any sense, like, it's gross.' And I just kind of—I was like, come over, like, I need to sit down and like, we need to talk because you're like, you're my brother, and we need to just talk about it. And he has come around to it.

As she states, Crystal's brother's initial negative reaction waned over time, but his initial reaction of anger reveals that he, like many family members of our sample, thought that the work she was doing was wrong, something to be ashamed of.

In many cases, participants reported not actual negative reactions, but the anticipation of such. Many of our participants had not told their families about their work and had no plans to do so willingly, fearing consequences if they did so. Opal, a 24-year-old white-passing Brazilian cisgender woman who exclusively used OnlyFans at the time of her interview, outlined her reasons for hiding her work from most of her family:

I have a brother who's a cop, who's a deacon, 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. 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.

Opal's strict religious background created an environment where she felt she had no choice but to hide that she was an online sex worker from her family. She contrasts her family's positions in their community with her occupation as a sex worker, stressing that her family would find her work so offensive to their beliefs that they would cut contact with her. Opal's situation was an extreme example, but she was far from the only participant to hide their work from their family for fear of consequences.

Reactions from participants' families, however, were not uniformly negative. Several of the participants quoted above in this section contrasted those negative reactions from more



accepting family members. Turquoise, whose mother was anxious about their work, received a completely different reaction from their father: “My dad doesn't give a shit. [laughs] He's like, Oh, cool. Uhh, you make money? That's awesome.” Turquoise described her father as much more open regarding sexuality and more trusting in their ability to keep themselves safe online. Emerald, who was cut off by her grandmother and shunned by an entire portion of her family, said about closer relatives: “My mom fully supports me, uh, my dad and my stepmother [laughing] don't really agree with it, but just whatever—go along with it, don't want to hear about it.” The reaction of Emerald’s father and stepmother is in line with the begrudging acceptance mentioned before, but their responses—and, of course, her mother’s full acceptance—were a far cry from the disowning Emerald faced from her grandmother.

Acceptance was common from same- or similar-age relatives, such as siblings and cousins. As Crystal’s brother shows, not *every* same-age relative was so accepting, but many were. In contrast with her father’s passing disapproval, Jade says of her sisters: “[They] 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.” In other words, Jade’s sisters not only put up with or accept her work as an online sex worker—they celebrate it. Opal shared that her older sister was the only relative she had told about her work:

She's the only family member that does know. She's always been extremely supportive of everything that I've done in my life. Um, which I'm very thankful for, and she was just like, oh like, you really have an OnlyFans? And she like, asked me about what I post on it, and like... she asked me if I was comfortable and like, she asked me like, normal questions that people would ask, but it never came from a place of—it's like, you really have an OnlyFans right now? Like, it was never from a place of disappointment...

Similarly, Malachite told their younger brother:

My little brother knows, 'cause we're like super close. Yeah. [...] Um, I didn't even really- I like, told him like, right when I was like, [laughs] thinking about doing- or right when I started doing it 'cause we're just like really close. Um, like we're closer to each other than we are with our parents. So, I didn't worry about him saying anything, um I think I just said, oh, I think I'm gonna post nudes online for money, wish me luck [laughs] and then he's like okay be safe. And that was it.

In both Opal and Malachite's cases, they hid their work from most of their families, choosing only to tell a particularly trusted sibling. These close familial relationships serve as important sources of support for both participants—they know that one family member supports them, even as they hide their involvement in sex work from the rest of their families.

### ***Other Sex Workers Get It***

In the face of stigma and its consequences, participants discussed relying on other sex workers for support. Participants spoke at length about the online communities that sex workers have built, the friends and collaborators they have met through online sex work, and the ways online sex workers support each other emotionally and professionally. Crystal said the following about what the online sex work community has done for her:

I think it also just helps to see so many other creators online doing the same thing as you, just like so many other like, cuties. And it's like, it's just good to see the community. And I don't know, I just tried to remind myself that like, it's—it's not like, the nice and good people that are coming at you and telling you what you're doing is wrong.

