SESTA-FOSTA's Impact on Black, LGBTQ+ Sex Workers' Use of the Internet and Digital Support Tools

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Abstract

The goal of this study is the examine how internet service provider censorship due to the implementation of SESTA-FOSTA influences the experiences of Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers online as well as how digital peer support impacts how Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers' experiences with sex work. There is a growing literature on the impact of SESTA-FOSTA on sex workers, especially those who utilize the Internet to advertise or perform their services. Current literature on sex work largely focuses on secondary sources or the perspectives of law enforcement, legal scholars, or clients and frequently neglects the perspectives of sex workers themselves. Furthermore, studies that do center sex workers fail to thoroughly investigate the racial nuances that exist between white and black sex workers and the ways in which sex workers can exercise agency. This study employs a qualitative methodology and sex workers from an organization operated for and by sex workers (known as FNWSO in this study) were interviewed. In-depth interview responses suggested that Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers experience prejudice, increased censorship, disproportionate content regulation in digital spaces. Results also suggest that digital support through engagement with sex worker organization can help sex workers maintain their safety and a sense of labor autonomy. These discoveries add to radical scholarly work that is aimed at destigmatizing and decriminalizing sex work in addition to shedding light on the everyday lived experiences of sex workers, especially those who belong to other marginalized groups.

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Introduction

"Sex workers are everywhere. We are your neighbours. We brush past you on the street. Our kids go to the same schools as yours. We're behind you at the self-service checkout, with baby food and a bottle of Pinot Grigio. People who sell sex are in your staff cafeteria, your political party, your after-school club committee, your doctor's waiting room, your place of worship. Sex workers are incarcerated inside immigration detention centres, and sex workers are protesting outside them."

- Molly Smith and Juno Mac

Many people have a very simplistic and stigmatizing view of sex workers, but sex workers are not a monolith and individuals from various backgrounds and walks of life engage in sex work. In fact, whether you are aware or not, you probably know a sex worker. Growing up in my hometown, Detroit, Michigan, my familiarity with sex work started at a young age due to the numerous strip clubs I saw across the city and because I observed several women waiting on major streets at night waiting for potential clients. However, as I entered adulthood and left Detroit for college I realized that not only is sex work more that stripping and street prostitution, but also that I actually knew several sex workers. For instance, a handful of my high school peers engaged in stripping post-graduation, a couple of my neighborhood friends performed kink sex work, and even on campus I met a few sex workers like one student who was a sugar baby to pay for her living expenses in Ann Arbor after transferring from another school. Importantly though, alongside my discovery of how many people I actually knew who engaged in sex work, came also a newfound understanding of how sex work and sex workers are put at risk due to legislation that criminalizes sex work.

On April 11, 2018, former president Donald Trump signed The Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, also known as SESTA-FOSTA, into law. Previous to this, Section 230 of the Community Decency Act stated

that internet service providers are not responsible for the content published by its users, but SESTA-FOSTA's signage now holds internet service providers responsible for any content that is suspected of promoting or facilitating sex trafficking. The goal of SESTA-FOSTA was to reduce rates of sex trafficking, but its vague language is quite overreaching and without a definition of sex trafficking included in the legislation, SESTA-FOSTA has had unintended consequences for sex workers in the US.

Due to legislators conflating sex work with sex trafficking, digital spaces for sex workers have been limited, regulated, and surveilled. Sex work refers to various kinds of sexual labor in exchange for money or other compensation (i.e. shelter, drugs). However, sex trafficking refers to the criminal act of forcing individuals to work in commercial sex, but SESTA-FOSTA does not distinguish between the two. In fact, the legislation does not include a definition of sex trafficking at all. Internet service providers, whether out of moral or legal obligation, have felt a greater responsibility to censor their content under this legislation and remove any content that could be viewed as promoting or facilitating sex trafficking. It is quite expensive and time consuming for websites and social networks to meticulously filter through all the content that is available through their platforms. Therefore, many internet service providers have opted to use cheaper, more simple filtering techniques by utilizing algorithms and keyword searches to quickly flag and remove content. In particular, many individuals in the queer community (even outside the sex industry) have noticed this censorship and numerous platforms have taken a preemptive role to avoid prosecution. A blog on an LGTBQ news outlet by a queer journalist argues that "instead of paying for these exorbitant costs, most businesses have just opted to shut down any forums for sex or dating" while "others have banned any and all 'adult content' (including discussion boards) and created rules forbidding sexual comments" (LGBTQ Nation,

2019). Examples of these bans and regulations include "Tumblr committing a mass purge of all 'adult content,' Craigslist closing its personals, the hook-up app Scruff forbidding users from posting racy images, Facebook creating new guidelines censoring any discussion of users' sex lives and Instagram censoring historic art and advertisements for many sex-oriented ventures, including Savage's LGBTQ-inclusive adult film festival, Hump" (LGBTQ Nation, 2019). The effect of these algorithms and censorship also has a disproportionate impact on darker, black, plus-sized, curvy, and trans or gender nonconforming bodies that are already heavily targeted by platforms. Moreover, sex workers are losing harm reduction and community building strategies because they can no longer utilize digital tools to advertise sexual services, politically organize, alert others of violent clients, or screen clients. In fact, SESTA-FOSTA has already been blamed for the return of many sex workers back to the streets, which is extremely dangerous work (Ref). Street work greatly comprises the agency of sex workers and puts them at more risk of violence from not only clients but also police. In the ongoing discussions of how SESTA-FOSTA has impacted sex workers, much of the focus has been on how SESTA-FOSTA has removed safety tools and increased risks for sex workers. While this concern is valid and necessary, platforms and digital tools have also been used by sex workers to advertise their services, screen clients, find fellow sex workers, and organize support groups. Platforms have been hubs for sex workers to politically organize, to support one another, to seek other resources to enrich their lives.

Digital platforms allow sex workers to exchange ideas and content that has built entire digital communities and forums that guide sex workers' rights activism and conversations around challenging stigmatization and outdated heteronormative values. SESTA-FOSTA has invoked a fear of being surveilled amongst sex workers and caused many to use digital tools sparingly or manipulate information collection features on their devices to maintain financial stability without

compromising their own safety. Thus, I examined questions like: What digital tools do sex workers utilize? How has SESTA-FOSTA challenged the neutrality of Internet platforms? How has censorship resulting from SESTA-FOSTA limited the digital connections and support available to queer sex workers? Digital tools are especially pertinent to organize decentralized sex workers, and this has been largely overlooked. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook allow sex workers to join online social and support groups. Thus, since SESTA-FOSTA has informed the way platforms treat users and regulate content, SESTA-FOSTA has implications that limit the capacities of sex workers to support themselves (and each other) online, which I will examine in this study. However, it is vital to recognize that SESTA-FOSTA only illustrates a fraction of a larger issue about the ways in which platform guidelines, algorithms, and legislation like SESTA-FOSTA impact sex workers ability to exercise agency on their own terms. Findings indicated that prior to SESTA-FOSTA Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers faced exclusion even within sex work communities which was only exacerbated after SESTA-FOSTA's signage. Major themes that emerged were exclusion and censorship online as well as empowerment and mutual aid.

Literature Review

This literature review is divided into four main sections. Firstly, it frames previous debates around sex work as well as the previous approaches to research around sex work and sex workers. Additionally, it suggests flaws and gaps that are present in previous models. Next, it outlines the history of the regulation of black bodies rooted in the enslavement of Black people. This is particularly important for considering the racial nuances that Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers experience and how agency has allowed some sex workers to utilize the very systems that exploit them. Finally, it discusses how sex work in more recent years has evolved with the rise of the Internet, but most importantly how SESTA-FOSTA's implementation has shaped sex workers experiences

The Debates on Sex Work

In the field of research on sex work there is a clear divide that emerged in the United States in the 1980s (Brooks, 2010). On one side, there are anti-sex work feminists who believe that sex work is inherently degrading, oppressive, and a form of violence against women and that therefore sex work should be abolished (MacKinnon 2005; Overall, 1992). Catherine MacKinnon, a well-known feminist scholar and sex work abolitionist, claimed that, "If prostitution is a free choice, why are the women with the fewest choices the ones most often found doing it?" (Mackinnon, 2005). These scholars also call for the criminalization of buying sex to punish clients rather than sex workers themselves since they believe sex work is harmful in all forms. Other scholars like Kathleen Barry believe that sex work should be abolished because the nature of sex work does not allow one to consent truly and freely. However, this perspective ignores the many individuals who do perform sex work and would be out of work if

it were abolished or if clients were too scared to seek sex workers due to laws criminalizing buying. Moreover, it neglects that there are still many women who do freely choose sex work as their occupation and viewing sex work as inherently oppressive suggests that these women do not possess agency or autonomy.

On the other side of the divide are pro-sex work feminists who find a positive light in sex work and argue that it can be empowering for women and help them gain financial independence (Mai, 2012). Unlike, anti-sex work discourse, fervent pro-sex work scholars call for the decriminalization of sex. But, this perspective also has its flaws. Typically, it is criticized for being overly optimistic and unrealistic since still many women who do choose sex work did so because they were facing severe financial hardships or could not otherwise find employment (often due to discrimination or legal status). For example, individuals who identify as LGTBQ+ are disproportionately more likely to face homelessness, employment discrimination, and therefore more likely to rely on sex work for financial stability. Thus, in general, this idealistic image of choosing sex work freely does not quite fit with the experience of queer sex workers. Plus, this view neglects that while sex work can be empowering for some, it also poses many risks, and many sex workers, especially transgender women of color, have experienced violence from clients and law enforcement due to their choice of employment (Thurkal, 2005; Weitzer, 2019; Yost, 2019). Despite this, mainly scholars have failed to examine the role that race plays in the experiences of sex workers, especially due to the focus of sex work is more on "sex" than "work".

The two perspectives aforementioned are quite rigid on their understanding of sex work and do not reflect the diverse experiences of sex workers, and frankly, I do not think that any one perspective could. For instance, these two perspectives lack depth on the racial hierarchies and

complexities that exist within sex work (Brooks 2010). These polarized debates fail to address questions of race. Additionally, to further complicate the debate, with the stark rates of sex trafficking in the United States (and around the world), anti-sex trafficking advocates have often conflated sex work with sex trafficking in their discourse (Brooks, 2010; Tripp, 2019). The issue with this conflation is that sex-trafficking refers to the crime in which one individual uses threats, violence, abduction, or other means of coercion to force another individual to sell sex or sexual services. On the other hand, sex work refers to when an individual is willingly and freely exchanging sex or sexual services for money. Therefore, this conflation had led to anti-sex traffickers promoting a rhetoric that views sex workers as victims who are in need and should be rescued while also neglecting real victims of sex trafficking. Moreover, in this digital age, the conflation between sex work and sex trafficking has led to unprecedented consequences online.

Barbara Sullivan argues, “it is usually more appropriate to talk about prostitution in the realm of work rather than sexuality” (Sullivan, 2000, p.1). Most often scholars who study sex work argue about what it means to freely consent and if sex workers are able to give consent given their circumstances. To consent freely means that an individual voluntarily agrees to participate or engage in something without the use of force, coercion, intimidation, or threats. For the purposes of this essay, it will refer to when an individual voluntarily agrees to engage in sexual activity with another. Some claim that sex workers cannot consent freely since they rely on sexual activity and services to maintain financial stability. Catherine MacKinnon claimed, "Sex, when it’s right, like friendship, is its own reward, it’s mutual, it’s equal in its diversity… In prostitution, women have sex with men they would never otherwise have sex with. The money thus acts as a form of force, not as a measure of consent. It acts like physical force does in rape" (MacKinnon, 2010). Thus, the need for financial stability is viewed as a form of coercion.

However, this understanding again relies on a stereotype of what sex work looks like and further commodifies the complex experiences sex workers have with their clients. This understanding also lacks a nuanced definition of consent and equates any exchange of money for sex as coercive, which some exchanges of course can be, but this understanding cannot be applied to evaluate the experiences of individuals who still engage in this work because whether it be coercive or not, many individuals do engage in sex work. Plus, sex workers often view sex as strictly their work and just as someone who may not want to mop floors voluntarily but may be more inclined to do so if they are paid. Therefore, this poses the question is this coercive or mere employment. If it is coercive, is it impossible to consent freely when money is involved and are other forms of employment also inherently coercive since people are paid to do a task they would not typically do without compensation? Moreover, the notion that sex workers cannot consent freely ignores the negotiation process many sex workers go over with clients to draw clear boundaries. Sullivan also claims that sex workers ability to prosecute others for rape and convict their rapists communicates that not only can sex workers be victims of assault, but they also have the capacity to give and withdraw consent (Sullivan, 2007, p. 127). In my analysis, I borrow from Sullivan's understanding of sex work through the lens of work and examine sex work as a form of employment and thus how sex workers maximize their work experience. Additionally, it will be vital to assess the circumstances that also make their work or work environment hostile. Thinking of sex work as work in this analysis will allow for a nuanced understanding of how Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers labor choices are limited and the ways in which they maneuver those limitations and exercise labor autonomy.

