A Thematic Exploration of the Lived Experience of Sex Workers who are Censored Online

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Abstract

This academic enquiry explores the lived experiences of five sex workers who have encountered censorship on Instagram. It traverses feminist discourse and explores the unbridled capabilities of social media platforms as a contemporary beacon for information sharing. A qualitative research design and method was utilised to collect the data, which allowed for an in-depth insight into the varying degrees of censorship the participants experienced and how it affected their lives. Unanimously, the participants described experiencing biased censorship due to being a sex worker and reported intensified and increased censorship if they embodied other characteristics such as being, bigger-bodied, a person of colour, or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Each participant marked this biased censorship with negative mental health effects, a loss of income, and a loss of their sense of identity and community. However, the data showed that while they faced adversity when using Instagram, they were able to deploy tools and tactics to combat censorship practices and found agency and empowerment in doing so. Participants also expressed critical engagement and understanding of the broader framework which grounds censorship as a site of further stigmatisation and how it can be combatted with education and more open conversation. These findings open up the discussion to a broader commentary on the infiltration of offline societal prejudices into the online space and an examination of social media platforms as sites of abuse of power in contemporary online life that remain largely unregulated.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed,

Georgia Versey

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BACKGROUND

Censorship

Offline Censorship

From empires to presidents, free speech has long been fraught with contention and a difficult notion to tackle. Leaders assign it varying degrees of freedom and are met with equal amounts of acceptance, acquiescence or resistance. Limiting free speech is exercised to streamline beliefs, protect society, or muzzle the discourse of a nation. When knowingly throttled, it has been the catalyst for riots and revolts (King et al., 2013). However, the censorship of terrorist groups and other hate speech can be widely accepted as a sensible solution. With grey areas throughout, the spectrum of censorship and the ever-shifting cultural variables make moderating human communication an unsurmountable task that those in positions of power are asked to do. As we have moved into the digital era, that power is now held by social media giants like Meta and just as freedom of speech has historically been a site of much debate, that now continues into the online space.

Digital Censorship

The ubiquity of social media in the digital era facilitates online community and connectivity to an unprecedented degree. Information and data are spread instantaneously on a global scale from the likes of media outlets, politicians and the general public. With the intensification of information sharing, we are exposed to a plethora of differing opinions, behaviours and beliefs. While this can foster safe spaces for connecting like-minded folks, or encourage robust conversations, it can also incite the sharing of inappropriate, violent and extremist content that platforms seek to eliminate. As a means to counteract this unwanted content and keep their users safe, platforms deploy censorship mechanisms to regulate and control the type of content that may be viewed and shared on their sites.

Censorship can be deployed through several avenues such as human moderators, artificial intelligence moderators, shadowbanning, algorithms, self-censorship, content flagging or account deletion are among the many methods used to filter the types of information we may be exposed to on social media platforms (Binns, 2019; Crawford & Gillespie, 2014; Das & Kramer, 2013; Sleeper et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2013).

History of Instagram

The genesis of Instagram dates back to early 2010 when Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger joined forces to create a check-in app that was aimed at users sharing their favourite places to drink bourbon (Blystone, 2022). However, they quickly adjusted to the oversaturated market for check-in-based apps and repurposed theirs to be photo-centric and incorporated likes and comments which they then named, Instagram (Swisher, 2013). When the app launched in October 2010, it pioneered the way for instantaneous photo sharing, while also capturing the essence of social media and utilising the engagement of its users with the like and comment affordances (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). The balance of these elements was so successful that it captured the eye of Mark Zuckerberg, who in 2012 offered Systrom and Krieger one billion US dollars to buy the app and bring it under the Facebook (now Meta) umbrella (Meta, 2012). While the two sold the app to Zuckerberg, they remained CEOs of Instagram under the employment of Facebook to ensure it stayed true to its strengths and features and wouldn't morph into a direct extension of Facebook.

Over the following six years with Systrom and Krieger at the helm, Instagram rolled out new tools such as stories, IGTV and GIFs, scaling the app up to a fully-fledged social media platform. A platform here represents more than just Instagram as an app, but an

enormous database and application program interface (API) that integrates with third-party apps (Gillespie, 2014). The gravity of Instagram has become so instrumental in contemporary methods of information sharing, that it has become a cultural conduit for the type of information and content users are exposed to (Leaver et al., 2020).

Instagram quickly established itself as an integral player in the social media space, which was then characterised by the increased monetisation of the platform. In 2013, Instagram increasingly began rolling out advertisements and sponsored posts that may appear in the user's timelines, or between stories (Forbes, 2015). The other economic component of Instagram came from endorsements and brand deals that began taking place with users who had accumulated a large or meaningful following, from which we now recognise as an ‘influencer’ (Senft, 2008).

Introduction to Meta Platforms, Inc.

The newly renamed Meta is the parent company of platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp and more (Meta, 2023). Meta hosts over three billion active monthly users on Facebook (Dixon, 2023a) and over two billion active monthly users on Instagram (Dixon, 2023b). With such immense global engagement on these platforms, Meta relies on its guidelines to enact regulations on its users about the type of content that is permitted. For Instagram, the guidelines require that users only share photos they own (or have the right to share), that they post content appropriate for diverse audiences, foster meaningful and genuine interactions, abide by the law, respect other users, not glorify self-injury and be thoughtful when posting newsworthy events (Instagram, 2023a). When content is flagged by a human or artificial intelligence moderator as breaching these guidelines, the user will receive a notification to inform them of their infringement and have

their content removed. In cases of persistent breaches, the user may be banned (Cobbe, 2020).

Meta Platforms, Inc. as Regulators of Culture/Meta Censorship

As the gatekeepers to content and data, major platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat, possess an immense amount of power and control over the types of information we are exposed to. While censorship of some content is warranted and necessary to protect its users while using their platforms, other content is censored based on these corporations' cultural proclivities. Decisions are frequently made regarding issues pertaining to nudity, harassment and the appropriate amount of sexuality that is able to be displayed on their apps. These issues are heavily cultural and subjective and a conglomerate like Meta has seized the power to make decisions on a mass scale regarding the societal parameters of propriety through online content regulation. They are actively making cultural assumptions as to what should, and should not, be seen, and or, promoted on their platforms. By exercising this power they act as regulators of culture. We see these assumptions come to fruition through their algorithms. For instance, Meta algorithms on Instagram suggest accounts for a user to follow, they curate the explore and shopping feeds for each user and determine which posts will appear first on the users' feed based on the specific behaviour and engagement of that user (Leaver et al., 2020). A particularly acute point of tension is the way these algorithms are often invisible to the user, meaning Meta is able to make cultural assumptions based on social norms on behalf of users, which dictates the type of content users are exposed to. These cultural assumptions and the reinforcing of societal norms then create echo chambers which further perpetuate inequalities (Gillespie, 2018; Noble, 2018).

Further, Meta has positioned itself as the most prevalent and extensive surveillance system in the world (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Through the procurement of platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp along with their in-house app extensions like Messenger, Meta accumulates data from all over the globe. From the metadata of an uploaded image to tagging people, locations and hashtags, all give Meta the ability to create a highly intelligent digital profile that can be used to track and analyse users alongside other data points (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). When sold to advertisers, these data points become an extremely profitable and powerful asset. The magnitude of that type of power means that from behind closed doors, Meta both control the type of information we do see and the information that we do not. In recognising this immense power, it is important to interrogate the fact that a small group of invested stakeholders and employees at Meta are given the power to dictate cultural spaces and discourse and set the boundaries for what is normal and appropriate. We must then analyse these community guidelines and moderation tools that 'protect' this imagined community and be critical of the way they are enforced and who they benefit.

Censorship and Women/Feminism

The social mediascape facilitates varying facets of sharing and engagement amongst its users, with different tools and affordances offering certain benefits for users. As a photo-centric platform, Instagram offers its users a unique avenue of self-expression and self-promotion with the sharing of user-generated imagery. This shift to user-generated imagery was significant in contrast to traditional forms of media that heavily controlled and manipulated perceptions of, particularly the female body, but also ideas about sex and sexuality (Andsager, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). These images of young, thin and tall women are reinforced through magazines, television and other sources of mass media that set unattainable beauty standards for women (Grabe et al., 2008; Tiggemann, 2011). Social

media platforms, but particularly Instagram, became a haven for users to represent themselves and their identities how they chose to. This exposure and vulnerability catalysed a shift towards greater acceptance of different types of bodies and identities (Andsager, 2014). However, as Instagram's engagement and popularity grew, the platform implemented greater restrictions over the type of content that could be shared.

Instagram's guidelines have been a contentious issue for women and feminists alike in response to the heavier regulations that are imposed upon women and folks with female anatomy. Initially, nudity was explicitly banned, including the displaying of female nipples (Leaver et al., 2020). However, after users fought back against the censorship of breastfeeding content, Instagram re-evaluated its community guidelines to be more contextualised and inclusive (Locatelli, 2017).

Censorship and Sex Work

Instagram's *Community Guidelines* (2023a) page, begins by stating: "Instagram is a reflection of our diverse community of cultures, ages, and beliefs. We've spent a lot of time thinking about the different points of view that create a safe and open environment for everyone". However, research on the implementation of censorship has consistently found that it is those from marginalised groups of society that are disproportionately and inequitably censored in comparison to their counterparts (Gredler, 2021; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020).

In the space of sex-positive communities, research has explored the way in which social media platforms act as intermediaries that shape the extent to which sexual content is shared (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). Tiidenberg and van der Nagel (2020) explored

the positive effects sex-positive content has on well-being, self-confidence and reducing feelings of isolation within this community. Similarly, Gredler (2021) investigated the effects of community for LGTBQI+ people on Tumblr. A platform that was initially a safe space for the rainbow community, where explorative content and collective creativity were fostered, became more restrictive which had ramifications on their identity and mental health.

Sex Work

Definition

The definition of sex work is multifarious and ever-evolving making it difficult to offer a unanimous definition. Traditional definitions of sex work pertain to the "buying and selling of sexual services for cash payment"(Høigård & Finstad, 1992, p.8). Under New Zealand law, sex work is defined as the exchange of physical sex for payment in the form of money, a gift, a favour, or something of value to the sex worker (Prostitution Reform Act 2003). Most commonly referred to in the context of New Zealand, is sex work conducted in massage parlours, escorting and street prostitution (Jordan, 2005; Plumridge & Abel, 2001). However, in the digital age, this definition becomes blurred when accounting for online sex work. In this case, the physical nature of sex work is substituted for digital services, which can include: the production of live or recorded content, photographs, phone sex, or the trading of anything a person finds sexually enticing in return for payment (Jordan, 2005).

Discursive Constructions of Prostitution/Sex workers/Prostituted persons

Historically, the term prostitute has been used to negatively connote women as whores, immoral and unclean (Pheterson, 1986; Tulloch, 1997; Zangger, 2015). Indicative of a shift in the social climate and movements of the late nineteenth century towards greater equality of the sexes, the terminology of 'sex work' and 'sex worker' became prominent

(Bullough & Bullough, 1987; Healy et al., 2010; Jenness, 1990). The terms directly references 'work', which functions to legitimise the sex industry. It indicates that sex workers are people with occupations, rather than the disparaging connotations that are typically associated with prostitution. By subscribing to the term sex work, I endeavour to further validate the legitimacy of sex work as a form of employment and uphold the human and civil rights of sex workers.[1]

History

The earliest records of sex work in New Zealand can be recounted to early European colonisation where Māori women were traded for muskets and other goods (Belich, 2008). However, as the state began intervening amidst the rise of the nineteenth-century public health movement, the sexual conduct of the public became increasingly regulated and subsequently controlled (Tulloch, 1997). The public health movement was in response to the rapid growth of slum living conditions that promoted unsanitary living conditions that the upper classes of society wanted to avoid (Porter, 1993). The state was, therefore, urged into action culminating in the gradual intervention and implementation of the state-sanctioned public health system (Tulloch, 1997). Vaccine legislation was the first health intervention to be enacted in the British colonies, followed by the catalytic Contagious Diseases Act which required anyone suspected of prostituting themselves, to undergo compulsory genital examination (Smith, 1979).

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[1]In keeping with periodic literature and legal definitions, I will sometimes use the words 'prostitute' and 'prostitution'. However, 'sex work' and 'sex worker' are the preferred terms and will be used where possible.[1]

The disease-centred approach, conducive to the Contagious Diseases Act, dominated the discourse around sex work and its state regulation. However, synonymous at the time were first-wave feminists and religious, puritanical ideals that employed positivist discourse to strongly influence the perception of sexuality and sex work in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries (Tulloch, 1997). The Evangelical reformers posited that sex work was not only responsible for spreading venereal disease but also responsible for the decline of marriage and the family unit and therefore, advocated for the end of prostitution (Walkowitz, 1980). The purity movement was also propelled by these ideals and sought to cleanse society of immorality and restore the 'unique' qualities of women as nurturing, caring and maternal (Boylan, 1978; Tulloch, 1997).

First-wave feminists also drew influence from this movement in the campaign for equal rights and concern over patriarchal coercion and the sexual exploitation of women. In the nineteenth century, equal-rights feminism campaigned for the equal civil and political rights of women (Bacchi, 1990). With greater rights for women being fought for, came increased recognition of married women being able to exercise bodily autonomy and greater sexual freedom (Tulloch, 1997). However, central to the first-wave feminist societal critique was the rejection of the sexual double standard and the power that men held over women sexually. The feminist movement particularly solidified an ideology about women's bodies as a sexual object for the needs of men (Kent, 1990) and engendered the renowned feminist debate that prostitution is the subordination and exploitation of women for the sexual desire of men (Brookes, 1993). According to the ideologies imposed by the social purity movement, first-wave feminism, religious discourses and the Contagious Diseases Act, sex was emphasised as unclean, immoral and patriarchally induced. These ideologies

led to the imposition of stricter interventionalist sex legislation, while the implicit links made between diseases, moral corruption and sex work imposed a stigma that lingers to this day, affecting the livelihoods of sex workers globally (Fleming, 1989).

