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"Fucking With the Binary": LGBTQ Sex Workers' Gender and Sexual Identities

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“Fucking With the Binary”: LGBTQ Sex Workers’ Gender and Sexual Identities

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ABSTRACT

The lived experiences of LGBTQ sex workers are largely unknown. Of the few representations of LGBTQ sex workers in media and academia, most are shrouded in inaccurate and dehumanizing stereotypes. Through qualitative interviews with eight LGBTQ sex workers, this thesis attempts to portray an accurate view of the way LGBTQ sex workers negotiate their gender and sexual identities. LGBTQ sex workers were found to balance their queer and trans identities with clients' perceived desires for hegemonic gender presentations. They reported a mix of positive and negative outcomes from engaging in the sex industry. Additionally, they expressed desires for institutional and cultural changes to improve the harmful aspects of their work.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Sex work¹ has long been debated in academic, feminist, and mainstream discourse. Shrouded in stereotypes and moralistic claims, representations of sex work often swing between polar extremes. At one end of the spectrum, dominance feminists claim that sex work is inherently oppressive, often portraying sex workers as helpless victims of patriarchy and/or capitalism (Showden 2012). In an attempt to combat this harsh view, sex positive feminists began describing the sex industry in a more positive light. Some claim that sex work is just an occupation as any other, leading to the popular phrase “sex work is work,” while others go as far as claiming that the sex industry is inherently queer and progressive (Barton 2001; Mai 2012; McKay 1999; Read 2013).

Given these focused views and general claims about the sex industry as a whole, it is not surprising that scholars have also tended to box sex workers into narrow representations. Indeed, little research has been conducted on sex workers’ actual lives and experiences, and the research that has been done tends to rely on simplistic and harmful myths. As such, most studies on sex workers focus on their risks of contracting sexually transmitted infections and/or facing physical and sexual violence (Begum et al. 2013; Gorry, Roen, and Reilly 2010; Jackson, Bennett, and Sowinski 2007; Mai 2012; Vanwesenbeeck 2013; Weitzer 2010).

Additionally, research focused on LGBTQ sex workers specifically is rare (Barton 2001; Smith and Laing 2012). Barton (2001) theorizes that most scholars studying sex workers avoid talking about gender and sexual orientation out of fear of alienating their informants. Rather than protecting informants from feeling shame, however, researchers contribute to the stigma LGBTQ sex workers face by perpetuating their invisibility in academia (Smith and Laing 2012). Thus, the

¹ I use a broad definition of sex work that includes any individual working within the sex industry.

complex lives of LGBTQ sex workers have largely been unexplored in academia; they are either ignored completely or presented in stereotypical, stigmatizing ways.

Sex workers deserve the right to accurate, rich, and empowering representations in society at large, academia, the legal system, and the media. Notably, several researchers report that most sex workers feel they are oppressed not because of any inherent flaw in the sex industry or in their clients, but because of the stigma placed on them by society (Begum et al. 2013; Gorry et al. 2010; Mai 2012). Sex workers are affected by “whore stigma,” a concept that describes how women are dishonored when they engage in many sexual behaviors or have many sexual partners (Pheterson 1993:39). Additionally, sex workers are characterized as being criminals and having a lack of competence in other forms of work (Robillard 2010), spreading HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Begum et al. 2013), and lacking moral values (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, and Benoit 2006). Although cisgender² male sex workers may experience fewer stigmas than cisgender female sex workers given that traditional masculinity allows for more sexual exploration than traditional femininity does, stigma still negatively affects sex workers of all genders (Vanwesenbeeck 2013).

When researchers and journalists fail to address their own biases and agendas before presenting information about sex workers, they contribute to the discrimination, oppression, and violence that sex workers experience. Thankfully, new definitions and conceptualizations of sex work allow for the diversity of sex workers’ lives to be more accurately represented. Weitzer (2009) argues that sex work is a diverse field with a wide range of worker experiences and power relations. The boundaries of sex work are ambiguous, making the sex industry complicated and

² ‘Cisgender’ is a term that refers to individuals whose gender identities match the gender they were assigned at birth. ‘Cis’ is a popular abbreviation for cisgender that I will use throughout my thesis.

contradictory (Harcourt and Donovan 2005). Drawing on Sullivan's (2010) work, Begum et al. (2013) outline a fluid and open way of describing sex work and sex workers:

...Rather than being able to define legal sex work as either empowering or demeaning, as researchers we need to accept that for the women in the industry it is both – sometimes at the same time, and sometimes at different times – and that all paid work reflects these contradictions to a greater or lesser extent (Sullivan 2010). Rather than trying to determine whether sex workers are victims or activists, we need to accept that women may not identify strongly with either term. Simplistic stereotypes and narratives are likely to continue to add to stigma and discrimination experienced by sex workers. (98)

In keeping with this definition, I allow the LGBTQ sex workers in my study to define and describe their own identities and lives. This is in effort to decrease the stereotyping and stigmatization of sex workers as a whole, with a focus on a particularly marginalized and stigmatized group of sex workers, LGBTQ sex workers. It is important for individuals to understand that a singular sex worker identity does not exist (Orchard et al. 2013). Additionally, philosophical debates about the morality of sex work are often dehumanizing and patronizing. As such, this thesis will explore the rich experiences of LGBTQ sex workers, a group that lives on the crux of many complex socio-cultural contexts (Smith and Laing 2012). LGBTQ sex workers illuminate the importance of intersectionality with their multiple oppressed identities and can teach us much about gender identity, sexuality, identity management, authenticity, and performativity. LGBTQ sex workers are well aware of the restrictions and tensions between identity and performance. By listening to their stories, we can greatly increase knowledge in the fields of queer theory, feminism, sexuality, and identity.

Theoretical Basis

Most scholars who have researched LGBTQ sex workers ground their work in theories of gender and sexuality performance. Butler (1990) contends that gender and sexual orientation are repetitively acted out in an endless performance. Similarly, West and Zimmerman argue that

individuals do gender, which involves a “complex of socially guided perceptual and interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (1987:126). More simply, both Butler (1990) and West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender and sexual orientation are not static internal identities. Instead, they view gender and sexuality as processes that are continually enacted and re-enacted in everyday life.

Although this paper does not seek necessarily to argue against performativity theories, my intent to focus on the lived experiences of my participants renders these theories largely impractical as the basis of my work. Rather, I contend that research on sex workers is consistently warped and twisted to fit the theoretical and moral needs of the researcher, leading to more abstract arguments than deep understandings of actual sex workers’ experiences. Showden (2012) argues that researchers studying sex often battle each other with contrasting epistemologies in attempt to prove their academic theory as ‘right.’ While it is laudable to attempt to combat whorephobic and sex-negative theories from the past with more positive representations of sexuality, queer and gender theories still dehumanize sex workers. Sex workers are not all helpless victims of patriarchal abuse, as dominance feminism would have us believe, but they are also not all queer crusaders, as some proponents of queer theory suggest.

Showden’s (2012) theory of sex-positive queer feminism combines aspects of feminism and queer theory into a form that recognizes the diversity, complexity, and contradictory nature of sexuality. This theory allows for an academic understanding of sex workers’ experiences with gender, sexual orientation, and sexuality, without reducing their lives to a singular moralistic claim. By combining queer and sociological theory, sex-positive queer feminism explains the multiplicity of many sex workers’ identities.

At its core, queer theory is concerned with destabilizing identities in order to understand their complex nature (Valocchi 2005). Queer theory moves past binary categories, such as ‘male’ or female’, ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’, arguing instead that “sexual identities, desires, and categories are fluid and dynamic” (Gamson and Moon 2004:49). LGBTQ sex workers in particular face unique opportunities surrounding their identities. Lesbians may have sex with men for work, while transgender men may present as women with their clients. Identities are understood to be multifaceted; individuals have multiple ways of conceptualizing and enacting their gender and sexuality (Marvin and Grandy 2013).

While queer theory goes as far to contend that there are unlimited, defiant possibilities for gender and sexual identity and expression, sociological theory recognizes structural and personal limits in these realms (Showden 2012). For oppressed groups, these limits often involve being simultaneously excluded from dominant ideologies and being expected to assimilate into them (Muñoz 1999). Rather than being solely essentialist or socially constructed, identities are products of both social structure and individual agency, meaning that individuals balance their core selves with the constraints in their environments (Valocchi 2005; Muñoz 1999). LGBTQ sex workers carefully negotiate their own personal identities, cultural and societal stigma, heteronormativity, demands from clients, and financial interests in choosing how to represent themselves. This process of “disidentification,” through which oppressed individuals strategically work within and against dominant ideologies, allows LGBTQ sex workers to simultaneously reinforce, subvert, be subordinated by, and overcome heteronormativity (Muñoz 1999; Showden 2012).

Sex-positive queer feminism recognizes the extreme variation in identity and expression that occurs in a single individual, making way for even more complexity in an entire group of

people. LGBTQ sex workers are not monolithic tropes that can be summed up in any single sentence. Instead, this theory sees LGBTQ sex workers as individuals navigating many intricate identities, expressions, expectations, and norms. This thesis utilizes sex-positive queer feminism to explore the lives of LGBTQ sex workers living in Denver and Boulder.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Identity Management among Sex Workers

Most scholars agree that sex workers utilize a broad range of tactics to artfully manage and present their identities with clients. For example, some have argued that sex workers develop “dual identities” to keep their working persona separate from their ‘real life’ persona (Begum et al. 2013:87). Robillard (2010) outlined a few ways that sex workers create boundaries around their physical surroundings and bodies to maintain a divide between their working and non-working selves. For example, sex workers may separate their living space from their working space, perhaps by having a separate bed or massage table for clients so their personal bed remains their own. Individual sex workers may also reserve some intimate acts, such as kissing or receiving oral sex, for their romantic partners, so that interactions with clients do not bleed into their non-working sex lives (Robillard 2010). Others found that some sex workers go through “shedding” rituals after work, like taking a shower or switching from a working name to a “real” name to clearly mark that they are going back to their personal selves (Orchard et al. 2013:192). Some lesbian women may also intentionally choose a job in the sex industry where they are working with men in order to create a clearer boundary between work, where they feel no desire for their male clients, and personal interactions, where they feel “authentic” desire for women (Barton 2001:16).

Although Begum et al. describe this process of separating working lives from personal lives as a negative component of sex work, claiming that workers are “forced to live a ‘double life’” (2013:95), other scholars have found this process to be positive. Day (2007) and Mai’s (2012) separate studies on sex workers in the UK both found that workers enjoyed the separation and escape their working lives gave them. The ability to switch between personas may also be an

indication of psychological wellbeing, since workers are able to actively control their working experience (Gorry et al. 2010). Several other scholars have claimed that sex workers' ability to separate working and non-working sex encounters is healthy and protective. The process of separation has been labeled as an "effective strategy to manage emotions" (Abel 2011:1177) and "a resistance strategy...to control the workplace (Sanders 2005:337). Notably, most other types of service work also require the construction of a working persona to reduce burnout and keep a positive, healthy personal identity (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Hochschild 1983; Marvin and Grandy 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013).

My thesis addresses how LGBTQ sex workers employ a variety of strategies to manage their personal and working personas. The process of managing identity is a healthy way for LGBTQ sex workers to persevere their personal identities, while ensuring success in their working environments. As Robillard argues, sex workers are not "passive victims of unfavourable conditions determined by class, ethnicity or gender, but as subjects of power, though limited, who choose the trajectory of their life and their multilayered identities" (2010:530). By navigating the complex realities of their often-stigmatized identities, LGBTQ sex workers are able to control more effectively their working and non-working selves, relationships, and experiences.