Research on Sex Work

Because sex work is criminalized in some places, but legalized in others, research on sex work is limited, and the experiences of sex workers are often inaccurately simplified. In particular, in the United States, research on sex work is hard to execute due to fear, stigma, and legal circumstances. The boundaries of not only what is sex work but also the legality of certain forms of sex work are not concrete. For example, stripping which is encompassed in sex work is legal in the US whereas other forms of sex work like what is traditionally understood as prostitution is illegal in most of the US. Thus, research is limited and reliable statistics about sex work are difficult to calculate.

Despite these challenges, there is substantial literature on safety tactics used by sex workers, how they have evolved in the digital age, and the importance of digital platforms for sex workers. Ironically, some scholars have argued that law enforcement had the capability to take down webpages and content that promoted sex trafficking and protect sex trafficking victims prior to the signage of SESTA-FOSTA through the case of the takedown of Backpage. Backpage was infamously known for its role in promoting and facilitating sex trafficking and sexual exploitation (Tripp, 2019). Despite SESTA-FOSTA not being signed into law yet, the FBI was able to seize and remove Backpage. Backpage, an internet service provider, plead guilty to sex trafficking which showcased that there was already sufficient legislation in place to protect sex trafficking victims as well as punish traffickers and buyers (Tripp, 2019).

In addition, some studies address how sex workers cope with stigma and the importance of social support (Koken, 2012; Bloomquist & Sprankle, 2019). Sex work can feel very isolating and can be detrimental to the mental well-being of sex workers especially those who are queer.

To combat these feelings, some sex workers have turned to support groups, other sex workers, and sex worker online influencers for peer support because it provides a space for representation. The results of these studies typically offer recommendations for therapists and counselors who may work with sex workers (Bloomquist & Sprankle, 2019). SESTA-FOSTA has also been held responsible for the removal of many online sex worker online influencers. The removal of these influential individuals carries a message toward sex workers that they are not valued and delegitimizes sex work as a form of employment. It also disproportionately denies queer sex workers representation and avenues for self-expression and affirmation.

Still, even though there is recent scholarship on sex work, I am very critical of the way studies have traditionally been carried out. One major flaw is that numerous studies describe sex work from the perspective of clients, scholars, activists, or readily public forms of information rather than from the perspective of sex workers themselves. There are several issues with this methodology. Firstly, because sex work is illegal in the US, public data on sex work are limited and often comes from crime statistics which are underreported. Additionally, clients, especially those who had a negative (or even violent) experience with a sex worker may recast their story or omit details due to embarrassment or guilt and produce a response bias.

Another major flaw, that specifically draws my attention is the lack of representation in research on sex work. Even though men sell sex to men and women sell sex to women in the sex industry, many studies focus narrowly on the stereotype of a female sex worker and a male client. This stereotype has greatly skewed conversations about sex work and makes viewing sex work as oppressive appealing to many. It also largely ignores individuals who identify outside of the gender binary. Moreover, many of these studies have samples that are predominantly, if not all, white and/or cis-gender. Thus, I am critical of recent sex work scholarship since many

studies do not include sex workers of color or queer sex workers in the sample (or at the very least include very few compared to the entire sample). Aside from the stigma of sex work, sex workers of color are faced with racial discrimination and more likely to make less profit than their white peers (Brooks, 2010; Koken, 2012; Mooreman & Harrison, 2015). Therefore, the ways in which race and sexuality complicate sex work is greatly unexplored. This is particularly important for Black women who in an American context were historically exploited for their sexual labor. Thus, the ways this history is being reinforced or challenged today in the realm of sex work fails to be explored in the current literature.

Black Women and Sexual Labor

Historically, black women in the United States have been a marginalized and misrepresented population and the black female body has been hypersexualized, which has roots in American slavery that still impact the lives of black women today (Hooks, 1981). Consequently, I believe that the experience of black queer sex workers has traditionally be overlooked or oversimplified in the current scholarship on sex work due to racist and heteronormative constraints.

First and foremost, it is important to examine the history of American slavery and specifically the treatment of black women in colonial America. The enslavement of black women in the US can be viewed as one of the earliest institutionalized sex trafficking systems. Rape and the sexual, physical, and emotional exploitation of black women was a common practice within American slavery. In particular, "the political aim of the categorical rape of black women by white males was to obtain absolute allegiance and obedience to the white imperialistic order." (Hooks, p. 27) It is critical to recognize that the sexual exploitation of black women by white

men were not isolated incidents of deviance or assault, instead a systematic form of oppression. Rape was a form of punishment and torture that not only upheld a white supremacist order, but also reinforced the patriarchy. Additionally, the degradation of black women, showcased the impact of traditionalist Christian morals around sexuality at the time which portrayed women as sexual temptresses. This understanding had harsh consequences for black women facing a particular intersection of sexism and racism to this day, and most relevant to this study, these ideas perpetuated fetishized and eroticized understandings of black women's sexuality.

Ideas around sexual morality positioned black women as sexual beings leading to stereotypes like the Jezebel stereotype. Slavery as a form of sex trafficking also perpetuated white supremacist ideas about beauty. For instance, the language around "fancy maids", or enslaved black women purchased for sexual pleasure reproduced a lot of colorism that can be seen today (Baptist 2001). Women who had lighter complexions were sometimes referred to as "yellow" or "mulatto" and these light-skinned women were often more expensive and marketed as desirable within "the market for selling the right to rape" (Baptist 2001). Despite this sexual exploitation and desirability, enslaved black women were still disavowed of their beauty and denied their womanhood. Thus, ironically, black women have had to navigate a denial of beauty alongside a clear history of sexual desire and systematic rape. These historical conditions have established enduring stereotypes that have implications on black women who engage in sex work.

These hypersexualized ideas about black women's sexuality and bodies however were not left in the antebellum South and even had implications for hypersexualized understandings of other women of color. Even DuBois argued that the position and degradation of enslaved black people reinforced arbitrarily based ideas about racial inferiority and superiority that had the

effect of justifying white supremacy and perpetuating exploitation abroad in countries in Asia, Africa, and South American that were colonized (DuBois, 1998). Therefore, the hypersexualization of black women and other women of color (i.e. Asian women, Indigenous women) paired with an investment in white male superiority rooted in colonial and imperialist projects had the effect of dehumanizing women of color and devaluing their labor, especially black women. This devaluing of black women's labor in more recent times has situated black women at the crux of labor discrimination based on race and sex. Racial and gendered hierarchies thus limited the labor opportunities available to them as well as explicitly devalued the labor of black women from agricultural labor, to domestic labor, to dangerous industry or emotionally-draining service jobs (Branch, 2011). Black women, historically were, and unfortunately even today are overworked and underpaid for their labor across many industries and fields. Additionally, culturally in an American context, black women have negotiated a complicated overt dismissal of desirability alongside a history of rape and exploitation.

As a consequence of the continued exploitation of black female labor, despite being the most educated group in the US compared to other minorities and black men, black women are on the lower end of the socioeconomic bracket (Katz, 2020; NCES, 2019). Despite these barriers though, it would be a grave mistake to ignore the creativity and resilience of black women, particularly when it comes to maneuvering systems of oppression that too often have excluded black women from wealth, prosperity, and liberation. Although there are many ways in which black women have worked within current institutions as well as challenged those same institutions to create new employment opportunities, promote labor autonomy, and develop survival strategies, the focus here will be on black women's relationship to sex work (Harris, 2016). As previously mentioned, black women have been subject to hypersexualization while

also being greatly devalued for their labor. Many black women, especially in urban cities like New York City, have used sex work to supplement wages and to exercise labor autonomy in hopes of achieving financial stability and mobility (Harris 2016). Black women engaging in sex work have learned to tap into sexual economies while also directly challenging pervasive dominant ideologies around race, gender, and sexuality, so laws like SESTA-FOSTA work counterintuitively if its goal was to better protect trafficked women.

Sex work and therefore the autonomy and financial opportunities it can provide for women are under further scrutiny under legislation like SESTA-FOSTA and any legislation that criminalizes sex work. The criminalization and regulation of sex work by individuals who frequently view sex workers as victims in fact ignores systems of oppression that make sex work a survival strategy in the first place (Mia, 2020). SESTA-FOSTA and other legislation geared toward the regulation of women's bodies especially transgender, undocumented, or minority women's bodies victimize an already exploited, underserved, and unprotected demographic.

Sex Work in the Age of The Internet and SESTA-FOSTA's Impact

The Internet has drastically shaped the sex work industry and how sex work is conducted. In fact, the Internet has allowed many sex workers to work remotely behind a webcam. Most importantly though, the Internet has been cited in numerous studies for being a tool to reduce risks and harm for sex workers. Notably, several studies have found trends that sex workers utilize the Internet to advertise their services, screen potential clients, and negotiate with clients before meeting, which has greatly improved their safety (Campbell et. al, 2019; Moorman &

Harrison, 2015; Tripp, 2019). For example, the Internet has allowed sex workers to create online blacklists of known dangerous or violent clients.

Online social network sites have also provided spaces for sex workers to find and connect with fellow sex workers. As a result, many sex worker rights organizations and sex worker support groups have been able to help find access to resources and offer social support. In fact, as a testament to the importance of the Internet, some of the groups have formed solely online, with some remaining as forms of online support and others branching out into offline into getting activism and advocacy for sex worker rights. This has led to countless sex workers being able to forge both online and offline relationships that help them deal with stigma, fear, and feelings of isolation. Plus, even though some of these communities and organizations directly reduce risk associated with sex work (i.e. health risks), others simply offer a sense of security for sex workers since they feel they have a community to turn to which is equally important.

Online digital platforms allow sex workers to exchange ideas and content that have built entire digital communities and forums that guide sex workers' rights activism and conversations around challenging stigmatization and outdated heteronormative values. Moreover, the centralized nature of content online has allowed information pertaining to sex work to be available widespread and in recent years has even aided sex workers in maneuvering around two bills that drastically altered the Internet and the role of internet service providers: The Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, often referred to as SESTA-FOSTA.

Prior to SESTA-FOSTA's signage, under online communications legislation, internet service providers were not responsible for the content published by its users, but SESTA-

FOSTA's signage now holds internet service providers responsible for any content that is suspected of promoting or facilitating sex trafficking. After the signage of SESTA-FOSTA, sex workers were not able to utilize the Internet like they used to. The goal of SESTA-FOSTA was to reduce rates of sex trafficking, but its vague language is quite overreaching and without a definition of sex trafficking included in the legislation, SESTA-FOSTA has had unintended consequences. Because SESTA-FOSTA shifts responsibility to platforms, platforms hold a great deal of power in deciding what content is acceptable and not on their platforms as well as what users are allowed to utilize their platform. Specifically, many digital spaces that were available to sex workers became limited especially to those who were already disproportionately surveilled and policed even before SESTA-FOSTA's introduction like trans sex workers and sex workers of color.

Due to SESTA-FOSTA, sex workers are losing harm reduction and community building strategies because they can no longer utilize digital tools to advertise sexual services, politically organize, alert others of violent clients, or screen clients. In fact, SESTA-FOSTA has already been blamed for the large numbers of sex workers who have moved their operations to the streets and many more others resorting to accepting work under unsafe conditions. It also has impeded online discourse about sex work and sex education. Some sex workers and support groups, as a result of the legislation's implementation, directly addressed SESTA-FOSTA online and provided sex workers with tools and strategies for staying safe on online forums and blogs. Because the legal language of SESTA-FOSTA assumes heteronormative sex, this puts people within the queer community in a very vulnerable position, especially for people who are queer and also utilize sex work for economic and social support.