For Crystal, contact with the online sex work community has served as a reminder that she is not doing anything wrong by being a sex worker; the community has helped normalize the work in

her mind. The respect she gets from the community also helps her reframe the criticism she receives—with that support, it is no longer reflective of a problem within herself, but a problem of the people she is criticized by. Emerald commented on the importance of community support as well:

And having, you know, connections with other sex workers, that go through the same thing that you have, that you can vent to, and you know, support each other is—is important as well. Because 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. [laughs]

Emerald's point is that support from other sex workers provides something that support from non-sex workers does not—an intimate understanding of one's experience. Friends and family outside of the sex industry can be compassionate, but as they have never been sex workers themselves, they are sometimes unable to understand well enough to give meaningful advice or comfort.

### ***Destigmatize Clients, Too!***

Even while they face the entitled behavior of some clients, many participants perceived stigma around the consumption of their content as well and emphasized that their clients, just like them, are people worthy of respect. The following short quote from Citrine illustrates the point: “I think that people have this misconception that like, sex work, be it... in-person or online is strictly and solely about sexual interactions. And so much of the time folks just want to talk, just want to talk.” Citrine was one of several clients to report that there is more to the worker-client relationship than sexual satisfaction. Many clients come looking for genuine connections,

even if they are mediated by financial exchange, and participants often found these interactions emotionally fulfilling. Jade recounted a specific interaction with a subscriber:

I remember one comment said, I remember someone slid into my DMs and was like, “Hey, I can tell that you're really insecure about your tummy, because I can see that you're trying to hide it. But I love it. It's amazing,” blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I was like, you know what, I think the fact that he wasn't fetishizing it, he was just being like, very appreciative of it, I was like, you know, I'm gonna start just being more out there and open about it.

Here, Jade received support from a subscriber—she got a direct message consisting of a genuine compliment without any explicit expectation for anything in return. It was a comment that improved her confidence. In contrast with the entitled behavior discussed in the previous theme, this was a client who recognized her emotions—her insecurity around her body—and genuinely wanted to help improve her self-esteem.

### **Levels of Shame**

Participants started their work in the sex industry with varying levels of shame surrounding their involvement—while some were unashamed from the beginning, others held preconceived notions about themselves and other sex workers. A common sentiment was that participants respected sex workers before they started but could not picture themselves as sex workers. Citrine held this sentiment:

I think that in the beginning, I had a very... like, pro sex work, sex positive attitude for everyone. But when I would reflect the mirror on myself, I wasn't able to like embody that. And I would feel guilty or feel embarrassed or feel dirty or ashamed. So the real shift was when I let all of that go.

Citrine's initial perspective on sex work reflects, as she stated, acceptance of sex work and sexual expression in the abstract—she believed in sex workers' rights, even though she was not involved in the sex industry herself. However, though she consciously disbelieved society's ideas regarding sex work, she could not shake those same ideas away when dictating her own behavior. Like many participants, however, she grew more comfortable with her work as she continued to perform it, stating that unlearning that shame marked “the real shift” in her experience.

Opal expressed a similar sentiment:

So, I think that the biggest change, for me was just my level of respect that I had for the people in this industry. Like, I've always had a level of respect for them 'cause it's like I—it was—I always looked at them be like- being like, kudos to you because I could never do that type of situation. And once I started doing it, it was like, damn. Like, this is like, really work like, you got to put on a full face sometimes you got to put makeup on your body. And then you washing that shit off is never fun. And then it's like... like people who like, actually put in like, hours and hours worth of content, like, people that are constantly posting content all day long like, and people who like, mentor other people and to actually be like, having OnlyFans accounts and... I think that there's a lot of respect to be had in this industry...

Opal's statement emphasizes the increased respect for other sex workers that she developed as she learned first-hand how much effort went into sex work. Similar to Citrine's account, her initial support for sex workers was abstract, supporting them but not knowing the full extent of their experiences. Her statement subtly suggests the 'easy work' misconception, discussed earlier, as well; Opal respected sex workers for the confidence she saw in them (and not in

herself) but had not considered the effort that went into their work. After entering sex work herself, she learned through experience how much work it was, and her respect for herself and other sex workers grew.