Gender, Sexuality, and Sexual Orientation in Sex Work

One of the many ways in which sex workers manage their working identities is through presentations of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on how male-presenting sex workers manage these presentations, since there is so little research on male sex workers to begin with. The following research thus applies to

individuals working in the sex industry presenting as cisgender or transgender women.³

Although most scholars seem to agree that sex workers employ a wide variety of techniques to present their gender and sexual orientation to clients, there is disagreement over what these presentations seem to signify.

The most obvious presentation for sex workers to employ is that of a hyper-feminine heterosexual woman, since that is the image most frequently presented in the media. Many scholars have studied the different ways in which sex workers adhere to this hegemonic femininity. Sex workers presenting in this way use their appearance to communicate their femininity and heterosexuality: they may use stereotypically feminine clothing, body language, and flirtation styles to become an “idealized heterosexually desirable object” (Spanger 2013:44). Specifically, sex workers utilize specific beauty practices such as “make-up, hair styling, dieting and cosmetic surgery” to appear beautiful and sexually attractive to men (Rivers-Moore 2013:154). As previously noted, some sex workers may alter themselves to seem more feminine in order to create a separate working persona. In addition, sex workers understand that most clients prefer to be with young, traditionally beautiful, hyper-feminine women, and so they must adhere to those standards to succeed (Rivers-Moore 2013; Marvin and Grandy 2013; Trautner 2005). With exotic dancing specifically, sex workers must exaggerate their femininity by “having large breasts, being attentive, good conversationalists and non-argumentative, needing to be rescued, [and] being sexual” in order to do well at their jobs (Marvin and Grandy 2013:232).

Although some radical feminists have criticized sex workers for conforming to stereotypical male fantasies of beauty, thereby reinforcing patriarchal gender expectations (Rivers-Moore 2013), many scholars argue that hyper-feminine presentations actually help subvert hegemonic gender ideals. By relying on queer theories that view gender as a

³ Not all individuals who present as cisgender or transgender women for work identify themselves as such.

performance, heteronormative sex work can be seen as a queer act of defiance. Sex workers who repeatedly act out hyperfeminine ideals are similar to drag queens who embody an exaggerated version of femininity for entertainment, making their work a “[parody] of the heterosexual norm” (Read 2013: 475). When clients purchase a service from a hyper-feminine, heteronormative sex worker, they are presented with how gender and sexuality are merely social constructions that can be bent, blurred, and distorted (Webber 2013; McKay 1999).

Sex work itself can also be seen as an act of subverting gender norms, regardless of how a sex worker might present their gender and sexual orientation. Since sex workers transgress traditional gender norms by being sexually and economically autonomous, they fragment and liquefy femininity (Jackson 2011). Thus, sex workers “[enact] multiple and contradictory expressions of femininity and masculinity,” blurring the lines around what is considered appropriate feminine behavior (Marvin and Grandy 2013:240). By adhering to some norms of hegemonic femininity (e.g. wearing makeup and feminine clothing), but violating others (e.g. being sexually promiscuous), sex workers can help destabilize binary gender ideologies.

Due to the radical potential of sex workers to complicate normative scripts of gender and sexuality, some theorists have argued that the sex industry is inherently queer. Mai contends that the sex industry is a “queer contact zone” because it allows for the exploration of many different gender and sexual roles for both clients and sex workers (2012:573). The sex industry also queers heteronormativity by mixing economics with sex, which is usually relegated to the private sphere (Pendleton 1997). Sex work de-naturalizes gender and sexuality, turning them into performances available for purchase. This allows individuals to recognize the social constructions underlying heteronormativity, which is usually taken for granted (Read 2013). The

ability for sex work to disrupt social norms and normative behaviors makes the sex industry a site of queer exploration.

Regardless of the queer possibilities of the sex industry, many aspects of sex work are heteronormative. Academics, radical feminists, and LGBTQ sex workers themselves have criticized the sex industry for reinforcing oppressive gender roles and catering to heteronormative ideals and acts (Mai 2012; Read 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013). As previously stated, most sex workers do need to conform to hegemonic feminine ideals in order to succeed in the industry, limiting the potential for LGBTQ workers to express themselves fully in their work (Webber 2013). Sex workers frequently engage in acts of subversion against heteronormativity, whether it be choosing to present their gender and sexuality differently or choosing a branch of the industry that allows for more queer expression, but workers are still constricted by heteronormative ideals (Wieringa 2012).

Conclusion

In my attempts to center the lived experiences of my LGBTQ sex worker participants, I choose to emphasize the contradictory elements of their work. Importantly, the sex industry can be both a site of queer rebellion, and heteronormative restriction. I contend that sex workers are not “victims of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and male dominance” (Read 2013:468), but each individual sex worker is also not inherently queer and subversive just for being a sex worker. Sex workers may engage in different acts, hold different beliefs, and present themselves in a variety of ways for a multitude of reasons. In line with other scholars fighting for sex workers’ rights, I worked not to essentialize LGBTQ sex workers into a monolithic identity (McKay 1999; Read 2013). Instead, my research accounts for a more encompassing documentation of identities that LGBTQ sex workers may experience, construct, and hold.

With this approach, I hope to emphasize that individuals' gender/sexuality identities and presentations, within both their working and non-working personas, are varied and mutable (Ocha and Earth 2013). LGBTQ sex workers, like all other individuals, can "enact multiple, overlapping, intertwined, contradictory and simultaneous identity roles" (Read 2013:244). Through navigating the complexities of the sex industry and the everyday world, LGBTQ sex workers employ a variety of identity management techniques to balance their mental health, personal identity, working identity, and economic strategy (Webber 2013). LGBTQ sex workers do not oscillate between an 'authentic' self, where workers would theoretically present their gender and sexual orientation as they do in everyday life, and an 'inauthentic' self, where workers would conform completely to clients' expectations. Instead, LGBTQ sex workers integrate various aspects of themselves and their lives at different times in their work, as all individuals bring out different parts of themselves in different social interactions (Webber 2013). I hope to let my participants speak for themselves to reveal the complex, diverse, and rich lives of LGBTQ sex workers that are often hidden by stereotypes, ignorance, and distant academic theories.

METHODS

I used a qualitative in-depth interview design to explore how LGBTQ sex workers think about and present their gender and sexual orientations. I chose to do a phenomenological study in order to examine closely the lived experiences of my participants (Bogdan and Biklen 1982; Rossman and Rallis 2003). In keeping with my attempt to represent LGBTQ sex workers' lives accurately, rather than impose stereotypes and myths upon them, qualitative interviews allowed me to discover the meanings my participants placed on their jobs, identities, and experiences (Miles and Huberman 1994). I conducted interviews from January to March 2014 with current and former sex workers living in the Denver-Boulder area.

Gaining Access

I recruited participants who self-identified as LGBTQ sex workers over the age of 18. I used a broad understanding of the terms 'LGBTQ' and 'sex worker'. LGBTQ specifically stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, but it can include many other identities related to sexual orientation and gender identity, such as questioning, asexual, intersex, genderqueer, gender fluid, and gender variant. The sex worker identity can include any individual currently or formerly working in the sex industry. This can include, but is not limited to, escorts, strippers, porn stars, sugar babies, cam girls/boys, and phone sex operators.

I attempted to solicit participants for my research in several different ways. I distributed recruitment flyers and emails to different friends who work in the sex industry, who are service providers for sex workers, and who do sex workers rights activism. Unfortunately, I received no calls or emails from sex workers who did not already know me. It is easy to assume that LGBTQ sex workers, who are extremely stigmatized in the U.S. and who are doing potentially illegal work, would be wary of contacting an unknown researcher. Several of my participants also

acknowledged fear of being portrayed in a negative or inaccurate light, which is common in academic research on sex workers. All of these factors combined made it impossible for me to recruit participants with whom I did not already have a rapport or connection.

Thankfully, I have a fairly large number of friends and acquaintances who are sex workers. In the year or so that I have been engaging in sex workers' rights activism, I have met fellow activists from many different branches of the sex work industry. Additionally, I have found that being educated and open-minded about sex work has led many people I encounter on a day-to-day basis to disclose their sex work histories to me. All of my participants were friends, acquaintances, and co-organizers who volunteered to be a part of my study after hearing me talk about it with them. It was essential for me to gain rapport with the community for many months prior to deciding to complete a thesis. If I were an outsider, I probably would have gotten few or no individuals to trust me enough to participate in the short time span of my recruitment.

Data Collection and Analysis

When potential participants contacted me, I told them about the goals of my study and made sure they met the inclusion criteria. Participants that were able to meet in the Denver/Boulder area were scheduled for a confidential in-person interview at the location of their choice. Given that I knew my participants, most of the interviews were conducted at my home or the participant's home. One interview was conducted over Skype, an online video chat software, because the participant was not in Colorado during the time I was conducting interviews.

The interviews lasted about an hour, on average, though they ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours. I based each interview off a semi-structured questionnaire list that focused on participants' identities, experiences at work, and opinions on sex work and queer issues. (See

Appendix A for the full interview guide.) The first part of the interview format included questions about demographic information, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and relationship orientation. Then, I asked participants about how they presented their gender and sexuality in different areas of their lives, and how they felt about those presentations. Finally, I asked participants about LGBTQ sex workers' rights and activism. The same interview guide was used for all participants, although I asked clarifying and probing questions and allowed participants to guide the conversation to other topics that were important to them (Miles and Huberman 1994).

I transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews using the Dragon NaturallySpeaking 12.0 software, which is software that transcribes spoken audio into a text format. Dragon is only able to learn and recognize one speaker's voice. Therefore, I listened to each interview with headphones and re-stated the participant's statements into a microphone, which Dragon then transcribed into text. In order to protect my participants' confidentiality, I deleted the audio recordings of each interview after I finished transcribing them.

Next, I coded the transcribed interviews for themes that arose from my participants' narratives. I first used descriptive codes, which involve little interpretation, to link similar phenomena across multiple interviews (Miles and Huberman 1994). I kept memos to organize my list of codes, which I gradually whittled down into three broad themes that encompassed my major findings. Once I had my three main themes, I worked backwards, pulling out the specific subtopics within each finding that seemed to connect to each of my participants' experiences.

Given the exploratory nature of my research, I attempted to let general themes emerge on their own by recognizing consistencies between participants, rather than forcing the interviews to meet my pre-established ideas or theories. Especially because I had detailed knowledge of my

participants' lives before I began my research, it was crucial to avoid imposing my beliefs onto their stories. I attempted to reduce bias by using an inductive form of data analysis, which involves creating themes only from the interviews, as opposed to linking codes with other theories and literature early on (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Participants

Eight individuals were interviewed in my sample, all of whom I assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. (See Table 1 for a description of participants' identifications.) Their ages ranged from 21 to 34 years old, with an average age of 26. I allowed all participants to self-identify their gender identity, preferred gender pronouns, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and relationship orientation. In order to respect their identities, this paper mirrors the language individuals used for themselves. Four participants identify as cisgender women, one identifies as a transgender guy, one identifies as gender queer on the masculine spectrum, one identifies as gender fluid, and one does not identify with gender. Four participants identify as white, one identifies as white with some Native ancestry, one identifies as Latina, one identifies as bi-racial, and one identifies as Mediterranean. All eight participants identify as queer. Seven participants identify as polyamorous and one identifies as non-monogamous. Five individuals expressed that their polyamorous identity includes the ability to stay monogamous with a partner, given the right circumstance.

The individuals in my sample represented many different branches of the sex industry, and most have worked several different jobs. The different types of sex work that participants have done include being a sugar baby⁴ (n = 3), escorting⁵ (n = 3), web camming⁶ (n = 3),

⁴ Sugar babying involves going on dates, talking, or having sexual interactions with a sugar daddy or sugar mommy. Sugaring normally replicates a dating relationship, instead of exchanging money for a single service.

⁵ Escorting involves having sexual interactions with a client.

stripping⁷ (n = 2), giving erotic massages⁸ (n = 2), being a financial domme⁹ (n = 2), and performing in porn¹⁰ (n = 2). The average age of entry into the sex industry was twenty years old. At the time of being interviewed, three participants were currently working in the sex industry, while five were not. Only one participant expressed that she did not want to do sex work again in the future.