New Zealand Legislation

With the introduction of the Police Offences Act in 1884 the public solicitation of prostitution was made an offence, followed by new restrictions on brothel-keeping in 1891 which shifted to include pimps and procurers by 1900 (Tulloch, 1997). The Crimes Act 1961 made illegal: brothel-keeping, living off the earnings of prostitution, or the procurement of sexual services. Greater regulations were enforced with The Massage Parlours Act 1978, which regulated parlours, owners managers and sex workers. Then in 1981; the public solicitation of prostitution (including parlours) was made illegal under the Summary Offences Act (Jordan, 2018).

Decriminalisation in New Zealand/Prostitution Reform Act 2003

In New Zealand, under a criminalistic model, sex workers were at an increased risk of harassment, exploitation and health issues due to the illegality and covert nature of the arrangement (Abel et al., 2007; Jordan, 2005). They had no rights to be able to negotiate terms of employment, or most poignantly, they were unable to report violent encounters with clients which is a recognised component of sex work (Jordan, 2005). This criminalised framework meant that to the detriment of their health and well-being, sex workers were excluded from basic human rights to work in a safe environment (Prostitution Law Review Committee, 2008). Particular to the issue of criminalisation, was the lack of support and information being provided to promote safe sex practices, which is noted as critical to limiting the spread of HIV and other venereal diseases by the World Health Organisation

(Ministry of Women's Affairs, 1991). In response to these issues, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) was formed in 1987. NZPC advocated for the rights and protection of sex workers and soon obtained government funding to provide support, information, condoms, HIV testing, and drug and needle programmes to sex workers (Worth, 2003).

Alongside the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, Amnesty International and sex worker organisations who globally call for legislative change and the decriminalisation of sex work, NZPC fought for the decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand/Aotearoa (NZPC, 2021; World Health Organization, 2013). In 2000 the *Prostitution Reform Bill (*2003) was submitted, which outlined the harm of criminalised sex work. The main features of the bill were to decriminalise sex work and create a legal framework that would uphold the human rights of sex workers, safeguard their welfare and occupational health, and prohibit sex work for persons under the age of 18 (Prostitution Reform Act 2003). When lobbying for *The Prostitution Reform Bill* to be passed in court, MP Georgina Beyer recounted a violent encounter of being held at knifepoint and sexually assaulted as a sex worker, declaring that she should have had the legal right to call the police and report this incident (Jordan, 2018). The Act addresses this power imbalance that sees sex workers disproportionately being at risk of violence and necessitates safer working conditions for those in the field. It allows for greater power to be exercised by sex workers in negotiating their terms of employment and having the ability to enter into legitimate employment relations and therefore, legally dispute any exploitation or foul play. In 2003, the court ruled in favour of decriminalising sex work and Aotearoa New Zealand became the first country in the world to pass such an Act (Armstrong & Abel, 2020). In 2008, the Prostitution Law

Review Committee (2008) noted a distinct shift in the safety and protection of sex workers by being able to refuse particular clients or practices through the legitimisation of their work conducive to *The Prostitution Reform Act 2003* (Prostitution Law Review Committee, 2008).

Current Situation

Research conducted post the implementation of the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) in 2003 has noted improvements in the human and civil rights of New Zealand sex workers. Perhaps most significantly, decriminalisation has meant that sex workers are afforded a legal framework with which to report instances of violence, or exploitation that may occur when working. The Prostitution Law Review Committee (2008) noted that while violence is still commonplace within the industry, the PRA has made it easier to report violent encounters to police. To protect against exploitative and unsafe working conditions in brothels, the establishment owners must now obtain a certificate and pass inspections based on cooperation with the best practices, as set out in the Health and Hygiene Bylaw 2013 for commercial sexual services. The Committee (2008) also documented high levels of safe sex practices and increased awareness of occupational health and safety requirements. In response to the fears of those opposing the bill who suspected there would be a growth in sex worker numbers and increased crime, the Committee expressed that the industry had not grown and many of the predicted social evils had not come to fruition. They also found there was no explicit link between sex work and criminalistic behaviour – rather, sex workers were more commonly the victims of crime than the perpetrators (Prostitution Law Reform Committee, 2008). In conclusion, the Committee deemed the PRA to be a success regarding its intention towards safer and more humane labour conditions. Cementing this by suggesting that " the vast majority of people involved in the sex industry are better off under the PRA than they were previously" (Prostitution Law Review Committee, 2008, p.

168). However, while legal improvements have been made to the betterment of the labour conditions for sex workers, moral prejudices still linger that impact contemporary sex workers.

Global Legislative Approaches to Sex Work

Sex work has long been a contentious issue that incites responses on a spectrum from disdain, to acquiescence, to advocacy. The correlating concerns traverse gender equality, human trafficking, globalised sex markets, public health and the safety and rights of sex workers (Graham et al., 2022). As a topic that predominately affects women, feminists in particular take strong and oppositional stances within the feminist doctrine regarding sex work and how it should be regulated.

Globally, pro-sex worker feminists, human rights advocates, and some academic and medical professionals call for the decriminalisation of sex work and regard it as the safest model for sex workers (Harcourt et al., 2010; UNAID's, 2012; UNDP, 2012). A decriminalised model removes the penalties and regulates the sex work environment, which is conducive to a more successful public health model (Jordan, 2005). New Zealand was the first country to decriminalise sex work, followed most recently by Belgium (Graham et al., 2022). All other jurisdictions legally regulate sex work to some degree.

The most common model of legalisation operates akin to the decriminalisation model, but diverges by introducing laws and policies to regulate the industry (Cox, 2021). This model is fought against by sex worker advocates as it allows direct governmental control, who police based on enforcing legal frameworks as opposed to actively protecting against violence and theft against sex workers (Ham, 2011). The legalisation also reinforces

a criminalistic ideology about sex work, where the work remains framed by a punitive process.

A criminalised model is the most totalitarian model of regulating sex work, whereby the sex industry is outlawed and is illegal for both the client and the sex worker (Jordan, 2005). This is widely considered by pro-sex worker advocates as the most dangerous and detrimental to the rights and lives of sex workers globally (Abel et al., 2007; Loch, 2022; World Health Organization, 2013). It takes it underground and removes the access to legal protection and safety, which categorically puts sex workers' lives at risk. This model is also quick to conflate sex trafficking with sex work, which sees the continual establishment of such totalitarian laws against sex work. A decriminalised model upholds both the safety and the rights of the sex worker, while violence and trafficking remains illegal.

Another model that has been implemented in mostly Nordic countries such as Sweden and Norway, and was later adopted in Northern Ireland, France and Canada, is what is known as the Nordic or Swedish model. This model criminalises the client or the buyer rather than the sex worker in an attempt to curb demand. However most research claims it is an unsuccessful model as it conflates sex work with sex trafficking and leaves sex work in the shadows and perpetuates stigma (Armstrong & Fraser, 2020; Krusi et al., 2014; Östergren, n.d.).

Stigma

The stigmatisation of sex workers is a well-documented phenomenon (Armstrong & Fraser, 2020; Benoit et al., 2018; Sanders, 2004; Weitzer, 2018). Particularly for women, sex work stigma is rooted in patriarchal ideologies of women and their believed role in society as virtuous, doting mothers and wives (Boylan, 1978) and any women seen to be living

outside of these moral sanctions were deemed immoral and labelled as degenerate (Tulloch, 1997). Young women were sought out by men to 'balance' their sexual desires and improve their behaviour, while women were in turn blamed for providing the service (Eldred-Grigg, 1984; Macdonald, 1986, 1990; Robinson, 1987). Sex work became widely touted as a 'social evil' that needed to be controlled (Macdonald, 1986, 1990; Robinson, 1987). This cultivated the perpetual vilification of sex workers and led to increased criminalisation, marginalisation and stigmatisation that still manifests, even under a decriminalised model.

Erving Goffman (1963) pioneered stigma as a theory to describe the social phenomena of being deeply discredited due to a socially undesirable attribute. He argued that stigma manifested itself in micro-level interactions that persistently affected how someone was treated. Stigma then transpires into socially detrimental outcomes such as marginalisation, public sanctions and the devaluation of one's identity (Baran et al., 2012; Goffman, 1963; Stone et al., 1992). The historic patriarchal and evangelical treatment of sex work as immoral, compounded with the perennial criminalisation of sex workers ensures their consistent proximity to stigmatisation. Scholars deem sex workers as one of the most stigmatised communities due to their occupation which attracts physical, social and moral stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Kreiner et al., 2006). A recent study conducted in New Zealand of 20 sex workers who were interviewed regarding their relationship to stigma revealed that the consequences of stigma still instilled fear in the participants. They found that it manifested in emotional stress, concealing parts of their identity, or internalising aspects of shame (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022).

The stigmatisation of sex work can also detrimentally impede the desire to seek out help and support for those who may need it, for fear of judgement or condemnation. This can be dehumanising and dangerous due to the fact that violence and rape are regarded as occupational hazards of sex work and they may be exposing themselves to high-risk situations both physically and mentally (Jordan, 2005). This is evidenced by the fact that sex workers often experience long-term psychological consequences, substance abuse and higher rates of mortality (Rössler et al., 2010). For example, Plumridge and Abel (2001) found that 41% of street-based sex workers in New Zealand had reported violence being perpetrated against them, and 21% of indoor workers. More recent research also shows that while the decriminalisation of sex work has helped significantly due to the ability to screen potential clients with the support of the law, risk factors still prevail that require management, particularly for street-based sex workers and migrant workers (Armstrong, 2018; Macioti et al., 2022; Meriluoto et al., 2015). The increased threat to violence as a sex worker increases their vulnerability and as an already stigmatised group, this creates a dangerous and hostile position for a sex worker to be in. Stigma was also found to manifest *within* the community as a means to gain social acceptance hierarchically, or isolating themselves further to avoid the risk of being stigmatised by other sex workers, which perpetuates the danger (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022). Therefore, despite the decriminalisation of sex work in Aotearoa, the power of stigma and the threat of violence still festers in the societal ideals that generate risk and vulnerability for sex workers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context of Sex Workers within Patriarchal Structures

This review of the literature examines relevant bodies of scholarship to this research, to assist in answering the question, w*hat are the lived experiences of sex workers who are censored on Instagram?* Each body of scholarship serves as an influential piece of research, upon which I will build the framework for a wider scholarly enquiry. The chapter begins with a pioneering piece of literature written by Judith Walkowitz, as a means of providing the historical context of sex work and how they have perennially been ostracised and framed as deviant, immoral and less than. In understanding this foundational context, we are able to identify the sociological underpinnings that shape the individual lived experiences of sex workers today, which is critical to the relevancy of any contemporary analysis.

In her first piece of published literature, Judith Walkowitz (1980) traverses the way in which moral and ideological frameworks shaped the degrading regulation of prostitution in the nineteenth century in *Prostitution and Victorian Society.* Her book meticulously interrogates the medical and police regulation of prostitution, using the Contagious Disease Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 as their vehicle for increased control over both women and impoverished communities. This work set a precedent in this field for the way Walkowitz not only examined the harm caused by increased state regulation of prostitution and women in Britain but also by applying a class and gender framework to explore this exercise of power. In doing so, she was able to make sense of these social relations on a broader scale which can be used to apply meaning to the way that sex workers and women experience the world today. However, what set Walkowitz apart from other scholars of prostitution and women's history at the time, was the way she looked beyond the dominant moralistic assessment of prostitutes as 'fallen' women who needed to be saved or banished

and instead, afforded these women agency and autonomy with personal histories. This approach was catalytic for future scholars to understand sex work and sex workers through a sex-work feminist framework that provides a more holistic and grounded appraisal of these issues.

In the Victorian period, religious and puritanical beliefs were firmly established schools of thought. Prostitution was deemed to be “the Great Social Evil” (p.32) that was tainting the sanctity of the family and the moral fibre of society. Sigmund Freud wrote in 1910: “The woman’s value is measured by her sexual integrity and is reduced by any approach to the characteristic of being like a prostitute” (Freud, 1957, p. 167). Sexual intercourse was understood puritanically, in that it should only occur between man and wife within the privacy of one's home. The family unit was integral to upholding the patriarchal authority of the fathers, who were responsible for their family's moral, social and economic welfare. To evangelical men, prostitution was a source of pollution that was tainting their sons, claiming they were "accosted by women of the town at every step" (p.34). However, leniency was afforded to men who needed a heterosexual outlet while enlisted, or waiting for marriage to keep them from insanity. Men "were subject to sexual impulses that could be partially curbed and regulated, but never completely repressed" (p.45). In contrast, women's sexual inclinations were framed as “devoid of sexual appetite” (p.45), or if they did have a sexual inclination, they were of poor character (p.81). Therefore, any women who participated in sexual relations outside of wedlock were seen as pathological, immoral and desecrating the holy union and sanctity of marriage. These dominant ideologies upheld a strict double standard for male and female sexuality that influenced the enactment of medical and social sanctions on prostitutes and women. Prostitution was systematically

analysed by men and doctors like W.R. Greg and William Acton, who believed it was an issue that needed a remedy and could be understood through scientific research. As writers like Acton saw it, prostitution was a source of moral pollution, but one that could be regulated with police and medical supervision. As Walkowitz points out, these sexual and social ideologies became embedded in laws that directly affected social and class relations.