For several participants, the dissipation of their shame went beyond simple acceptance—they began to take pride in their work. Citrine exemplifies this point:

Well, that's the other thing. I mean, I forgot. I guess I forgot to mention this as far as benefits, but I mean, I actively will call myself a whore. I don't—or a slut. I feel like I've used, I use those words in a reclamatory sense. Um, and that shit is fun.

Citrine's reclamation of derogatory terms for sex workers and sexually active women reflects more than just pride in doing her job and doing it well; she shows the type of pride that develops in defiance of societal messages insisting on shame. She rejoices in taking terms meant to attack her and people like her and take away their power by using them to refer to herself.

Notably, despite the varying levels of shame participants began their time as sex workers with, not a single participant expressed feeling intense shame surrounding their work at the time of their interview. No participants distanced themselves from the label of 'sex worker.' Further, almost every participant answered one of the final questions of the interview, where they are asked what they would tell the world about their work if they could, with a statement asserting the validity of their work.

This theme's two subthemes reflect two sentiments that tended to replace the shame that our participants were unlearning. At times, their shame was replaced by a sense of *Sexual Liberation*, as their involvement in online sex work has allowed them to become more comfortable with their sexuality; at other times, as will be discussed with the subtheme *Sex Work Versus Construction*, the shame was replaced with an emphasis on viewing sex work in the same

light as any job. Though participants could lean more heavily into one replacement than the other, the two replacements for shame were not mutually exclusive.

### *Sexual Liberation*

Participants reflected on how their involvement in sex work has helped them challenge societal taboos around sex in general; sex work, they say, has allowed them to express their sexuality more freely, within and outside of the content they create. Peridot expressed this idea with the following quote:

I'm kinda grateful, you know, I'm grateful for, for, uh, exploring this and—and really diving into my sexuality and realizing that like, it's not a bad thing, um, and to have supportive people in my life, you know, because I did feel almost shameful, you know, to have these desires, um, so to know that it's not, and that there's, there's a huge industry is kind of comforting...

By becoming an online sex worker and making contact with other sex workers, Peridot has entered a community where sexual expression is very normalized. This environment has allowed her to reclaim her sexuality from the ingrained shame she felt around having sexual desires at all, even separate from sex work. Jade made a similar statement:

I love meeting women in particular, um, like me, who... express themselves in the same ways and are very unashamed of, you know, showing their bodies. And, um, it really challenges a lot of the things that I've been conditioned to believe... like growing up in a more reserved family who—my family isn't conservative necessarily, but they're definitely not about, like, sexual liberation or being open about that sort of thing. So it's really nice to just be surrounded by people who are really into that. And it's... not a shameful thing.

Jade, like Peridot, feels empowered to express her sexuality within the online sex work community, where the norms run contrary to societal conservatism around sex. She emphasizes that she appreciates other online sex workers, especially other women, for their openness regarding sexuality.

### *Sex Work Versus Construction*

While many participants saw their work as sexually liberating at times, some participants emphasized that their sex work is, above all else, a job. They discuss their work at times as if it were any other job. The two angles at which our participants unlearned shame were, again, not mutually exclusive—many participants simultaneously felt sexually liberated *and* saw their work as work first and foremost—but some participants preferred to see their work solely in this light, even above the narrative of empowerment and sexual liberation. Malachite was one participant who viewed their work this way:

I would say that it's just work. [laughs] That's it and it's not like, it's not selling my body, I mean, if we're thinking about work, then a lot of people sell their bodies like when you think by like, construction workers or athletes so it's kind of if you think that's selling body, then that's also selling your body. Um, yeah it's just work like it's not—'cause I don't like it's not like the worst and, like most degrading thing in the world and it's—but it's also not like, this glamorous sort of thing um, either, it's just like a job and that's it, I just wish people would like just understand that.

