A Pornographic Ethnographic Study: The Lives of Online Sex Workers

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Abstract: This ethnographic research examines different experiences of female-bodied performers in the adult film industry. The pornographic industry carries the reputation of being exploitative and seedy. Through analysis of the performer’s lived experiences, it becomes clear that the industry is far more nuanced than most assume. The average daily experience of online sex workers is reviewed and examined, and then the mental, emotional, and social impacts that performers face from their line of work are explored. The unique communities they build and how they find support are discussed as how these intersect with judgment and shame. This paper explores how the roles of stigma, trauma, and embodiment of sexualized characters greatly shape the experiences of online sex workers.

My first time watching porn, I was nineteen. It was my freshman year of college, and in my Introduction to Anthropology course, we were assigned to research a subculture. After kicking around a few ideas, I landed on porn stars. My initial interest in porn stars came from my conservative religious upbringing—pornography had been presented as a destructive force and the individuals in the industry were either malicious sex addicts or victims of sex trafficking. It was during my first year of college, away from the relentless forces of my religious community, that I began to reexamine the things I had been taught growing up. Concepts such as sex and sexuality were especially interesting to me. Pornography fell under my interest because of how taboo it had been for me.

The selection of porn stars as my subculture was approved by my professor, so I began my research. My research led me to Pornhub, where I watched porn videos—for the first time in my life—while taking notes on every scene. I thought that pornography and by extension porn sites, were catered to "beginner" viewers since I had been told how enticing porn would be my entire life. I assumed hardcore films had to be sought out, but the videos on the homepages of websites would be simple one-on-one gentle intercourse. This was not the case, and the first videos I watched involved rigorous three ways, stepsibling fantasy situations, and anal sex. I walked away with the opinion that porn was disgusting and very confused as to how anyone would want to engage in any way with pornography.

It was through this subculture project that I also discovered there was little research on the actual lives of porn stars (or as I later learned the preferred term, online sex workers). Most research consisted of philosophical debates regarding the ethics of pornography and psychological studies of the effects of pornography on the brain, but very little on the lives of these performers. What few studies conducted about online sex workers were regarding early film sex workers in the 20th century or involved small sample sizes of only a few hundred individuals.

The lack of research left me feeling unfulfilled with my first project. My views on pornography and the individuals it employed were still largely negative, but I recognized that I did not have enough information to justify that belief or any belief, positive or negative, regarding online sex workers and pornography. I spent four years aggressively researching everything I could on anything related to pornography or sex work. I discovered that pornography and online sex workers are much more complicated than often presented and that they cannot be neatly labelled as "bad" or "good."

My final capstone project for my anthropology degree led me to interview sex workers, attend pornography conventions and museums, and read all the information I could find on sex work. I developed concepts to explain what I was seeing, which I explore throughout this paper. The first being personas of the self: These personas are hyper-sexualized, fictionalized versions of the sex worker, which they take on when working. It combines real aspects of their personality with an endlessly erotic fantasy of themselves. Part of the role these personas play is protecting performers emotionally from pornophobia.

Pornophobia, which I explore later in great detail, is the belief that pornography and anyone attached to it is inherently bad. The effects of pornophobia heighten violence against sex workers and drive many of the negative impacts associated with pornography. After discussing pornophobia and its effects, I explore the ways online sex workers cope, primarily by creating online support groups or "social media neighborhoods" that they use to protect themselves. After discussing these aspects, I explore how performers are still able to build real relationships with their clients and even go so far as to heal themselves and others from traumatic experiences through sex work.

Literature Review and Background

There are many names for female-bodied online sex workers: porn stars, cam girls, adult content creators, and adult film stars. I found through my research and in talking to these individuals that the most accurate and accepted term is "online sex workers." Online sex workers are anyone who creates pornographic content. In this paper, pornography will be defined as "...sexually explicit [images] or videos intended to sexually arouse the viewer" (Jhe et al., 2023, p. 1).

For my research, I divided online sex workers into two categories: freelancers and professionals. Freelancers are individuals who self-produce and post content to places like OnlyFans, cam-girl sites, and amateur porn sites. Professionals are those who are signed with an agency and work on professional porn sets. The owners of these films then often post the content on sites like Pornhub and Xvideos. Most professionals engage in some form of freelancing as well, but not all freelancers engage in professional porn shoots.