As venereal diseases began to run rampant through Britain, societal leaders readily applied the ideologies of Acton and Greg, who laid the blame for moral and sanitary decline solely on prostitutes. To curb the rising statistics of enlisted men contracting venereal diseases, key military figureheads and state bureaucrats implemented the first of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD) in 1864. However, as Walkowitz explores, the implementation and ramification of these acts were tacit manifestations of the social and sexual ideologies of this era, that reinforced class and gender relations. The rationale for these acts was that venereal diseases, particularly syphilis, were spread through impure sexual relations with diseased prostitutes, "literally and figuratively the prostitute was the conduit of infection to respectable society" (p.4). Therefore, under the Contagious Diseases Acts, local CD authorities were deployed to police the streets for any women whom they suspected to be prostitutes. If a woman was accused of being a prostitute, under law she was to be examined by a doctor for venereal diseases. If the woman claimed not to be a prostitute, the responsibility lay with her to be able to prove that she wasn't. If she was found to have a disease, she could be detained in hospital for up to three months. The intrusive internal examination was sanctioned only for women, as it was feared that it would be demoralising for men to undergo such an ordeal and would destroy their self-respect. As opposed to prostitutes and women, who were assumedly depraved and

undignified. Further, for women and men that upheld virtuous ideals of only being penetrated by their husbands, this invasive examination left the women 'impure' having been raped by the "steel penis, the speculum" (p.146). The enforcement of these acts were categorically sexist and imposed mechanisms of control over women, but particularly for women who were operating outside of the social ideals of womanhood. In this way women could be regulated and remain oppressed under the patriarchal regime – an issue that has permeated into the way sex workers are treated today.

The women were often kept in hospitals known as lock wards, which according to Acton, got their name from medieval hospitals built for lepers who would be kept in restraints. The direct comparison of prostitutes and lepers demarcates the marginalised identity of a Victorian-era prostitute, under the imposing social ideologies upheld during this time. These lock wards operated as examination and treatment sites for prostitutes, but also as disciplinary institutions to re-indoctrinate these women into inhabiting the correct domestic female roles in society. They were trained in needlework and laundry, and subjected to a strict religious atmosphere. The women were prohibited from writing, or having visitors from the outside world and kept separate from other patients. The lock wards imitated the 'appropriate' social order with the male doctor in the position of power and the respectable virtuous nurses as the female role models. The gender lines in which these acts were implemented irrefutably demonstrate the formidable patriarchal dominance that worked to shame, marginalise and oppress females, whether prostitutes or not. It was for the prospering health of men, that women were subjected to such examination, even though it was both men and women participating in the sexual relations. Women, but especially prostitutes, were seen as the embodiment of contagion and

corruption. These social and medical assumptions made in this era of sex workers being immoral, unclean and the spreaders of disease became perpetually etched into the prejudicial assessment of sex workers. To this day, sex workers are commonly misconstrued and feared for being unhygienic, when it is widely accepted in the sex worker community, that they uphold the strictest safe and hygienic sexual practices (Anderson, 2011; Durisin, 2018; Poutanen, 2015; Williamson & Folaron, 2001)

As Walkowitz demonstrates, the regulation of these acts also worked to uphold hierarchical class relations. The CD acts were heavily enforced in areas of poor and middle-class communities, for it was in these places that prostitutes were typically found. Prior to the enforcement of the acts, prostitution was a condemned but tolerated occupation. Among the labouring poor communities, prostitution was seen as illegitimate and immoral, but some of the working class understood it as a strategy for women to survive. Lodging houses run by low-income families, or single women would be consistently rented out by prostitutes, bringing them greater profit than other lodgers. However, as the acts were enforced, police began inspecting boarding houses unannounced, pulling back sheets and bidding any women lying with a man to get dressed while they remained in the room. They would follow women through the streets at night, threaten and harass their families and working-class folks in search of prostitutes, and even bribe civilians to be spies. Anyone seen to be harbouring prostitutes, or renting out rooms to them could be fined, or imprisoned. The sanctions of these acts also reinforced that prostitution was an intolerable profession. Low-income and working-class folk who once aided prostitutes, allowing them to stay in their houses, or offering them daytime work, were now turned against them. Correspondingly, prostitutes were forced onto the streets, or into unsafe housing situations

with no protection and boarding house owners lost their income. At times, these women were then pushed into working under a pimp to ensure work. This meant that while women were able to support other low-income families and themselves, they were now under the control of men who could be volatile and untrusting. Although, a moment of strength in this book for me was the way Walkowitz points out that not all pimps were the villains they were made out to be. Some offering much-needed security and support. Although more broadly, the need for women to turn to the aid of male pimps was another means of ensuring that women were reliant on men to provide for them and having a vested interest in keeping them on the streets. The enforcement of these acts were categorically a method of increased control for the state into the lives of the poor and they drove a wedge between prostitutes and their labouring communities (Diduck & Wilson, 1997). As an already vulnerable group, they were cruelly sought out by local officials enforcing these acts and incessantly displaced and criminalised, ostracising them for any sense of community or support (Bowen, 2021).

The patriarchal oppression of women was not only perpetuated by men but also by the way women treated each other. Walkowitz accounts for hierarchies between sex workers at the time that stratified the value of brothels based on revenue, whether they worked in upper or lower-class communities, and by the race of their workers. This along with work by Timothy Gilfoyle (1992) and Marilyn Hill (1993) were some of the first historical accounts of what is now referred to as whorearchies (Fuentes, 2022; Knox, 2014; McClintock, 1992; McNeill, 2012). The whorearchy can come from within or outside the industry, but is a sex-worker-defined model that refers to the hierarchy of sex workers based on social factors like gender, race, age and the type of sex work you do (Fuentes,

2022; Knox, 2014; McClintock, 1992; McNeill, 2012; Sciortino, 2016). The whorearchy can come from within or outside the industry and is based on a combination of prejudicial assumptions. Commentors on the topic tie the whorearchy to patriarchal depictions of womanhood as determined by levels of chastity (Bowen, 2021; Freud, 1957; Rubin, 1984), or based on their degree of contact with clients, or their proximity to the police (Duggan, 2016). This evaluation sees cam girls placed at the top of the hierarchy, followed by strippers, sugar babies, dominatrices, indoor sex workers and at the bottom, street-based workers (Duggan, 2016). This hierarchy directly indicates a value placed on patriarchal ideals of chastity and the idea that intercourse should be reserved for man and wife, and rendering promiscuity as deviance. Other researchers highlighted the reflections of social stratification that place those of lower class and people of colour as less than within the whorearchy. Sciortino (2016) suggested that racism and classism place greater value on white, middle-class, cis-gendered women compared to workers of colour or immigrants. This can then directly correlate to their opportunities, whereby they may not be hired to work in a brothel and forced into street-based sex work (Sciortino, 2016), which has a higher level of risk.

As most women were able to remain inconspicuous about their occupation by streetwalking at night, once a woman was accosted by the police and registered as a prostitute, she would be made to attend her examination in the daytime. This was humiliating for some who would often be taunted by young boys awaiting them or judged by onlookers. Any anonymity she may have had was lost and she was now forced to live publicly as a prostitute. This blatant exposure to their neighbours and employers would prevent them from finding any alternative form of employment and drastically limit their

future opportunities. This was particularly problematic because, for most women of this time, prostitution was a temporary form of employment. Concurrently, not only did this public stigmatisation affect their futures, but the way they saw themselves as they were made to accept their marginalised status. As Walkowitz points out, some of these women seemed to have compartmentalised their transitional period through prostitution, bargaining with their self-image knowing they were only doing it temporarily. “It is unlikely that prostitutes fully internalised the notion of being “fallen” when they knew they could “rise again” (p.203). These Acts made sex a matter of state policy and were used to manipulate and control the lives of prostitutes, women and the poor. The reach of power local authorities had was greater than it ever should have been and in response, the hostility and public humiliation prostitutes received created a class of ‘sexually deviant’ females, ostracised from any respectable life in society.

Early Feminist Movements

In 1866, civilian doctors and authorities rallied together to have the acts extended and again in 1869. The unjust roll-out of these acts, however, sparked a repeal movement among activist groups who believed the acts were cruel and sexist. These groups predominantly consisted of working-class women who banded together in solidarity with their 'fallen' sisters. However, the first meeting of the National Association forbade women to participate, so in response, the Ladies' National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (LNA) was born. Headed by Josephine Butler, who established herself as a key feminist figurehead from this era. The LNA fought against the acts as a violation of the legal safeguard to refuse medical examinations or bodily autonomy, the absolute power of police over women, and the sexual double standard that solely punished women for male vice, while men remained unscathed. It was from these movements that

we see the beginnings of feminist activism. People began to recognise that women could participate in political matters and be empowered and intelligent members of society. However, as Walkowitz aptly depicts there were limitations to the feminist agendas of these groups. Often they would resort to their moralistic and puritanical agendas of rescuing these 'fallen' women, instead of supporting them, even becoming hostile towards those not wanting to be 'saved', or reformed according to their standards (Scoular & O'Neill, 2007; Walkowitz, 1980). The dominant rationale here was these women were in prostitution because they were impoverished, not sinful. Therefore, were simply in need of saving. Moments as these in Walkowitz's analysis highlight the deeply engrained ideologies in this era, that women were intrinsically virtuous and deemed to be inherently doting and domesticated. Walkowitz does suggest that occasionally feminist and personal rights activists acknowledged that some prostitution was a voluntary choice and not necessarily the last option. Mostly though, it was believed prostitution was a transitional period that women entered into either for money and autonomy, or were forced into it from broken homes, or more sinister reasons. I believe these rationales for sex work are still intensely active ideologies in today's society. Sex workers are often presumed to be manipulated or trafficked into sex work, or in a predicament with limited options and in need of economic security. While in some cases these scenarios are devastatingly true, there is also a wide range of reasons someone may be in sex work, including by choice which is important to recognise. This rhetoric lends itself to the inability to comprehend women as people with bodily autonomy, or possessing a sexual nature. It parallels to the experiences of contemporary sex workers who are misunderstood, or judged due to these ideologies that still manifest themselves in the stigma and shame of sex work.

Walkowitz goes on to highlight some weak points in Butler's doctrine. Stating that, while she relentlessly fought against the sexual double standard and advocated for the full legal, political and educational rights of women, she still upheld distinct notions of womanhood as wives, mothers and defenders of the home. Recognising these limitations I believe is where Walkowitz's strengths as a researcher stand out. She is able to give a robust, balanced and holistic view of these women and not sensationalising them for all the groundbreaking work that they did (although they did). She acknowledges that by restricting the identity women should attain, there were still limits to their activism. In the same vein, she also recognised male feminists who were instrumental in these campaigns and the fight for women's freedom.

What was also apparent from this research, were the perpetual themes of activism against a centralised state and the control that aristocrats and the military hold over the working class. These themes are still well established today, with the state, corporations and the military possessing the power to shape the social, economic and political lives of communities. Always though, it is the marginalised communities, like sex workers who bear the brunt of these particular ideologies, just as Walkowitz proves in her work. Apparent in this research though, was the relentless support of women looking out for other women. Female neighbours of sex workers in lower-class communities, often protected prostitutes from the police, but also helped them escape. It was also women like Butler, who were at the centre of the repeal effort fighting for the rights of prostitutes. Particularly though, Walkowitz described it as the "fallen sisterhood" (p.27). Fellow prostitutes would support each other, typically working in pairs or coming to the aid if someone was in distress, contributing to pay for bail, doctors' fees and in some cases a proper funeral. They would

look out for each other on the street, warning others of men who were cruel or untrusting. They were a distinct subgroup of females who were ostracised, harassed and treated with cruelty by both state authorities and society as a whole. However, they were united in their outcast status from dominant cultural ideals and banded together. Something that can be witnessed to this day in the thriving community networks of sex workers unionising, or simply finding solace in their kindred experiences.

In this early piece of research, Walkowitz set the precedent for deep diving into the history of prostitution. She exemplified how to connect the intersecting frameworks at play and recognise how ideologies manifest themselves through institutions, laws and social behaviour. This analysis opened the door for future researchers to understand sex workers within a set of moral and social paradigms, of which were embedded into the fabric of society during these formative years. Walkowitz pioneered a space to be conscious of the way that prostitutes were more than just 'fallen' women who were evil or trafficked into it. This was an intentional and thoughtful analysis that hadn't been explored through the lens of prostitution before. She opened the space for other scholars to see prostitutes and prostitution as more than just a job, but as a set of choices made within a set of circumstances, each unique and should be recognised as such. This is invaluable to future researchers to apply these same methods to sex work and sex workers today.

Patriarchal Forces

To supplement Walkowitz's sex-work feminist approach, I draw on Deniz Kandityoti's *Bargaining with Patriarchy* (1988). This piece lends itself again as a sex-work feminist approach to understanding the ways in which women negotiate and use agency within structures of oppression. It explores an aspect of nuance within the power relations

between men and women. A patriarchal bargain illustrates the subjugation that women are subjected to, while also investigating how women utilise individual agency to assert control over their social identity and sense of value. It reflects the themes that are apparent in the discourse around contemporary sex work and how sex workers negotiate and assert control over their selfhood, while still recognising the systems of oppression that they are working in and amongst.

In her journal, Kandiyoti (1988) expresses her resistance to the reductionist way patriarchy is used as a concept. Feminist discourse that explores the gendered dynamics of society engages with the concept of patriarchy often as a blanket term to reference men's domination over women. While Kandiyoti doesn't delve into the theoretical debates on patriarchy, she does utilise this diversion in perception as her point of entry to highlight the inner mechanisms of patriarchy. To reveal the intricate process of hegemony at work and better epitomise the concept, Kandiyoti analyses the different ways women negotiate with forms of patriarchy; she coined this the patriarchal bargain. A patriarchal bargain is a trade-off made either consciously or unconsciously within a set of predetermined structures that make up the material basis of these women's lives. To illustrate these bargains, she first analyses a type of patriarchy borne through the insecurities of polygyny that are commonplace in sub-Saharan Africa and then classic patriarchy, a form exhibited in the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. Both geographical illustrations exist within varying cultural and social paradigms that alter the way patriarchy manifests, but through Kandiyoti's analysis of the patriarchal bargains occurring, we are able to examine the functioning basis of gendered relations. With this blueprint, we may apply the same analysis

to any culture, society, or time period and deduce a more intricate understanding of the way female subjectivities are formed and subjugated.