Malachite pushes back not only against the idea that sex work is degrading work, comparing it to other highly physical jobs that rarely get referred to as 'selling one's body', but also against the idea that it is inherently 'glamorous,' as they put it, or empowering. They have normalized sex work to the point where they see it as a job and nothing more.



## Discussion

With this thesis, I examined online sex workers' perceptions of stigma in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent popularity of the platform OnlyFans. Our participants discussed their experiences of stigma stemming from society, from their interpersonal relationships, and even from within themselves.

### Still Dirty Work

Like its in-person counterparts, online sex work fits well into Hughes' (1958) description of 'dirty work.' Participants reported judgement not only from the people they knew, but from strangers and from, even as it applies more directly to in-person sex workers, the ways that United States law enforcement suppresses their profession. Participants' continuous flow of clients, however, shows the societal need for sex work—and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a form of it that clients could access while isolating themselves. Because their work is so heavily devalued, this need does not translate to respect for the workers; these conditions, with sex work so needed yet degraded, have created a situation where our participants reported being treated less as humans performing a service and more as endless sources of content, their needs and emotions left unacknowledged. This is not unlike past findings regarding in-person, full-service sex workers, who reported disrespect and even violence from clients (Pitcher, 2019). Further, the stigma surrounding sex work can serve to keep sex workers in the industry, even those with career goals in other areas, if a worker's history in sex work is revealed to future employers; this was a concern found in previous research (see: Koken, 2012; Pitcher, 2019), and it was a concern echoed by our participants.

Particularly relevant to our sample, as they operate largely or exclusively online, was social media censorship. With the passing of FOSTA-SESTA in 2018, social media platforms

took all precautions they could to avoid being found responsible for enabling sex trafficking, often by introducing new restrictions or outright bans on any sexually explicit content. Some websites removed entire sections of their services that were deemed too risky to maintain after the bill's passing, and several websites were taken down completely due to the bill, as discussed in a *Vox* article written not long after the bill was initially passed (Romano, 2018). Years after this legislation came into effect, sex workers continue to suffer from its effects as they dodge censorship attempts from the platforms they need to use to advertise their services. Blunt and Wolf's (2020) research on the effects of FOSTA-SESTA has already shown the detrimental impact the bill has had on in-person, full-service sex workers, and participants' accounts show that online sex workers are negatively impacted by the bill as well. Whether the fault lies with the U.S. government for passing the act, the platforms for choosing to sacrifice the sex workers using their service, or both, the effect has been the marginalization of sex workers on these platforms.

The notion that our participants' work was 'easy' was also unique to this study's results. This belief being held by people who plan to or simply wish to enter online sex work was especially so; previous research did not substantially touch on aspiring sex workers' beliefs about the profession at all. This finding may have been influenced by the context of this research—with the sharp increase in OnlyFans creators (López, 2020), the public conception could be that, since so many people are entering online sex work, it must be 'easy money.'

### **Social Support**

Our participants often discussed negative reactions from others in their lives about their involvement in sex work, whether these reactions already had occurred or if the anticipation of them led to the concealment of a participant's work. This finding was unfortunately in line with

past research; Koken (2012) found that many sex workers concealed their work not only in other professional realms but also in their personal lives. As mentioned, however, no participant was completely without support. Every single participant in our sample had someone to confide in. As Koken's (2012) findings described, hiding one's occupation from *everyone* in their lives leads to feelings of isolation, so it is an optimistic finding that this study's sample had no participants in that situation.

In considering participants' families' reactions—actual or anticipated—to their loved one's involvement in sex work, I found a slight generational difference. As described, older relatives such as parents were more likely to disapprove of sex work while same-age relatives such as siblings were more likely to approve. This was far from a hard rule; several participants reported having parents and other older relatives approve of their work and provide their full support, while some same-age relatives, like Crystal's brother, reacted in disapproval and disgust. While this study does not provide consistent enough information, or enough information at all, to make a strong case for this generational difference, the possibility of its existence implies that societal attitudes regarding sex work may be slowly changing.