As it currently stands, there is limited research done on the lives of online sex workers. Sociologists and psychologists have studied to some extent the roles and lives of sex workers, but these generally are exotic dancers or full-service sex workers (FSSW), also known as prostitutes. Online sex worker-specific research can be hard to come by. The largest peer-reviewed study I was able to find with this information was done by a group of psychologists in 2013 with a group of 208 performers. This study looked at opinions regarding sex, condom use, and STD concerns as well as basic demographic information like race, gender identity, sexuality, and age (Griffith et al., 2013). While an excellent start to gathering information on online sex workers, the sample size is relatively small, and subjects were only recruited from one health clinic in Los Angeles, California, thus further limiting the sample size. This data also did not include any information on freelancers.

Information on how much revenue the pornography industry generates is murky. The professional industry is estimated to generate 12.8 billion dollars a year in the US (Lüdering, 2018, p. 12). There is no exact data on the freelance market, but it is estimated to have millions of performers worldwide (Simon, 2024). There is also limited data on how much income freelancers generate since freelancers exist across so many sites, making them hard to track.

There is also little information on how performers prep for shoots, interactions with family members regarding their careers, client-performer relationships, how online sex workers

enter the industry, and what a typical day of shooting content looks like. There are a few interviews with online sex workers regarding such topics, but these interviews are usually done with bigger names in the industry (Nocella, 2023; West, 2019). Accounts of the experiences of the "common" unknown online sex worker are hard to come by. Despite a lack of direct information, some concepts and ideas translate to the online sex worker experiences I observed.

Fantasies around sex are frequently used to sell sex. This concept was explored by anthropologist Debra Curtis. Her research focused on American Tupperware-style parties for selling sex toys (2004). Curtis mentions how saleswomen emphasize the fantasy of sex with the toys. This concept directly ties into my idea of the persona of the self. Online sex workers emphasize a fantasy of themselves to move more "product." But these personas are not sold in a void.

In a presentation by anthropologists Susan Faulkner and Jay Melican, they examine how people use social media to create "personal spaces." These personal spaces exist entirely virtually but allow the owners to create rules, cater to specific aesthetics, and stand out (2004). These spaces become particularly important to those with large online followings, it builds a niche that only they can exist in. I take Faulkner and Melican's ideas a step further, with online sex workers not only creating "personal spaces" but also social media neighborhoods. These neighborhoods, which I will review in greater detail later on, are made up of similar online personal spaces and are used to further market and protect online sex workers.

Part of the need for social media neighborhoods comes from the fact that sex is traditionally seen as embarrassing and uncomfortable, as emphasized in Wardlow's book on FSSWers in New Guinea (2006). This discomfort bleeds into policies that affect sex workers. For example, a United States federal bill attempted to redefine obscenity to include "an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual contact…or lewd exhibition of the genitals, with the objective intent to arouse…the sexual desires of a person" (Interstate Obscenity Definition Act, 2022). Since the US does not allow obscenity, this bill would effectively outlaw pornography if passed (*Miller v. California*, 1973). These large-scale policies all promote pornophobia. As will be explored in this paper, these sentiments lead to stigma that can result in emotional, physical, and financial harm on a personal level.

Methodologies

The methodology of this study consisted of open-ended interviews done over video calls, phone calls, or direct messages with online female-bodied sex workers and related professionals. I recruited subjects by messaging them directly through their X and Instagram accounts. In total, I directly messaged an estimated 266 accounts, 24 through Instagram and the rest on X. Some sex workers heard about my research through friends, and they reached out to me themselves.

In total, I conducted 33 interviews over the course of three months. I had a list of pre-written questions (see Appendix) but also frequently diverged from the list to gain information about individuals' specific experiences. I gave the interview subjects the option of how they would prefer the interviews to be taken: 7 interviews were conducted over the phone/Zoom call

and the remaining 26 were done over messaging apps. Thirty interviews were with current sex workers, 9 of those being professional performers and 21 were exclusively freelancers; one was with a former sex worker and two were with sex therapists.

I observed sex workers both online and in person. I conducted online observation over the course of three months by following over 200 sex workers' X accounts. I spent an estimated 180 hours in online observation. I took note of major trends but also used the accounts to gain a better understanding of sex worker vernacular. I was able to observe the different "styles" sex workers took on like BDSM, foot fetishes, financial domination, etc.

For my in-person observations, I attended the Adult Video News (AVN) expo in Las Vegas in January of 2024. The AVN Expo is the largest gathering of sex workers in the world. Held every year, it lasts four days. I attended one of the days of the public expos. I spoke with a few sex workers there but largely spent the time observing how online sex workers interacted with fans.

This paper pulls from these interviews and observations. Any potential identifying information has been removed, and I refer to most to interviewees as "performers" rather than using fake names. This is because performers use stage names, and by needing to create thirty different fake names, it seemed likely I would accidentally use someone's legal name. To prevent potential discomfort of the sex workers, I avoid using any names (with one exception) — fake or otherwise.