In sub-Saharan Africa, polygyny is the source of insecurities that leave women vulnerable to the inclination of men to take responsibility and protect them, but also to the appropriation of her conjugal loyalty expressed through labour. Kandiyoti explores the explicit ways in which women openly resist and negotiate the terms of their marital relations. In exchange for their labour, wives negotiate support and security from their husbands in the way of wages or the use of irrigated land. However, the support role of the husband beyond that is typically inconsistent and intermittent, and more often than not, it is the woman's labour that supports her children and the costs of the home. To offset these vulnerabilities, women strive to learn more skills and maximise their self-sufficiency so as not to be entirely dependent on the fragility of shared responsibility synonymous with polygyny. In most cases, women will prioritise tending to their own plots of land before that of their husbands to ensure their autonomy is maximised and they are reaping maximum benefits. In some cases, they will walk away from a marriage when there is little to no benefit for them (Hanger & Moris, 1973). As it is the men who have the right to buy land and reap the economic benefits of these resources with the help of their wife's labour, it is clear to see the patriarchal dominance. However, the types of patriarchal bargains exhibited by the women illuminate the power structures in place that maintain the dominance of men. While they are able to negotiate, resist, or walk away from these engagements, ultimately, they are still relinquishing power and autonomy to men. It is within these bargains that the limits of women and the process of female subjectivity are exposed, and

importantly, it is through these bargains that the functioning mode of patriarchy is reproduced.

The alternative form of patriarchy analysed by Kandiyoti is what she terms *classic patriarchy*. Under this mode of patriarchy, male dominance is reproduced through the patrilineal continuation of the household. Under this form of patriarchy, women are married into families at a young age and are subjugated by their husband's father as the head of the household, their husbands, but also the senior women and particularly her mother-in-law. The responsibility for the young woman no longer lies with her natal kin, and she is now subordinate to her husband's family. Within this framework, women deploy different tactics to the resistance of sub-Saharan polygyny and instead bargain with their freedom as young women within the cyclic nature of women's power. She justifies hardship in her youth and abides by the authority of her mother-in-law, knowing that she will reap the benefits of being economically and emotionally protected by her husband's family, but also in the expectation of having daughters-in-law when she is older (Mann, 1985). The bargain is obliging as a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law; in detriment to their freedom, they exhibit loyalty and submissiveness, which is traded with the promise of power in the future. While in the previous example, the women resisted their subjugation through developing skills and openly negotiating their labour, here, women submit and display unwavering affiliation to their husband's kin in exchange for the cyclic reward of greater freedom. Again, the limits to opportunities for women are illuminated through these bargains, and we further see the functioning power of patriarchy in the negotiations of these women's autonomy.

As Kandiyoti points out, these patriarchal bargains are not fixed in specific cultures, classes or historical positions. They are fluid, perennial and ubiquitous. Power is constantly functioning and being reproduced in daily encounters with forms of patriarchy. These bargains expose the hegemonic tension between genders that ultimately dominate female subjectivity. Within the sex work industry, we see this bargain in the trade of bodily labour for economic reward, or the sexualisation of women for the increased opportunities it may reap. However, as some scholars have noted there is an important distinction to be made that it is those exhibiting hegemonic femininity that reap the most rewards. Women who are white, affluent, heterosexual nurturing and polite are afforded greater social acceptance for their adherence to patriarchal ideals (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Hamilton et al., 2019; Quadlin, 2018). This is problematic because it affirms that patriarchal order, but also perpetuates issues like intra-community power struggles like the whorearchy (Fuentes, 2022; Knox, 2014; McClintock, 1992; McNeill, 2012; Sciortino, 2016). Kandiyoti also explores an apt example of the abdicated responsibility by men from the consequences of sexual intercourse that was afforded by the introduction of birth control. With this tool, the ultimate responsibility of pregnancy lies with the women, particularly in places where there is limited support afforded to pregnant women. In this example, we see women bargaining with their futures within the logic of a system that hinders their autonomy. Women perpetually deploy strategies and tactics to maximise the benefits within a set of structures that limit the power afforded to them. In some cases, that entails resistance, protest and going against the normative order and in other cases, it is in quiet submission and acquiescence that women are etching their path to greater freedom.

Intersectionality

To more comprehensively utilise a feminist perspective, we must also recognise the intersecting patterns of oppression that shape the lived experience more severely for those who sit at the axis of multiple marginalised identities. Kimberlé Crenshaw's work in *Mapping the Margins: Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour* (1991), accounts for these intersecting patterns of discrimination such as gender, race, sexuality or class to illustrate how they operate synonymously to exacerbate the oppression experienced by those of compounding subjugated identities. Her work has been instrumental in critical theory and contributes to this research by inciting a more robust dissection of how oppressive structures are operating. Intersectionality is a critical frame to investigate the relationship between race and power on social media, but also to help prevent the perpetuation of power imbalances within this piece of research (Collins, 2000; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). The use of intersectionality as a theory allows a more acute analysis of the experiences of sex workers who are censored on Instagram and how their identities shape their proximity to oppression and how that affects their lives.

That the title for this piece references' mapping' is particularly apt to the ideas that intersectionality present. Intersectionality delineates the neglected location where multiple points of social and cultural identifiers intersect, which informs the subjective reality of one's identity. In this particular piece, Crenshaw anchors her analysis on the ways that gender and race intersect. She demonstrates how women of colour are perpetually dismissed with the negligence to locate their position at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. Crenshaw exudes nuance in this piece and grounds her theory in reality by patently demarcating examples where women of colour are perpetually failed structurally, politically and socially. It is clearly demonstrated how, women of colour, in particular, have

suffered from compounding subordination and ostracization, by excluding the concepts that intersectionality address in public discourse and political action. Crenshaw lays an irrefutable foundation for how we may utilise intersectionality to unionise better and tackle systemic issues that minorities face.

A prudent preliminary point to the notion of intersectionality is the importance of social and cultural identifiers that are pivotal to identity politics. A common issue central to the social justice agenda is often to mistakenly devoid different groups of people of any social categorisation or significance. With the misconception that categories of identity are vessels of domination and bias. A counteracting argument is to, therefore, deplete those categories of social meaning. However, as Crenshaw points out, contrarily, it is those very categories and their diversions from each other that must be recognised for their significance to best understand the way that power is working to subjugate certain identity groups. For it is not the elected identities that attract oppression but the social systems of power that enact subjugation over them. To best combat that exercise of power, it is imperative that we acknowledge the significance of those identities and the intricacies that shape those various realities so that we can best enact positive change specific to the needs of those groups.

Crenshaw strengthens this position by mobilising intersectionality to account for both the differences *between* groups, but also the differences *within* groups. She illustrates this by positing examples where both feminist and antiracist defences are deployed in response to instances of violence against women. When feminist efforts account for violence against women, the blueprint for the victim is a white woman. In antiracist

accounts, it is the black male that they are trying to vindicate from the racial profiling characteristic of violent accusations. However, by treating both females and people of colour as mutually exclusive, the conflating experiences of those who are located at the intersection of the two are overlooked. Namely, the distinctive location of women of colour is neglected, and consequentially their experiences cannot be comprehended wholly. Giving examples from a battered women's shelter, Crenshaw demonstrates how this omission detrimentally impacts the lives of non-white women. As with a lot of the women who end up in these shelters, they often weren't only faced with the immediate repercussions of the violent encounter but also the reasons that put them in a violent situation in the first place. Often they were impoverished and had a lack of support and alternatives to the situations they were in. Disproportionately it was women of colour who were burdened with multiple layers of oppression such as poverty, being uneducated and having increased familial responsibilities. The systemic gendered and class structures that induce these situations for lower-class women are compounded by the lack of support from their community facing similar issues. They are also more vulnerable to the housing and employment practices that make it fundamentally more challenging for people of colour to create alternative, risk-reduced lifestyles. In this micro example, we can devise that it's not only violence that women of colour are structurally more suspectable to, but a myriad of other oppressive situations conducive to their experience of compounding and intersecting patterns of subjugation. In comprehending these layers of oppression that particularly women of colour experience, places like women's shelters can be better resourced to respond to the conflated needs of black women. Additionally, the needs of other non-white women can be better understood. Crenshaw draws out examples where language barriers prohibited shelter for women and children, immigrant women not wanting to draw attention to their

residency and cultural barriers that bind women to violent marriages for fear of disappointing families or disrupting deep-rooted traditions. When compounded with the gendered subjugation, they also experience, these patterns of oppression evolve into a new domain of subordination specific to non-white women.

Politically, Crenshaw deploys intersectionality to critique the agendas of feminism and anti-racial efforts. Advocating for either women or people of colour, and overlooking those who are both, is a fundamental flaw for women of colour who cumulatively experience those systems of oppression. An issue specific to women of colour is conjured by the sometimes opposing political agendas of feminism and antiracism, which requires women of colour to side with one argument over the other. In neglecting to recognise the location of coloured women, they fail as doctrines in their own right by inadequately traversing the breadth of their ethos. Therefore, counterintuitively hindering the validity of their efforts. Within feminist debates, Crenshaw points out that by failing to interrogate race, resistance efforts reproduce racialised subordination that oppresses a portion of all women and vice versa regarding antiracist efforts. To refer back to encounters of violence, the feminist agenda is to vindicate the white women, while the antiracist effort is to vindicate the black man. Neither works to acknowledge or advocate for the women who are located at the intersection of both systems. To combat racism, women of colour become victims of the desire to protect their community from amplifying the racialised stereotype that black communities are violent. There is also a reluctance from the black community to open themselves up to further police scrutiny and control by reporting instances of intracommunity crime. In feminist debates, Crenshaw aptly gives the example of the Central Park jogger who was brutally attacked by a black man. The extensive global coverage of this

case blatantly reinforced that the white victim is the victim that warrants outrage and attention. Beneath that belief is the myriad of cultural connotations that are then attached to women of colour proportionate to their 'otherness' to the 'legitimised' white victim. Consequentially, the non-white victim is more vulnerable to being dismissed in court, inciting less political change and ultimately reinforcing the violence enacted against women of colour. The basis of antiracist arguments when a person of colour is tried in court references implicitly or explicitly the connotations that black men are a constant threat to white women. Defences to this argument, therefore, draw attention to the discrimination faced by black men who are perpetually framed as violent perpetrators, even when the victim is of colour. This reduces the victimhood of women of colour to a medium through which black men can be vindicated. Glaringly, in both discourses, the political validity of the experiences of women of colour is diminished and marginalised. This reinforces violence against women of colour and perpetually fails to incite any political action against it. Women of colour are, therefore, relegated to bearing the brunt of both feminist and anti-racial efforts while their needs are neglected.

As a theory, intersectionality is robust and easily transferred to varying intersecting identities and is incredibly important, particularly to those who occupy marginalised spaces. Crenshaw has proven that in this piece by thoroughly analysing and deconstructing the failures of both feminism and antiracist efforts to account for the intersecting patterns of oppression that actively shape the lives of women of colour. In doing so, she has expounded how we can utilise intersectionality to map the location of intersecting identities and more wholly comprehend the way power is working to subjugate varying groups of people, but also *within* groups. Further, a more nuanced understanding of intersectionality and

acknowledging the significance of compounding identities will strengthen the individual discourses in counteracting the power dynamics they work against. When the specific needs of those who sit at the intersection of oppressive regimes are understood, those issues will garner greater awareness and responsive action, a better allocation of resources, better policies and validation for the conflated oppression faced by those people.

To further the functionality of Crenshaw's work to this research is the application of Intersectionality to the politics of social media. Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández and Johan Farkas (2021) investigate how social media perpetuates systems of racism, stating that racist hate speech festers on social media platforms through the weaponization of memes (Lamerichs et al., 2018) and pseudo-online identities created to incite hate speech (Farkas et al., 2017), among other methods. Matamoros-Fernández (2018), suggests that due to their "affordances, policies, algorithms and corporate decisions" (p. 933) social media platforms reproduce racist dynamics. The automatic lightening of the skin of non-whites on Snapchat (Jerkins, 2015) and excluding those with an African American or Hispanic "ethnic affinity" from marketers on Facebook (Angwin & Parris Jnr, 2016). The perpetuation of racist proclivities on social media deems them to not only ensure the continuation (and at times worsening) of racism online but also gives way to a new framework of structural oppression (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Chun, 2009; Nakamura, 2008; Noble, 2018; Noble & Tynes, 2016). Intersectionality offers itself here as a lens by which to critically analyse platforms as a site that structures and upholds systematic oppressions through the prejudices that are ingrained in the digital fabric of platforms.

The Power of Platforms

To better understand the inner workings and inherent nature of platforms is documented by Tarleton Gillespie. His book *Custodians of the Internet* (2018) traverses the exponential growth of platforms as intermediaries and their relationship with moderation. His work here is contextualised in a commentary on power relations between platforms and the public, that interrogates their increasing power as auditors of public discourse. *Custodians of the Internet* is a pioneering account of platform moderation and that lays a foundational understanding of the mechanisms of platforms and supplements this research as such.