⁶ Web camming, sometimes shortened to 'camming', involves talking, stripping, masturbating, or modeling online, usually in a live chat with clients.

⁷ Stripping involves dancing at a strip club or at private parties, such as bachelor parties.

⁸ Erotic massage involves giving a full body massage to clients. The 'erotic' component can come from the sex worker being partially or fully naked, giving the client manual sexual stimulation, engaging in other sexual interactions, or a combination of the three.

⁹ Financial domination involves extorting money from consenting clients, usually in a BDSM context.

¹⁰ Porn performers involves being filmed having sex with others. Amateur porn usually involves filming yourself having sex, as opposed to working for an outside company that sets up the filming.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of the Sample

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Preferred Gender Pronouns	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Orientation	Race	Sex Work Done Over Lifetime
Riley	27	Does not identify with gender	He / him / his	Queer	Polyamorous	Mediterranean	Webcam model, sugar baby
Zoe	28	Cisgender woman	She / her / hers	Queer	Polyamorous	White with Native ancestry	Escort, stripper, amateur porn performer
Shane	21	Gender fluid	They / them / theirs	Queer	Polyamorous	White	Webcam model, sugar baby, financial domme
Cameron	27	Transgender man	He / him / his	Queer	Polyamorous	White	Erotic massage
Ariadne	28	Cisgender woman	She / her / hers	Queer	Polyamorous	Bi-racial	Escort, porn performer, webcam model, sugar baby
Lilith	22	Cisgender woman	She / her / hers	Queer	Polyamorous	Latina	Financial domme
Laine	34	Genderqueer on the masculine spectrum	He / him / his	Queer	Non-monogamous	White	Erotic massage
Jolene	21	Cisgender woman	She / her / hers	Queer	Polyamorous	White	Stripper, escort, sugar baby

Limitations

One limitation of my study is that my sample size of eight is fairly small. Although I attempted to include more participants, it was extremely difficult to find people who were willing to talk to me outside of my trusted friend group. However, even this small sample allowed significant insight into the lives of LGBTQ sex workers. The participants in my study provided rich narratives about their lives that have not been previously documented in sex worker research. The experiences reported by my participants are not meant to represent LGBTQ sex workers as a whole, nor would they even if I had ten times the number of participants. At the same time, their words open the door to further understanding the compelling and often invisible lives of LGBTQ sex workers.

Another limitation is that my sample is mainly comprised of somewhat economically privileged sex workers. Two of my participants expressed that they did sex work in the past out of financial need, though neither of them were doing sex work at the time of their interviews. Every other individual in my study expressed that they did not need to do sex work; they could stop at any point and get another job if they wanted to. Although it may be beneficial to study sex workers who freely choose to enter the industry, since most research on sex workers focuses on coerced and/or circumstantial street-based prostitution, different forms of sex work may alter identity management. Street-based sex work has been found to be internalized as a “lifestyle generally associated with a lack of choice and control,” while indoor sex workers are more likely to separate their working and personal lives (Gorry et al. 2010:497). The impact of this distinction on LGBTQ sex workers is unknown. Thus, it is unclear how participants’ experiences were modulated by their social economic status and their motivations for entering the sex industry.

Additionally, although half of my participants did not identify their race as solely white, all of my participants have fairly light skin and acknowledged that they can pass as white in most social situations. Hegemonic gender roles are constructed upon white ideals, granting my participants some privilege in their presentations, even if they violate other aspects of appropriate gender or sexuality (Schippers 2007). Since no studies have been completed analyzing the intersections of race and LGBTQ identities within the sex industry, it is unclear how my participants' white and white-passing privilege affected their presentations of gender and sexuality.

Finally, another possible limitation is that I allowed current and former sex workers from all branches of the industry to participate in my research. Most research on sex workers tends to focus on one subtype (such as strip clubs or street-based prostitution) in order to fully analyze the impacts of the social environment on individuals. Having individuals who have done many different types of sex work introduces many new variables to my research. It may be hard to tell whether individual differences in identity presentation are due to personal characteristics or the type of work. Although I am less equipped to explain phenomena in one specific branch of the sex industry, my choice to include a wide variety of sex workers allowed me to more fully understand the range of LGBTQ sex workers' experiences. The goal of this paper is not to make any definitive conclusions about a subgroup of sex workers, as previous research has done. By allowing all LGBTQ sex workers to participate, I hope to show the true diversity of their experiences. Indeed, most of my participants have worked several different jobs within the industry, complicating researchers' tendencies to box sex workers into one monolithic identity.

FINDINGS

The LGBTQ sex workers in my study expressed many complex ways of thinking about, identifying, and presenting their gender and sexual orientation. The first theme in my findings, *presentations of gender and sexual orientation*, involves how the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample negotiated their clothing, hair, makeup, and identity labels with clients. Each individual constructed a unique work presentation that mixed their personal identifications and preferences with stereotypical gender norms. These presentations allowed them to retain their queer identities and be successful in the sex industry.

The second theme, *effects of sex work*, represents how LGBTQ sex workers felt their work influenced them and their clients. Sex work had many benefits for LGBTQ sex workers, including monetary gains and personal growth, but had the drawback of being potentially violent and exploitative. Although participants in my study often reported that their clients did not grow from most types of sex work, aside from learning to accept their sexuality in erotic massage sessions, LGBTQ sex workers tried to educate their clients about boundaries and consent.

The final theme, *visions for a better world*, identifies the participants' perspectives on LGBTQ sex workers' rights. My participants believed that most of the problems within the sex industry, such as violence, coercion, heteronormativity, and fakeness, should be attributed to structural and cultural forces, not the sex industry itself. LGBTQ sex workers discussed how patriarchy, economic inequality, the criminalization of sex work, and the stigmatization of LGBTQ sex workers could be overcome to make their jobs more authentic and enjoyable. The individuals in my study also provided advice on how allies should understand and interact with LGBTQ sex workers.

Presentations of Gender and Sexual Orientation

Each of the participants in my sample struck a careful balance between authenticity and playing a role when it came to presenting their gender and sexual orientation to clients. They incorporated their personal identities, personal emotional needs, the desires of their clients, and the demands of the sex industry into their work. Each LGBTQ sex worker felt pressured to present as more mainstream and heteronormative than they would like in order to be successful in the industry. Despite this pressure, they each found ways to weave their queer identities into their work.

Gender Presentations

The LGBTQ sex workers in my study all presented themselves at work in more stereotypically gendered ways than they did in their personal lives. Regardless of their personal gender identities, MAAB (male assigned at birth) sex workers acted more in accordance with hegemonic masculinity, while FAAB (female assigned at birth) sex workers acted more in accordance with hegemonic femininity. These gendered presentations included self-identifications to clients, clothing and accessories, grooming, and make-up. Despite recognizing the need to present in more stereotypical ways, each individual had multiple ways of letting their queer identities shine through, either overtly or covertly.

All of my participants stated that they identified themselves as cisgender to most, if not all, of their clients. These identifications seemed to be based largely in clients' perceptions of gender and sex. The cisgender women had the privilege of having clients guess their gender correctly, since they all presented as feminine and female. Jolene, a cis woman who is a sugar baby and used to strip and escort, explained this process in the following way:

My gender identity is very mainstream. Like, I am a cis woman and I look the way I identify. So that hasn't ever been a conversation around other people. You see someone

whose gender identification is more ambiguous and then that sparks a conversation, but I haven't ever been asked or felt the need to talk about my own identification.

The genderqueer and gender fluid individuals allowed clients to misgender them as males or females, in accordance with the sex they were assigned at birth. Shane, a gender fluid person who formerly did webcam and sugar baby work, explained how clients assumed their gender identity. They stated, "Well, they all assumed that I was a cis woman, right? Most people aren't even aware that you can be anything other than a cis woman or a cis man. Like, I didn't need to put on this big show to prove that I was a woman or anything, it was just, 'you have boobs, you're a girl.'"

Most individuals thus found it fairly easy to present as cisgender with clients. They did not have to talk about their gender identity or go too far out of their way to ensure that clients perceived them as cis. On the other hand, Cameron, a trans man who does erotic massage, experienced much more conflict surrounding his gender identity. He explained how he manages presenting as a cisgender women to clients while taking testosterone:

People can tell that I'm not quite a woman at this point because of hormones, but they can't totally figure it out. They're not really sure what's going on or what it is, so they just assume that I'm a trans woman. So this guy came in and he was like, 'Are you a man?' And I was like, well the answer is kind of yes, but not in the way that you're thinking.

Since Cameron's hormones have changed his secondary sex characteristics, clients occasionally think that he is a trans woman. Although he doesn't mind that much that this happens, stating that it's just "a little bit weird because it's not who I am," he still tries to assure clients that he is a cis woman when they seem distressed about his gender identity.

Although they presented as cisgender in most circumstances, some LGBTQ sex workers have been more open about their gender identity. Cameron has a section on his website about gender bending. Although he says that few people request him to dress up like a boy, it does

happen occasionally. Laine, a masculine-of-center genderqueer individual, explained that he recently had a client who broke his rule of presenting “strictly as male and masculine” in his work. He stated, “I had a session where this client who’s been a regular asked if I wore women’s clothes, and I said, yeah, that I do. That discretion led into some stuff about gender.” Laine seemed to be able to talk about his true gender identity with this particular client because he was given the space to do so. “I’ve had some clients that approach [the topic of gender] to talk about themselves, but that wasn’t the case with him. He was just interested in my gender expression, which was cool.” Laine and Cameron thus present as cisgender initially, but make room for exploration of their true gender identity when clients request it.

In addition to identifying as cisgender to clients, either through letting clients make assumptions about gender or reassuring them in conversations, the individuals in my sample adhered to more stereotypical gender presentations. Most explained that they wore more feminine (for FAAB sex workers) or masculine (for MAAB sex workers) clothes while working than they did otherwise. Lilith, a cis woman who used to be a financial domme, said, “I dressed super sexy [for work]... And, I mean, you can see me now, I’m wearing a baggy t-shirt and I’m not wearing a bra. When I’m online, I definitely wear a bra.” Shane also noted that they had “a giant bag full of super uncomfortable, frilly lingerie” that they only used for work. Riley explained how he toned down his normally “flamboyant” appearance for work. He stated, “Normally I’ll wear my hat to the side, but I might flip it back. And I’ll take out my piercings and dangly stuff.”

Many found ways to incorporate their own personal style into their work outfits, or chose not to alter their clothing at all. Although Jolene has felt pressure to dress in more stereotypically feminine or sexy ways, she does not change her clothing for clients. She stated, “I dress pretty

much the way I dress now. Like, I don't really put on a show for anybody these days, which is fun." Laine, on the other hand, has found a more subtle way to weave his authentic self into his working attire. He explained, "I wear clothes that are really masculine, except sometimes I'll wear women's jeans and women's shirts. I just do it in hidden ways that no one would really recognize." Laine is thus able to portray himself as masculine to clients, while secretly expressing his more queer gender identity.

Wearing makeup was another way that sex workers who presented as women for clients established their femininity. Of course, each individual tailored the makeup they used to match their personal preferences and identities. Zoe, a cis-woman who used to escort, strip, and make amateur porn, said that she generally wore makeup while she was working, but explained, "I was always getting in trouble for forgetting to paint my nails, which I'm not good at." Cameron, on the other hand, normally did not wear makeup, but he stated, "I do sometimes wear foundation when I'm breaking out. I have a powder foundation to make my skin look more smooth." The feminine-presenting sex workers used makeup as a tool; each used a different amount, or none at all, in order to appear attractive to clients and maintain their identities.