The respect participants observed from some of their clients—those who offered genuine compliments, those who were patient, those who participants made genuine connections with—reflected the finding in Pitcher's (2019) study that the participants of said study found arrangements where they respected and were respected by clients to be a source of job satisfaction. A factor associated with 'dirty work,' as described by Hughes (1958), is the *disrespect* between workers and those who benefit from their work; these reports of respectful clients, then, imply that some clients do not see online sex workers as 'dirty workers.'

### **Unlearning Internalized Stigma**

The final question in this study's interview guide was, "If you could tell the world anything about your work, what would you want them to know?" As already discussed, participants overwhelmingly responded with statements asserting that their work was in fact work and they deserve respect for it. Participants discussed the hard work that went into sex work, denounced the moral judgements made by the public on them and their clients, and commented on how legal restrictions on any form of sex work only made the work more hazardous to engage in.

These statements were reflective of our participants' overall views of their own occupation and of themselves and others for engaging in it. As previously mentioned, no participant distanced themselves from the label of 'sex worker'. Further, even when participants expressed personal discomfort with producing certain types of content (e.g., more nudity than they were comfortable with, a fetish they were unwilling to perform), they were often careful not to imply that other online sex workers creating those types of content were wrong for doing so. There was a powerful sense of solidarity with other sex workers in our participants' accounts; participants had profound respect for other sex workers and preferred to see them as colleagues, not competitors. Competition was regarded as a design flaw of the platforms they used, not an issue other sex workers were responsible for.

These findings stand in contrast to some past research. Notably, Mavin and Grandy's (2013) sample of exotic dancers tended to cope with stigma through making downward social comparisons, judging other dancers as lesser for not seeing their work as a temporary arrangement or for dancing fully nude. As discussed, our participants avoided making those comparisons, emphasizing that types of content they personally did not make was not wrong or

shameful, but simply not the type of content they are comfortable creating. Jones' (2016) study of webcam models' forum posts and Nayar's (2017) study of sugar daters' blog post comments brought results that contrast with this study's findings as well. The former found a dismissive attitude surrounding harassment, doxxing, and the theft of content (Jones, 2016); our participants, while they did discuss the importance of protecting oneself from these dangers, did not pass judgement on people who fell victim to them, instead expressing compassion and framing these issues as problems with society rather than something inherent to being a sex worker. As for Nayar's (2017) sugar daters, they carefully balanced emotional connection with financial exchange as to avoid feeling like sex workers and often looked down upon other sugar daters who explicitly valued the financial exchange. Not only did our participants take no issue with viewing themselves as sex workers, they often experienced emotional connection in tandem with financial benefit; they viewed their work as work and therefore saw financial exchange as acceptable, but nevertheless enjoyed making connections with respectful clients.

Our participants' respect for themselves and other sex workers was not entirely new—Pitcher's (2019) study interviewed several participants who saw themselves as professionals, saw their work as a career, and expressed solidarity with other sex workers in the face of harmful legislation. Koken's (2012) study also brought results of participants pushing back against legal marginalization as well as showing pride in their work, which both Pitcher's (2019) study and the current study reflect. These studies were conducted within the past ten years, suggesting that the attitudes of sex workers towards their own profession have existed on a wide spectrum recently, from internalized shame and rejection of peers to pride and solidarity with other workers.

It is possible that the structure of online sex work community spaces, where sex workers find each other and support one another both emotionally and by promoting one another, has created an environment promoting both pride in one's own work and respect for one another. Contact with other online sex workers both prevents individual sex workers from feeling unsupported and alone and exposes them to several other sex workers, forcing individuals to see every sex worker they come in contact with online as a complete human being. The support our participants report receiving from other sex workers could also create a sense of belonging and solidarity, especially as it made our participants see other sex workers as collaborators rather than competition. In short, the constant positive contact our participants had with other sex workers through online communities was a likely contributor to their ability to unlearn their own internalized stigma against sex work.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

What this thesis has examined is how our sample of online sex workers, interviewed in 2021, perceived stigma. The time period of this research was interesting, considering the previously discussed increase in cultural relevance of online sex work due to the popularity of OnlyFans. However, as this study *only* collected data from this point in time and not from any point prior to the increase in OnlyFans' popularity, this study cannot draw any conclusions about any effect this cultural context has had on online sex workers' experiences of stigma. It should not be interpreted in this light.