The boom of the internet brought with it the thrill of unbridled potential. It was the genesis of intense knowledge consumption and rapid information sharing. It possessed a newfound freedom for modern society that revolutionised human connection. Social media platforms looked to harness the opportunity to pioneer digital community and shared participation. The intention of these platforms was to host and facilitate user participation that transcended proximity. However, it quickly became clear that unchecked freedom also brought with it unwarranted content that demanded attention. Platforms enacted varying tools of moderation to combat undesirable content and as the scale of the problem grew, so did the solution. Moderation is now a central pillar of what platforms do and is essential to their vitality as information conduits, auditors and curators. It is the art of compromising and adjudicating between the varying values of its users. However, as the power of platforms has inflated with their domination in the digital space, the way they are increasingly manufacturing the way we experience information and the mechanisms of moderation has garnered greater criticism. This issue has only transpired with time and users have become increasingly vocal about the desired capacity of moderation and the lack

of clarity that platforms provide about their moderation systems. In his book *Custodians of the Internet* (2018), Tarleton Gillespie deep dives into the progression and the magnitude in which moderation has shaped the existence of platforms as institutions in the public sphere. He eloquently encapsulates the negotiations of managing and curating a space that is able to safely facilitate open discussions, opposing opinions and varying cultural thresholds, while also maintaining integerous to their intentions and financial obligations. *Custodians of the Internet* is an exploration into the convoluted nature of moderation and an interrogation into the unbridled power beholden by platforms.

Moderation is more than flagging and removing undesirable content. To understand the way a particular platform moderates, is to hold up a prism to the beating heart of its operations. Its political and moral affiliations, and the way it manoeuvres and manipulates the fabric of society as stewards of public discourse. Moderation is the very essence of what it means to be a platform in the sense that it shapes the entire experience of its users. What a user is, or is not, exposed to, in which order content appears, and how users are able to interact with each other. As well as the complex, labour intensive systems that uphold this fragile balance. Whether users are aware of it or not, they are immersed in systems of moderation and it plays an integral role in how they operate as conduits of the chaos of human interaction.

It is easy to off-load blame to corporations like Meta when their moderation tools perhaps swing too little, or too far, from the oscillating parameters of right and wrong. However, what I appreciated about Gillespie was his ability to offer a robust and nuanced discussion around the complexities of moderation for both its users and the platforms. He

insists that managing the spectrum of human opinions is a difficult task that can rapidly grow out of control and become unsafe. Determining the best way to demarcate the boundaries and how to impose them, whilst also attempting to remain facilitators of a democratic space for its users, advertisers and company interests, is the biggest job for any platform. They must synonymously keep their platform free of harm while nurturing open public discourse. This presents a particularly difficult task for platforms that mimics the perennial tension between prohibition and progression that leaders have attempted to govern for centuries. However, now they also face contemporary fears like sexual predation and the innovation of terrorists finding ways to exploit the freedom of the web. Throughout his book, Gillespie offers a critical but fair examination of moderation as an unsolvable task. There is no, one right answer, the art of moderation is central to the prosperity and survival of a platform and they don't always get it right. However, he also insists the process of moderation needs further interrogation, regulations and growth.

Gillespie is quick to assert that *all* platforms moderate. Without it, a platform would become untenable and overrun with vile content. Every platform must decide whether to warn, flag, remove, prohibit, and whether to act before or after a breach. They must develop a system and a set of tools that require extensive time and labour and a way of enforcing these through written regulations for users. Moderation is pivotal to their existence and yet, unless you are someone who runs up against it, you wouldn't know it was at work, manipulating your entire experience. An essential dynamic to the online experience of these platforms is moderation being as inconspicuous as possible. Platforms promote themselves as non-interventionist and objective hosts of public discourse. It's only when you meet resistance that you are exposed to their systems of regulations.

When a user experiences moderation, the platform will refer them to their guiding documents to police online participation. Two pieces of documentation convey these regulations. The first is the terms of service, this is a contract of sorts for engaging with a platform as a user and is more laden with legalities. The second is the community guidelines, or something similarly labelled. The community guidelines are a more digestible version of the structured terms and conditions and are the set of terms more likely to be referred to when users come up against moderation tools. Here Gillespie aptly highlights an interesting tension between the promised freedom of the internet, crossing with the structures and regulations that uphold the vitality of a platform. Unpacking that intersection unveils the paradoxical values of desiring freedom, but also requiring freedom without harm, or to be controlled by the elitist agenda. To counteract this, platforms disavow their systems of moderation to best disguise this paradox from its users. Guidelines are a way to dress up moderation in a friendly disguise, laden with niceties about the ideals of what a platform aims to be, followed by the list of ambiguous rules users must adhere to. With these guidelines, platforms are able to pick and choose when, if, and how they might intervene in a situation causing concern. The sinister nature of this power dynamic allows platforms to moderate and curate in whatever way they choose, making them above reproach. As Gillespie points out, platforms enjoy this levity under the sanction of Section 230 of U.S. telecommunication law. This safe harbour law absolves platforms of responsibility in two parts. It firstly states that intermediaries that provide access to network services are not considered publishers of the user-generated content and therefore, cannot be held liable for anything said, or posted to their site. However, if an intermediary *chooses* to moderate, it is still privy to the sanctions of the safe harbour law. This means that platforms are free to restrict, curate, delete and post content, but are not legally considered

publishers, therefore absolving them of any legal ramifications. This offers platforms 360 degrees of protection. They are protected if they do and protected if they do not, meaning platforms are afforded complete sovereignty over any and all online systems of moderation. This allows them to intervene when and how they like, with no external regulators to hold them to account, or legal ramifications if something goes wrong.

In an increasingly digitalised world, it is important to be critical of those who are mediating and designing the way we experience it. While platforms offered themselves as mere conduits of information, they are actively moderating, recommending and curating; establishing themselves as auditors of information and curators of public discourse. Platforms make use of tactics like ordering content algorithmically, targeting information, banning content, featuring content, arranging content by what is trending and most problematically, the hiding and shadowbanning of content without users knowing. They are from top to bottom torquing public discourse by intervening and manipulating our online experience. Consciously or not, our experience of information is shaped by the few deeply invested stakeholders who determine the boundaries of public discourse behind closed doors and above reproach under section 230. The fact of moderation grants those few people monumental cultural power. As Gillespie points out, when the parameters of propriety are set by a small group of people that share a privileged worldview then the perspectives of those who fall outside of that view, are unaccounted for. They are private companies that have agendas to serve determined by their stakeholders and financial investors. They determine the subjective boundaries of public rhetoric, which has functioning ramifications for the structure of society and whose voices are heard, and whose are not. A lack of diverse perspectives in making those top-down decisions manifests

itself in the exclusion and increased censorship of those communities of people that fall beyond the established boundaries. Beyond the exclusion of those marginalised communities, are the echo chambers and amplification of the homogenous perspectives that align with those in power. Both consequences are problematic and expose the way platforms are able to exploit and control the cultural mediascape and reinforce structural disparities. Made worse by the fact that they are able to do it on their own accord without any external auditing or regulations, therefore being absolved of any responsibility or accountability.

The magnitude of moderation as an issue is significant in a world that is deeply dependent on online connection and information sharing. While it is easy to deem p platforms as the protagonists, Gillespie is able to ground his work in reality by recognising that moderation is a never-ending problem and immensely difficult to grapple with. It is a constant reimagining of the solution to meet the ever-changing heterogeneity of human relations and the appropriate boundaries that maintain civility and safety. All this while also leaving room for freedom of speech and allowing those who challenge those boundaries to express themselves. It is an unsurmountable task that we ask them to mount, and it is important to recognise the challenge that moderation presents. Equally though, it is important to challenge the power bestowed upon them as cultural curators and their ability to do so without legal intervention. We must interrogate their use of power, how it is being enacted, and for whom those consequences are affecting most. The discourse around platform moderation needs to shift from the mistakes made by platforms trying to tackle the enormous task of moderation and instead, examine the unbridled power that platforms hold and their obligations to the public that come with such power.

Sex Work in the Digital Era

A further investigation into the digital mediascape is through the lens of Madeline V. Henry and Panteá Farvid's (2017) piece *'Always Hot, Always Live': Computer-Mediated Sex Work in the* Era of 'Camming'. Their work serves as an epitomic snapshot of the evolution and construction of sex work through discourse and delineates the working terminology and definitions of sex work over time. This piece offers an overview of the correlating positions taken by varying strands of feminist theory, with Henry and Farvid positioning their work within a sex-work feminist framework. Together they analyse the use of labour in sex work and challenge the misconceptions surrounding camming. This work lends itself to the research being conducted as a fusion of relevant themes such as online sex work and applying a sex-work feminist framework, while also interrogating issues pertaining to online sex work in a participatory culture and work mediated through technology. These themes and ideas of labour and the toll that online sex work takes emotionally, physically, and materially expand on the breadth of discussion for encapsulating the lived experiences of online sex workers.

Discursive formations are indicative of the hegemonic ideologies and socio-political structures from the period in which they are used. As Henry and Farvid (2017) suggest, the historical use of prostitution carries with it oppressive connotations that are synonymous with the domesticated role of women at that time under archaic patriarchal values and religious doctrines. Prostitution was dominantly understood as the direct act of heterosexual penetration in exchange for financial gain. It was tied to promiscuity and those who practised prostitution were regarded as destitute and erosive to the fabric of society. In a salute to the monumental women's rights movements and as a society taking steps

towards greater social consciousness we now use the term sex work, or sex worker (Harding & Hamilton, 2009; Weitzer, 2010). This separates itself from the negative and patriarchal connotations of prostitution and reinforces the labour aspect of this work (Kempadoo, 2018; Zangger, 2015). The term also allows a broader understanding of what sex work entails, accounting for the myriad of exchanges that take place under the umbrella of sex work and the different genders who partake. Henry and Farvid drew attention to the term being used by scholars which could reflect the next development by using 'body work', or 'emotional work' to directly reference the physical and emotional labour that this type of work requires (Abel et al., 2010; Hochschild, 1979; Sanders, 2004; Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Wolkowitz, 2002). The use of these terms illuminates the misconception of sex work as mechanical labour, instead of recognising the emotional and physical toll that this work can take just as any other customer-facing role. The movement through varying social-political climates has reflected the way sex work is accounted for discursively and ideologically. However, it is important to recognise the embedded historical context that maintains a marginalised position for sex workers and particularly for those who sit at intersecting patterns of oppression. As Henry and Farvid point out, the entrenched patriarchal regime manifests itself in the invisibility of those who pay for sex work (typically male) as opposed to (typically) women who are providing the work and are marginalised and problematised.

Feminist responses to the oppression of sex workers vary in correlation to the beliefs of each group. Radical feminists largely advocate for the abolition of sex work as they believe it perpetuates the subjugation of women and is inherently exploitative and destructive (Barry, 1979; Dworkin, 1981; Farley, 2004; Hughes, 1999, 2004; Jeffreys, 2009, 2010; MacKinnon, 1979, 1989). Liberal feminists argue against the monolithic rhetoric of

radical feminism and account for individualistic experiences and agency to determine the oppressive nature of sex work (Chapkis, 1997, 2003; Doezema, 2002; Rubin, 1984). Marxist feminists much like radical feminists see sex work as exploitative, but with a more focussed response to the nature of labour exploitation, therefore deeming sex work unempowering for women (Beloso, 2012; Limoncelli, 2009; West & Austrin, 2005; Wonders & Michalowski, 2001). The fourth ideology accounts for a greater balance between the ideologies and suggests that there is room for individual empowerment, while still recognising the oppressive patriarchal structures that shape the lived experience of sex workers and avoids a totalistic stance for, or against sex work (Comte, 2014; Connelly et al., 2015; Farvid & Glass, 2014; Harding & Hamilton, 2009; Sandy, 2006). A sex-work feminist approach, I believe reflects the current socio-political climate best. It allows room for a nuanced understanding of sex work and affords agency to women, which is critical in affirming the right for women to use their judgement and have that be accepted. However, not accounting for the oppressive patriarchal weight that limits and undermines the livelihoods of women is a reductionist view. An account of the micro and macro factors at play is critical to understanding the lived experiences of sex workers.

Henry and Farvid's work is particularly salient in its contributions to the online sex work forum, demarcating the ways in which technology has changed the lived experiences of sex workers. Firstly, the use of technology to conduct sex work allows individuals to promote their content and themselves without the need for pimps or brothels to determine their arrangements (Jones, 2016). Further, online sex work affords sex workers a degree of privacy and control that is vulnerable in face-to-face interactions (Mathews, 2017). Online sex workers consider themselves creatives, producers, and in control over the identity they

choose to present (Gill et al., 2011). These factors add to the position that sex work has the potential to be empowering as it enables women to reassert control over their bodies. It also complicates the notion of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) often called upon by feminists, as (unless being trafficked or unwilfully forced into online sex work) sex workers are presenting themselves to be gazed upon (White, 2003). The gaze is no longer imposing, but enabled by the women.

The abolitionist argument that sex work is destructive to the physical and psychological health of women is also refuted through the use of online sex work that counteracts aspects of this argument. Henry and Farvid do highlight the residual possibility of psychological harm due to the loneliness that can come from online-based work and being in a profession that is emotionally laborious and centres objectification and the sexualisation of one's body. They do also posit new dangers of maintaining anonymity, being the victim of unconsented recording, or being digitally captured. I would argue though, that they are pre-existing dangers that can also still take place in offline sex work.