Choosing a haircut was one of the only gender performances that almost all of the LGBTQ sex workers in my study did not alter for work. Although some styled their hair to look cleaner or more put together, only one person, Cameron, expressed that he waited to get a certain haircut out of fear that it would reduce his marketability. The tendency for LGBTQ sex workers to feel less restricted in choosing a haircut may be because haircuts are more permanent markers of appearance. It is easy to change one's clothes and makeup for a few hours for work, but maintaining a work-friendly haircut would impede on individuals' abilities to express themselves in their everyday lives. Thus, sex workers are less likely to consider clients' reactions when

deciding how to cut their hair. Zoe expressed that she “buzzed off all of [her] hair” right before she started doing sex work. Lilith also recently cut off all her hair, despite being slightly concerned about how that might affect her ability to do sex work in the future. Ariadne, a cis woman who has done escorting, porn, webcamming, and sugaring, frequently changes her hair length and color, as well. She stated that she has wigs that she uses for work, though, so that might allow her more freedom in altering her natural hair.

While few of the sex workers expressed distress over choosing their clothing, makeup, and hair—most found those processes to be somewhere between slightly annoying to fun—many of the feminine-presenting sex workers had complicated feelings about shaving. Four out of the six feminine-presenting individuals in my sample expressed that they normally do not shave their armpits, legs, or pubic hair. They seemed to be anxious about how clients would react to their body hair. This is certainly understandable, for appropriate femininity still allows women to not dress sexy, not wear makeup, and have edgy haircuts, even if it is not viewed as ideal. Women are usually expected to have hairless legs and armpits, though, and are frequently demonized if they do not shave.

The feminine-presenting sex workers in my sample seemed well aware of this beauty standard. While they were nonchalant about their choices to alter other parts of their body, three individuals (Shane, Jolene, and Cameron) stated that they intentionally promised themselves not to shave for sex work. This shows that there is a greater pressure to be hairless in the sex industry, since these individuals needed to set a standard for themselves from the start to avoid violating their personal boundaries. Shane explained, “I had to promise a few of my friends that I wouldn’t shave for work. Before that, I’d want to grow out my hair, but I’d get all anxious before work and just shave anyways.” Jolene’s promise to herself not to shave was rooted in deeper

feelings about not wanting to sacrifice her identity for sex work. She stated, “I’m definitely not going to change much of who I am in any way that’s even slightly permanent.”

Each of the feminine-presenting sex workers who did not shave tried to work out a process for hiding their body hair from clients. Lilith stopped shaving during a break from sex work and has not worked since growing out her body hair. She expressed feelings of uncertainty about shaving, stating, “It’s something that I have been thinking about again, now that I’m starting to get back into [sex work]. Like, I don’t know if I’ll shave. Maybe I will sometimes. I don’t know. It’s not something I’ve been able to figure out yet.” Shane used sneaky methods to hide their body hair completely from clients. They expressed, “When I was camming, I just set the lighting up so my leg hair wouldn’t show and I just, like, never raised my arms. I don’t think anyone noticed.” Cameron employed a similar tactic with clients. He stated, “I kind of just keep my arms down...but I don’t think people are too weirded out by me not shaving my armpits. Not shaving my legs is a much bigger deal. I wear thigh high stockings at all times when I’m working.” He will let clients see his leg hair if they ask, but he uses the excuse that he is a hippie to avoid confrontations about it. Jolene is much more open about her body hair. She stated, “[My sugar daddies] know that I don’t shave my armpits because I wear short sleeves. Nobody’s said anything.” Still, she stated that she thinks she will need to confront her sugar daddies about her unshaved pubic hair if they start to have sex.

The LGBTQ sex workers in my study managed their personal identities, individual preferences, and the desires of clients to construct their gender performances. Each individual presented themselves as more stereotypically masculine or feminine, but they still retained much of their everyday appearances with clients. Making decisions about what beauty norms to adopt was not a helpless process of succumbing to hegemonic gender roles. Rather, LGBTQ sex

workers skillfully balanced their needs for being authentic, having fun, and making money in choosing how to present their gender at work.

The main reason individuals altered their appearance was to fit what they believed were the demands of the industry. Ariadne described how clients influenced her gender performance when she was webcamming. She said, “When I would get on one-on-one chat, that’s what people wanted a lot of the time, was for me to do things that were more feminine. So it would be like, I got requests to put on heels and to put on lipstick, too.” She explained this phenomenon of clients requesting feminine presentations by stating, “I think it’s this ideal that people are paying for.” Zoe summed up her tendency to appear more feminine very succinctly. When asked why she alters her appearance, she simply responded, “Because that’s what the demand is for.” Although Laine did not have as many aspects of his appearance to change for sex work as the feminine-presenting sex workers, he still felt pressured to present in a masculine way to be successful. He stated, “I default to almost a caricature of a gay sex worker identity... I don’t feel at liberty to express gender in a variety of ways at work. I think that undermines my marketability.”

Although it was universally accepted among my sample that most clients want to purchase services from traditionally masculine or feminine cisgender sex workers, a few questioned the validity of that assumption. Laine wondered whether his beliefs about what clients want are just “based on [his] own perceptions.” Shane also questioned their perceptions of the sex industry. They explained, “I get self-conscious because I always just assume that clients want this super attractive, feminine woman who’s super skinny and has giant tits. And I know there have to be clients who want someone who looks more like me, but... [pauses]... I guess I’m too scared to show myself and see if that’s really true.” Shane’s fear that they would lose clients

if they expressed their gender more genuinely was shared among the other sex workers in my sample.

Adopting different gender roles for work was not seen as a wholly negative or coercive process, however. A few individuals expressed that they liked getting to dress up and play a role. Riley stated that playing a masculine role was one of his favorite parts of being a sex worker. He explained, “Even though I don’t particularly identify with masculinity, I get to play it as a role sometimes. I get to explore a part of myself that I don’t normally get to in other relationships. So that’s fun.” Jolene explained how she enjoyed the beauty rituals she went through to be more feminine when she was stripping. She said, “That was part of the allure of [stripping], was being somebody different than who I was. It was like being able to put something on and off, I guess. I got to be super fancy and makeup-y, and then I got to take it off and be someone totally different during the day.” Ariadne also described the thrill of playing a more feminine role. She stated, “I think I feel sexier when I’m feminine. I think there’s that element, where I can get into things more [with clients]. I kind of feel like I’m doing drag sometimes, you know?” Cameron felt similarly, as he compared the experience of playing a role for clients to being an actress. As these statements show, many LGBTQ sex workers very much enjoy getting to explore alternative gender presentations at work. Sex work can simultaneously prevent individuals from presenting their authentic selves with clients and grant individuals the freedom to play with gender roles.

The process of altering one’s presentation for work did not stay stagnant over time. It seemed common for individuals to base their appearances off stereotypical representations of sex workers when they first got started in the industry. Unlike more mainstream jobs where new workers receive training, most individuals who begin working in the sex industry have to figure their jobs out themselves. Thus, it seemed common for new sex workers to learn from watching

other sex workers. Lilith explained that she presented as more feminine at work because she saw that most of the other girls working on her website were “typical straight white girls.” Before Shane started working as a cam girl, they also examined other workers. They explained, “I watched the live streams of the most popular cam girls on the site to figure out how to be successful. It felt kind of creepy to be studying them, but I had no idea how to start camming, otherwise.”

Over time, the LGBTQ sex workers in my study expressed that they became more authentic for two reasons: some began to realize that they could present themselves in a more queer way and retain clients, and others reached a higher socioeconomic status where they did not feel they were dependent on keeping clients. Cameron expressed that he has slowly becoming more authentic over time, and has continued to do so after realizing that he was not losing clients. He stated, “I think it’s basically just been entropy, like moving to a lower energy state. It’s a fair amount of effort to pretend to be someone you’re not.” As he started talking more genuinely about his life, appearing less feminine, dressing less formally, and transitioning with hormones, he started to see “a lot of people who were into the other sides of [himself]”. Laine had a similar experience of gradually reducing the amount of role-playing he was doing in his work:

I think after six years of doing [sex work], I understood that there’s probably more of a range in what clients want than I originally acknowledged. There are clients who would be interested in having a straight masseur or whatever, which isn’t me, but for the parts of me that feel kind of straight, there are people who wouldn’t be turned off by it or wouldn’t be disappointed by it.¹¹

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Laine feels pressure to appear gay for his clients, and thus worries about the straight part of himself, while other workers worry about clients’ perceptions of the queer parts of themselves.

The process of exploring how authentic one can be without losing clientele seems to be a long one; both Cameron and Laine have been doing erotic massage fairly consistently for the last five or six years.

The other sex workers who have been in the industry for a shorter amount of time, or who have participated in sex work less consistently, were able to become more authentic when they reached financial independence, although they also noted that their time in the industry helped in their process. Jolene explained her thought process behind being authentic with her current sugar daddies. She stated, “I was like, I have nothing to lose with them and I don’t really care about keeping this, so I’m just going to be super honest.” She stated that she felt free to be herself because she had other jobs as a backup, so she did not necessarily need the money from her sugar daddies. Ariadne also talked about having the privilege to express herself more genuinely because of her financial situation. She said, “Before, for me [doing sex work] was very circumstantial, and now it’s choice. Webcamming was choice. Sugar babying was choice. So I think that I can reenter the sex industry in a way that I can perform gender the way I want, because I’m not coming from this place of need.” LGBTQ sex workers’ economic situation may play a large role in how they present their gender to their clients. Those who rely on sex work as their main source of income may not be able to take risks by deviating from gender norms, for if they lose clients, their livelihood is at stake.

Sexual Orientation Presentations

Surprisingly, although most LGBTQ sex workers in my sample took steps to present their gender in a more stereotypical way, every individual except Riley reported that they advertised themselves as willing to see both male and female clients. Some of the more structured websites individuals worked on allowed them to select their sexual orientation as ‘bisexual’, or to select

the preferred gender(s) of their clients. For example, a popular sugar-dating website allows sugar babies to list their sexual orientation as heterosexual, bisexual, or gay, and allows individuals to choose if they want to be shown to sugar daddies and/or sugar mommies. Those who posted their own advertisements on general forums stated that they would be willing to see men and women. Riley was the only individual who only advertised to gay men, since he finds clients on gay social media sites.

The LGBTQ sex workers in my sample did attempt to make their sexual orientation seem more mainstream, however. Every individual in my sample self-identified as queer in our interviews, but they tended to identify as bisexual to their clients. Laine described his process of identifying his sexual orientation to clients:

I start off identifying as gay as my orientation, and depending on the energy of the session, I open up as queer. And sometimes I say queer, but more often I say bi because a lot of my clients are in the 60+ age range and they don't have a cultural understanding of the word queer that our generation does, for instance. So bi is an identity that they can understand more easily.

Lilith echoed Laine's reasoning for identifying as bisexual to clients. She said, "I have tried to present my orientation as bisexual because that's more of a common sexuality than queer. You see bisexual on the internet more than queer. Like, for dating sites and stuff, it's usually straight, gay, or bisexual." Zoe also considered ways to identify her sexual orientation in more understandable and mainstream terms. She explained, "I have thought that if I got back into the sex industry, I might try to target myself specifically at the unicorn hunter couples. Have you heard this term unicorn? It basically means a young, pretty, bi girl who will be your third." Thus, the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample negotiated ways to identify as queer and see clients of different genders, while still appearing slightly mainstream.

Although Riley was unique in that he was the only individual who advertised himself exclusively to male clients, he had a similar process of identifying himself to clients. He explained why he does not identify himself as queer at work. He stated, “Queer is not an identity that people understand, and I don’t want to take time to explain it, especially to someone that doesn’t really matter to me.” He usually identified himself as straight, curious, or bi to clients. Since he had no interest in having women as clients, he did not mind identifying as straight or curious in order to make more money. He explained how these identities made him more marketable to clients. He said, “Sometimes people will be like, ‘Yeah, this is so hot that I’m converting this straight guy.’ It’s like the same reason that straight guys fetishize getting with lesbians. The grass is always greener on the other side.”