Next, the implementation of SESTA-FOSTA has challenged the norms of platform neutrality. In emerging studies on new media forms there are two theoretical approaches to viewing digital objects like Google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and the Open Web: as an infrastructure or as a platform (Plantin et. al, 2018). The key nuance is that infrastructures are viewed as responsible for regulating the content that is available through it (i.e. Google), whereas platforms are viewed as a neutral mediator that only facilitates the sharing of content, but not the regulation of that same content (Plantin et. al, 2018). Typically, social networking sites and social media are viewed as platforms and therefore viewed as not responsible for regulation. Platform neutrality refers to this deregulation, but also to setting transparent conditions for how users and content is treated (Bostoen, 2018). Some scholars have argued that platforms serve as a middleman, so they hold enormous power over their users and accessible content and without neutrality could promote discriminatory practices online (Bostoen, 2018). SESTA-FOSTA legally challenges traditional platform neutrality and has promoted the very discriminatory practices many scholars forecasted. Plus, platforms like Instagram and Facebook have censored loads of content without a clear description of what content is deemed acceptable and not and what criteria are met when content is being flagged as sex trafficking. However, how can a platform motivated by private corporate interests regulate its content in a way that benefits the public? What content is considered acceptable and not on platforms? What unintended consequences could this create for marginalized groups online? These are the types of questions I will examine in my analysis.

Instead of dealing with large costs of censorship and content regulation, most digital platforms have chosen to simply remove any forums for sex or dating while others began to frantically flag and ban content that could be suspected as facilitating sex trafficking. Several

digital platforms adopted the term "adult content" as an umbrella term for content related to sex or other topics that platforms deem inappropriate. Examples of these bans and regulations include "Tumblr committing a mass purge of all 'adult content,' Craigslist closing its personals, the hook-up app Scruff forbidding users from posting racy images, Facebook creating new guidelines censoring any discussion of users' sex lives and Instagram censoring historic art and advertisements for many sex-oriented ventures, including Savage's LGBTQ-inclusive adult film festival, Hump" (LGBTQ Nation, 2019). In recent years though, members of the LGBTQ+ community (even those outside of the sex industry) have noticed that their content is being removed under these new bans and regulations. Therefore, SESTA-FOSTA does not only further stigmatize sex workers, but it also stigmatizes queer sex and sexuality, and it pushes queerness toward invisibility online.

A large sum of sex workers identify with the LGBTQ+ community, and an especially large proportion of transgender individuals rely on sex work for financial stability. In fact, research reveals that, "homeless LGBTQ-identified youth are seven times more likely than heterosexual-identified peers to trade sex for a place to stay" (Survivors Against SESTA, 2018). As a result, SESTA-FOSTA puts queer sex workers at even more risk, since they are unable to use the Internet as a tool for safety. In addition, it has led to queer sex workers feeling even more isolated.

SESTA-FOSTA has also been deemed responsible for increased violence toward queer sex workers. By forcing them off the Internet and onto the streets, SESTA-FOSTA has made queer sex workers even more vulnerable to attacks by clients or police (Yost, 2019). Plus, due to their occupation, queer sex workers may be reluctant to report these attacks which further isolates them and puts them at risk for future attacks. Furthermore, the legislation's vagueness

allows other users to flag content who may not know how to distinguish between sex work and sex trafficking or who may be purposefully trying to remove non-heteronormative content. Moreover, due to the nature of platform algorithms, transgender bodies are disproportionally flagged and removed.

Framework and Analysis

This study aims to answer the following questions: (1) How has internet service provider censorship due to SESTA-FOSTA's implementation influenced digital peer support available to Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers? (2) How does digital peer support impact how Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers' experience their work? This study will attempt to fill a gap in current literature and argue that the implementation of SESTA-FOSTA has impacted sex workers' ability to digitally seek peer support, platform regulation norms, and more broadly, it further stigmatizes sex workers online but particularly Black and LGBTQ+ sex workers who face disproportionate risks even prior to SESTA-FOSTA's signage. It is quite apparent that SESTA-FOSTA has negatively impacted sex workers in various ways, but its effect on sex workers' virtual social life and how they seek empowerment and agency online has not been thoroughly investigated. In fact, numerous studies cite police data, or other secondary sources rather than speaking with sex workers themselves which has led to a greatly biased perspective. This study also aims to demonstrate that SESTA-FOSTA is a part of a larger issue about who holds claim and control of women's bodies and sexuality. For women of color, especially black women, this larger issue has roots dating back to slavery in the American South (and in fact even prior) (Baptist 2001).

I will be approaching this research from the perspective that sex work can indeed be a form of empowerment and a means of exercising control over one's body. Particularly, I

hypothesize that this experience is more complex for groups of individuals who have historically been hypersexualized and fetishized in American culture. Audre Lorde, a black queer feminist argued that in a racist, sexist, and homophobic Western colonialist society recognizing and embracing one's eroticism is a mechanism for self-affirmation under the patriarchy. Therefore, I anticipate that for individuals who may already feel vulnerable to the effects of increased hypersexualization, sex work can provide an opportunity to reclaim and control one's erotic nature and can be quite liberating or empowering rather than oppressive.

This study seeks to showcase how SESTA-FOSTA's implementation was unnecessary and further harms sex workers, especially those whose occupation is complicated by their race, class, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Specifically, SESTA-FOSTA showcases a larger problem that interferes within the ways in which many Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers have come to combat a history of sexual repression and violent sexual exploitation in the United States (and even abroad) as a result of colonialism and the ideologies it continues to perpetuate today.

Methods

My main research questions are: (1) How has internet service provider censorship due to SESTA-FOSTA's implementation influenced digital tools available to Black and LGBTQ+ sex workers? and (2) How do digital tools shape the experiences of Black queer sex workers and their understanding of their work? In order to answer this, I needed to better understand how sex workers interact with one another on digital platforms like Instagram and Twitter. I examined to what extent and in what ways does internet service provider censorship impact sex workers' abilities to use social media, create digital networks, and build relationships with peers. More broadly, I also examined questions like: How can digital social interactions empower or reject Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers? What is the impact of censorship and exclusion on stigmatized populations like Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers? How does content flagging and banning impact the formation of digital networks and peer relationships online?

My methods included the use of eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews of black sex workers who identify with the LGBTQ+ community. Due to social distancing measures, I utilized Zoom at U-M, to video chat participants. I asked participants to find a quiet place free of distractions to be interviewed for approximately 45-75 minutes. This helped ensure that the audio recording of the video chat is clear and understandable for transcribing. Additionally, each participant will receive a $40 compensation for their time.

Transcription and Coding

The transcription software, Rev.Ai was employed in this study to transcribe all interviews. Rev.Ai is highly rated for its speech-to-text accuracy and can actually capture audio

that is an automatically digital format (U-M Zoom audio). Transcriptions were transcribed in their entirety and reviewed for transcription errors.

Transcriptions were coded using Microsoft's commenting and annotating features. Responses were coded to reveal trends about the way Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers experience digital platforms after the signage of SESTA-FOSTA as well as how being a member of digital network of sex workers shapes their experiences. Digital interactions between users and between the user and the platform were coded to reveal trends about discrimination, digital peer support, harm reduction, and empowerment. Codes included capturing platform names (i.e. Tinder and Instagram), different forms of exclusion or censorship (i.e. rejection from online groups and content removal), and ways in which sex workers interacted in digital spaces and resources they acquired.

Privacy, Confidentiality, Harm Reduction

Since my data includes responses from a vulnerable population, several guidelines were put in place to preserve confidentiality and protect personal identifying information. Firstly, no legal names were collected for this study and participants were asked to apply using their "stage or online" names. Additionally, personal identifiers will be stored separately and other personal data that could be used as an identifier will be redacted or changed if used in the final findings. Subject names will be disguised with pseudonyms when responses are being transcribed. Furthermore, to alleviate any negative feelings or emotional stress that may be invoked by the interviews, I provided study participants with various hotline and crisis center resources. I encouraged participants to contact one of these resources if they wanted to speak with someone about any upsetting memories or feelings that they may have experienced.

My main inclusion criteria required participants to: be a sex worker who is black and identifies as LGBTQ+, have advertised their services on a social media platform, have at least one active social media account (on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram) or an account that was active within the last two years. My independent variable is platform censorship and I will analyze how it affects my dependent variables, which are accessibility and use of digital tools to promote work and access peer support Therefore, I asked questions like: Have you been able to form meaningful relationships online? Have you had your content banned, flagged, or removed? Are you familiar with SESTA-FOSTA? How did you become familiarized? What challenges have you or your peers experienced due to SESTA-FOSTA? How do you feel when your content is removed, or your page is blocked by Instagram/Facebook/Twitter? To what extent, if any, has sex worker or sex worker support group social media accounts raised your awareness on issues related to sex work? Have you seen sex workers with large followings have their pages removed?

I hypothesize that increased censorship as a result of SESTA-FOSTA legislation has decreased the accessibility of digital tools for sex workers and has created barriers for them to form meaningful digital relationships and exchanges that function as peer support. In addition, I hypothesize that this inaccessibility and exclusion further stigmatizes the complex experiences of black queer sex workers by decreasing their visibility and representation online. Moreover, I anticipate that for those who post content more frequently or more explicitly (i.e. suggestive images, nudity, or explicit mentions of sexual services) will feel this effect more greatly and open up dialogue to the larger implications of what legislation like SESTA-FOSTA means for black and/or queer sex workers.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is its sample size. Initially, I planned to interview 15 to 20 individuals, but I gathered a sample of 8. To improve the accuracy and expand the range of responses, future studies should try to capture a larger sample. Moreover, my sample is biased in that most of the respondents were college educated or working on their bachelor's degree. As a result, my findings may not be reflective of the experiences of Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers who do not have the same educational level. I hypothesize that the combination of my respondents' formal education and informal education through interactions with other sex workers helped these respondents be particularly resourceful and seek out financial independence which may not be as accessible to those without higher education or a support network like FNSWO. Therefore, it could also be useful to include more sex workers of various educational levels as well as sex workers who are not a part of an organization like FNWSO to draw comparisons and highlight any differences in their experiences to provide a more wholistic view. In addition to a subgroup that did not participate in an organization at all, there could also be a subgroup of individuals participate in another organization like FNSWO or an organization that is different from FNSWO (i.e. an organization that is not operated by and for sex workers). Increasing the sample size and interviewing members from 2 or more sex worker owned and operated organizations as well as including those who did not participate at all and different types of organizations would provide a rich data sample to examine the ways organizations impact sex workers experiences. Importantly though, this sample can reveal more about the specific resources and types of support that prove to be the most empowering and useful for Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers and sex workers generally.

Another limitation of my study is that it was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to travel restrictions and other social distancing practices, my data on sex workers interactions with other sex workers within FNWSO (especially those separated geographically) was limited. Particularly, when asking if respondents interacted with other sex workers in non-digital spaces (face-to-face interactions) many who responded no explained that they had a strong desire to, but due to the pandemic were restricted [Figure 3]. Thus, administering this study post-COVID-19 pandemic when restrictions are lifted, and many other aspects of social life turn back to "normal" could yield a more in-depth analysis of interactions between sex workers and how they experience their work.

Data

Eight in-depth interviews form the basis of my analyses. To gather my sample, I used a purposive sampling method and searched content on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook that included any of the following phrases and search terms: “sex work”, “queer sex work”, “sex worker”, “sex workers” “sex worker support”, “SESTA-FOSTA” (searched in combination and individually), “sex worker rights”, and “sex workers rights”. Then, I utilized this content to track down the accounts that posted it, recorded account names if they were organization accounts, and created a list of fifteen (still active) sex worker organization accounts that I encountered. Fortunately, since search algorithms on many social media platforms utilize geolocation data, most of these organizations were based in the Midwest, but I uncovered some located in other states like Washington, Georgia, and California. Then, from these accounts to ensure my sample could speak to digital support, I narrowed down these organizations to those that addressed the LGBTQ+ community and had some mention of their solidarity on their platform. Next, I looked for accounts of organizations that have been actively posting in the last two years and showed digital interaction (i.e. sex workers commenting on posts and sharing links to others, exchanging dialogue in comments, sharing photo and video content to help advertise for another sex worker). This narrowed my pool down to 5 organizations, and after reaching out to them, one representative from an organization that specifically caters to black and Latinx sex workers and most of whom identify as LGBTQ+ confirmed that they would be willing to promote the study to their members. I interviewed eight black sex workers who also identify as LGBTQ+ from FNSWO, recorded the interviews, and transcribed and coded their responses. I recorded notes on emotional and physical reactions, and common themes that arose as well. All of the participants who were interviewed were dominatrixes and engaged in kink sex work.

Results

Overview

These results are aimed at outlining background information around study participants and exploring two main research questions. The first chapter briefly outlines brief descriptions of the respondents that were interviewed. This chapter includes a short description of every respondent and sheds like on the sample that was interviewed.