I must call attention to the demographics of our sample. Two-thirds of our participants were white and monoracial, and slightly over two-thirds were cisgender women. In terms of gender, our non-cisgender participants were all assigned female at birth, meaning that our sample had no transfeminine participants. It is unlikely that the demographics of our sample are

representative of all female and non-binary online sex workers active at the time our research was conducted. Further, our snowball sampling method may have meant that much of this study's participants were pulled from the same corner of the online sex work community. These participants may, as a result, have had similar perspectives to one another; participants recruited via snowball sampling starting from another inner circle of the online sex work community may have had different perspectives than our participants.

From these limitations, directions for future research can be determined. Online sex work is a relatively new sector of an old profession, and while studies have been performed on some forms of online sex work (see: Jones, 2016; Nayar, 2017), these workers are still a population in need of further study. Future studies would ideally have more diverse samples or aim to examine the perspectives of a particular demographic of online sex workers—for example, a study focused on the experiences of transgender online sex workers could be conducted, hopefully filling the gaps this study contains by lacking any transfeminine participants.

Further, this very study being replicated years later could prove as interesting of a time to conduct this research as the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic was. As discussed, the lockdowns associated with the pandemic were associated with an influx of new OnlyFans creators (López, 2020), leading to a very saturated online sex work market; in a few years, it is possible that many of the creators who joined the platform during the pandemic will have closed their accounts or simply stopped posting, and the experiences of those online sex workers who stayed in the industry—and the experiences of those who left—could be of interest.

Finally, research directly targeting the stigma against sex work should be conducted. Intergroup contact studies, like those Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) investigated in their meta-analysis, have been attempted sparingly, if at all, for reducing stigmatized views of sex

workers—in my own literature review, I was unable to find any research of the sort. As discussed earlier, these studies have been found to reduce prejudiced attitudes towards a variety of marginalized groups; we as researchers should investigate whether these procedures would have the same effect on participants' attitudes towards sex workers.

### **Conclusion**

As discussed, much of my findings regarding stigma reflect older literature. Our participants' concerns regarding their future career options were also found in Koken's (2012) and Pitcher's (2019) samples, and Pitcher's (2019) participants discussed disrespect from clients as well. On an interpersonal level, our participants' wary navigation of who to disclose their involvement in online sex work to was echoed by similar findings in Koken's (2012) sample. At the same time, I found manifestations of stigma that were unique to the context of this research. Previous data, conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated influx of OnlyFans usage, did not focus on the censorship that sex workers who promote themselves on social media must dodge, nor did it find the misconception that online sex work was an 'easy' way to make money. Evidently, the stigma surrounding sex work is old, but it has evolved to accommodate newer forms of sex work and new contexts in which sex workers provide their services.

While this study revealed how stigma has adapted to the modern sex work scene, our participants also reported support from loved ones and pride in themselves to a magnitude not seen in past literature. To say participants of past studies on sex work were uniformly rejected and ashamed of themselves would be needlessly simplistic—one of Koken's (2012) themes dealt with participants' experiences of receiving support from loved ones and beginning to advocate for themselves and other sex workers; Pitcher's (2019) sample discussed the positive impact that respect from clients can have on their working conditions. What set this study's findings apart,



however, was the uniformity of our participants' support systems and pride; everyone had someone to rely on, and everyone was unashamed of their work to the point where they could wrap up their interviews by advocating for themselves and other sex workers.