It was extremely important for most of the queer sex workers in my sample to advertise themselves to clients of all genders, which may be why they were willing to self-identify with a deviant sexual orientation. All but two of my participants stated that they wanted to have more clients with different gender identities, instead of having mainly male-identified clients. Zoe explained why she would have liked having more women clients when she was still involved in sex work. She said, “It’d be more enjoyable. I wouldn’t be alone with men. It’d be safer. And I enjoy sex with women, as should be clear from the fact that I’m doing this interview.” Most of the other sex workers in my sample agreed that they would enjoy their work more if they could have clients who identified as men, women, genderqueer, and trans. Ariadne and Riley were the only ones who expressed that they didn’t want to have clients of different genders. Ariadne stated, “I’ve actually always had a hard time doing sex work with women. Like, I can be with guys sexually... But I like women, you know? So it gets a little harder for me to separate things.” Despite this, Ariadne did state that she advertised to female sugar mommies and had previously

done lesbian porn. Riley, on the other hand, kept a firm boundary between his relationships with men and women. He expressed, “I view a lot of my relationships with male bodied people as more of a throwaway. Like, ‘you’re a stupid boy.’ So with female bodied people, I am more likely to get romantically involved with them, so I wouldn’t necessarily want to have casual sex with them.” While the other sex workers in my sample wanted their clients to mirror their romantic partners, Riley and Ariadne liked keeping their romantic and working lives separate.

Regardless of their preferences for the genders of their clients, the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample had a hard time getting clients who were not cis men. At best, Laine stated that 2% of his clients were women or genderqueer individuals. Jolene and Zoe were able to dance for women when they were stripping, but they had difficulty booking diverse clients when they were doing other forms of sex work. Ariadne and Cameron reported that they had spoken with some trans and women clients, but that those conversations never turned into an actual exchange of services. Lilith and Shane were never able to get any clients besides cisgender men.

The absence of women and trans clients was a great annoyance to most of the LGBTQ sex workers. Cameron even stated that it was the biggest disadvantage of his work. He explained, “The big drawback [of sex work] is that it’s all a subset of sexuality that I don’t identify with and that I think is oppressing other sexualities.” Lilith also expressed frustration about the heteronormativity of her work. She said:

Even when I wasn’t completely identifying as queer, it was still a little bit weird to me that [my clients] were all straight cis dudes. It just seems a little bit unnatural. [laughs] Like, I know that that’s what we’re supposed to think, that it is natural, but I don’t think it actually is. It’s just weird to only be working with a very small group of people.

It seemed to be difficult for individuals to enjoy being a sex worker fully when they were not able to express and practice their queer identities at work.

Overall, the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample presented in a variety of ways that simultaneously displayed and hid their queer sexual and gender identities. They felt pressured to identify and present in more stereotypical ways in order to retain clients. By identifying as cisgender and bisexual, the LGBTQ sex workers hoped to avoid tension and conflict with clients who might not understand their complex identities. Altering clothing, make-up, and body hair were common tactics to present as more mainstream and make more money. Each individual found several ways to incorporate their personal identities into their work, however. Some kept their gender deviant haircuts, wore the same clothing they did in their everyday lives, or refused to wear makeup or shave in order to stay true to their authentic selves. Additionally, most of the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample attempted to solicit clients with different gender identities, even if they did tone down their personal identification from 'queer' to 'bisexual' with clients. Sex workers mainly enjoyed how they presented their gender; individuals either had fun playing a role or enjoyed getting to be themselves, or felt a combination of the two. They felt frustrated that they could not act out their queer sexual orientations with clients, however, since the bulk of clients are cisgender men.

Effects of Sex Work

Most of the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample had positive experiences in the sex industry, overall. Many cited that they enjoyed being able to make large amounts of money and explore alternative lifestyles. Additionally, individuals had larger life changes due to sex work, such as learning to respect their boundaries and becoming more queer. Some had harmful experiences with sex work, though, due to violent clients and feelings of objectification. Although several sex workers did not think their clients learned or grew from purchasing sexual services, many in my sample did try to educate their clients about consent, boundaries, and self-

love. The effects of participating in the sex industry seem to be a complex mix of stretching and reinforcing social norms.

Effects on Sex Workers

When I asked the individuals in my sample what their favorite aspect about being a LGBTQ sex worker was, the overwhelming response I got was, “money!” Most of my participants loved the structure of sex work, since they were able to work very few hours for a large amount of money. Shane explained how they felt about their income from sex work:

I find it so ridiculous that people accuse sex workers of selling our bodies. I worked one night a month and made more money than some people who work 8 hours a day every day at a horrible minimum wage job. Like, congratulations, you kept your clothes on, but you’re the one who signed away your body and your livelihood.

Cameron also appreciated his open work schedule and generous income. He explained:

I don’t think I would be very happy with a 40 hour a week work schedule. I think most people are actually not that happy, they’ve just been trained to be okay with it... But I have a lot of interests and a lot of projects I do. I do a lot of stuff outside of work. I only work maybe three hours a day.

Since most jobs within the sex industry allow workers to take ample time off, choose their own schedules, and pick their clients, the sex workers in my study were able to have flexible, open schedules while still making up to hundreds of dollars every day. Of course, my sample is fairly privileged, and thus makes more money doing sex work than individuals who do survival sex work.

Another positive aspect of being a LGBTQ sex worker that my participants cited was being able to explore alternative behaviors and lifestyles. Jolene described how being a sex worker allowed her to play with social norms. She stated, “I really like the edge spaces. I like things that are not dangerous, but that are perceived as different, wrong, or edgy. I feel like those boundaries are often bullshit and I really like walking them.” By testing out her own boundaries

and expectations, Jolene felt she could learn about herself and others through sex work. Ariadne began to enjoy how LGBTQ sex workers blurred social boundaries once she began connecting with other queer sex workers. She explained, “I just like fucking with the binary and fucking with the normal, you know? ... I feel like together, we’re pushing the boundaries and saying that things aren’t so black and white and that things are really texturized. And that’s what I think we as queer sex workers do. We’re kind of like everything that blows everybody’s minds.” Jolene and Ariadne liked bending stereotypes through engaging in sex work as queer women. They appreciated redefining their own understandings of the world and stretching others’ perceptions.

Working in the sex industry allowed a few participants to grow as individuals. Laine described how his work allowed him to grow sexually. He stated, “I mean I’ve probably had sex with 500 different men of various ages through work, up to 85 or 90 year olds. So it’s just a huge variety of experience. I have a sense of the diversity of things that turn people on. It’s also helped me to find or understand my kinks and my boundaries.” Since Laine has been able to experiment with many different types of clients, sex work has helped his sexuality broaden significantly. Stripping also helped Jolene explore her sexuality. She stated that since the strip club was a “pretty queer friendly environment,” she got to experiment sexually with women for the first time. Jolene described how this changed her sexuality: “After I started stripping, I became this really hardcore lesbian and didn’t want to be with men at all. I think that was really awesome for exploring that space.” Sex work allowed Jolene to question her sexual orientation, granting her the freedom to practice being queer.

Ariadne also listed several positive things that sex work has taught her. She explained, “In this whole process, I’ve learned how to say no. Before I didn’t know how to say it... I’ve also learned more how to appreciate my body. I can’t say that I completely do, but I work with

what I've got." Learning how to negotiate with clients taught Ariadne how to enforce her boundaries. She also explained that she has learned how to "own [her] experience," meaning that she recognizes how her history of trading sex and doing drugs has contributed to the strong person she is today, instead of trying to push painful memories away. Laine's experience with sex work has been extremely positive overall, as he stated that one of his favorite things about being a queer sex worker was "being able to feel really blessed and positive and in tune with the universe about the work that [he's] doing."

While a number of the LGBTQ sex workers in my study appreciated the beneficial aspects of sex work, or learned important insights about themselves from doing sex work, there were also downsides to working in the sex industry. Zoe was the only individual in my sample who was not interested in doing sex work in the future. She explained that she started doing sex work "out of desperation" and encountered coercion and violence. These incidents were extremely impactful to Zoe and made it difficult for her to find any positive aspects of her work. Although Shane did not have any actual experiences with violence, like Zoe did, their biggest issue with sex work was the potential for them to be dominated. They stated, "I'm very afraid of getting taken advantage of, you know? So I'm afraid that even if I become this super empowered sex worker, I'll just be fooling myself and I'll actually letting myself be treated like shit." They explained that it was hard for them to figure out how to view themselves, since there are no realistic portrayals of sex workers in the media. "There is the extreme dichotomy of normal society telling you that if you're a sex worker, you're a sad and hopeless little girl who's getting walked all over, and then the sex worker community can sometimes be the exact opposite, where doing any sex work at all is empowering yourself."

Hopefully these accounts present a more nuanced view of sex work than the ones Shane was confronted with. The LGBTQ sex workers in my study felt a complex mix of emotions about their work and often felt simultaneously empowered and oppressed by the sex industry. Their experiences also seemed to be mediated by the orientation of their work. Laine and Riley, the two participants who portray themselves as cis men and mainly work for gay male clients, pointed out that they had less safety concerns than their friends who worked as cis women. Laine pointed out that it is less common for law enforcement to target male providers. Riley also noted that his female sex worker friends seem to be at a higher risk for violence. He stated, “I’ve never heard of there being a mass grave discovered of all male sex workers, you know? I’ve heard this happen with women.” LGBTQ sex workers who cater to gay men may have more positive, or at least less violent, experiences with their work.

Effects on Clients

Although I did not interview any clients of sex workers, and thus cannot make any claims about their experiences, I did ask my participants how they thought their clients were affected by purchasing sex. Most of the LGBTQ sex workers felt that their clients did not take any valuable lessons away from the act of purchasing sexual services. Only Laine and Cameron believed that their clients discovered hidden aspects of themselves from getting an erotic massage. Although most believed that their clients simply got sexual satisfaction from their sessions, which was not necessarily viewed as a bad thing, several of my participants still attempted to educate their clients about consent.

The majority of the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample did not think that their clients learned anything about themselves. Jolene explained why she felt her clients were fairly unaffected by their interactions with her: “They already knew what they wanted before they

came to me, and we had a pretty heteronormative relationship. I don't feel like that really stretched anything for anybody." Lilith felt similarly about her clients. She explained, "The feeling I've gotten from my clients is that they're just horny men that are trying to find something quick and easy online. I don't really feel like they're thinking very hard about themselves or others. They're just like, 'Oh my god, this makes my dick hard. Let's do this.'" My participants mainly felt like their clients were replicating their normal sex lives with them in ways that mirrored hegemonic scripts. Most could not imagine that having stereotypical straight or gay sex between two cisgender individuals would push clients' boundaries, even in the context of a paid transaction.

Laine and Cameron were the only individuals who felt that their clients had a deeper experience with them, rather than just experiencing sexual gratification. Laine attributed this phenomenon to his clients' backgrounds. He stated, "For a lot of clients, I am their first gay experience." Laine is able to help his clients explore their sexual orientation in a safe environment, which many of them have never had the opportunity to do. The fact that both Laine and Cameron do erotic massage, which is usually associated with bodywork and connection, probably contributes to their view that their clients experience sexual and emotional healing with them. Laine explained, "For some people, I'm one of the first times that they have been the recipients or been able to just be vulnerable enough to let someone else work on them." Cameron described another positive aspect of receiving an erotic massage:

I think one of the main things that can be really healing for people from seeing a sex worker is having unconditional acceptance. It's not like, 'Are you cute enough? Do you make enough money? Do you work out enough? Are you masculine enough? Is your cock big enough? These sorts of questions that people seem to have fear around don't apply to our connection.