A Day in the Life

Before diving deeper into the aspects of sex work, it is important to review what sex workers *do.* There are many misconceptions about sex work, even among academics (Griffith et al., 2013, p. 638). Through my interviews with online sex workers, I was able to create a basic layout of how professional porn shoots are performed. First, online sex work is not very 'sexy.' In professional porn shoots, a large portion of the shoot is spent just getting ready. Sex workers have consent checklists of sexual acts in which they mark what acts they are and are not okay with. These lists are sent ahead of time to the director and co-stars. Everyone reviews the lists before the shoots. Performers I spoke with emphasize that there is also mandatory STD testing that must happen no more than two weeks before the shoot. These tests are full panel workups and involve swabbing anal, vaginal, and oral cavities and blood tests.

The performers I interviewed all had very similar experiences on set, with sex being filmed in about five-to-ten-minute increments. Performers mentioned that there are usually up to a dozen people on set. While they are given scripts, there is usually some improvising mixed in. Performers also mentioned that shoots can last anywhere from 4 to 16 hours. There is also an industry standard for professional shoots' pay scale, as all the online sex workers I interviewed described being paid between $800 to $2000 per shoot, depending on the scene. Royalties were never reported, with sex workers being paid once up front. The sex worker's agency will usually take a cut of 20% or more. For many freelance performers, this high percentage is what drives them to freelance work. Most performers reported shooting no more than four scenes in a week.

For freelancers, work is much more flexible, but also time-consuming. The freelancers I interviewed varied greatly in their schedules, usually shooting when it was most convenient for them. Most freelancers I interviewed start the day by checking their social media and engaging with other sex workers. They are in a near-constant cycle of content creation, editing, and then posting. Some content gets posted for free, some is sent to specific buyers, and some is published to specific sites. Some freelancers I interviewed created posting schedules, so they do not go too many days without posting new content. For most, freelance work is a full-time job on top of other everyday responsibilities.

It is often these outside responsibilities that drive the individuals I interviewed to sex work. They often navigated disabilities, motherhood, school, and second jobs on top of their sex work. They repeatedly expressed that the flexibility of sex work is what lets them attend to these other responsibilities. In my interviews, one sex worker who was also a mother said, "[I]n today's world it seems most of us moms always have that nagging and pulling inside us, we want to help provide for our families, but we also want to be home with our babies." Sex work allowed her to stay home but still make an extra income. Another described how her autism made typical 9-to-5 days extremely difficult to navigate. Another described why she entered the industry, saying, "I was 18 and college took all my money…College was very physically intense, and I couldn't/can't drive, so I wasn't able to get any other job." Sex work gave them the financial independence they otherwise may not have been able to achieve.

While flexible and financially supportive, sex work is still work. It requires a varied skill set to maintain followers and income. It is not for the faint of heart nor those looking to make a quick buck. Since so much is required for sex workers to be successful, they must find ways of coping to survive in the industry.

Personas of the Self

Workers take genuine and authentic parts of themselves and mix them with a fantasy sexual sequence to create what I term as a "persona of the self" —they are neither playing a completely fabricated character nor are they entirely themselves. The most successful accounts I saw often had one other layer of a "theme" beyond just their pornographic content. Many are heavily educated in politics and mix their opinions into separate posts on their accounts. Others stream video games or have live streams. Specific themed "looks" are not uncommon either. Posts featuring goth makeup, kawaii (Japanese style) outfits, and cosplays are all popular. Humor is also an aspect that allows content creators to let their personalities shine. Performers of all types can find their markets, as one performer mentioned in their interview, "Being in the adult industry, there are different avenues you can take. Different people who love all different body types…"

Regardless of not needing to conform to customer preferences, it still takes effort for workers to get followers. Anthropologist Scott Ross studied how social media users gain followings and interaction. He compares Instagram and social media to science, saying "Users attempt to craft successful communicative acts through studied experience of usage [and]

following the social lives of posts to determine if an image is valuable" (Ross, 2019, p. 29). If social media is a science to be studied, then sex workers are the PhD holders of the online world. They understand that it is not just about nudes, but about the right amount of editing, captions, schedules, and interaction. They watch which of their posts get the most traction and at which times, all while maintaining an air of ease. As one creator said, "It takes a lot of effort to appear effortless." And that is the goal: to appear effortless. This starts with the target group being marketed to.