The next section evaluates how internet service provider censorship due to SESTA-FOSTA's implementation shapes Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers access to digital platforms and digital tools. Interviews suggested that there is problem of exclusion and censorship of black sex workers online, especially black trans and plus-sized bodies. Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers face exclusion from not only broader online communities, but even within sex worker communities that are predominantly white or heteronormative. This exclusion and censorship create inequitable access to resources that are made extremely accessible by digital platforms. Unlike the work of previous scholars who study sex work, I argue that SESTA-FOSTA removes more than just harm reduction tools. SESTA-FOSTA is a part of a larger project that is aimed at regulating and controlling the bodies of women and thus perpetuating labor inequalities in addition to racist, misogynist, heteronormative ideas about sexuality and who is deserving of representation in digital spaces.

The final chapter of this section specifically focuses on how digital peer support shapes the experiences of Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers. I argue that digital peer support (which in the context of this study comes in form of organizational support from an organization operated for and by Black and Afro-Latinx sex workers can positively shape the experiences of Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers both in and outside of their sex work. Digital peer support from other sex

workers and educators promotes inclusion online, and it is also a way for sex workers to uplift their own communities on their terms through empowerment, community organizing, and mutual aid. These forms of engagement and community support help sex workers retain their own autonomy, create opportunities for personal growth or financial stability, and explore their own pleasures. Respondents suggested that censorship and exclusion as a result of SESTA-FOSTA continuously jeopardizes the efficacy and mere existence of support tools like sex worker-led organizations. I claim that is crucial to protect and support these organizations to better support the ongoing work of sex workers who try to uplift their community whilst also deconstructing racial and gendered hierarchies that have transcended into digital spaces.

Chapter 1: Study Participants

Respondents' Background Data

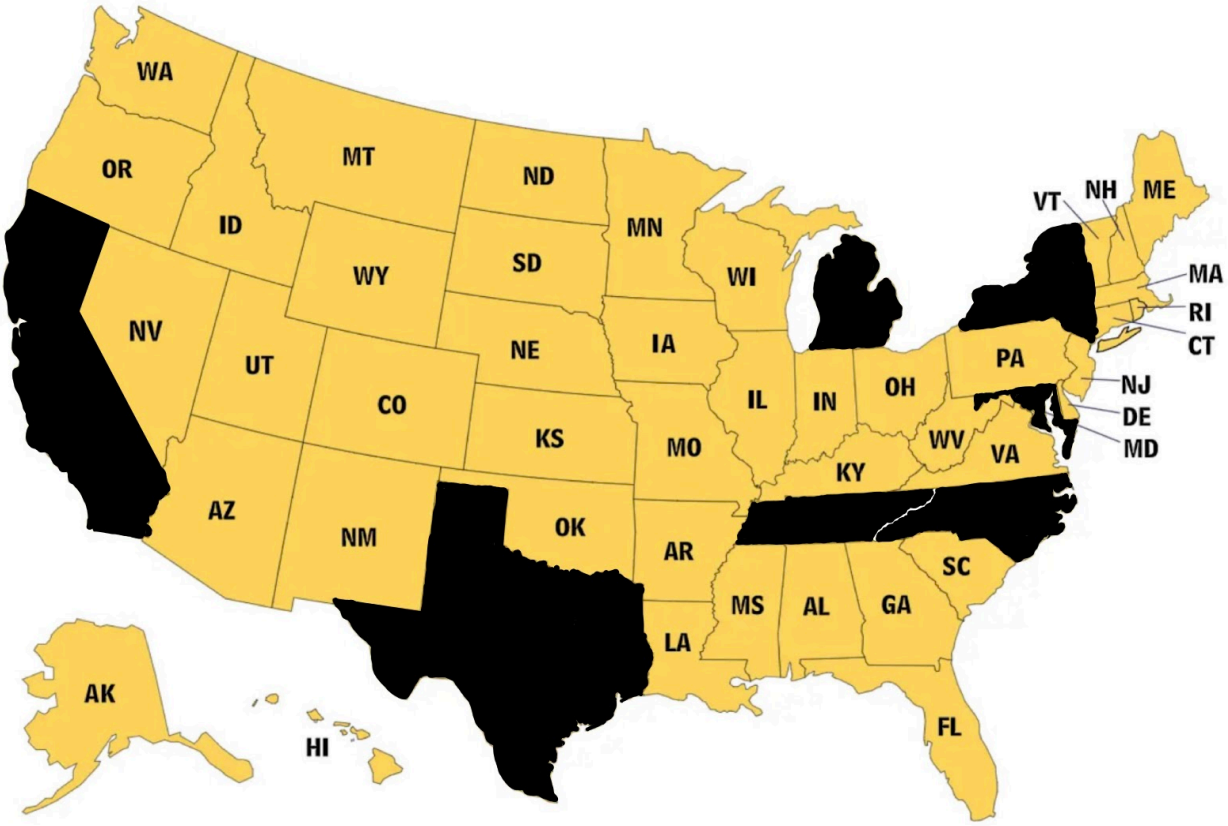


Figure 1

This section provides a brief overview of this study's respondents' background information. First and foremost, my research supports ongoing body of research that describes not only the diverse spectrum of sex work but also the spectrum of sex workers. As previously mentioned, sex work encompasses many forms of labor (i.e. emotional, physical, sex, and intimate acts) and not all sex workers have sex with their clients. Sex work ranges from "camming" on video chats to phone sex call centers to strip clubs to brothels like "Mona's Ranch" in Elko, Nevada. All of the respondents are engaged in sex work, but more specifically,

they are all professional dominatrixes and involved in the kink realm of sex work. Some respondents revealed that they have oral or penetrative sex with clients. However, the overall majority of respondents revealed that they do not in fact have sex with their clients.

My sample included 8 black women who all identify as LGBTQ+. Some respondents were mothers, some students, and others were entrepreneurs, coming from different states, and with varying educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses; therefore, reaffirming that sex workers come from various backgrounds (See Description Table below). I draw attention to the number of women who have higher education degrees. This showcases that not all sex workers are as uneducated as many studies portray them and it showcases that even with a degree, labor opportunities are limited. Even Valentina Mia, a trans women who engages in sex work and scholarly discourse stated she "felt sex work was my best option, even with a graduate degree." (Mia 2020, p. 238). Respondents in this study were all a part of a sex worker-led organization that is geared toward supporting Black and Afro-Latina sex workers called FNSWO. Thus, it is worth noting that while all these women are involved in pro-domme sex work, they are based in various states and are geographically separate. FNSWO gives these women a space to unite and forge relationships with other women engaged in the same kind of sex work who would otherwise be impossible or extremely difficult to connect with without social media. In the final sample, respondents' ages ranged from 21-36 and included 6 cis-gender women and 1 transgender woman.

Respondents' Biographical Descriptions Table		
Name	**Age**	**Biography**
Mistress Diamond	22	College student and part-time worker based in Detroit, Michigan pursuing a career in sex therapy
Mistress Sugar	21	College student and wedding planner from Charlotte, North Carolina pursuing a PhD after her graduation
Madam Jay	31	Mom, astrologer, and online store entrepreneur from Harlem, New York
Ryan TheDom	35	Masculine presenting female educator balancing sex work and her white-collared job in Dallas, Texas
Goddess Ebony	26	Peer educator from Washington D.C. who decided to become a full-time sex worker
Miss Brooklyn	36	Afro-Latina woman based in Brooklyn, New York; mom and educator
Mistress Erika	31	Black and Mexican woman pursuing second degree and juggling several jobs in San Francisco, California
Queen Nubia	27	Transgender woman from Knoxville, Tennessee who began sex work after her transition and is working on her master's degrees in Engineering, and in Teaching as well as other business ventures

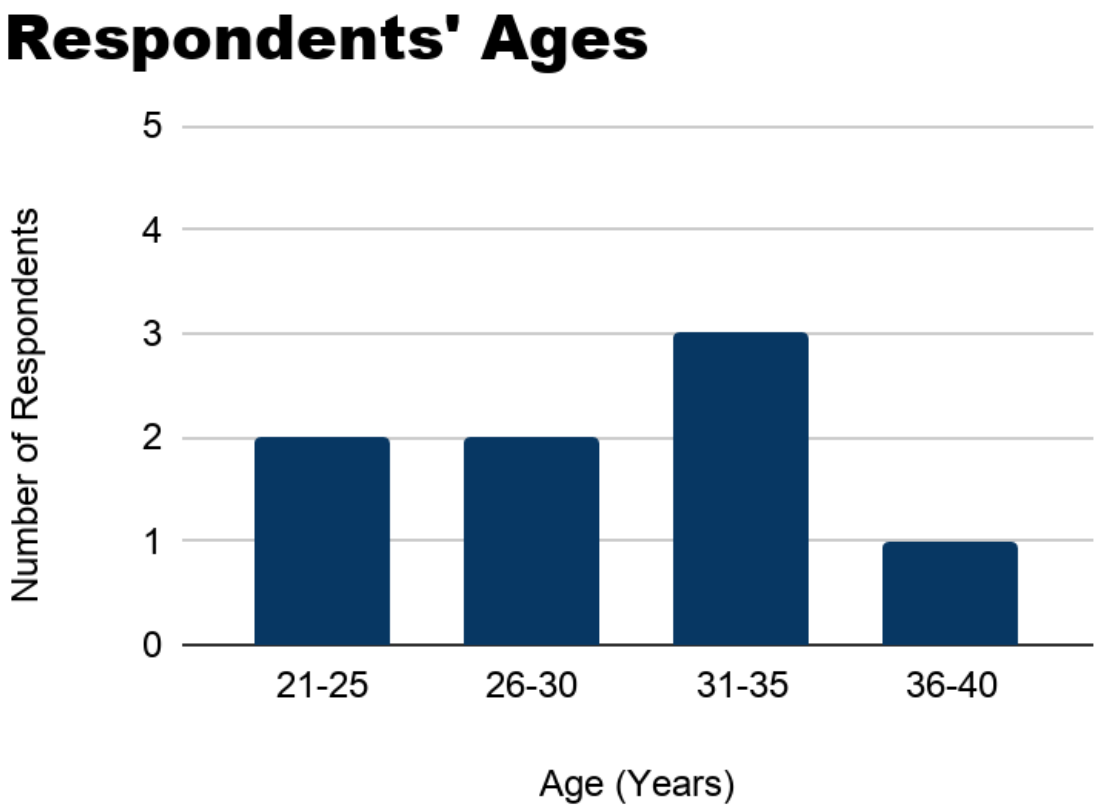


Figure 2

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that this study centers the voices of sex workers rather than outside experts. Thus, the presentation of these results reflects that. In order to preserve the anonymity of study participants, but also avoid dehumanizing or depersonalizing data presentation I have included several short biographies. These biographies use pseudonyms and have some details altered to protect personal information.

Chapter 2: Exclusion and Censorship Online

This second chapter examines the first question that guides my analysis: **How has internet service provider censorship due to SESTA-FOSTA's implementation influenced digital peer support available to Black queer sex workers?** Interview data showcases that censorship and exclusion are partially a product of SESTA-FOSTA's effect on platform regulations and digital spaces available to sex workers. SESTA-FOSTA further complicates the issue of exclusion of sex workers from digital platforms and denies Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers access to digital tools and harm reduction tools. Most importantly though, it promotes the erasure of sex worker spaces and sex workers as individuals online. Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers are particularly vulnerable due to oversurveillance and over-policing online.

My analysis focuses on black queer sex workers access to social media and digital tools, online and offline support, and if and how SESTA-FOSTA mitigates these exchanges. Digital tools are very important for sex workers. Previous research points to the potential for harm reduction using Internet tools. For example, online databases and blacklists help warn other sex workers (and other people in general) of potentially violent or dangerous persons.

Several respondents revealed the difficulties they faced when searching for peers and a community within the broader online community of sex workers. Responses suggested that due to the implicit biases of other users or platform algorithms that carry over from the real world to the digital realm, black sex workers, especially those who have plus-sized or curvy bodies, are disproportionately censored and face further stigma. Rather than the open arms they had hoped for some respondents were met with outright rejection when reaching out to other sex workers and organizations for support.