Laine and Cameron believed that the nurturing nature of erotic massage allowed their clients to respect and love themselves more.

Although most of the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample did not think they had much of an impact on their clients, most still reported that they try to educate their clients about consent and boundaries. Perhaps this means that they have a bigger influence than they imagine. Zoe stated that she did not feel like she educated her clients about consent, but she did report that she tried to enforce her boundaries as often as she could. Similarly, Lilith does not explicitly bring up consent in her sessions, but she has clients fill out an application to determine where their boundaries are. Lilith stated that the application includes “their gender pronouns, what they’re looking for, what they’re wanting out of this interaction, and what they’re wanting from me.” Zoe and Lilith both attempted to acknowledge, respect, and enforce boundaries, even if they did not necessarily discuss the concept of consent with their clients.

Cameron and Riley took a more direct approach to teaching clients about consent.

Cameron explained how his procedures for discussing boundaries have changed over time. He stated,

I used to give people ‘Consent 101’ every time they walked in through the door, but I think that I sort of cultivated a different client group now where it’s not so much of an issue of people having no idea about consent. But people come in and I will sort of tell them that I’m really big on communication and it will enhance our sexual connection if they communicate with me.

Riley also stated that he had detailed conversations about boundaries and consent before he met any clients in person. He explained, “Sometimes I will start that conversation, sometimes they will. Generally that conversation goes like, ‘What are you into? Are you HIV-negative and disease-free? Do you use drugs? If we do something a little kinkier, is there a safe word you want to use?’” Riley believed that there was more of a culture around consent among gay males,

which made conversations about boundaries much easier than he assumed it was for straight-acting sex workers.

The LGBTQ sex workers I interviewed expressed conflicting views regarding their clients. Most believed that since they were replicating heteronormative sexual scripts, their clients did not take much away from their sessions. In contrast, the two individuals who did erotic massage, Cameron and Laine, felt like their clients learned how to explore and accept their sexuality. My participants may just not be giving themselves enough credit for being positive influences on their clients, however, because many of the LGBTQ sex workers in my study educated their clients on boundaries and consent.

Visions for a Better World

As with any profession, those who work in the sex industry experience a complex mix of fun encounters, boring routines, painful struggles, and personal growth. Although outsiders are quick to blame any negative experiences that sex workers have in their jobs on the supposedly inherent oppressive nature of the sex industry, none of the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample believed this narrative. When asked what sex work would look like in their perfect world, each individual had a vision for how changes in outside forces and institutions would affect the sex industry. In other words, the participants in my study attributed the negative aspects of their job not to sex work itself, but to harmful societal views and practices. LGBTQ sex workers have a radical vision for the future that addresses patriarchy, economic inequality, the criminalization of sex work, and stigma surrounding LGBTQ sex workers.

Heteropatriarchy

Almost all of the participants in my study saw heteropatriarchy, or the system of (cisgender, heterosexual) male domination, as a contributing factor to many of the drawbacks of

sex work. Lilith, who expressed frustration over the fact that most providers of sex work are women and most clients are men, explained why she thought these gender imbalances exist. She stated:

Women are supposed to be asexual. They're supposed to be the guardians and the gatekeepers, but at the same time, men are wanting sex. Since they want sex, there's got to be a way to cater to that. So women are expected to cater to that desire for men. You're not supposed to have sex, but then they also want you to be the dirty slut. The virgin/whore dichotomy gets ya every time. [laughs]

Under patriarchal ideals, women are not allowed to explore their sexuality for their own gains. Thus, it is more acceptable for women to become sex workers, where they will still service men, than to be a client of a sex worker, where they would be paying someone else to service them.

Patriarchy seemed to influence even the queer sex that some sex workers were having. Ariadne, who used to do lesbian porn, talked about how heteronormative her supposedly queer scenes were. She explained, "How lesbian sex is portrayed in porn has always really bothered me. It's always these two really femme women who are having sex in this way that a guy would think about it, right? They always have these fake nails. That would fucking hurt! [laughs]" Ariadne also talked about how other 'queer' types of porn are portrayed in a heteronormative way. "Transgender porn is really big, but it's interesting to see how that person is fetishized and sexualized. The relationship that porn portrays between that person and their body is pretty problematic." Simply increasing representation of LGBTQ individuals in the sex industry is clearly not enough to combat heteronormative ideals, then. The sex workers in my sample understood that the overarching patriarchal system is what prevents women and LGBTQ individuals from owning their own positive sexualities.

Since patriarchy is such a pervasive system, very few of my participants expressed ideas for how to overcome it. Instead, they talked about what they thought sex work would look like if

patriarchy were somehow magically abolished. Every individual believed that there would be a more equal gender balance within sex work, with people of all genders participating as providers and clients. Cameron and Jolene did still believe that there would be more male clients, albeit in significantly lower proportions, due to hormonal and biological differences. Zoe also stated that she did not think there would ever be a huge queer market in the sex industry, since statistically there are fewer LGBTQ individuals than straight cisgender individuals.

In addition to at least partially balancing out gender discrepancies, LGBTQ sex workers stated that eliminating patriarchy would help to reduce violence against sex workers, especially female-presenting sex workers. In the previous section, I detailed how Laine and Riley perceived female-presenting sex workers to be at much higher risks for violence than male-presenting sex workers. This is not surprising, considering that women in general, especially trans women, face higher rates of violence than men (e.g. Bachman and Saltzman 1994; Lombardi et al. 2008). Each of the participants in my study expressed a vision of a world where sex workers did not have to worry about violence, abuse, or coercion with their clients.

Economic Inequality

Economic inequality was another societal trend that the LGBTQ sex workers in my study cited as a negative force that hurts sex workers. Lilith explained that she felt very privileged because she chose to do sex work, while there are many people who need to do sex work to survive. Zoe and Ariadne both emphasized that LGBTQ adolescents are more likely to be homeless, and thus may need to get into the sex industry to cover their basic living expenses. Their views are consistent with research showing that 20% to 40% of homeless minors are LGBTQ, since teens may run away or be kicked out of the home after they come out to their families (McClain and Garrity 2011). Zoe presented a narrative to explain how trans women of

color in particular are at risk for being economically vulnerable, and thus needing to enter the sex industry. She stated:

If you were a black trans woman who's poor, in New York City, and transitioning in your teens, not only is there a lot of discrimination, but it's hard to put yourself towards getting all sorts of qualifications, I think. Also, transitioning is pretty expensive. Oftentimes people are doing black market hormones and surgery has pretty much never been covered by insurance, if you do have insurance.

Her narrative illustrates how some trans people need steady incomes to pay for hormones and surgery, yet due to discrimination, are unable to get 'mainstream' jobs that could cover those expenses (Lombardi et al. 2008; Ragins and Cornwell 2011).

The LGBTQ sex workers in my sample expressed that in a perfect world, no one would feel forced to do sex work, or any other job that they did not want to do, for that matter, in order to survive. Zoe and Ariadne theorized that this shift would require reducing discrimination against LGBTQ individuals that puts them at higher vulnerabilities. Additionally, Zoe proposed, "We'd have a negative income tax with a universal basic income so that we'd do away with doing [sex work] out of desperation, as I did initially." Shane had a different vision for eliminating economic inequalities. They stated:

I'm an anarchist, so for my utopia to exist, we'd need to smash capitalism first. I don't know if sex work would exist in my ideal society because I don't think work would really exist. People shouldn't have to work to earn money to buy things to help them survive. What if we just helped each other survive? We could put our energy towards taking care of ourselves and our friends, instead of devoting our lives to making money.

Although no one agreed on a vision for reducing economic disparities, everyone did express that they wished sex work could always be about choice and empowerment, not coercion.

Criminalization of Sex Work

One of the largest negative impacts on individuals' work was the criminalization of sex work. My participants unanimously agreed that criminalization hurts sex workers by forcing

them to hide their occupation, preventing support for themselves and their clients, and inhibiting them from being authentic in their work. Jolene, Ariadne, Laine, and Shane all expressed that they were less likely to be open about their jobs because they were afraid of potential legal repercussions. Even though Jolene, Ariadne, and Shane were not engaging in illegal behavior at the times of their interviews, they still restricted their communications with others out of fear of being monitored by law enforcement.

LGBTQ sex workers also expressed that criminalization prevents individuals from getting support. Zoe explained that since it is a crime to share information about sex work and mentor other sex workers, many sex workers are left in vulnerable positions. Preventing sex workers from learning how to protect and take care of themselves in the industry from veteran sex workers could potentially increase STI transmission and violence. Sex workers are thus forced to pick between two oppressive choices: mentor new sex workers and risk going to jail, or maintain their personal safety and watch new sex workers struggle. Laine pointed out that criminalization does not just affect sex workers. He explained that since many individuals are afraid to see a sex worker out of fear of being arrested, “there’s a big unmet need of people who need intimacy.” Criminalization oppresses sex workers and clients alike by trapping them in fear. Individuals are less likely to do what is healthy or helpful, and instead retreat into lonely and potentially patterns of behavior so that they are not arrested.

The criminalization of sex work was also seen by Jolene as reinforcing heteronormativity and preventing authentic expression. She explained, “I think that if sex work was legal, it would give way to a lot more queerness and acceptance of queerness. I feel like fakeness comes out of fear a lot of times... Like, fear of the law plays into fear of coming out, which plays into fear of being yourself to somebody.” Jolene’s statement matches up with a previous finding that

economic instability may prevent LGBTQ sex workers from presenting more authentically with their clients. The fear of not making enough money to survive or of being arrested and convicted forces LGBTQ sex workers to hide themselves from the world.

The individuals in my sample expressed desires for the decriminalization or legalization of sex work. Although there have been lengthy debates among sex workers and sex workers' rights activists about the differences between decriminalization and legalization,¹² my participants focused on the potential benefits of sex work simply not being illegal. Ariadne stated that if sex work was seen as a legitimate job and was not criminalized, there would be more support for sex workers. She explained, "I think there would be organizations that were sex worker sensitive, not only for people leaving the industry, but working with people who want to stay in the industry... There would be communities of care and there'd be clinics for sex workers." Zoe also believed that sex workers deserved more organizational and institutional assistance. She stated that her ideal society would include "good educational resources for sex workers" and widespread, easily accessible support organizations. Overall, the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample believed that decriminalizing or legalizing sex work would lead to more authenticity, more support, and more healthy interactions between sex workers, clients, and communities.

Stigmatization of LGBTQ Sex Workers

My participants were well aware of the stigma surrounding sex workers, especially LGBTQ sex workers. Every individual I interviewed stated that they avoided disclosing their

¹² Under a legalized framework, sex work would be legal as long as sex workers complied with special regulations and licensing procedures put in place by local, state, and/or federal governments. Under a decriminalized framework, there would not be special laws aimed at sex worker. Instead, sex work would be regulated by the same laws that regulate other businesses. For a more detailed explanation, see Lutnick and Cohan (2009).

profession to others because they were afraid of being judged or misunderstood. Lilith described what she believes is the normal view of sex work in the U.S. She stated:

I think that most people feel like it's something that women do because they don't have other options or they're just trying to make a quick buck or they're somehow forced into it. Normally, it's not something that's seen as empowering. It's like, 'Oh, this girl is doing sex work. There's clearly something wrong going on here.'

Shane explained that this view prevents them from being open with friends about what they do:

I have a lot of progressive and radical friends, but sex work still isn't on their radar. I can't come home and complain about a client like people with normal jobs can. People wouldn't just talk to me about my day at work, they'd start asking me why I started doing sex work, how I do it, am I oppressed, how many of us actually do drugs, how does sex work fit in with my feminism, and a bunch of other super moralistic and heavy questions.

Riley also emphasized how the stigma surrounding sex work interacted with his queer identity.