Of the individuals I interviewed, target audiences included those interested in financial domination (the submissive sends gifts and money to their dominatrix), foot content, MILF content, humiliation, masturbation, and vaginal squirting. Sometimes performers would dip into multiples of these fetishes, but they primarily stuck to one or two main kinks. However, kink curation is only the beginning.

After curating their kink, they decide on a presentation, depending on what they think will sell. For some, it involves hair and makeup. One performer had wigs they would use to make preparing for filming easier. Other performers went for natural looks, with one commenting, "[S]ometimes buyers like that 100% authentic look. Just rolling out of bed and flashing a quick picture or video." It all boils down to recognizability and creating their niche. Even pubic hair is sculpted and curated for specific looks. Some performers dye their pubic hair to be a variety of colors, even shaping it into specific shapes.

This marketing of style and theme all help to curate each performer's persona of the self. Personas of the self are different from what I term the "primary identity." Primary identities are the sum of all the things that go into what makes someone themselves: personality, opinions, physical presentation, life experiences, education, etc. The personas of the self can be a part of the primary identity, but primary identities are never personas. Personas of the self exist only in specific spaces and with certain individuals. To simplify, the personas of the self *are* the sex worker, but the sex worker is only one piece of the primary identity.

For sex workers, the persona of self is crucial. It is not just about presenting oneself in a good light, it is quite literally selling oneself. Sex can make people uncomfortable, but when they feel a connection to the one promoting it, they are more likely to buy (Curtis, 2004, p. 101-2). This is why the sex worker's persona of the self is so important. Viewers are seeking a connection with the performer. The sex workers I interviewed emphasized this as the secret to selling content; the buyers are looking for more than just pornographic content, they want to feel connected to the individual on the other end.

Just like any entrepreneur, sex workers try to increase engagement with their audiences. They use the same methods mentioned in Faulkner's and Melican's presentation (2004): surveys, short bite-sized content, and engaging with comments. Whenever I scrolled through my X feed, I was bombarded with posts asking, "Which look [viewers] liked best?" and "What should [the performer's] next video be?" All of this was an attempt to make the fans feel like they knew the content maker and that they were a part of the process.

Personas of the self are like personal brands described in anthropologist Ilana Gershon's article (2014). They both use their characteristics to market themselves and promote themselves. They also both include a level of editing and filtering. The difference between a personal brand and a persona of the self is the spaces they occupy. Sex workers step out of these personas when they are not in front of a camera, while personal brands are taking one's personality and marketing it (Gershon, 2014, p. 286-7).

Personas In Spaces

In one of my first phone interviews, I chatted with Jane, a very talkative and friendly online sex worker. I did not need to ask many questions as she happily chatted away about her experiences. For me, it was the ideal interview—just listening while she endlessly shared what she thought was important. One of the few questions I asked was if her partner cared about her work, and she replied, "No, he knows the people online get one version of Jane, and he gets the real—" For the first time in the interview, she paused: "He gets the real Jane." The reason for the pause was, I assumed, that she almost used her real name instead of her stage name.

When Jane almost used her real name in her conversation with me, it seemed it was because she forgot she was speaking as an online sex worker "Jane." Sex Worker Jane was a persona of the "real" Jane. Jane was a professional sex worker, so she did not often engage in freelance behaviors, such as talking on the phone to customers. The change of the normal contextual space the persona Jane took up had shifted, which made it difficult to truly maintain the persona since personas are limited to one specific context or location.

It is difficult for personas of the self to exist outside these specific spaces. These spaces include the physical and the non-physical. Examples of spaces would be sex workers' social media accounts, porn sets, and private messages between workers and customers. When these personas are shifted to unfamiliar circumstances, like a phone interview, it can be awkward. I observed examples of this awkwardness while at the AVN expo. The AVN expo was set up like a traditional convention, with sex workers at booths and tables for fans and attendees to meet them. For sex workers, they were between the spaces where their personas lived: They were taking on the persona of the self, but in a shared physical environment with fans no longer on the other side of the screen. The sex workers I observed at the convention were often shy and seemed uncomfortable interacting with attendees.

The one exception I saw repeatedly was what happened when performers posed for pictures. As soon as they stepped in front of a camera, the persona of the self took over. They knew exactly how to stand and pose to emphasize their features. The confidence that immediately showed up as they stood with a stranger's arm wrapped around their waist is something I have never seen. It was like a different person, but as soon as the picture was taken, they became shy and reserved again.

Pornophobia

Near the beginning of my research, I was discussing the porn industry with my dad. He was more of an audience as I recited all of my observations and knowledge. He would occasionally ask questions, but mostly just listened. Despite his relaxed nature in the conversation, I repeatedly felt the need to emphasize to him that *I* was not going to go into the sex industry. I listed my reasons as it took too many hours, and I would not want to be on social media that much. Both were true, but my real reason for emphasizing my lack of interest was from my own internalized pornophobia.