To lay the final stepping stone towards a cohesive appraisal of the correlating literature for this research, I will draw on the work of Carolina Are. *The Shadowban Cycle: An Autoethnography of Pole Dancing, Nudity and Censorship on Instagram* (Are, 2021), takes a qualitative autoethnographic approach to determine how Instagram's shadowbanning tool operates from a user's perspective and positions it within a risk society analysis to understand the phenomenon theoretically. This piece pioneers one of the first academic contributions of shadowbanning as a new (and largely under-researched) tool of censorship. Shadowbanning is a very recent area of scholarly examination and Are traverses the genesis

of it as a term, to the phenomenon it has become as a sophisticated and sinister censorship tool. This work covers themes of moderation, online sex work, and the further ostracisation of marginalised communities on platforms, making it the apex of this literature review. She supplements her research with examples grounded in the sex worker and performative art community, which posits it as a hub for self-expression and self-promotion (Cook, 2019).

Instagram became the platform of choice for online creators who basked in the ability to connect with like-minded users and easily disperse content to their audiences. However, as the platform has evolved, creators have met increasing barriers to their expressive freedoms and are monitored and moderated to varying degrees. Now, moderation on platforms is ubiquitous. A new tool used within these systems of moderation is, shadowbanning. Shadowbanning is a user-generated term that is used by corporations like Meta to drastically reduce the visibility of content that is deemed borderline inappropriate (Constine, 2019). The origin of the term stemmed from the early 2000's when moderators of the website *Something Awful*, attempted to troll new users by minimising their reach (Cole, 2018; Savolainen, 2022). This moderation through de-visibility hides content from explore or hashtag pages and reduces visibility from other users feeds, thereby drastically diminishing their reach (Are, 2019b, 2019c; Constine, 2019). While it is not removing or explicitly flagging content, it is akin to censorship as it prevents them from fully engaging with their audiences and participating on platforms (Gillespie, 2018). Typically shadowbanned content does not significantly breach the guidelines enough to have it flagged or deleted through standard moderation tools, so it is instead hidden to minimise the harm of the suspectedly inappropriate content. Meta denied using any form of censorship likened to shadowbanning even though creators were noticing drastic drops in

engagement. In 2018, Zuckerberg introduced new policies he was rolling out over the (what is now known as) Meta platforms. He announced shadowbanning as a tool of moderation for "borderline" content, such as nudity, revealing clothing and sexually suggestive poses – without being able to assert what exactly is meant by that (Zuckerberg, 2018). For Are, she applies a world risk society theory (Beck, 1992, 2006; Franklin & Giddens, 1998) to position these moderation tactics as an attempt on behalf of businesses and institutions to limit the level of risk for their citizens and users. They do so by implementing systematic restrictions on civil liberties based on an arbitrary identification of risks that are believed to reduce the harm to their users (Beck, 1992, 2006; Franklin & Giddens, 1998).

As a North American born conglomerate, Meta embodies ideals of sexuality synonymous with the Western mentality that sees women's sexuality as distasteful and degrading to oneself (Kaye, 2019; Paasonen et al., 2019). They reflect the historically punitive values that prefer to see women subdued, domesticated and under patriarchal control. In response to these cultural values and within a world risk society framework, sexuality is feared, avoided and heavily governed (Paasonen et al., 2019). These punitive cultural values were exacerbated by the introduction of FOSTA/SESTA in 2017 which saw an exception to the safe harbour section 230 of the Telecommunications Act stating that platforms could be liable for promoting or facilitating prostitution in response to increasing concern over online sex trafficking (Paasonen et al., 2019; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). This meant that platforms became militant over sexual content restrictions, banning sex work-related content and female sexuality, conflating the two with sex trafficking (Are, 2019b; Paasonen et al., 2019). This phenomenon is illustrated by Zuckerberg (2018) who admitted that Facebook's technology flags 96% of the nudity they take action against,

compared to 38% of hate speech. In the most up-to-date *Community Standards Enforcement* report (Meta, 2022) 29.3 million nudity content was actioned and only 10.6M for hate speech. These statistics indicate Meta's hierarchy of fears by prioritising the moderation of sexual and nude content over other risks like online abuse, fake news and hate speech that have been at the forefront of user and government appeals for greater attention (Bartlett, 2018; Jane, 2014). This is also reflected in the highly contested censorship of nipples on Meta, conjuring movements like the #FreeTheNipple campaign in response to the censorship of female, but not male nipples (Gillespie, 2018). The gender specificity of this regulation implies the sexualisation of nipples as per the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), therefore making them unacceptable for public consumption while men are afforded greater self-expression (Paasonen et al., 2019). Are notes too the continuation of sexism from offline spaces, like the male-dominated domains of IT and Silicon Valley that perpetuates male gaze notions of propriety (Jee, 2021). These factors all contribute to the heavier regulation of women's bodies and sexual content, in lieu of a focus on more pressing issues. Therefore, solidifying an inherently male-gaze approach to moderation that upholds puritanical ideals synonymous with the western-patriarchal agenda (Mulvey, 1975; Paasonen et al., 2019). It also indicates that they chose the path of least resistance by targeting an already heavily regulated issue of women's bodies. Are coins this "The Shadowban Cycle", whereby platforms arbitrarily tackle a particular issue relative to censorship to ensure they are seen as addressing public concerns and reducing the risks for their users. In reality though, their censorship practices follow perennial prejudices and do little to regulate more fickle issues like hate speech. This cycle ensures that women and sex workers are digitally shackled making it harder for them to reach new audiences which affects their sense of shared community, income and validation of their identity and digital

labour (Are, 2019a; Constine, 2019). In turn, these restrictions perpetuate the subjugation of women's sexual freedom and reinforce patriarchal values.

At its genesis social media was championed as an avenue for pure, democratic self-expression that operated beyond the hooks of societal pressures and subjugations. It sparked movements and trends that normalised different identities and body types which was instrumental in a greater acceptance of individual differences (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Cohen et al., 2019) and provided an opportunity for marginalised communities to represent themselves (Vivienne, 2016). However, to appeal to advertisers and stakeholders Meta wove into their censorship practices a reinstallation of those subjugations of self-expression, particular identities and body types (Gillespie, 2010; Paasonen et al., 2019). As Are proves, the reference for Meta's Community Standards were found to be based on the antiquated advertising guidelines by Victoria's Secret ("Exclusive: Victoria's Secret influence on Instagram's censorship policies*",* 2019)**.** When bodies akin to the standards of Victoria's Secret are held as the standard Meta users are compared to, it creates a drastic exclusionary model for what is considered ideal and appropriate, resulting in an intensification of censorship for bigger-bodied folks and other marginalised bodies. Shadowbanning is the axis through which these types of idealised body standards are implemented, by reducing exposure to different body types that deviate from the social norm. As has become clear through research like Are's (2021), other marginalised communities like artists, sex workers, people of colour and LGBTQIA+ are among the groups that also have a disproportionate proximity to Meta's censorship mechanisms. Due to their arbitrary and subjective nature of risk identification, these institutions incubate hostile environments for already marginalised groups.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to interpret the lived experiences of sex workers who have been censored on Instagram. It seeks to understand the socio-political and material conditions that shape their lives and how they apply meaning to them. This chapter describes the qualitative research method that will be employed to facilitate an understanding of the participants' subjective perspectives, emotions and opinions, which cannot be quantified or measured numerically (Anderson, 2011; Hammarberg et al., 2016). The chapter then describes the methods of data collection and analysis. The semi-structured interview model will be discussed and justification for its use provided. The chapter then describes the process of analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which allows for a deep inquiry into the way online sex workers experience censorship and the world around them.

Approach to the Research

Fundamentally, a qualitative design allows room to explore the way that social actors apply meaning to social phenomena, which is then interpreted by the researcher (Liamputtong, 2019). As this research aims to answer the question 'What are the lived experiences of sex workers who are censored online?', the research method requires a qualitative paradigm that explores the social and cultural phenomena shaping their experiences and what thoughts, attitudes and feelings they subsequently apply to them (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). A thematic analysis then aims to find themes that reflect patterns of shared meaning around a concept or idea (Braun et al., 2014). Either explicitly or implicitly, patterns emerge from the data that are pertinent to the unique experiences of sex workers who are censored on Instagram. Those patterns are then thematically coded

against repetitive and consistent data points and reflexively analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). However, themes do not passively emerge from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), but are deductively interpreted and filtered through the subjective epistemology and philosophical interest of the researcher. My particular worldview and theoretical position are woven into the research in the way I select and present evidence to frame my arguments.

Qualitative research, in particular, draws on the perceived reality of the researcher and how they have obtained, understood, and interpreted social phenomena. This process through which knowledge is obtained and understood is the epistemology of the researcher (Hathcoat et al., 2019). It is important to recognise my epistemological position as the researcher and the filter through which I process the data and present any assumptions that have been made (Holloway & Todres, 2003). In acknowledging the active role of my epistemology in the production of this knowledge, I am aligning with a reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2019). They determine that, alongside the theoretical assumptions and analytical skills of any one researcher, all research is imbued with a particular interpretive analysis that shapes a deductive response. My particular reflexive analysis is through an interpretative lens grounded in philosophical proclivities pertaining to my sociological praxis as a young, white, middle-class woman. This research is underpinned by a feminist and pro sex-worker philosophy that frames how the data will be analytically perceived. It draws on critical theories such as Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988). A sex-work feminist paradigm lends itself to an exploration beyond just sex work and into the gendered, racial and heteronormative lines by which censorship is enforced on Instagram with the intention of

exposing the hypothesised discrepancies. In doing so, I will not only critically explore the inequitable ways in which censorship is enacted, but also the positive ways sex workers unionise and empower themselves as well, to deepen my understanding of this phenomenon.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To best facilitate an open-ended and valuable interaction with the participants, a semi-structured interview will be used. This method is most effective for studying the thoughts and opinions of emotionally sensitive issues, which is synonymous when interviewing participants from a marginalised group such as sex workers (Barriball & While, 1994). While I will prepare a set of curated questions, a semi-structured interview allows the data collection to transpire conversationally, offering the participants the opportunity to discuss experiences they deem significant (Longhurst, 2016). The semi-structured nature of the interview will ensure the discussion remains on topic while allowing room for improvised follow-up questions in a more conversational manner. It encourages reciprocity and a deeper exploration based on the participant's responses (Galletta, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Allowing the participant to answer how they choose, also gives an additional insight into a subverted level of meaning for the researcher, by showing what the participant deems as significant and why that is the case (Cridland et al., 2014). This method of data collection generates similar types of information about the research idea from each participant and leaves room for deductive analysis based on themes that emerge from the data collected (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). Recognising this reciprocity between the researcher and the participant demonstrates that reality does not exist objectively, but is

shaped and deduced through the exploration of experiences and meaning (Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

An inquiry into the historical and current socio-political climate surrounding the core concepts can shape the intent of the research and what the best method to use will be. Therefore, to produce an efficacious interview, adequate research of the historical and contemporary context of the themes will need to be explored. The literature review component of this research ensures a thorough appraisal of the pre-existing knowledge to be able to most effectively conceptualise an interview structure (Barriball & While, 1994; Turner, 2010). Methods of previous knowledge curation aided in the formulation of a set of interview questions that would guide conversation in a manner that would conjure reflection and in-depth responses that were relevant and data-rich (Dearnley, 2005; Krauss et al., 2009). Both questions relating to the main themes of the study, and follow-up questions were drafted to facilitate conversation and optimally maintain the flow of the interview while ensuring flexibility during the interview to pursue relevant topics that may organically emerge (Barriball & While, 1994; Rabionet, 2011; Whiting, 2008).

Deductive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method provides the tools to retrieve a rich data set by identifying, analysing and reporting themes. Themes are identified as ideas that are captured as significant to the research question, or consistently prevalent in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As mentioned above, this is a deductive analysis and reflects a subjective interpretation of importance and precedence based on my own epistemology and analytical interest in this area. Due to the specificity of the research agenda, it felt

important to provide a detailed and nuanced account of themes that pertained to those concepts, rather than the entirety of the raw data corpus.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline the importance of the level at which themes are to be identified. Themes are either decided upon through a semantic approach or an interpretative approach. The two approaches highlight the way in which meaning is applied to the data by the researcher. Meaning is either taken at the surface level of the data presented, or meaning is interpreted through the significance of patterns and their broader implications (Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 1990). An interpretive or latent approach goes beyond what is said or described and interprets the significance of the underlying ideas, assumptions and ideologies that inform the semantic data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An interpretive approach is typically synonymous with a constructionist perspective that suggests meaning and experiences are socially produced and reproduced (Burr, 1995). This research design draws on the interpretative constructionist method to infer broader sociological meaning about the way in which a marginalised community experiences platform governance and social paradigms of power more generally. In applying a feminist and pro-sex worker philosophical axis, being able to interpret meaning in the underlying themes within the data and how they are socially significant is critical to an in-depth and robust research inquiry. Doing so enables the examination of culture and empowers social change and communities (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), which is particularly important for research regarding a marginalised group such as sex workers as a tool for policy debate and social change (Sweeney et al., 2019).

The semi-structured interview questions are critical to the strength of the data and analysis. There are questions pertaining directly to the research question, but also questions that aim to draw out more in-depth explanations about how and why social phenomena occurs (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004). The set of questions decided upon for this research was structured around core concepts of the research question such as sex work, censorship and empowerment. However, within those categories were questions with more specificity and others that left room for the participants to share experiences that would offer a deeper account of social factors that shape their lives.

Thematic Analysis Coding Table Sample

Below is a sample thematic analysis coding table that illustrates the process of identifying codes within the data that were relevant to the research question or significant in some way. Those codes were further refined and themes were drawn from this process.