He stated, "Being queer, people already make a set of assumptions about your sexual health. To compile sex work on top of that, people are just going to judge you." Since sex work is not seen as a legitimate job, sex workers are not able to disclose their professions without being prepared for an onslaught of misguided and oppressive questions.

Several LGBTQ sex workers stated that people's misconceptions about sex work has interfered with their ability to date. Cameron even stated that being a sex worker was his biggest barrier to dating, due to the stigma that his partners carried about sex work. He explained:

I feel like the vast majority of sex worker related discrimination in my life, and in general, has been people who care a lot about me and think that I'm in danger. That's kind of fucked up. I don't think that's a way of being supportive to someone at all. One sort of ironic thing about that is it's hard to address, because people are like, 'Well, I'm not biased against sex workers. I'm just afraid for you because some people are.' Well actually, the experiences I've had with those people are the worst sex work related experiences I've had by far.

Given that sex workers' intimate partners frequently try to 'save' their partners from the sex industry, it can be hard for sex workers to establish long-term relationships with supportive individuals.

Stigmas about sex work also affected LGBTQ sex workers' ability to be honest in their working lives. Ariadne, who works as a service provider, expressed fear about outsiders finding out about some of the sex work she has done in her life. She explained, "There is stigma out there. So some people are going to think that [doing sex work] is going to change the relationship I have with my clients, you know?" Laine also feared that others' negative perceptions of sex work would affect his other jobs. He stated, "Being out about it could jeopardize my ability to do certain kinds of work, like teaching or tutoring. It could also undermine business relationships." Cultural misunderstandings and judgments about sex work prevent sex workers from being honest and limits the opportunities of those who are open about their jobs.

Interestingly, my participants felt much more stigmatized for being sex workers than for simply being LGBTQ. Each individual I interviewed was more open about their queer and trans identity than they were about their job as a sex worker. Although violence and discrimination against LGBTQ individuals is well documented (e.g. Lombardi et al. 2008; Ragins and Cornwell 2011), most of my participants reported that they were out as LGBTQ to the majority of the people in their lives. Stigma around sex work seemed to be more severe, pervasive, and limiting to the LGBTQ sex workers in my sample.

In order to see how allies can help combat stigma against sex work, I asked each of my participants what they wished people knew about LGBTQ sex workers. Ariadne and Lilith both responded that they wished people knew LGBTQ sex workers even exist. Ariadne explained that since the sex industry frequently appears very heteronormative, it can be hard for people to understand that sex workers identify differently than they present. Zoe echoed this sentiment, stating, "People are pretty much not aware that there are straight-for-pay sex workers." She also

added, “People’s gender expression does change for sex work,” meaning that individuals will present their gender differently at work than how they do in their everyday lives.

Ariadne and Zoe also wanted people to know that doing sex work does not affect their queerness. Ariadne stated, “Just because I have sex with guys for work doesn’t make me any less queer.” There seems to be stigma against LGBTQ sex workers that assumes that sexual relationships with clients have to transfer to one’s personal sexual orientation and identity. Zoe shared that a photographer once got extremely confused over the fact that Zoe identified as a lesbian and was doing straight sex work. In reflecting on this experience, she stated, “I wish people wouldn’t assume that all cis female queer sex workers are bisexual.” It is important for people never to assume anyone’s gender identity or sexual orientation. Allies should question their own assumptions about queer identities and who they think is ‘allowed’ to identify in certain ways.

Another important message that my participants wished people understood was that LGBTQ sex workers are normal people. Lilith explained, “We exist and we’re real people who have real, complicated lives. Like, sex work is a part of our lives, but even with the most devoted sex worker, it’s not all of their life. There’s other things going on and this is just a piece of it.” Many sex workers expressed that they feared talking to other people about their work because of the tendency for outsiders to reduce sex workers’ identities to their jobs. Cameron believes this trend is due to the lack of representative, realistic portrayals of LGBTQ sex workers. He suggested, “I think most people just need to meet somebody, or maybe even just read a simple account by someone that’s not some distorted representation. The vast majority of people I’ve had talks with about sex work and queer issues are really clueless about it and all they need to know is that somebody did it and had a decent experience with it.” Allies should educate

themselves about what sex workers actually experience, so they can view sex work as a profession, not an identity.

Jolene also expressed that she wanted allies to understand the complexity of LGBTQ sex workers' lives. She stated, "I want allies to not make assumptions about sex workers' experiences one way or the other, like that sex work is a great thing or it's not a great thing, because it's such a varied experience for people. Stop judging because it's really something I don't think you know about until you actually do it yourself." The tendency for allies to get into moralistic, abstract debates about whether sex work is empowering or oppressive alienates actual sex workers. There is not a single sex worker identity; each individual working in the sex industry will have different experiences, views, and thoughts on sex work. Allies should focus on supporting actual sex workers by listening to what they need, instead of drowning out sex workers' voices with misguided assumptions and theories.

Stigma can only be reduced once individuals recognize it exists. Shane expressed their desires for people to educate themselves about sex workers' rights issues. They stated:

Most people are just so clueless about sex work. Even among the most radical, most progressive feminists who have been studying gender and sexuality for years, it's really uncommon to find people who don't just completely adhere to all the fucked up myths and stereotypes about sex workers. It's horrifying. People need to realize that most of the information they receive about sex workers is completely wrong, because it almost always comes from other uninformed people who also aren't sex workers. Like, seek out articles written by sex workers. Talk to actual sex workers. We've put out so much information about our lives and our struggle, but no one reads it, except for other sex workers.

By searching out information and resources created by sex workers, individuals can educate themselves about the realities of the sex industry. (See Appendix B for suggestions on how to be an ally to sex workers and Appendix C for a list of sex workers' rights resources.) Prioritizing

the words of sex workers is critical to developing a more nuanced understanding of sex workers' rights.

DISCUSSION

Given that LGBTQ sex worker research is very rare, most of my findings are novel. Additionally, regardless of participants' sexual and gender identities, few researchers have attempted to let sex workers speak for themselves about their experiences; they instead have warped their participants' words to fit abstract theories and moralistic claims. My participants' stories are not meant to represent all LGBTQ sex workers' experiences, but they do offer important insight into the various ways in which LGBTQ sex workers can present and interpret gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.

Presentations of Gender and Sexual Orientation

My findings that women-presenting LGBTQ sex workers present themselves in hyperfeminine ways in order to be successful at work replicate previous studies. The LGBTQ sex workers in my study described much more nuance and complexity in their presentations than has previously been found, however. My participants found intricate ways to balance stereotypical gender roles and heteronormativity with their queer gender identities and sexual orientations. This process was documented in the male-presenting sex workers in my study, as well. I also discovered that time spent in the industry and economic privilege influenced how much risk LGBTQ sex workers were willing to take in expressing themselves more authentically.

The sex workers in my study that presented themselves as cis women to clients altered their appearances in order to appear more stereotypically feminine. As previous research has discovered, these beauty rituals included wearing stereotypically feminine clothing, wearing makeup, and appearing more sexy or hypersexual (Marvin and Grandy 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013; Spanger 2013). I found that the sex workers that presented themselves as cis men to clients

also attempted to appear more masculine by wearing different clothing. Since almost all studies on beauty in the sex industry have focused on individuals who present as cis and trans women, it is important to recognize that male-presenting sex workers feel pressured to conform to gender stereotypes, as well.

Most previous research on sex workers' gender and sexual presentations has focused on individuals whose personal and working identities overlap (e.g. cisgender women who present as cisgender women for work). Since my participants all identified as queer and have varying gender identities, I found that they had many more opportunities for expressing or hiding their queerness in their work than previously thought. No one completely adhered to all aspects of hegemonic masculinity or femininity; each individual presented a blend of their unique selves with expected gender norms. Language turned out to be an important tool for establishing mainstream identities. Each participant attempted to identify themselves as cisgender and bisexual (or gay, for the male-presenting sex workers) to their clients. The LGBTQ sex workers in my study seemed to agree that 'queer' is a newer, radical term that most individuals do not understand, and thus they identified themselves with more mainstream language.

Hair was another surprising point of contention for the LGBTQ sex workers in my study. Rather than having stereotypically gendered hair, like previous research has found, my participants chose to get more edgy and androgynous haircuts. Additionally, a few of the feminine-presenting sex workers did not shave their legs or armpits, even if they did attempt to hide it sometimes with clients. Hair seemed to be an important way for the participants in my study to express their queerness and reject gender norms. They were unlikely to change their haircuts or alter their body grooming rituals for sex work, perhaps because they did not want to have to appear in more stereotypical ways in their everyday lives.

LGBTQ sex workers balanced their personal queer and gender-variant identities with their stereotypical work presentations. In concordance with previous research, they reported that they decided to act more feminine or masculine in order to retain clients and make money (Rivers-Moore 2013; Marvin and Grandy 2013; Trautner 2005). However, these motivations did not stay static over time or across participants. I found that individuals who have been in the sex industry longer and who have more economic privilege were less likely to adhere to gendered scripts. Those who have done sex work for several years slowly began incorporating their authentic selves more into their work, and found that they were still able to retain clients. Those who were wealthier or had income from other jobs, on the other hand, felt they could take risks with how they presented themselves, because they would not be negatively affected by losing clients.

Double Life

Previous research has found that sex workers construct alternate work personas to help them separate their working and personal lives (Begum et al. 2013). Although each individual in my sample altered themselves in multiple ways to perform their work, no one expressed that they felt like they had created two distinct identities, nor did they feel as though they had to 'shed' their working personas at the end of the day (Robilliard 2010; Orchard et al. 2013). Instead, the LGBTQ sex workers seemed to blend different parts of their 'authentic' selves with the persona they expected their clients to want. Additionally, my participants did not view the aspects of role-playing they did participate in as necessary for preserving their selfhoods or mental health, as some previous research has found (Abel 2011, Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Gorry et al. 2010; Hochschild 1983; Marvin and Grandy 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013; Sanders 2005). Instead, they enjoyed the fun of getting to play a role, since they felt like they were acting or doing drag.

Effects of Sex Work

In keeping with newer theories of sex work that recognize that the sex industry contains sites of oppression and empowerment, the LGBTQ sex workers in my study cited that both they and their clients had a mix of positive and negative experiences (Begum et al. 2013). The benefits of being a sex worker that my participants reported seem to be consistent with other research. They enjoyed making money, being able to set their own schedules, stretching their boundaries, and learning about their sexuality (Begum et al.; Vanwesenbeeck 2013). Although the negative impacts of violence and coercion on sex workers have been well documented (Begum et al. 2013; Gorry et al. 2010; Jackson et al. 2007; Mai 2012; Vanwesenbeeck 2013; Weitzer 2010), few studies have recognized how sex workers can simultaneously feel empowered and disempowered by their jobs.

The LGBTQ sex workers in my study reported new ways of affecting their clients than has previously been found. Sex positive research has tried to argue that sex workers subvert hegemonic gender roles for their clients, since their gendered performances illuminate how gender and sexuality are socially constructed (Jackson 2011; Marvin and Grandy 2013; McKay 1999; Read 2013; Webber 2013). My participants strongly disagreed with these theories. They believed that since their interactions with clients were heteronormative, their clients' views of gender and sexual orientation were reinforced, not subverted. Some of the LGBTQ sex workers did report that they believed their clients learned to expand and accept their sexuality, however. Additionally, my participants tried to teach their clients about consent and boundaries.

Views on Sex Work

The trend in sex work research to argue that the sex industry as a whole is inherently queer did not match up with my participants' views (Mai 2012; Pendleton 1997; Read 2013). They expressed frustration over how heteronormative and patriarchal their work can be. Almost all the LGBTQ sex workers wished that they could see more diverse clients, present themselves in more queer ways, and feel safer and accepted in their work. However, their frustrations were not indicative of inherent flaws within the sex industry. While previous research has tried to make sweeping claims about the sex industry as a monolithic entity, my participants recognized that structural and cultural forces impact their work more than anything else. They expressed that patriarchy, economic inequality, the criminalization of sex work, and stigma contributed to the oppressive aspects of their work.