Pornophobia is a relatively new term. The first use I could find in academic literature was in a legal essay review about pornography law by Theresa Bruce in 1997, but Bruce does not even use the word in their review, just in the title. Otherwise, the term has been scattered in tabloid health magazines and obscure online dictionaries. With its apparent obscurity and muddied definition, I formed my own definition: Pornophobia is the strong aversion or distaste towards pornography and sex workers and the sex industry in general. It goes beyond simply not wanting to consume pornography: it affects policymaking, social interactions, and beliefs. I found pornophobia to lead to forgetting the primary identity and the person behind the persona of the self, basically the online sex worker became viewed as less than a person. Using my previous example, I sought to avoid the assumption that I might join the industry; to be attached to the industry was to diminish my worth and personhood. Other examples of pornophobia are negative beliefs around sex work, institutional barriers, and social and physical violence committed against online sex workers.

Pornophobia surrounds us, and I found myself up against it time and time again, both in myself (despite my best efforts to remove it) and in others. In the weeks leading up to my university's finals week, the school provided chalk for students to write encouraging messages on the quad. Amongst these, read one "Even if you fail, there's always stripping!" This sentiment, disguised as a joke, reveals much more problematic origins. For one thing, it promotes the idea that sex work is not real work.

Many of the sex workers I interviewed protested that idea, with one commenting, "A lot of people joke about quitting work and selling feet pictures. And that does annoy me because the amount of work that goes into this industry is very underrated." Most sex workers I spoke with worked between 10 and 80 hours a week as sex workers, many on top of being mothers, students, and employees for other businesses. Of the 33 interviews I conducted, only two people had no other major obligation beyond sex work. This undervaluing of sex work and the assumption that it is easy is another form of pornophobia.

Unfortunately, pornophobia extends to institutional settings. For example, United States-based online sex workers can have their bank accounts closed without warning should the bank find out they are sex workers. This is called banking discrimination and is completely legal (Equal Credit Opportunity Act, 1974). It can lead to ruined credit scores and inaccessible funds. The exact reasons for banks refusing to serve online sex workers are unclear, but performers are well aware of the consequences that revealing their source of income can lead to. One performer

explained the risks of sex work in this regard: “There’s also [real life] consequences like from banking, housing, future jobs asking about resume gaps if you do [sex work].” It is often for this reason that sex workers go through third-party banking apps or lie to their banks about their actual professions.

However, pornophobia can lead to much darker consequences. Many of the individuals who are most likely to commit pornophobic acts are the consumers of porn. “They think we’re the scum of the earth, so they feel like they can tell us anything,” said one sex worker. Indeed, many people I interviewed expressed that there were many things they “couldn’t unsee” that were sent to them from viewers. One performer said:

> “This industry has also subjected me to a lot of things I wish I could unsee. Thus lessening my overall trust and respect for people, but men in general. No one warns you about this when joining the industry (at least not in my experience) …Because we aren’t widely understood and respected [sex workers as a whole], we are treated pretty nasty, and some people set out to intentionally harm us in some form.”

Several performers mentioned similar things. One performer mentioned:

> “Guys either completely disrespect me, or think they get a free pass to treat me like a sex object… [One man] wrote an entire diary entry, calling me bitch, whore, saying I don’t deserve the title of a woman, said my parents failed me, called me dirty etc. I never once disrespected him, but he was a complete asshole to me.”

Some are exposed to awful things like child sexual abuse material. One stated, “[A] negative experience I have had is reoccurring, and that’s facing clients who are pedophiles and rapists…” Another performer mentioned:

> “The absolute worst of what I’ve experienced is someone contacted me...and started randomly sending me [child porn] …I even went through the process of submitting a tip to the FBI. It’s definitely not uncommon…I got many messages and comments from other sex workers saying they had been subjected to [it].”

One worker eloquently summarized the results of pornophobia: “risks of being harassed, or doxxed by angry men online…disgusting things you see…like bestiality and sexualization of minors, and people threatening/expressing interest in sexually assaulting them.” Many of these things stem from the dehumanization of sex workers rampant in pornophobia.

In a phone interview, one performer told me about one of her experiences going to the store. She was wearing a Pornhub hoodie. As she told me the story, I could tell she was proud of having the hoodie. Pornhub sends gifts to creators after they reach a certain level of engagement and/or income, and this performer had reached that goal and been sent the hoodie as a symbol of her hard work. While at the store, a man approached her and complimented her hoodie. She responded with, “Thanks! Look me up on Pornhub!” and gave the man her channel title. The man then proceeded to follow her to her car. Her appearance on Pornhub made the man believe it was acceptable to harass her. She was no longer human—she was a sex worker.