As non-sex workers, we should be listening to their advocacy. We should examine our beliefs about sex work and sex workers, both online and off. As this study's participants have both demonstrated in their accounts of their work and stated outright, their work is hard work that deserves to be seen in a similar light as any job, and they as sex workers deserve the same respect any worker deserves. We should encourage the people in our lives to challenge their own beliefs about sex work. Finally, we should be aware of sex workers' desires with regard to political and legal discourse surrounding sex work. It was FOSTA-SESTA that led to the increased social media scrutiny our participants struggled to navigate, and Blunt and Wolf's (2020) study's participants report that the law is harmful even for in-person sex workers; we should push back against legislation like this bill. In short, we as non-sex workers should respect sex workers, trust that they know best what would make their work safer, and offer our support to them.

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## **Appendix**

### Interview Guide

This appendix contains the list of interview questions our research team asked participants. As our method of interviewing was semi-structured and open-ended, the only ‘required’ questions were the icebreaker, the demographic questions, and the nine numbered questions following the demographic section. The optional follow-up questions listed under the ‘required’ questions were meant to be asked as needed, if the participant’s answer to the original question did not address something covered by a follow-up question. Interviewers were encouraged to break from the interview guide and inquire further about information participants brought up at their own discretion, and often did so using probing questions such as, “Can you tell me more about that?” In addition, interviewers were instructed to keep the three research questions for the overarching project in mind: “What motivates women to pursue this line of work?”, “How is engaging in online sex work empowering?”, and “How does engaging in online sex work take a toll on those engaging in it?”

This interview guide outlines only the questions asked to collect data. Prior to collecting this data, interviewers introduced themselves to the participants, received verbal consent to conduct the interview and to record, and received the participant’s payment information. Following the interview, interviewers reminded participants that their data would be kept confidential, invited them to share any feedback about how the interview process felt for them, asked if they would be interested in providing feedback on the preliminary results of the study, and asked if they had recruited any other interested participants.

#### **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. 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**

1. Can you walk me through your experience with sex work from when you began until now?
  - a. *Optional:* How do you define online sex work? Or: What does online sex work mean to you?)

- b. *Optional:* Can you tell me your “why” for doing online sex work? Or: What motivated you to begin online sex work?
  - c. *Optional:* Tell me about your early experiences with online sex work. (If needed: At what age did you begin online sex work?)
  - d. *Optional:* How have your experiences changed since you began online sex work? (If needed: Have the online platforms changed? Has your work routine changed?)
  - e. *Optional:* 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. *Optional:* What does your work mean for you financially?
  - g. *Optional:* Do you have other employment besides online sex work?
  - h. *Optional:* 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, e.g., Instagram, Snapchat? 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?
  - a. *Optional:* What do you like most about your work? If you had to name a favorite thing, what would it be?
  - b. *Optional:* How do you feel while you are engaging in online sex work?

- c. *Optional:* Can you tell me about your feelings of personal control (regarding your body, content, finances, pleasure, commitment...)?
- d. *Optional:* How has the way you view yourself changed throughout your experience with online sex work, if at all?

### **Possible Toll of Online Sex Work**

- 5. What do you find to be personally problematic for you with your online sex work?
  - a. *Optional:* What would you change about your work, if anything?
  - b. *Optional:* Have you had any negative experiences while engaging in online sex work? Can you explain?
  - c. *Optional:* Have you had an experiences with doxxing, capping, trolls? If yes, can you describe what that was like for you?
  - d. *Optional:* Do you ever experience burnout? What happens when you experience burnout? (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? Are there things that you do to wind down after work?)
  - e. *Optional:* Tell me about some things you like to do to take care of yourself.
  - f. *Optional:* How would you describe the impact of your work on your social life?
  - g. *Optional:* 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.
  - a. *Optional:* What are some examples of positive experiences with subscribers? (If needed, prompt with fetishes, self-image, body image)



- b. *Optional:* What are some examples of negative experiences with subscribers? (If needed, prompt with fetishes, challenging experiences, discomfort)
- 7. Can you talk to me about the competition in the industry?
  - a. *Optional:* Are there racial/gender/sexual orientation/weight/age/ableism biases?
  - b. *Optional:* How does that impact you? (If needed, prompt with sense of self, body image, work and income)

**Final Questions**

- 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?