Code	Description	Example
Feeling a sense of agency	The participants expressing a sense of empowerment and control as a sex worker	“It's given me so much power. Like, I can do what I want with who I want, when I want.”
Loss	Experiences of loss due to censorship	“I can’t use brand content tools”
Stigma/awareness of broader social factors	Instances where the participants addressed underlying sociological factors that influence censorship	“So it’s just another patriarchal tool to keep us sex workers silent and taboo.”
Bio-politics	Instances where the participants perceive that types of identities affected censorship	“I'm a Māori and queer, so whether directly or indirectly through the biases of the app, I definitely think that I'm targeted more than other women or men.”
Social media as a site of connection	Participants shared a strong sense of community through social media	“Instagram was my place to connect to people from all

		over the world that have shared interests with me.”
Shadowbanning	Participants expressing belief they are shadowbanned	“You have to type in my full name on Instagram to fine me.”

Table 1: Thematic analysis code table

Limitations

Thematic analysis is an effective and useful methodology when used correctly. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) outline areas in which there is room for error. The flexibility of thematic analysis opens the research to a plethora of approaches and results. Braun and Clarke (2006) identify this as both a positive and potential negative as it can produce a data set so rich and vast that it’s overwhelming for the researcher. They also identify the risk that the analysis will remain at the surface level if not prioritising the analysis within a theoretical framework to ground the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Due to the intent of qualitative research being to capture opinions and social phenomena, it requires an in-depth and time-consuming data retrieval process. Sample sizes are therefore typically small and negate the ability to make broader generalisations (Mason, 2002). Research of this scope and size is not intended to be applicable across a large population or as evidence upon which to build a legal case. It is, however, perfectly suited to contributing to policy advice should a government department or organisation seek to understand the lived experience of a marginalised group.

The flexibility of a thematic analysis approach leaves room for ambiguities and inconsistencies in the themes that are developed (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Human experience and language are full of subjectivity and ambiguity that is filtered through the

researcher and potentially leaves the data vulnerable to have the researcher's values, emotions and attitudes projected onto it (Boyatzis, 1998). Therefore, as noted above, it is important to acknowledge the epistemological position through which the research will be analysed and presented to counter any claims of invalidity. There needs to be clarity not only about why this research is occurring but how the analysis has been conducted (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This type of analysis goes beyond mere description of the data and inductively identifies ideas and themes, and draws on connections between them.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

My interest in this research burgeoned from an inquiry into censorship in my post-graduate studies that made me aware of the degree to which online censorship appeared to be imbued with systematic discrimination. Motivated by an interest in social justice, I felt drawn to a subject that highlighted the inequality that groups in marginalised positions face systemically. Exploring digital censorship, became an interesting point of entry into the research as I was noticing an infiltration of offline biases into the more contemporary public sphere of social media platforms. These ideas and interests became the initial discussions with my supervisor where we decided to narrow the scope of the research to only one social media platform and only one marginalised group. My past research on censorship has naturally centred Instagram as a space where those from marginalised groups experienced increased amounts of unequal censorship. As a platform with increasing power and social stratification manifesting in the digital realm, we decided Instagram was the best choice through which to explore digital censorship.

Regarding which group of people to focus this study on, it became apparent through further reading that sex workers were a group consistently at the forefront of this unequal censorship on Instagram. In occupying a controversial space, sex workers have historically been ostracised in offline spaces which has been acknowledged academically. However, academic inquiries into the lived experiences of sex workers online is a largely under-researched area. This then became the subject of this research. However, as someone outside of this community, this choice came with some apprehension as I felt the responsibility to amplify the voices of this community rather than speak on behalf of them. I therefore set out to seek advice from experts in this field to ensure I could execute this research as ethically as possible and mitigate this issue. Due diligence required consulting experts in the area to seek a better understanding of the predicaments sensitive to sex workers. The New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) was consulted to gather both relevant information and to identify and mitigate any ethical tensions that could have potentially arisen as a result of this research. This consultation helped me explore the nuances that couldn't be found in previous research and was an effective way of gaining empirical knowledge (Krauss et al., 2009) and shaping the approach of the research. The NZPC were supportive of the research and so with their 'blessing' I felt confident in applying for ethical approval and moving into the next phase of the research with the lived experiences of sex workers at the heart of it.

Methodological guidance from previous researchers in similar fields was also an avenue that studies have shown to be useful (Kallio et al., 2016; Rabionet, 2011). This was incorporated through the engagement of a previous student who completed a methodological exploration similar to this research and offered advice on best practices. I

deduced that a qualitative method of semi-structured interviews would be the best way to retrieve rich data that matched the aim of the research. It would enable an in-depth exploration of the participant's experiences while remaining focused on the core themes of the research.

Due to the historically punitive prostitution laws in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the continual criminalisation of sex work globally, there is lingering discrimination and stigma that surrounds sex workers in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Armstrong, 2018; Hayward, 2021). For this reason, they are vulnerable to greater amounts of social marginalisation and therefore have an increased vulnerability to sexual and physical abuse due to the nature of their work (Plumridge & Abel, 2001). Therefore, the ethics application needed great consideration and care. I sought external expert advice from multiple sources to ensure the aim of my research was both ethical and designed with sex worker rights at the core. Once ethics was approved, I began directly reaching out to sex workers on Instagram. I ensured that they clearly stated they were a sex worker in their bio and referenced that they had been censored on Instagram before. This was typically in the form of a line in their Instagram bio mentioning the number of followers they might have previously had before their account was deleted, or by linking their backup account implying a threat to the existence of their current account. This indicated that they had or were experiencing some sort of moderation on Instagram. The secondary method for gathering participants was via The New Zealand Prostitute's Collective Instagram page where they, and other prominent sex worker advocacy accounts, shared a poster advertising a request for participants for my research. Interested participants who responded to my request and who met the criteria were contacted and interviews were set up, all of which were completed over Zoom.

While interviews were being conducted, I began by researching on the broadest spectrum the three core themes of censorship, sex work and feminism. I then refined my academic analysis down to more specific and more contemporary pieces of literature to form the theoretical and historical literature basis of this research.

I had each interview transcribed post-completion through software called TranscribeMe and double-checked the transcription against the audio recording to ensure it was accurate. Once I was sure they were accurately represented, I re-read the transcription multiple times to familiarise myself with each interview. After re-reading them, I went through each transcript to identify reoccurring themes and important ideas that stood out, and instances where past scholarship linked to the data. I then highlighted those and made notes in the margins. I spent time reading my notes and began analysing them for common ideas. Once solid themes began to emerge from this process, I settled on four main themes. Those themes are instances of perceived censorship bias, effects of censorship described by the participants, comments on how they felt empowered through sex work, and points they raised regarding changes they would like to see regarding sex work and censorship. I then consolidated all the coded data points across each piece of data in a document under each theme, with notes as to why they were significant. This document therein became my dataset. The emerging themes were refined, described and checked to ensure the accuracy of the coding and the grouping of codes, until I was satisfied that the themes were justifiable in the data. From this point, I had the basis of my findings and analysis, with which I was able to present under our four core themes with a description as to why they were important to the research.

In the next chapter, I present the findings of this research, describing the themes and presenting relevant quotes from the interview transcripts to support the analysis. Those themes are then discussed in the context of relevant theory and placed within a broader sociological framework to infer meaning and significance.

FINDINGS

This research set out to answer the question *what are the lived experiences of sex workers who are censored on Instagram?* The prior chapters offered an introduction to the themes that frame this question and a literature review that serves as a historical and contemporary contextualisation amongst scholars who have written and researched these themes. The previous chapter outlined the methodological application through which this research was designed and I will now present the findings from the data that was collated and analysed as a means to answer the research question.

This academic enquiry sought to qualitatively collect data from sex workers that captures their lived experiences. As a means to respond to a social-centric question, a semi-structured interview model was utilised to observe and record data in relation to the research question. Each set of data was transcribed and pseudonyms were created to ensure the privacy of each participant. Each set of data was then thematically analysed and codified to deduce consistencies throughout the data. The findings will be organised by theme and each finding will present a claim, the corresponding data, and an elaboration of why the data is being used to support each claim.

In seeking to discover the lived experiences of sex workers who are censored on Instagram, four key themes emerged from the data analysis. First, is that there is a perceived censorship bias as enacted by Instagram. Second, is that sex workers are significantly impacted by censorship on Instagram materially and mentally. Third is that sex workers find tactics and methods to positively affect their lived experiences as sex workers.

Lastly, is the consistencies in how sex workers engage with desires and ideas on improving the landscape of moderation and the stigma that affects their lived experiences.

Censorship Bias

A theme that consistently arose from the semi-structured interviews was commentary about the unequal way in which the participants believed they experienced a greater amount of censorship compared to other users. They attributed this increased censorship to aspects of their identity, such as their occupation or their sexuality. Links are then discussed between the biases in the enforcement of Instagram's censorship practices and Instagram using their censorship paradigm to intentionally curate a digital space of the platform's choosing. These comments directly relate to a perceived exercise of power by Instagram to intentionally censor certain folks more than others. This is significant when determining the way in which platforms shape the lived experience of sex workers through their censorship practices. Whether that be diminishing the reach of their business and affecting their profit potential, or dampening their artistic inclinations and self-expressionism to the detriment of their selfhood. This section delineates perceptions of biased and disproportionate censorship experienced by the participants, which they found to be unfair and why and how they believe platforms exercise power in this way.

Censorship Based on Identity

All five participants affirmed a perception of increased censorship due to an aspect of their identity or image. They made comparisons to other users that they felt received less censorship due to their online presentations. Sam feels as if there are identities that are specifically targeted by Instagram’s censorship mechanisms:

I think people that get targeted the most on this app are indigenous folk, POC folk, disabled folk, anyone that doesn't fall under this like white cis, abled body, and I am a white cis woman and I still experience censorship, but I know in particular that its brown bodies, its fat bodies that are really being targeted.

She also suggests that censorship is intended to keep sex workers silenced, which supports the argument that platforms are targeting specific types of identities and in turn re-creating the bio-politics that dictate the offline world:

Censorship is just the new silencing tool to keep us in the dark and to keep us oppressed and 'othered'.

Riley noticed that she was able to post content more proximate to breaching the guidelines than others who are a different type of sex worker, which suggests a hierarchy of acceptability akin to the idea of 'whorearchy' whereby sex workers closer to chastity are more widely accepted socially:

I noticed, like, I could post so much more than my friends that were dancers. They would just post a bikini photo and that would get taken down for solicitation. And the caption would have just been like a heart emoji or something. And yet I was posting, like, basically full-on nude with just a little bit of pixelation and I could get away with that.

This recount describes varying degrees of acceptance for sexuality and identifies the parameters Instagram has erected as to their idea of culturally appropriate. Those that are outside, or close to those boundaries, experience increased censorship and suggest a censorship bias based on their sexuality.

Kai described her experience of censorship based on aspects of her identity:

I feel like the women that get away with uncensored racy photos or uploading content that pushes up against Instagram's guidelines are thin, white women, especially celebrities. I'm a Māori and queer, so whether directly or indirectly through the biases of the app, I definitely think that I'm targeted more than other women or men who fit better into the norms that Instagram's moderation isn't so intense for.

Sam agreed that celebrities are able to post more without censorship due to their notoriety and greater alignment with social norms, which is rewarded with a more prominent online presence:

> *They're really trying to spoon-feed us and these perfect presented bodies. That's why you see a lot of celebrities that are still able to post these risqué images because they're putting money towards Instagram and everything, and they're upholding this heteronormative, monogamous idea of what bodies are meant to look like.*

Kai describes a very clear bias against those who occupy marginalised positions socially. It reflects a distinct replication of offline social structures into the digital-scape. It demonstrates the bio-politics at work that are dictating the identities that are championed and afforded greater opportunities, and which are shunned and further ostracised. Jordan shares the same sentiment, describing greater censorship due to their skin colour and body type:

> *Me and other sex workers I know that are brown-skinned or people of colour, are definitely censored more than cis white folks. . . . Particularly thin white women get away with posting a lot more risqué content than those who don't fall under that criteria. And once you're on Instagram's radar, it's very hard to get off it.*

Alex supports this finding by perceiving a strong link between being transgender and receiving increased censorship:

> *When they see trans bodies specifically, that’s what they’re reporting and not liking what they see.*

Alex describes a different way censorship is enacted biasedly through Instagram. She asserts there are users with an intentional grudge against sex workers who embody specific identities and consistently report their content as offensive. She strongly believes they are reporting the photos solely because of their gender orientation and not because the content is offensive. She expresses frustration with the anonymity that is allotted to them by

Instagram's reporting process, which allows them to exercise their biases hidden behind censorship mechanisms. It also suggests an accomplice in Instagram that enables user-to-user censorship without sufficient auditing processes therefore, once again they are further perpetuating the marginalisation of identities outside of the social 'norm'.

> *We've had problems with people or transphobic people specifically reporting photos and accounts and posts about our trans sex workers. They don't want to see it. So they report it and get us banned and things like that.*
>
> *Especially when it comes to our gender diverse and queer posts you know about bi services and our trans girls, it's really frustrating and like upsetting because especially* with *the anonymity of Instagram and social media, we don't know who has this massive grudge against our trans worker.*

Further, Sam suggests that the perceived heavier censorship of sex workers also gives the ability for other users on the platform to exert power over them. She believes she has had her content reported by users who intended to silence her, which, as she asserts, is dangerous to the sex worker community:

> *I get sent death threats and rape threats a lot. I get sent really brutal messages. I report them. I get censored. You know, I've reported pages before and it's come back, but we can't do anything. So it makes me feel very unsafe to be on the internet, knowing that... It's how I imagine sex workers in countries where it's not decriminalized feel when their clients assault them, they can't go to the police. And that's the thing I don't think people understand is that they are aware of that. I think people know that we're being censored on the internet and they're aware that that gives them power over us. So it's just another patriarchal tool to keep us sex workers silent and taboo. And that's actually dangerous for us because keeping us silent, keeping us suppressed results in us being killed, especially POC, especially trans, especially the lower working class. And it frustrates me how people claim that they're trying to save us when they're trying to care about us, but they're not listening to us, just censoring our voices and then speaking on top of us. And it's dangerous. It's killing us.*

They then continued to describe the perpetual cycle of identity-based censorship that is made worse by the mechanisms of Instagram's censorship practices. Jordan feels like

certain identities attract censorship, which is then filtered into a cycle of censorship, thereby exacerbating and worsening the degree of moderation experienced:

> *So if you're being censored more because of parts of your identity and how you look, then it's a cycle that progresses into much more intense or harsher censorship, which just perpetuates the same issues and promotes the quote-unquote, ideal body type. So, yeah. It's fucked.*

Jordan describes the censorship intensification that exacerbates the marginalisation of bodies outside of the 'norm' and indicates the pattern of reinforcement that this type of censorship bias perpetuates. Participants then described feeling as though censorship was consistent and relentless once you come into contact with Instagram's moderation mechanisms, which further escalates the censorship cycle. They discussed being unable to post any content, regardless of the content without it being removed. So much so, that they would either have to create a new account or turn to other platforms.