It is pornophobia that requires the personas of the self. These personas allow for a layer of protection; in all the above examples, sex workers only experienced harassment when they stepped into their persona. It is for this reason that many sex workers keep their "vanilla" lives separate from their sex worker lives. Many of the sex workers I interviewed mentioned that they usually kept their work private from at least a few people in their lives.

The main tragedy of sex workers lies in this concept. Almost everyone's social media is layered with some level of fantasy (Ross, 2019). Most do not feel the need to hide their online personas. There is not often the risk of losing family or loved ones if they see us step into our personas of self. Pornophobia drives these personas underground and hidden; they cannot reveal them to loved ones. Even addressing that the personas exist can be dangerous, as one sex worker commented, "I know sex workers who were thrown out of their homes and lost family over being outed…" The message is sent repeatedly; their personas are not welcome to appear in their primary identity. Many of the online sex workers told me that they hid their work from their out-of-work lives, even going so far as to not tell their children what their job. One sex worker told me her son did not find out she was an online sex worker until he was in his teens, even though she had been a sex worker since before her son was born. Fortunately, her son did not mind, but other sex workers emphasized how frequently they hid their employment for fear of judgement.

Pornophobia exists in the industry as well. Sex workers are seen as their parts rather than a person. The most common response I got from sex workers when I asked them what they wished the public knew about them was simply, "We ARE people." As one worker eloquently said, "We could be your sister, daughter, friend, or the person you just passed at the grocery store." Unfortunately, they are not always viewed as people. One sex worker told me a story regarding her and her agent:

> "I was invited over to my agent's house to film a collab. Strictly work. His coworkers were literally in the next room. He asked to take photos of me in all of the positions first but while on top of me from behind he just started having sex with me off camera. He put it down and fucked me for a while and then came inside of me without asking. It was super uncomfortable...I truly don't really think he understands what he did was wrong or that I'm uncomfortable."

Her agent did not see her as a person; he only saw her as her persona of the self: an endlessly sexual being that was just human enough to have sex with. The fault lies entirely with the agent and with every individual who forgets there is a person behind the persona. Pornophobia through its dehumanization of sex workers encourages rape, violence, and hate.

Social Media Neighborhoods

Faulkner and Melican (2004) described social media as often feeling like a personal space, and indeed, sex workers feel their social media accounts are *their* spaces. Most sex workers do not hesitate to block individuals. One mentioned, "I really have zero tolerance for people who do not treat me with respect…So I ban a lot of people and walk away from a lot of

things." So commanding and self-assured were sex workers in their online spaces that I often came to think of their social media pages as the homes of their personas of the self.

Similar to how one might not tolerate someone coming into their physical home and berating them, so too do sex workers not tolerate hateful comments or judgment from followers. Sex workers even create "rules" for their pages and how fans may approach them. For example, financial dominatrices ("findoms") demand that followers pay them "tribute" before sending a private message. Failure to send proper tribute, usually ranging from $5 to $50, ends with followers either being demanded to send double what is acceptable or being completely ignored.

Beyond their own accounts, there is a sex worker community where they consistently interact with each other's accounts, a sort of social media neighborhood. Faulkner and Melican (2004) observed that social media creates tight-knit communities. Online sex workers do have an online community, but that extends to fans, producers, full-service sex workers, exotic dancers, and anyone with any connection to the sex industry. The social media neighborhoods I observed were much more close-knit and designed to uplift, rather than just acknowledge a shared interest as seen in online communities.

Sex workers' social media neighborhoods had several distinctions I have not observed in any other form of social media. For one, they face shadowbans by the social media companies. These bans hide accounts from being looked up; the only way to find a shadow-banned account is if you follow another account that tags the banned account, or someone you follow also follows the banned account, and you find them in their followers' lists. These shadow bans exist partially to limit children from viewing pornographic content, but more frequently, it is yet another echo of pornophobia. Shadow bans can be particularly damaging since many sites, like OnlyFans, need advertisements from external sites to funnel viewers to a user's channel.