Exclusion in Digital Spaces

In this particular study, the organization, FNSWO, creates a digital space (as well as a physical one) to organize decentralized sex workers who were traditionally overlooked, neglected, or rejected, in other digital spaces. FNSWO centralizes sex workers who often felt quite socially isolated and who were geographically separate. Respondents made it quite apparent that there are digital barriers which make it difficult to find a community online as a sex worker. First, there is the barrier of being a sex worker online. Similar to PC gamer fanatics who search for online gamer communities, sex workers seek online communities for sex work, but SESTA-FOSTA makes these communities hard to find due to the conflation between sex work and sex trafficking. Without a support network and access to the right resources, sex work can be further stigmatizing and dangerous, but these online groups can offer aid, knowledge, and help sex workers meet other sex workers.

Another barrier is an issue of race and color. While respondents mentioned difficulty in seeking online support, it is clear that there is not a lack of sex workers or sex worker organizations, but instead the issue is more complex. One facet of this issue is established sex workers being unwilling to aid new sex workers or just being passive or unresponsive. Miss Brooklyn described her experience reaching out to white dommes online:

> "They don't want to teach you and like I said, when I became a sex worker, I was alone, I was winging it. So, I would reach out to the dommes, even on Twitter and they just... they're not very friendly at all. Then [there] were people who would just flat out not respond or like respond, but kind of in a way that was like you know, off-putting... It's hard to read somebody's vibes through text messages, but they just weren't welcoming and like, you know, friendly. Like if somebody came to me and said, Hey Miss Brooklyn,

you know, I really wanna learn. I'd be like, well, what do you want to know? [When I reached out to dommes I'd say] I'll attribute $25 or whatever, a little something so that, you know, just for your time because I understand, but some of them would just be nasty [or were unwilling to teach]."

Miss Brooklyn, who was the only sex worker she knew when she first got into sex work and had lost several family and friends due to the stigma around her work described feeling isolated and even depressed. Thus, to help better cope with these feelings and seek knowledge around safe and efficient sex work she sought out relationships through digital platforms like Instagram, FetLife, and Twitter. Other respondents also mentioned that they felt very uncomfortable or unwelcomed by white sex workers also engaging in kink sex work. Mistress Sugar stated that when she reached out to online organizations she also faced difficulty seeking guidance and support,

"I tried to reach out to one group and after I told them about myself and probably once they saw that I was black sex worker… they said they thought I wasn't the right fit".

Another respondent echoed this sentiment and claimed,

"It just wasn't very welcoming you know especially compared to FNSWO."

This unwelcoming atmosphere pushed many of these women to search for organizations catered toward sex workers of color. However, this did not alleviate all of their issues.

Another facet, more closely tied to SESTA-FOSTA, also complicates this issue. Due to censorship of content related to sex work on social media, it is hard to find these digital spaces and even more difficult to maintain them. Mistress Diamond explained when discussing her search for community:

> "I wouldn't even say it's a lack of black people in BDSM, because there's not, there are so many like kinky black people, right. There's so many people who are interested. Um, I definitely think because it is so gate-kept, it is hard for black people to create those communities, especially online, um, where these platforms are so intent on, like trying to wipe you out when literally you may only be trying to create a community like, they come in, they wipe them out."

Her response showcases that rather than there being a lack of black sex workers engaged in similar work, there is in fact a lack of digital spaces for black sex workers. Because black sex workers are overpoliced online, digital spaces available to black sex workers are limited and heavily surveilled. Furthermore, black sex workers are frequently excluded from predominantly white online sex worker communities which puts them at even more risk under SESTA-FOSTA. SESTA-FOSTA which promotes the removal of these hubs therefore threatens the very existence of organizing online. As a result, SESTA-FOSTA removes protections and tools that sex workers have used to empower themselves and maintain their safety (Chamberlain 2019). Because SESTA-FOSTA also relies on advertisements or digital forums to flag sex trafficking and the bills language is coded to legally sanction platforms, several platforms have opted to just removing or censoring this content which has the effect of further pushing sex trafficking out of the public eye and further marginalizing and silencing sex workers (Chamberlain 2019). However, importantly Mistress Diamond's response points to exclusion that many black sex workers faced prior to SESTA-FOSTA.

Under SESTA-FOSTA, sex workers presence online is in constant threat, but more specifically black, darker toned, curvy, and plus-size sex workers, whose bodies are more often flagged for nudity, explicit, or inappropriate content. As a result, some sex workers try to

minimize their presence online on platforms that are not explicitly sexual (i.e. Facebook). Others maintain back-up social media pages in the event that their account is deleted, banned, removed, or temporarily suspended. The risk of having an account removed can cost sex workers valuable resources that allow them to pre-screen clients, negotiate before meeting, and maintain support networks with other sex workers. Moreover, the anxiety of being spotted and banned online makes it even more difficult for online communities to exist. It also contributes to an overall erasure of digital spaces for black queer women who perform sex work. For example, sex workers found it difficult to maintain online dating profiles, for not only work, but even non-work purposes without some platform intervention. Respondents indicated that sex workers cannot include that they are a sex worker or a dominatrix in their profile. Dating platforms like Tinder almost definitely will hunt these pages down and profiles are flagged. Some respondents described even more extreme exclusion and outright denial of equal access to platforms. For example, Mistress Diamond stated:

> "If you have certain words in your bio... you honestly definitely can never mention that you're a dominatrix, so if you ever mention you're a dominatrix on a dating site, they're going to take off your account like that, period."

Another respondent, Mistress Erika experienced just that:

> "I was permanently banned from Tinder, which is really funny because I wasn't actually on Tinder for sex work. I was on Tinder to get back out into the dating world. And I figured that if I was going to do that, I might as well be honest with people about what I did. And so, I put on my Tinder profile that I have a day, I have a vanilla day job, but I also am a pro Dom. And the word pro Dom is apparently not allowed. And I believe someone may have also reported my account, because there are people who go out onto

> these social media platforms just to report accounts. I was permanently banned, and Tinder does not have appeals guidelines like other platforms do. So, I was banned [and] I did not have an option to appeal."

This respondent describes another facet of the exclusion in digital spaces. Due to obscure guidelines and policies or lack of appeals processes on digital platforms, it can be quite difficult for sex workers to maintain a presence online. As in this example, even individuals who were using Tinder for exclusively dating purposes were kept out of these spaces.

Queen Nubia who was also banned from Tinder reinforced this frustration:

> "Sometimes I see girls pose very raunchy photos that are sexually suggestive photos. I never am… [then] I think about who's probably running these apps more or less likely it was probably white men or like a moderator that looks at photos and stuff. Me, a black transgender woman is constantly getting banned or my photos get removed because they're too sexually suggestive or this and that, so I do question that."

Queen Nubia described how despite her efforts to not make her profile look as if it was advertising sex work and her lack of explicit photos, her account was still banned. She mentioned that aside from Tinder as a platform excluding her, she found that often her page would be reported or flagged after rejecting men online who go on dating sites in search of free sex which suggests that censorship may also be used a form of digital retaliation against sex workers. Most importantly though, Queen Nubia's experience showcases the need to evaluate the experiences through an intersectional lens. Due to the ambiguity platform's policies and procedures it is unclear whether Queen Nubia was banned because of her perceived status as a sex worker or as a transgender woman. However, that is not important, and instead what is important to understand is that frequently online (and offline) transgender woman of color are

often assumed to be sex workers. Even Queen Nubia recounted a time she was casually waiting for a friend in a hotel lobby when a man approached her asking for oral sex in exchange for money because he profiled her as a trans woman and thus assumed she engaged in sex work.

Racism, Colorism, Transphobia, Body Types

As previously stated, the issue of the exclusion and censorship of sex workers on digital platforms has disparate effects on sex workers based on several factors. Here, this section will focus on four facets of sex workers that can further complicate their experience as sex workers and their experiences on digital platforms. First and foremost, this study centers around the disparate effect SESTA-FOSTA has on black and LGBTQ+ sex workers. While most respondents did not point to their sexuality as cause for censorship or discrimination online, several respondents did discuss how being a black impacted their work and their presence online. Some respondents recalled working with women and non-binary individuals, but all respondents described largely serving men, in particular white men. These women described that there is a market for black female dominatrix amongst white cisgender men. Within the sex economy, black women are hypersexualized and racialized, but these women represent the many individuals who work within this economy and use this hypersexualization to their advantages (Brooks 2010, Miller-Young 2010, Uzurin 2020). Madam Jay described this sexual desire and hypersexualization quite artfully:

"White men, those are my clients. [White men] have always loved us, whether they loved us, you know, in the belly of a ship or whether they've loved us, you know, in a slave cabin in front of somebody's husband, they've still loved us."

This statement serves a reminder that this sex economy is not something that just emerged alongside the passage of recent anti-sex work legislation, but in fact has existed for centuries and transformed over time.

In addition to race though, black sex workers experience with sex work generally and on digital platforms is informed by their color, gender identity, and body type. These facets were not explored in depth, but respondents' responses indicate the need to consider these intersections when discussing stratifications within the black sex economy. For example, sex workers skin color can shape how sex workers market themselves and the opportunities they have access to. Mistress Erika, who was Mexican and Black and had a lighter skin complexion, explained that she felt she had privilege due to her ambiguous phenotypes:

> "I would say that I do have the privilege of being ambiguous lately, um, have ambiguous features. So people really would not necessarily, because I am mixed, because I have lighter skin because I cut my hair short. So you can't see the texture of it. Um, and I can wear weight. I have the ability to buy and wear wigs. Um, a lot of people don't necessarily look at me when they first see me and see black woman…. I think that I have the privilege of it, simply because I can and if I need to, I will market myself as racially ambiguous. There is an eroticism in the area that I moved through and because of my light skin and my mixed features I can take advantage of that by choosing if I need to, to not mention my race or to not answer that question, if I don't have to, whereas somebody who is darker skin or has more black features, doesn't have that option."

Mistress Erika discussed that although she identifies as Black and Mexican she might not always market herself as black if she believed it would be more beneficial to hide this information. Even Madam Jay, referenced her "light skin" and grey eyes as what makes her so marketable.

Though this was not observed in this study, several scholars point to hierarchies within the sex economy that stratify what is desirable and not which in turn can create wage gaps amongst women of color and in combination with the hypersexuality of black women that has persisted since slavery in an American context (Brooks 2001, Brooks 2010, Collins 1990, Baptist 2001).

Sex workers gender identity and body type also shapes their market and experience on digital platforms. This study's sample only included one transgender woman, yet some other respondents also experienced censorship of transgender bodies. Mistress Erika described her initial experience with censorship:

> "My first removed photo was a photo of another sex worker that I was friends with [tied] in rope. [The photo] had been up for quite a while on one of my pages. Um, but it was not immediately apparent based off of the photo that the person in the photo was trans. I believe that the second that people realized that this person was trans that's when certain people reported the photo because it was not unlike any of the other photos that I had already previously posted. The only difference is that the person I had tied up and took a picture of was trans. That was my first removed photo and I can say that when my photo was removed, I was angry… I was sad… not just for myself, but also for my friend, you know, I felt betrayed."

This respondent showcased the marginalization and negotiations of transgender bodies online. Even for photos that did not include nudity, if they included language or imagery hinting toward representing transgender bodies they were removed or flagged. Queen Nubia described often having people block her or flag her content when they were made aware that she was transgender.

For future research, it could be useful to study forms of digital retaliation and their impact on sex workers. While no respondents discussed forms of digital retaliation extensively, a handful of respondents mentioned receiving negative comments or direct messages from men online. Queen Nubia further described her experience with negativity and retaliation online:

> "Then if I don't comply with whatever kind of ruse or whatever scheme [these men] got going, they not only try to put me down and hurt me emotionally with their words, then they block, report, all the above, my account... Sometimes I've had my account, like on Plenty of Fish, [my] account got suspended for like 24 hours because [I] got reported too much. I had the same thing [happen on] another app called Monkey. And it's like, I started a Monkey to just to talk to other people and [men would] be like, are you a tranny? And I'll be like, yeah, I'm transsexual. And they report me, like for what?"

This respondent uncovers that discrimination toward transgender individuals is just as prevalent online as in the real world. Moreover, it showcases the agency that these women try to exercise online is mitigated by the infrastructure of digital platforms (Rand 2019, Vartabedian 2017). For example, Mistress Erika was permanently banned from Tinder due to its lack of an appeals process making Tinder a limiting and further stigmatizing sex work since even sex workers on Tinder for non-work purposes are excluded from these spaces.

Last but not least, sex workers experiences are also informed by their shape and size. Respondents evaluated how the viewed their body and if and how sex work has shaped the image they have of their body. Some respondents who were plus-sized discussed being reluctant to become a sex worker because of fears about how their figure would be perceived online. Mistress Sugar described her initial anxieties around her body and sex work:

“My boobs sit on my stomach sometimes and [so there’s] some insecurity. I'm like, I don't know if they're gonna like what I look like.”