It is extremely common for researchers studying sex workers to ask their participants only simplistic questions about the broad nature of their work. Then, it is the researcher who makes claims about how their findings should affect policy and academic theory. Since sex workers have not been afforded the space or agency to talk about what rights they need, it is not surprising that researchers have swung between extremist abstract theories on the sex industry. For one of the first times, instead of creating my own image of what sex workers are like, I asked LGBTQ sex workers themselves how they wanted to be viewed. They provided extremely helpful advice to allies of sex workers, stating that they wished people understood that LGBTQ sex workers exist, their lives and identities are complex, and that most representations of them are inaccurate.

CONCLUSION

LGBTQ sex workers in Denver and Boulder expressed many complex ways of thinking about, identifying, and presenting themselves with clients. In order to be successful in the industry while still feeling authentic, they integrated their personal queer identities with more stereotypical and mainstream presentations. Sex work allowed them to grow as individuals, have fun, and make money, but some were hurt by violence and objectification. LGBTQ sex workers' clients were not seen as learning much about gender or sexual orientation, but the sex workers did try to teach them about consent and did see them develop more self-acceptance.

Heteronormativity, violence, and fear within the industry were attributed not to the sex industry itself, but to outside structural and cultural forces. LGBTQ sex workers believed that ending patriarchy and economic inequality, legalizing or decriminalizing sex work, and reducing stigma against sex workers would allow them to be safer, happier, and more authentic in their work. Additionally, they expressed a desire for allies to educate themselves on the actual experiences of LGBTQ sex workers, instead of relying on inaccurate stereotypes presented in the media and academia.

Significance of Findings

This study contributes significantly to academic understandings of LGBTQ sex workers. Previous research has offered limited portrayals of LGBTQ sex workers steeped in stereotypes, inaccurate claims, and dehumanizing assumptions. My research shows that there is not a singular sex worker identity. Each individual working in the sex industry develops their own tactics for presenting themselves and interacting with clients. Although it is understandable to want to condense individuals' experiences into easily digestible themes, making claims about how all sex workers are oppressed, empowered, heteronormative, or queer violates how actual sex workers

view their lives. The LGBTQ sex workers in my study wanted to be viewed primarily as normal people with complex experiences and identities. This study illuminates that even among only eight different LGBTQ sex workers, there is a huge diversity of experience.

Implications of Findings

I asked each of my participants what sex work would look like in their ideal society and what they wished people knew about LGBTQ sex workers. Thus, the following suggestions for allies are entirely from LGBTQ sex workers. Those who are most affected by an issue should be able to decide how the issue should be addressed. It is patronizing and dehumanizing to assume that sex workers don't know what is best for themselves, or that they are not educated enough to understand how social structures impact their lives. Of course, sex workers with different experiences or in different regions may have different ideas on how allies can support sex workers.

The most important implication of my findings is that sex workers' voices need to be centered in any discussion or analysis on sex work. Academia and media must stop warping sex workers' stories to meet their own goals. LGBTQ sex workers deserve accurate representation of their lives, and that representation can only come when outsiders give them space to express themselves. LGBTQ sex workers know better than anyone how hegemonic gender roles affect queer presentations, how the sex industry affects individuals, and how structural forces impact sex work. Allies need to recognize how their perceptions of sex workers are distorted by cultural stigmas that devalue sex workers' intelligence and agency. LGBTQ sex workers are fully capable of understanding and analyzing their own struggles.

There are several steps allies can take in order to center LGBTQ sex workers' voices. By seeking out and promoting sex worker-run media, allies can spread accurate representations of

LGBTQ sex workers. Anyone who does work with LGBTQ issues, sexuality, or social justice, be it in an academic, activist, or media context, should work to elevate sex workers' rights issues by amplifying sex workers' voices. Professors can assign readings by sex workers, activists can collaborate with sex workers' rights organizations, and journalists and researchers can allow sex workers to speak for themselves. It is equally important that sex workers are included in discussions of human rights and gender/sexuality as it is that they are portrayed in a realistic manner. Thus, allies can practice stepping up by bringing up sex workers' issues and stepping back by creating space for actual sex workers to decide what they need.

A large part of this work entails recognizing the complexity of sex workers' experiences. A single sex worker may feel empowered, oppressed, challenged, and held back by their work even within one session. Additionally, sex workers have intricate lives outside of sex work. Thus, in their work to relearn what actual sex workers are like, allies should not attempt to discover the 'true' sex worker identity. Sex workers are more than their job and the sex industry; they are normal people navigating the complexities of their identities and the social world, just like everyone else. Allies should continually educate themselves on contemporary theories and experiences, continuously seek out different perspectives by other sex workers, and remind other non-sex workers to keep an open mind, as well.

Researchers working to understand and portray sex workers should examine their own biases thoroughly before they begin their work. It is a good idea to continually check in with the population you are studying in order to make sure your own stigmas are not influencing the findings. Additionally, researchers should be aware of any ulterior motives they may have. If your goal is to prove that the sex industry is oppressive or empowering, or that sex workers as a whole adhere or diverge from some stereotype, you should reevaluate your decision to study sex

workers. Sex workers are not props that can be twisted and bent to meet your needs. Instead, research should be serving their needs of gaining accurate representation and encouraging helpful societal and cultural changes that benefit sex workers. Finally, researchers should give more credit to sex workers' intelligence and agency by asking complex questions about their lives, struggles, and needs.

As previously discussed, allies should also be working to dismantle patriarchy, economic inequality, the criminalization of sex work, and stigma surrounding sex work. Allies can offer help to local sex workers' rights organizations, which will surely be working on these issues and might appreciate outsiders' help in their efforts. Additionally, individuals who are already working on issues related to sexism, classism, criminalization, and media representation should incorporate sex work issues into their analyses and actions. By building coalitions with sex workers, our movements can gain in strength and numbers. Sex workers can offer important insights about gender and sexual oppression, police brutality, and many other issues, since they work at the crux of many deviant identities and practices. Their struggle also deserves allies and supporters who do not necessarily expect any help back.

If you are reading this thesis, I encourage you to examine your place in the oppression of LGBTQ sex workers. What stereotypes have you internalized about sex workers and their clients? How many times have you read stories from actual sex workers? How many times have you spoken with actual sex workers? Did you let them speak for themselves, or did you ask them intrusive and oppressive questions to try to validate your own stereotypes about their lives? In what places in your life could you begin to support sex workers, through learning about their struggle, elevating their words to others, and working to help end their oppression? What is holding you back from doing those things?

LGBTQ sex workers deserve to live in a world where they can be authentic, where they can talk about their lives and work without fear of judgment or violence, and where they are valued as humans with important insights and experiences. This thesis is only one small step towards creating visibility for LGBTQ sex workers. My participants dedicated their time to this project with the hope that academic and radical communities would stop ignoring, judging, and oppressing them. They shared a sense of excitement at the idea of others finally understanding them and joining in their struggle. What will you do to make their time worthwhile and support the LGBTQ sex workers in your community?

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Demographic Information

How old are you?

What is your highest level of education?

How do you identify your race and/or ethnicity?

How do you identify your gender?

What gender pronouns do you use?

How do you identify your sexual orientation?

How do you identify your relationship orientation?

How would you describe the sex work you've done over your lifetime?

Questions about sex work and gender and sexual orientation

Who are you out to as LGBTQ and why?

Who are you out to as a sex worker and why?

How do you present your gender and sexual orientation to your clients?

Why do you present your gender and sexual orientation this way?

How do you feel about how you present yourself at work?

Do you wish you could change anything about how you present yourself at work?

Have you learned anything about gender, sexual orientation, or sexuality from doing sex work?

What do you think your clients have learned about gender, sexual orientation, or sexuality from seeing you?

What's your favorite thing about being a queer sex worker?

Questions about sex workers' rights

In your ideal world, what would sex work look like?

In your ideal world, would the gender balances within sex work change at all?

What do you wish people knew about queer sex workers?

What do you want to see come out of this study?

APPENDIX B

How to Be an Ally to Sex Workers¹³

Address Your Biases

- Don't assume. Some people make a choice to enter the sex industry because they enjoy it, others may be struggling for money and have less of a choice.
- Don't judge. Your opinions on the sex industry are irrelevant compared to the actual experiences of sex workers.
- Don't play rescuer. Not all sex workers are trying to get out of the industry or are in need of help.
- Do your own research. Most mainstream media is biased against sex workers and the statistics you read in the news about the sex industry are usually inaccurate.

Support Sex Workers in Your Community

- Stand up for sex workers in conversations. Don't let the stigma, bigotry, and shame around sex work continue.
- Put up sex work positive stickers, pamphlets, and posters in your office, business, or community. If you are a service provider, make it known that you provide equal treatment to sex workers.
- If you have power to influence hiring or admission decisions, reach out to sex workers. Don't discriminate against applicants due to their involvement in the sex industry, prostitution convictions or arrests, or long career gaps on resumes.

¹³ This list was compiled from Sex Workers Outreach Project-Chicago's website: www.redlightchicago.wordpress.com

- Work to eliminate policies and laws that discriminate against sex workers, including criminalization of sex work, housing discrimination, discrimination in custody cases, employment discrimination, police profiling, and police abuse.

Spread the Word

- If you are an academic or a reporter, seek out a diversity of voices and experiences from actual sex workers. Be critical of research and media coverage on sex workers.
- Share articles and blog posts written by sex workers with students, friends, and colleagues.
- If you are a policy maker, include diverse sex worker voices in discussion when drafting laws and policies that affect them.

APPENDIX C

Sex Workers' Rights Resources¹⁴

Sex Workers' Rights Organizations

Sex Workers Outreach Project-USA

www.swopusa.org

Sex Workers Outreach Project-USA is a national social justice network dedicated to the fundamental human rights of sex workers and their communities, focusing on ending violence and stigma through education and advocacy.

For a list of SWOP chapters around the United States, visit www.swopusa.org/chapters

Desiree Alliance

www.desireealliance.org

The Desiree Alliance is a diverse, sex worker-led network of organizations, communities and individuals across the US working in harm reduction, direct services, political advocacy and health services for sex workers. We provide leadership and create space for sex workers and supporters to come together to advocate for human, labour and civil rights for all workers in the sex industry.

Sex Workers' Rights Blogs

Tits and Sass

www.titsandsass.com

“Tits and Sass is a group blog run by sex workers who saw a void when it came to witty commentary on the public image of our industry. The ideas promoted about us in the public eye have an impact on the realities of our lives as sex workers every bit as strong as the law, so we’re not letting any more dead hooker or stripper bones jokes pass by without comment. We come

¹⁴ Website descriptions were copied from each respective website.

from different backgrounds and locations, work as strippers, porn performers, pro-dommes, prostitutes, and have a love of ripping apart stereotypes. This is our space for calling out pop culture fails, celebrating sex worker culture, and talking shop.”

Eminism

www.eminism.org

“Eminism.org is a personal website of multi-issue social justice activist/writer/rogue intellectual Emi Koyama. Emi often writes and speaks out about feminism, sexual and domestic violence, sex work/trade and trafficking, queer and trans liberation, intersex and disability issues, among others.”

HOOK

www.hook-online.com

“HOOK is a national, grassroots program that seeks to support men who are or were part of the sex industry. By creating positive relationships among men in the sex industry for communication and support, HOOK educates men in the sex industry, clients, and the public about sex work to reduce harm and to develop a network of service providers and nonprofit programs.”

Bound, Not Gagged

www.depththroated.wordpress.com

“BoundnotGagged is our way of responding to the injustice and hypocrisy that keeps sex workers’ voices muted and faces hidden. Sex workers may be in hiding, but they refuse to be silent. This blog will give you an inside look at the true inner-workings of this mysterious business.”