Frustration with shadow bans was frequently brought up in my interviews with online sex workers. They described their ways to circumnavigate shadowbans using gain trains. Gain trains involve groups of sex workers all agreeing to post each other's content and tag the creator. This allows individuals following one sex worker to then see posts of other sex workers and follow them. It proved extremely useful in recruiting interview participants since X would hide any accounts that matched keywords like "porn" or "sex work." Gain trains are just one aspect of the social media neighborhoods. Sex workers are constantly interacting and chatting. One sex worker told me she once had a group chat of over 140 people. These chats serve to help provide feedback on posts, organize gain trains, and police the social media neighborhood. As one performer mentioned, "It's 'in' within our community to govern ourselves due to the lack of support from laws to protect us." Anyone who breaks the rules of a sex worker's page or the "neighborhood" faces swift and immediate justice.

For example, one night I was scrolling through X, when I came across a post of a female-bodied sex worker critiquing a male sex worker. The post had several comments from other sex workers, all agreeing to boycott and block the male performer. I then saw a slew of tweets, all voicing opinions against the male sex worker. The reason for this ostracization? The male sex worker had posted a video of himself having unprotected sex with a female-bodied performer

where he switched between anal and vaginal sex repeatedly. This type of sex can lead to intense yeast infections and is seen as unacceptable amongst sex workers, since it poses a risk for the other partner. The online sex worker community punished this male sex worker for his actions.

Different social media neighborhoods have different rules. Common rules relate to "poaching" clients, posting pictures of children (even in nonsexual settings), types of content, and reposting content without permission. And while I observed divisions and feuds between sex workers or even whole neighborhoods, there was still an overwhelming sense of camaraderie amongst online sex workers—a camaraderie I was lucky enough to be allowed into, even as a non-sex worker.

Not Just Customers

While online sex workers are endlessly subjected to pornophobia and harassment, this did not stop them from being one of the most open and accepting groups I have ever encountered. I attribute this to the overwhelming sense of community amongst performers. "Everyone is a big family…We all know the job can be trying so we all stick together," one performer told me. Another mentioned, "Some of the most genuine people I have met are sex workers!" I cannot help but echo their sentiments. The sex workers I interviewed were usually eager to share their information and help with the research. I was still considered a "civilian" (the sex worker term for someone not in the industry), but I felt a sense of adoption and acceptance into the community I did not expect.

This extends to their fans. Creator-fan relationships are far more complicated than simply "likes" and comments. In regard to her fans, one performer mentioned, "I [have] created real friends with men that [are] beautiful humans. I talk to them every day of my life." It makes sense these bonds exist: for one thing, bonds help sell content, but deeper than that, sex workers have a natural approachability that allows feelings of friendship to bloom (Curtis, 2004, p. 101-2).

For most, especially freelancers, interactions with fans were positive. Creators create real bonds with their fans and look out for them. One creator mentioned that they once cut off a fan because the fan got a girlfriend. The creator did not want to interfere with his relationship. One dominatrix mentioned that they often become protective of their submissives. She told me the story that one of her dominatrix's submissives was being harassed by a stranger online. The dominatrix used her social media neighborhood of fellow dominatrixes to get the stranger's account shut down and banned. The dominatrix laughed, saying the general response from dominatrices to strangers harassing their submissives was "Only *I* can say that to my sub!"

Healing in Sex Work

One performer said she "wish[ed people] knew how vital sex workers could be to healing the darkest places of the human mind and body." I cannot speak to healing the darkest parts, but I did see healing in sex work. One example comes from the experiences a sex worker recounted to me where they often have one-on-one online roleplay crafted around a client's trauma. She mentioned that these roleplays often center around religious trauma, saying, "I have clients who

want to role-play around religion, and I have others that we simply craft affirmations about how God made them gay, and we thank God for that."

Outside studies have also shown that roleplaying certain scenarios can be healing. One study interviewed individuals who experienced early-life abuse and engaged in BDSM. The individuals found BDSM, coupled with therapy, to be a way to process their childhood traumas and regain control in their lives (Cascalheira et al., 2021, p. 11-12). Online sex workers are sometimes used both as a therapist and a role-play partner. One sex worker I interviewed joked, "There [have] been situations where I have become essentially a therapist."

The sex therapists I spoke to expressed concern that while healing may have occurred, using a sex worker over traditional therapeutic means could be harmful. They expressed concern that because online sex workers are not clinically trained, they may end up traumatizing themselves or their clients through these therapy roles. One sex therapist was not opposed to clients using kink to heal from trauma, but did specify that she would want to discuss it with the client and their partner beforehand, with clear boundaries in place.

Several of the sex workers I interviewed also have found healing for themselves in their work. One sex worker recounted to me:

> "My addiction started before I entered the industry, not because of it…it has served me because it allows me the freedom to meet with sponsees, go to meetings, take time for mental health…The adult industry did not drive me to addiction, and if anything, it saved my life."