Strikingly, respondents demonstrated the contrary and showcased the for curvy or big black bodies. Madam Jay, although not plus-sized explained this market:

> “They want them a black girl period, period. Also, what I realized is that, um, BBWs Oh, they get love. They get love, please. It's been, it's so sad because there's so many people, you know, living in their vanilla life, if you will, and they felt like, ‘Oh, I'm a size eight, I'm a size 10. Who's gonna want me?’ Then these 350-pound chicks are literally plopping down on clients and making bank, no exaggeration. You know what I mean?... The range is there.”

It is apparent from interview responses that plus-sized women are also fetishized within this sex economy and a desired demographic amongst white cisgender male clientele.

Goddess Ebony who identified as plus-sized echoed this desire:

> “Um, I feel like being a black sex worker specifically is like, fetishized a lot but I feel, especially as a plus sized woman, you know, people always come to me like, Oh, you’re my type… [Your] skin color, your body shape is very fetishized.”

Thus, these black and plus-sized women are also participating in acts of rebellion against dominant ideologies of ideal body types (Johansson 2020). Plus-sized sex workers also faced more censorship compared to thinner sex workers which makes black, plus-sized imagery a target online. For example, Mistress Diamond described seeing images being removed or flagged while similar or nearly identical images of white or thinner bodies (sometimes even nude and often celebrities or high-profile sex workers) were not censored at all.

> "You'll see a lot of sex workers… just having pictures or [Instagram] stories flagged when it's honestly, nothing really explicit about it, [especially compared to] things you'll see the fucking Kim Kardashians post. Sometimes what sex workers post is more PG than them."

Another plus-sized respondent, Mistress Sugar explained her experiences of double standards when it came to her color and size:

> "I've been banned from online groups and censored due to my size… But then I'll go to like a white sex workers page [even if they are my size] and they'll have like their cash app or something all in their profile but they're still in the group... [When it comes to posting photos] I've seen one of my white counterparts [with the] same photos not removed. So I feel like FetLife does have a big history of anti-blackness for some reason."

These responses suggest that body shape is another intersection that shapes the experiences of sex workers online. Respondents who were plus-sized or curvier recalled how they felt they needed to be more conservative when posting content because they knew it would be flagged due to the fact their body shape and size is hypersexualized online (even when that is not the intention). Therefore, SESTA-FOSTA limits digital space available to black and plus-sized bodies. This limitation has the effect of also thus limiting the overall representation of black and plus-sized bodies online.

Harm Reduction, Censorship, and Inequitable Access

Numerous studies suggest, despite the risk of facing possible legal sanctions, that the Internet is a valuable resource for sex workers to advertise their work and maintain a sense of safety and security. It is also true that black women are disproportionately censored and silenced

online. Thus, my sample is a hyper-targeted group whose existence is frequently challenged on these digital platforms. Digital platforms are a tool to maintain personal security and physical safety, but they are also institutions that are a threat to those same things, especially considering the massive censorship of platforms triggered by SESTA-FOSTA.

The Internet and social media platforms allow sex workers to "vet" interested clients before actually meeting in-person. "Vetting" referring to the process by which sex workers screen potential clients to gather basic information, to check for blacklisted or dangerous clients, and to make sure clients understand their boundaries and expected compensation. Sex workers can search clients' names on online databases that contain blacklists of potentially dangerous clients. In fact, these lists, which are difficult to access or are at risk of being removed due to SESTA-FOSTA's signage, have even been responsible for helping bring rapists and sex traffickers to justice (Olding 2020). Aside from these lists, social media platforms also help sex workers have control of where meet-ups occur and plan safety measures (i.e. having another person present for security) which can be life-saving. Censorship as a result of SESTA-FOSTA or obscure community guidelines violations online forces sex workers to maneuver digital spaces very cautiously and makes it difficult for black queer sex workers to maintain a presence online.

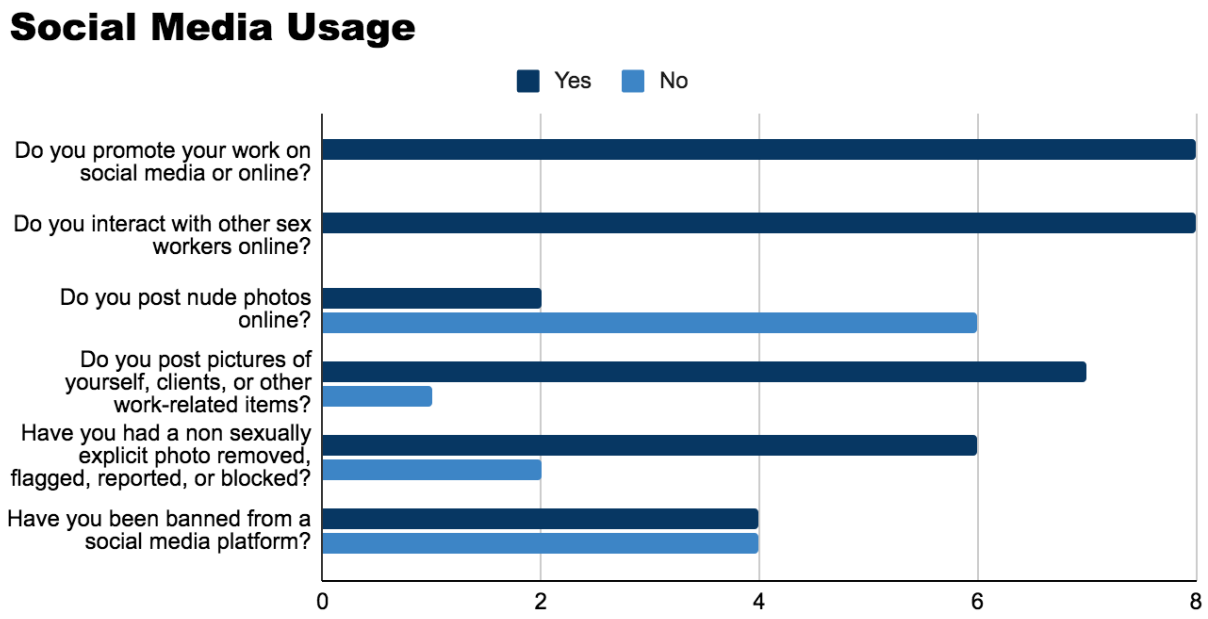


Figure 3

The most often mentioned form of censorship was the removal of photos but responses also revealed more extreme forms like account bans and suspensions. 6 out of 8 respondents mentioned having non-nude or sexually explicit photos flagged or removed on their social media {See Figure 3}. It is important to note that the one respondent who did not have an image flagged or removed suggested that she does not post often on social media. Photos that were flagged or removed for community guidelines violations typically were advertising flyers, FNSWO event reminders, or photos of themselves or other sex workers. For the first two, similar to dating websites, the mere inclusion of terms like “sex work”, “dominatrix”, “OnlyFans” can get these posts removed. Ironically, there are many celebrities (i.e. Kim Kardashian) or high-profile sex workers online who make posts promoting “OnlyFans” and posting sexually explicit if not outright nude images without repercussion. Only one respondent claimed that they posted nude photos online. For photos of sex workers’ bodies that are not explicit and flagged or

removed, it is clear that platform algorithms mirror some of the same biases that are present in society in real life. Black, queer, and non-traditional body types are disproportionally targeted online, shadow-banned, and censored, yet strikingly respondents revealed how easy it is to find uncensored nude photos of white bodies on social media platforms.

There are major safety concerns as well as cultural implications as a result of this censorship and inequitable access to social media. The most apparent implication that this censorship has is on safety and access to harm reduction tools. Censorship and lack of access to social media make it extremely difficult for sex workers to find clients without taking to the streets or "freestyling". Equally as important, this censorship reinforces heteronormative, sexist, and racist dominant ideologies that contribute to the stigmatization and the erasure of a black and queer presence online. Moreover, due to the lack of a human element it has for posts to be contested or to even inquire why a post was flagged or removed. Thus, making these community guidelines more obscure and less accessible to its users.

Chapter 3: Beyond Harm Reduction

This third chapter analyzes: **How does organizational support shape how Black, LGBTQ+ sex workers' experiences with sex work?** Respondents were asked about their experiences with FNSWO and broadly their emotions around the work that they do. Data indicates that inclusive digital peer support can have a positive impact on the ways in which Black LGBTQ+ individuals who engage in sex work experienced their work in addition to other aspects of their life. Therefore, this section also explores the implications of digital peer support and the role of community organizing and mutual aid in empowering sex workers (both in a political sense and in their day-to-day lives).

Largely, scholars have focused on harm reduction, yet censorship in response to SESTA-FOSTA limits other aspects of sex workers' lives. Digital tools have more value than just as a harm reduction measure and has great potential for enriching the lives of sex workers (in and outside of their work). Beyond harm reduction, digital tools allow sex workers to forge relationships with other sex workers who share their identities and experiences, seek mentorship, uncover new knowledge whilst also sharing information and their own perceptions, promote other creative projects or business ventures, and so much more.

Seeking Inclusion and Organization Resources

Social stigma, lack familial ties, and a lack of a sense of community can make sex work isolating, stigmatizing, and dangerous. Several respondents divulged a desire to find other sex workers, sex work communities, or sex worker organizations, to seek community and support. For many of these women, they did not know many other sex workers when they began performing sex work, in fact, Miss Brooklyn explained,

"I was the only sex worker I knew when I started out [doing sex work]."

In this sample, these sex workers sought connections and support through kink, BDSM, pro-domme, and sex worker online communities. Mistress Diamond, when asked about her experience seeking a community online and information stated,

> "[Being black and pansexual sex worker] definitely means like not necessarily having that community there at first… [when it came to learning more it was] so gatekept by white cis women."

In this response, Mistress Diamond reveals how difficult it can be for black queer sex workers to find sex worker communities that are remotely welcoming or understand their experiences. Several respondents reflected on this difficulty and pointed to other sex workers online seeming unwilling to share tips. As previously noted, even women who offered compensation for knowledge and resources like Miss Brooklyn found it difficult to find other sex workers especially when reaching out to organizations that largely catered to the experiences of white sex workers.

Some respondents suggested that their sexuality was openly accepted within the sex work community, yet this was not the case for their race and body types. Therefore, their search for community was further complicated by their race. Due to their experiences of discrimination online (i.e. lowballing black sex worker prices, being denied by online groups) and lack of representation of black queer sex workers online, these women decided to shift focus and join a group more catered to their identity in hopes of finding support and gaining knowledge. This group was FNSWO. Respondents either found the organization through their own search or received a recommendation to join the organization (or just an organization event) from a friend. More strikingly though, all respondents mentioned that they felt very supported within this

organization because it reflected their own identities and values. Sex workers in the group were black and Afro-Latinx, and there were sex workers who were queer and from a range of body types. FNSWO brings together women who would otherwise be disjointed, but more importantly provides a handful of forms of support.

One form of support FNWSO provides is emotional support through forged relationships amongst sex workers and its organization social events. These events and relationships allow these women to vent in safe space, seek validation, and exchange advice or passed-down knowledge. For example, one respondent revealed learning how to protect their personal information at an organization workshop. Other respondents discussed exchanging photos with other organization members to get advice on how to make their content better. One common theme though was the feeling of being a part of a sisterhood or larger community that reflected their own identity as sex positive black women and non-binary folk who engage in sex work. A handful of respondents like Miss Brooklyn described FNSWO as a family or sisterhood.

> "I think [this organization is] like a family. That's all I can say honestly. Because when I joined, I wasn't talking to my family. I had no family, no friends [and so this organization] became my support system."

Miss Brooklyn explained receiving legal advice and support:

> "There was so much knowledge of stuff that I didn't even know, like how to maneuver through sex work, pretty much like the legal stuff. One time we had a list of lawyers, you know, if anything happened... I didn't know what to expect, but the knowledge was above and beyond anything I could ever expect."

FNSWO provides a digital hub to centralize sex workers and their knowledge around sex work and other aspects of life (i.e. other business ventures, school, parenting) Other forms of support

through FNSWO were more tangible though. FNSWO offers financial support through charities, drives, networking opportunities, and pooling together resources. In December 2020, FNSWO held a toy-drive for their members with children to aid members during the holiday season. In another example, Madam Jay explained,

> "Someone asked the other day, how can I access emergency funds as a sex worker?... [the organization leader] has paid rent, she's got groceries [for other members], you know?"

This respondent explained how the organization gives members a hub to seek resources like emergency funds (in and outside of the organization), and how even members will step up to assist each other like buying one another groceries when money is tight. Other respondents revealed seeking knowledge about starting businesses or getting patents. A couple of respondents reported starting their own business or seeking other ventures with the support of the organization. These exchanges of knowledge and resources is a radical form of care and community empowerment formally understand as mutual aid which has been especially important for sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moraes et al., 2020). In FNSWO, mutual aid included emotional venting sessions, access to funds, and everyday necessities.

Many sex workers (and other marginalized groups) engage in mutual aid as a means of survival. Because sex work is illegal and highly stigmatized, it is difficult for sex workers to seek resources and assistance from dominant institutions, leaving sex workers to frequently rely on themselves. For instance, sex workers have developed tactics to maintain safety without the assistance of public safety officials like police. Therefore, Black and LGBTQ sex workers, who tend to be at more risk, lay the foreground for strategies of how to maintain safety and support outside of the scope of the state (Ludwig 2020). It is important to recognize that issues that impact sex workers also have implications for other groups who are heavily policed like black

and brown communities. Thus, the strategies that sex workers (especially those who are frequently involved in political organizing) propose should be forefront in conversations for radical social change around policing and understandings of community safety.

Empowerment, Liberation, and Healing

Sex work, due its intimate nature, includes a lot of emotional labor (Hochschild 1989). This labor can be strenuous, but sex work also allows women to create fantasies on their own terms. These women, cognizant of the fantasies they create, thus have control and say in their own pleasure and what their blackness and queerness mean to others. For the one respondent who was transgender, she revealed how commonly men will seek her solely because she was transgender and treating her as an object within their fantasies. However, this respondent also explained that there is power in these experiences since as a dominatrix she is put in a role of power and domination. She explained that outside of the exchanges she has with these men, these men probably do not interact with many black women, let alone a black transgender woman. Therefore, she views participating in sex work as also participating in a process to help others better understand black and transgender individuals. Additionally, though, these sex workers receive labor from their clients as well.

While some women reported having clients who are women or non-binary, the overwhelming majority of their client base were men, more specifically, white men. One unique characteristic of members of FNWSO is that due to these dynamics, these black sex workers sometimes require their clients do tasks as a form of reparations. Respondents reported having clients research famous black women in history, write essays about systems of oppression that target black and transgender women, and even spread this newfound information to their white friends or family members. For these women this reparations work is empowering.

Moreover, on a surface level, respondents explained feeling naturally powerful because they are a dominatrix. Being a dominatrix, and thus sexually and intimately dominant, puts more power and control in the hands of sex workers. Respondents described that they hold a great responsibility since hiring a dominatrix requires vulnerability. Therefore, the overall story that seems to emerge is that these women are participating in an ongoing empowering process of reparations sex work to help dismantle stereotypes and validate black queer sex workers.

Respondents also talked about how their form of employment enabled them to live lifestyles that were otherwise unattainable "in their vanilla lives". Most respondents had another job in addition to performing sex work, but they explained that the money they earned from sex work helped them maintain independence and seek opportunities that may not otherwise be available to them. Respondents mentioned traveling, starting businesses, and owning assets like cars, as a result of sex work. Mistress Diamond claimed,

> "My ability to travel was vastly greater. Now I feel like I'm in a much better position. Not only like in my life, but like financially, I would definitely say, [sex work has given me] more opportunities. As I've gotten older… I've had an opportunity to just network more, which is a big thing."

Mistress Diamond revealed a common sentiment of independence and financial freedom that I observed in my interviews. Sex work can help women who are generally underpaid in society gain independence, build wealth, and seek other opportunities (inside and outside of the sex work industry) that may require money (i.e. getting a patent).

Finally, some respondents divulged that for some of their clients or themselves, sex work has helped them work through a trauma. This trauma, usually sexual trauma, was healed through having sexual and intimate encounters with their consent and full control. The nature of being a

dominatrix allows these sex workers to have agency in their sexual encounters and the nature of being the client (a submissive) allows clients to also exercise control over their sexual encounters since they set boundaries as well. Mistress Diamond discussed how she used sex work to heal her own trauma as well as her clients:

> "[I want to] use BDSM and things like that as a tool for, um, healing, sexual trauma, um, especially, um, childhood trauma. A lot of people find confidence through BDSM, especially through domming a lot of women who step into being a dominatrix later in their life, especially after going through a lot of abuse or trauma, find a lot of confidence and self-healing in that, um, just in that taking back their power. Um, and that happens a lot with BDSM when we talk about, um, healing things, just because, you know, it's like, it's such a vulnerable position that you're put in that you are put in a position where you have to trust, you have to be able to communicate. Um, and those things can help a lot with healing. And so, for me, it was like being able to combine those two later in life"

Respondents also showcased that sex work can be body-positive, empowering, and help women develop body confidence. Miss Brooklyn elaborated on her transformation and the impact of emotional support provided by FNSWO:

"I feel empowered. I feel strong. I feel beautiful... like I was saying before I have a lot of sexual trauma in my life and I feel like I'm claiming my sexuality and reclaiming myself and my body. When I'm doing my work it's liberating, especially because things would happen to me and I wouldn't say anything, especially my childhood abuse, things would happen, and I would have to just deal with it and not say anything and not be able to say this is how I felt. And now I feel like it's liberating… I have the freedom to speak. I have my voice, I feel in control or something finally, if that makes sense."

Another respondent, Mistress Sugar, echoed this idea of viewing sex work as empowering and confidence boosting:

> "It really has given me so much confidence. Now I want to post something like that. So now I wanted to do, because I actually started a lingerie line online for plus size people. I, of course I have sizes that aren't plus size too, but mostly geared towards plus size people. And for my models, I use kind of friends and family from all shapes and sizes. So, it's not like when you see like plus size ads on TV, it's just like the tall really thick with no stomach plus size women. It's women with everything. We have rolls, we have pimples, we have scars, we have tattoos and stuff like that. And so, for me, it's mostly just about like confidence and I hope that's what I can bring to Brown and black plus-sized women."

Many respondents discussed feeling empowered or more beautiful as a result of their sex work even if they were not initially confident in their bodies. Sex work does not erase these women's insecurities as some respondents did discuss still working on their body confidence or combatting body dysphoria. However, through tapping into particular markets these women and other sex workers alike can profit from their hypersexuality and fetishization and achieve mobility and financial independence that may not be available to them in other professions (Harris 2016, Miller-Young 2010).

Sex Work is Political

Discussions around sex work have transformed from debating along a binary of whether sex work is good or bad but instead is centered around the rights of sex workers and their everchanging circumstances. With the recent passage of laws like SESTA-FOSTA that actively criminalize sex work and sex workers, being a sex worker is inherently political. Along with the

turn of the 21st century came a campaign to crack down on sex trafficking and, due to sex trafficking and sex work's conflation, at the same time criminalizes consensual sex workers (Weitzer 2019). Therefore, sex workers themselves, especially those marginalized by other identities like race or sexual orientation, are often very politically active. Mistress Erika who sometimes helped facilitate workshops and events around kink and sex work discussed her perspective:

> "I am somebody who in my community, um, is one of those people. That's very outspoken with the fact that kink and sex and identity are all political. You cannot erase politics, you cannot remove politics, um, from, from these types of things. Um, and I know that it has cost me opportunities amongst my community members. It has cost me collaborations. It has cost me money to be outspoken about these types of things. Ever since I first walked into any of this, I've been the first person to say [kink and sex work] like this shit doesn't exist in a vacuum. And anybody who thinks it does... either doesn't have any black friends or has the privilege to only move in those circles that, you know, that they can afford to not talk about [these issues]."

It is important to recall that sex work spaces (both digital and physical) are quite segregated across racial boundaries and the experiences of sex workers is greatly informed by their race. Thus, sex worker rights and discussion around sex work is a racial justice issue as well (Sankofa 2016). SESTA-FOSTA's treatment of sex workers sets a very limiting and dangerous legal precedent for further discussion of how to treat sex workers who perform their work consensually or how to reduce and eliminate sex trafficking.

Another respondent, Mistress Sugar recalled participating in activism around sex work:

> "[This organization] helped [lead] The Black Sex Worker Liberation March in New York, a few months back and stuff like that. And so, I just wanted to join a group where everyone, people who look like me [and] think like me are in this one giant space… Like, because I kind of was feeling like a little bit of an outsider, but with this group it's like, no, we're all a family, we call each other siblings."

These anecdotes reflect how sex work and sex worker's rights are linked to politics. In particular they showcase how online organizations like FNWSO can provide tools and resources to maintain sex workers' safety and also be vessels for political power. For instance, sex workers have frequently advocated against police violence and are thus a part of larger political conversation. Mistress Erika had first-hand experiences with police that motivated her to speak out against police brutality:

> "I have family members who are black drag Queens, trans sex workers, and I have seen firsthand the violence perpetrated on them by not only people out in the world, just attacking them for who they are, but also the ways and the manner in which the police have dealt with them when they need help, or even when they are just out and about. I have had family members who have been coerced and sexually abused by police officers. I saw that as a child with some of my female family members. It is like a really like well-known fact that Oakland PD is incredibly corrupt [they] participated in the largest sexual trafficking cover up"

This response alone showcases how sex work and sex worker organizing is not only a means of providing for communities, but also because of its proximity to political issues can be a mechanism for political power. As aforementioned, it is much more useful to discuss sex work through the lens of labor relations rather than a debate on the morality of sexual labor or

sexualities. The violence against sex workers that Mistress Erika discussed, from profiling to physical and sexual assault, exhibited the ways in which law enforcement internalize and reinforce stereotypes about women of color, particularly trans women of color, sex workers, and queer individuals. This harassment of sex workers shows how they can be targeted by police, but more importantly why organizations like FNSWO are so vital. FNSWO provides many resources, knowledge, and crucial to this argument, political power. The violent and dehumanizing treatment of sex workers by police reveal a complacency with current racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic practices within law enforcement. One must recognize though that the violence against sex workers is not isolated from the police brutality against Black people, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, etc. Therefore, sex workers inform the ways in which communities, especially those who face persistent police violence and lack police protection, can maintain safety and care without the need for police (Ludwig 2020). In this study, FNSWO functions a centralized organizing space to promote the safety, care, and overall enjoyment of life, amongst their members and their larger communities. Although here I focused on sex work relation to politics around policing, sex work is related to a plethora of larger social issues from labor rights, to women's rights, to healthcare.

Conclusion

These findings shed light on the complex experiences of Black and LGBTQ+ sex workers in digital spaces. Responses suggested that exclusion and censorship is largely a part of being sex worker online, but those effects are heightened for those who belong to other marginalized identities like transgender women and women of color. These effects are also in part mitigated by platforms and thus individuals who are most likely to be flagged by platform algorithms or other users face disproportionate exclusion and censorship. Moreover, even within online sex worker communities, many Black (and other minority) sex workers face rejection and exclusion from predominantly white sex worker organizations and online groups. Therefore, exclusion has a great impact on Black and LGBTQ+ sex workers access to digital tools and resources that are available through platforms and online communities that not only provides sex workers with harm reduction strategies, but also impacts their overall experience in sex work. SESTA-FOSTA further complicates this issue by shifting the burden of policing to platforms thus not only challenging the neutrality of platforms and further limiting digital tools available to Black and LGBTQ+ sex workers.

In this study, FNSWO provided a group of Black and Afro-Latinx sex workers with knowledge and resources that reduce harm. FNSWO importantly though goes a step further a provides Black and Afro-Latinx sex workers with a sense of kinship and resources that go beyond reducing harm and instead focus on enhancing its members quality of life. Overall, FNSWO provides a centralized space for Black and LGBTQ+ sex workers to engage in mutual aid strategies to uplift themselves and their community. Aside from these insights, these study results also showcase the need to restructure the way scholars study sex work and sex workers.

These findings validate claims that suggest it is more useful to evaluate sex work in conversation with fair labor practices rather than debates around morality or sexuality. Moreover, these results justify more research on sex work, and more specifically research that focuses on deconstructing the understanding that sex workers are a monolith. Scholarship on sex work not only frequently neglects the perspective of sex workers but is also lacks depth in its analysis because many scholars fail to consider how race, class, citizenship and perceived gender status shape the experiences of sex workers and reproduce social stratifications within sex work.