For another, the sex industry helped with eating disorders and self-harm:

> "I… have better body image than I've ever had before (which is huge since I'm in recovery from an eating disorder) ...It helps to keep me from having self-harm relapses too because I can't take pics if I have fresh injuries."

The increase in self-confidence does not seem to be unusual. In a survey using the Rosenberg Test, a test used to rank self-esteem on a scale of 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem, female online sex workers on average scored 34.69 (Griffith et al., 2013, p. 640). Amongst the sex workers I interviewed, boosts in self-esteem and confidence were common. One worker said, "I LOVE the body positively that you see in the [sex worker] community, it is amazing!" This confidence also translated into other aspects of their identity.

For many performers I spoke with, sex work provided healing for their sexualities. One performer mentioned that when she lost her virginity as a teenager, she was lectured by her parents for three hours straight. Another performer recounted how she remained a virgin until her late 20s due to her Muslim upbringing. When she finally lost her virginity, it was not a pleasurable experience. Referencing a proverb, she joked, "You fasted and fasted and broke it on an onion!" For her, sex work was a way to explore her sexuality. Others expressed using sex work to heal their traumas and reclaim their sexualities. One said, "I took my freedom back and now own [my sexuality] as exactly what I want it to be." Another performer mentioned, "I definitely know now that I'm kinky and I embrace it." It was through sex work that they were able to reclaim their sexual identities.

Conclusion

Through interviews with online sex workers, observing their online and in-person interactions. I uncovered some of the nuances and complexities of online sex work. Online sex work is not as simple as turning on a camera and performing erotic acts. It requires one to navigate emotional and mental turmoil brought on by pornophobia. Pornophobia saturates society and perpetuates the belief that pornography is a disgusting, artless product and the individuals featured in it are equally as despicable. This belief drives violence and cruelty against online sex workers.

Personas of the self are used to keep the damages of pornophobia at bay. Since these personas create a buffer between the hurtful slurs thrown at them and their actual identity. Personas serve an additional purpose in providing a marketing tool for performers by turning themselves into caricatures that reflect some of their personal interests while adding in the fantasy of endless sexuality. The industry is not all fantasy, however; it requires constant monitoring and supervision by the individuals who make it up. It creates social media neighborhoods that provide protection and support for online sex workers, while also ensuring ethical regulations are followed.

It is through this combination of social media neighborhoods and genuine human connection with fans and other workers that much healing and connection can be found. For many, sex work creates a safe place to work through past traumas and forge new friendships. It provides an opportunity to explore sexuality and identity free from judgment.

To capture the full scope of sex work would take far more than these pages. While sex workers often exist in online spaces as personas of themselves, their experiences capture some of the best and worst of humanity. It captures the emotional and at times, physical violence that stigma, like pornophobia, causes. However, sex workers are resilient to these forces and have found ways to heal through the painful moments. Through their connective social media neighborhoods, close relationships, and a little bit of fantasy, sex workers truly show the beauty of human connection and pleasure.

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Appendix

Below are the questions that were asked to the interview subjects. Questions were not always asked in order, and at times were skipped or altered depending on the online sex worker's circumstances. Depending upon the answers, additional follow-up questions would be asked for clarification or to better understand their life experiences.

1. Are you a freelancer, professional, or both?
2. What is your educational background?
3. What is your nationality?
4. What was your age at the time of your debut?
5. What is your current age?
6. What is your race?
7. What is your gender identity and sexual orientation?
8. How many years have you been in the industry?
9. What first got you interested in joining the industry?
10. What are some of your most positive experiences in the industry?
11. Have you had any negative experiences in the industry you don't mind sharing?
12. What does your typical day of work look like?
13. What preparations do you take before shooting?
14. (If freelancer) How do you come up with your ideas for shoots?
15. Have you had any difficulties recruiting followers?
16. How much do you make in the industry?
17. How many hours a day do you dedicate to your work, and how many days a week?
18. Do you have any other responsibilities outside of your work, like second jobs, schooling, parenting, etc?
19. (If freelancer) Have you ever wanted to join an agency?
20. How has being in the industry impacted your personal relationships?
21. Have your views on sex changed since entering the industry?
22. How would you respond to a friend wanting to join the industry?
23. Are there any acts you will not perform?
24. Are there any red flags people outside the industry can look for to determine whether the pornography they're consuming was made ethically?
25. Have you ever had your videos or pictures leaked, and how did you handle it?
26. How do you handle menstruation during your work?
27. Do you feel you were raised in a sex positive environment?
28. Do you have a preferred term for your work, like sex worker, cam girl, porn star, etc?
29. What do you wish people outside of the industry knew about the industry?