Finally, given these findings, if there is anything one should take away from this thesis it would be the following three things:

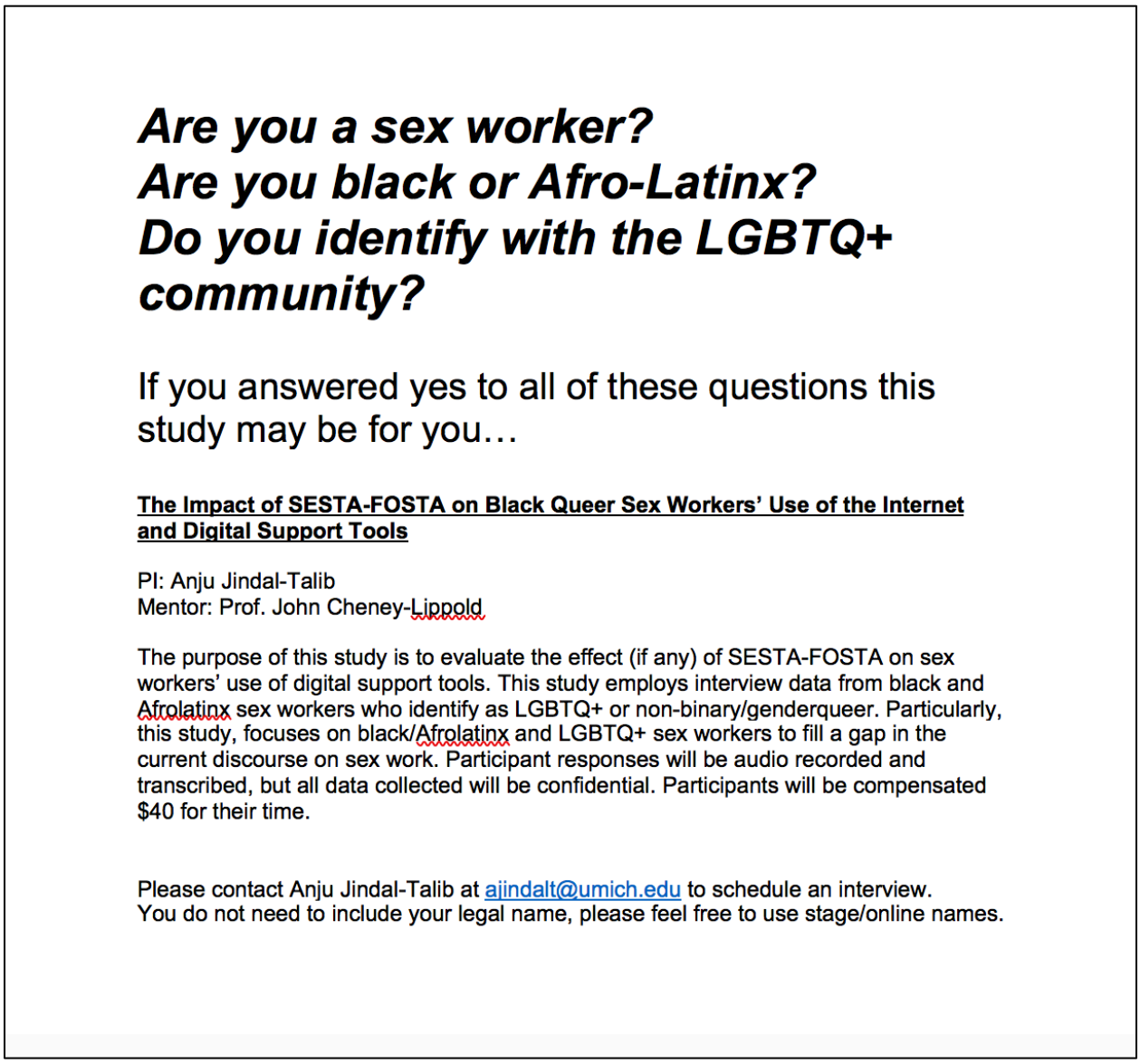
1. **Sex work must be decriminalized.** Majority of respondents when asked if they had other thoughts or suggestions on what should be done to better support sex workers indicated that sex work should be decriminalized. Decriminalizing sex work (rather than legalizing) would reduce the amount of harm and stigma sex workers face and help sex workers perform their work safely and on their own terms. Decriminalizing sex work would allow sex workers to avoid persecution by the law and remove the fear of conviction which prevents many individuals, particularly transgender women of color, from acquiring equitable employment, housing, and healthcare (Walker 2020).
2. **Research on sex work needs more extensive and take on an intersectional approach** rather than the fragmented one. To provide a more detailed and accurate depiction of sex work, scholars need to center sex workers in discourse around sex work. Additionally, scholars need to recognize that the experiences of sex workers vary due to not only the

type of work that they do but also how their own identities are understood in the context of their work.

3. **These issues are not isolated.** Whether you are a sex worker or not, the treatment and condition of sex workers reveals issues that impact everyone in the US. As aforementioned, sex workers frequently face violence at the hands of police which has led many sex workers to innovate radical tactics to reduce harm and uplift sex worker communities. However, these strategies are not limited to sex workers and other communities traditionally unprotected and targeted by police could learn from the ways sex workers empower their communities outside of the state. In addition to this, the overall stigma that is directed toward sex workers is a part of broader issues that negatively impact many communities. Specifically, stigma around sex work is linked to the broader racism, sexism, and transphobia that exists in the US. For instance, the tragic shooting in Atlanta at three massage spas on March 16, 2021 revealed how women of color are fetishized in American society. While it is unknown if the Asian women the assailant killed were engaging in sex work, the assailant felt as though they were and claimed that his violent attack was a means of exterminating his sexual temptations. This violence highlights how women of color are eroticized and objectified, but the assailant's comments in particular highlight how racism and stigma around sex work can intersect. Even prior to the attack, these spas had been the target of prostitution stings by local police in which only women were arrested (Bowman 2021). Thus, sex workers' rights are intrinsically linked to the empowerment of many demographics from transgender folk to people of color to women.

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



Are you a sex worker?
Are you black or Afro-Latinx?
Do you identify with the LGBTQ+ community?

If you answered yes to all of these questions this study may be for you…

The Impact of SESTA-FOSTA on Black Queer Sex Workers' Use of the Internet and Digital Support Tools

PI: Anju Jindal-Talib
Mentor: Prof. John Cheney-Lippold

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effect (if any) of SESTA-FOSTA on sex workers' use of digital support tools. This study employs interview data from black and Afrolatinx sex workers who identify as LGBTQ+ or non-binary/genderqueer. Particularly, this study, focuses on black/Afrolatinx and LGBTQ+ sex workers to fill a gap in the current discourse on sex work. Participant responses will be audio recorded and transcribed, but all data collected will be confidential. Participants will be compensated $40 for their time.

Please contact Anju Jindal-Talib at ajindalt@umich.edu to schedule an interview.
You do not need to include your legal name, please feel free to use stage/online names.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Name: _____

Pronouns: _____

Ethnicity/Race: _____

Age: _____

Background

Tell me a little about yourself and where you are from.

How did you get into sex work?

What was your main motivator when deciding to do sex work?

What does being a sex worker mean to you? Consent?

How would you describe your race/ethnicity? Sexual orientation?

Identity

How would you describe your sexual orientation? Do you work with men, women, non-binary folk?

In particular what does it mean to be a sex worker and black and _____ (sexual orientation + gender identification)?

Do you think your race impacts your job?

Are you proud of the work you do?

Do you have another job or form of employment?

Are you open about being a sex worker? (Do your family/friends know that you perform sex work)

In what ways (if any) has performing sex work shaped your life?

Organization

How did you hear about this organization? Why did you join this organization?

Did you have any expectations for the organization? What were they? Did your experience in the organization challenge or meet your expectations?

Do you participate in any of the organization's (virtual or in-person) events?

What is your favorite part or aspect of being a member of this organization?

Do you feel supported in this sorority?
-In what ways do other members support you online (and offline)?

The Internet and Social media

What social media platforms do you use?

Tell me about your social media use.

- Do you promote your work on social media or online? If so, in what ways?
- Do you interact with other sex workers online? If so, in what ways?
- Do you interact with other sex workers offline/ (face-to-face interactions)
- Do you have a personal social media and a separate social media to advertise your work?
- Do you post pictures of yourself, clients, or other work-related items?

How has your social media account and access to the Internet impacted the ways in which you find or reach (current or potential) clients?

- Has your phone, social media, or access to the Internet helped you get out of a difficult or uncomfortable situation with a client?

What things do you post on your social media? Can you tell me about your posting process?

Has any of your content been censored, banned, removed or flagged? How did this make you feel?

Have you ever had a social media account that was reported, flagged, or removed?

How do you feel about posting suggestive or nude photos of yourself?

Tell me about the kinds of comments you receive?

- On your posts, do you typically receive positive or negative comments?
- Could you give me an example?
- Have you received a negative comment on a post? What was it? How did that comment make you feel?
- How do negative comments in general make you feel? Positive?

Have you been able to meet other sex workers online?

Have you ever followed any sex workers with large followings and their content or social media account was banned, censored or removed?

Do other people repost your content or share your page on social media?

Has social media raised your awareness of issues related to sex work? What kinds of things did you learn online or on social media about sex work?

Are you a part of any other online groups for sex workers, black sex workers, LGBTQ sex workers, or black and/or queer individuals? How did you hear about this group? Do you communicate and interact with this group online or on social media?

Do you think you could easily continue your work without social media or access to the Internet? Why or why not?

Emotions, Support, Empowerment, Harm Reduction

Do you think performing sex work has changed your perception of your body? How so?

How do you find being a dominatrix? Tell me what it's like.

- What feelings are evoked?

How would you compare your experience being a sex worker before joining this organization?

Has joining this organization changed the way you seek clients or perform your work?

The Law

Are you familiar with SESTA-FOSTA, also known as The Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA)? What do you know about it?

In what ways do you think SESTA-FOSTA impacts your work?

Do you have any opinions on policy changes that should be made to better support/protect sex workers?

Any other thoughts?

Appendix C: Glossary

Term	Definition/Relevance
BBW	An acronym that is short for "big beautiful woman".
Kink/Kink sex work	A term that refers to non-conventional sexual practices. It also can refer to specific sexual tastes, fetishes, or fantasies.
Dominatrix/Domme/Pro-Domme	An individual who takes on a dominant role in sexual or intimate activities.
Masculine-presenting	A term used to describe an individual who chooses to express their gender in a more masculine (rather than feminine way).
Cisgender	A cisgender individual is someone whose gender identity matches to their sex assigned at birth.
Transgender/Trans	A transgender individual is someone whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth.
BDSM	A term used to refer to sexual acts that fall under bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism.
Reparations work	A form of labor that is consciously attempting to mitigate the effects of sociopolitical abuse of a marginalized group. In this study reparations work refers to the work that sex workers engage in as a way of atoning for the abuse of Black people, especially Black women.
Sub/Submissive	An individual who takes on a submissive role in sexual or intimate activities.
Freestyling	The act of finding a potential client or "sub" in the "real world" in public spaces like a bar rather than using a website for example.
Vetting	The process or system of steps sex workers use to screen potential clients to ensure that suitable to work with.
Sugar Baby/Sugar Daddy/Sugar Mama/Sugaring	Sugaring refers to exchange of intimacy for money typically between a sugar baby (who is often younger) and a sugar daddy or sugar mama who pays for that intimacy.

Sex Work	Sex work is used broadly in this context and refers to any exchange of money for sexual or intimate acts from stripping online via webcams to escorting to what people have traditionally understood as prostitution

Appendix D: Platforms Coded

Platform Name	Short Description
Facebook	Social networking platform founded by Mark Zuckerberg
FetLife	Social networking platform geared toward people interested in BDSM, kink, and fetishism
Grindr	Social networking platform and dating application for LGBTQ+ people
Instagram	Photo and video sharing social networking platform owned by Facebook
Monkey	Video chat application that randomly matches strangers to chat for 15 seconds
OnlyFans	Content subscription platform where creators can earn money for making content for their subscribers
Plenty of Fish (POF)	Canadian dating application and social networking platform
Reddit	Social news platform that centralizes discussions and ratings that users initiate and facilitate.
Seeking Arrangement	Dating application designed to help arrange mutually beneficial relationships between sugar babies and sugar daddies or sugar mamas
Snapchat	Multimedia messaging platform where users can exchange videos and photos colloquially referred to as “snaps”
Tinder	Dating application and social networking platform based on users’ geolocation
Tumblr	Blogging and social networking platform that allow users to create multimedia blogs
Twitter	Microblogging and social networking platform where users can exchange videos, photos, and messages colloquially referred to as “tweets”

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