Riley said:

> *As soon as Instagram finds you, they start shredding you. . . . I basically can't post because it goes down straight away…once the algorithms find you, you're fucked.*

Kai shared the same sentiment:

> *Also once Instagram flags you, it's like they put you on the blacklist or something. And then they target you way more.*

As did Alex:

> *We've reached the point now where it's just essentially unusable for us. We can't post. We can't talk about what we're doing. So what's the point of having it?*

All five participants agreed that bias censorship was enacted based on factors beyond their actions and felt a sense of hopelessness with Instagram's guidelines. They all reported

having read and being familiar with Instagram's community guidelines. They each cited reading them to avoid censorship, prevent further censorship, or gain an understanding as to why they had experienced censorship. However, they described a resignation toward trying to understand how to remain within the parameters of the guidelines, as they believe they would be censored regardless of their efforts.

Sam uses her Instagram to post nude art modelling content which is deleted in breach of Instagram's guidelines, but observes other users being able to post similar content which is permitted. She feels fed up with the way Instagram enforces their guidelines in a contradictory manner. She describes feeling as though they allow things for certain types of users, and not for others. Particularly heterosexual men and women, while noticing her queer male and female sex worker friends remain heavily censored.

> *I see so many, like straight rugby guys, full arse out. For some reason, that's OK. It's just ridiculous. So I have read the guidelines many times and they're contradicting themselves.*

She also reports self-censoring herself to avoid censorship, but finding it was in vain:

> *I started censoring myself, writing like a 12-year-old texting, you know, censoring any word that has sex work, stripping brothel, anything that could be linked back to sex work, and I still got the whole page shut down.*

Riley explained that her day job requires her to read and write legal documents which positions her as someone with a comprehensive understanding of terms and conditions. However, she describes having read Instagram's guidelines and finding them vague and ambiguous. She asserts that she knows the guidelines and believes her content does not breach them. She puts measures in place such as using an R18 filter, covering herself in accordance with the guidelines and never outright soliciting. However, she has had her

account suspended twice and has begun to cut right back on the content she creates so as to not lose her account completely.

> [I have read the guidelines] *so many times. Especially when I need to appeal my posts being taken down. But I find them so vague, which I think is on purpose. So that they can manipulate them and make the guidelines work for whatever they're trying to rule against.*

She feels as though the ambiguous enforcement of their guidelines leaves her feeling powerless:

> *If there was at least clarity from them, then it would feel like I wasn't so at the whims of the algorithm and I could actually take more control of trying to meet their guidelines. Like, I do the best I can, but when they don't follow the rules you kind of become powerless, I guess.*

The inability to participate on Instagram inside of the guidelines, regardless of her efforts, suggests a set of subterranean values that uphold different and hidden boundaries more aligned with Instagram's moral and cultural ethos. Those values represent the parameters of what Instagram believes to be acceptable, with a clear indication by the participants that it is not sex workers, bigger-bodied folks, transgender folks or any other types of identities that fall outside of what society accepts as normal. Kai supports this finding and expresses frustration with following the guidelines and still being censored with no explanation:

> *There is no nudity or anything that goes against their guidelines. So it's complete bullshit. I've even had posts removed wear I'm wearing a T-shirt and I'm completely covered up. It's just more frustrating that we follow the guidelines and they still censor us. And then just quote the guidelines back to us without any specific and proper explanation.*

Kai and Jordan both suggested there is an intent to the ambiguousness of Instagram's guidelines. Kai said:

They can manipulate them and make the guidelines work for whatever they're trying to rule against.

Jordan said:

I think they're purposely vague so that they can pick and choose when they want to enforce the rules.

These findings suggest a commitment by Instagram to ambiguously set a version of the guidelines that they can then manipulate into an online experience that matches their cultural boundaries. It further indicates two versions of the rules that give Instagram power to create a digital public sphere that reflects the parameters of offline social structures. A key part of censorship that Instagram relies on is its ability to mobilise hidden censorship tools like shadowbanning and algorithms to maintain their subterranean values without explicit user knowledge.

Shadowbanning

All five participants expressed that they feel as though they are shadowbanned. They describe noticing key signs like significant drops in engagement and having to type in the user's full handle to find them. This method of censorship describes an exercise of power from platforms over the accessibility of content to followers or other Instagram users, which can be done without notice to the user. This makes it a great point of contention for these participants who describe feeling targeted and frustrated with Instagram's censorship practices. Sam describes why she believes she is shadowbanned:

I'm also shadowbanned, you have to type in my full name on Instagram to find me. People trying to tag me in stories and yet they can't find my name. [Sam] is a hot name on Instagram. You know, I think people have, like, tagged me in posts, not even had nudity and then that post gets taken down. Like Instagram hates me, Instagram hates me

After Riley's first account became so censored she was unable to post anymore, she created a new public account. It was when she created this account she realised the degree her previous private account was shadowbanned, as she was able to reach more followers in a shorter amount of time than ever before. She also asserts that there is a link to becoming shadowbanned once you are flagged by Instagram's moderation mechanisms:

> *The private account was definitely shadowbanned the entire time, I reckon. But the public account got about two months, I think it's shadowbanned now because I've noticed a very significant drop in engagement going from 300 likes on a photo to maybe 100 if I'm lucky. And it was just so sudden. And that was after I got my first violation there. So there's definitely a link and they definitely do.*

Kai said:

> *I think I'm pretty much permanently shadowbanned now. You have to search my full Instagram handle to find my account. And when I do a grid post my engagement has dropped significantly from when I first started that page.*

Jordan also described their experience with shadowbans:

> *This is such a common tactic that we're aware of now. You have to type in my full handle for my page to show up on Instagram and some days randomly my engagement will drop massively. So, that's usually how I know, but that's one of the worst tools they use because they can just do it like they can just do it without ever notifying you that is happening or admitting to you that that's what they're doing.*

As a means to justify why platforms exercise censorship biasedly, all five participants contextualised their online experiences of feeling censored unfairly through broader societal structures such as patriarchal ideals, racism and the subsequent stigmatisation that affects the perceptions of sex workers. They discuss how the broader social-scape has shaped their lived experiences as sex workers, drawing a natural link between why platforms replicate these experiences online.

Sam believes that sex workers are stigmatised due to patriarchal values. She describes how these values affect the way that women are perceived, and specifically how they are perceived when they are doing sex work and why she believes it triggers a negative response socially.

> *I think a lot of it [stigma] stems from patriarchy. . . .It's not just women that engage in sex work. A lot of people do, I have intersex friends, trans friends, non-binary friends, male sex work friends. But I think because people predominantly view it as a woman's work, it's quite like motherhood in a way. It's this thing that we're putting a price on that men feel entitled to. And I think that intimidates a lot of people. So that's why they slut shame us. . . . I think it's this misogynistic idea that women are meant to be submissive. We're not meant to put a price on our sexuality so that intimidates both men and women. I recently wrote a podcast episode about SWERFs, and that's particularly the female feminists that are against sex work. I think they view us as victims of the patriarchy and victims of the male gaze, instead of us actually looking at it on its head and exploiting it and profiting off this thing that's been imposed on me since I was like 12 years old.*

She suggests that stigma is a dangerous ramification of patriarchy and racism:

> *The stigma comes from a lot of racism and misogyny, and it's the stigma that's dangerous. I always say the sex work industry is not dangerous inherently, it's dangerous because of how people treat us.*

Kai discussed that perception of sex work not being considered real work:

> *It takes labour, and it's transactional and we should be able to do it without judgement.*

Jordan said:

> *I just think people have such a warped idea of what it means to be a sex worker and just assume we are the scum of the earth. Because people think we're dirty have nothing to offer, not smart. But honestly, sex workers are some of the smartest, hardest-working people I know.*

Alex described the stigma surrounding sex work online as a heightened version of women's bodies being censored everywhere and Kai discussed the perception of sex work not being considered real work:

> *It takes labour, and it's transactional and we should be able to do it without judgement.*

Riley describes the varying severity of judgement felt by sex workers based on the type of sex work that they do:

> *There's a huge stigma within artists and nude models and all of that. And even some burlesque dancers will look like down on strippers or dancers not sure to refer to it, but it's just really frustrating that people don't really support each other for what they want to do.*

Kai notices a similar stratification between judgment based on the type of sex work a person if engaged in:

> *But I think if you're thin and white and have more modelling type of content, than something that's a bit deeper in the sex work community, like dominatrix stuff or even pole dancing, then you get away with it like way more and you aren't flagged.*

Jordan describes their understanding of the stigma around sex work and believes it is time to move past that historical mindset:

> *This world is seen as this dark thing and there's no denying it can be at times, but we are just people doing our jobs. We're not any more or any less, but I mean, I think patriarchal values are the reason why sex work is seen as so morally corrupt and outside of the social norm. And particularly for sex workers that take pride in what they do, that's not normal and that's not what society tolerates.*

Riley is so afraid of the effect that stigma can have on her life, that it affects the way she operates as a sex worker and is able to connect with her community:

> *I'm so terrified of the stigma that I just can't risk my career and my future and my parents finding out because it just freaks me out so much. I've seen so many bad*

stories of people, like losing friends, losing family, like being kicked out of their accommodation. There's so much risk associated with it.

I'd really love to just go out for a coffee with these girls and actually, like, chat about the shit that we go through. But I can't because it's not worth it for me. Which is quite sad.

The findings portray a distinct and consistent account of censorship bias that feeds into a cycle of reproducing offline social hierarchies in a digital space. The participants explicitly described instances of intensified and unequal censorship compared to other social media users, and sometimes peers within the sex work space, depending on varied identifiers. The findings delineate the various modes and methods deployed by Instagram to enact a set of cultural and moral boundaries that are seemingly hidden beneath the community guidelines, making it almost impossible to operate within them for certain types of identities and bodies.

Effects

A second stand-out theme that came from the semi-structured interviews was reports of how censorship, directly and indirectly, affected their lives as people and as sex workers. The participants each gave accounts of the effects of censorship materially and mentally. These findings directly respond to the research question by detailing how censorship has affected their lives as sex workers on Instagram. This section will delve into these descriptions to pinpoint the exact ways in which they perceive censorship has impacted their lives.

Income

This section details the way that the participants perceive a loss of income due to censorship. As a full-service sex worker that uses Instagram to promote her business, and

particularly after covid, Sam relies on Instagram to promote her brand deals and reports that it has affected all areas of her income. She reports that this is due to a diminished reach and engagement from being shadowbanned and the loss of ability to use tools like, going live and being able to tag branded content, which affects her brand deals.

> *I can't use the brand content tools, so I can't tag them when I do know a review which is part of my job. It's in my contract to do reviews and shit. I can't tag Adult Store Mega as a business tool. I can't use promotion stuff. My page is set to business mode, but I can't go live and I can't use business tools because of all the warnings I've had for nudity, adult solicitation and hate speech. . . .I'm still probably earning the amount when I started, if not less because of censorship, which really sucks.*

She describes instances where bigger brands are afforded greater leniency because they have a larger amount of followers, but individual creators and users are at greater risk and will often have posts censored or be restricted in some way. Kai had also lost the ability to go live which she believed affected her income:

> *Being able to go live and tease OnlyFans content really helped boost that. And now that I can't do that, and I'm shadowbanned, there's definitely been a drop in engagement on both platforms. So yeah, I would quantify that as having lost a portion of my income. Because I'm not able to spread my content as far. And I really, really hope not, but if my account gets deleted then I will probably lose my brand deal and any others that might come along because I will lose all the followers I've worked so hard to get.*

She also reported a drop in her OnlyFans subscribers due to censorship, which she promotes through her Instagram account:

> *I have also noticed a drop in my OnlyFans subscribers because I have to think so much about my content now. And also not being able to go live.*

Kai details the way that censorship affects the different layers of her income that are all intertwined. Alex also describes a loss of effective promotion and communication between them and their clients due to censorship, as they are unable to use their Instagram account

to advertise and take bookings as they would like. They suggest that using a landline number to call is stale and makes them more inaccessible:

> *So now they have to call up and there's a lot more steps to access us. Where people who may be a little bit more hesitant want to communicate and see a little bit more about the business, learn a little bit more about us, won't approach the business because it's stale you know*

Riley reported a loss of unpaid labour due to the extra labour to ensure she is following the guidelines:

> *I do all the grading and retouching and just all of the editing for most of the photography collaborations and work that I do. And so I spend maybe another ten to 20% of my time censoring stuff, even just to meet the guidelines, which they don't always uphold. Wastes so much of my time. If I was billing that time, it's not time I get anything back for, so much admin.*

Sam expressed that she had arranged for content to be delivered to certain clients and was unable to deliver the product due to censorship. She then had to discount content on another platform for them to access it, resulting in a loss of income and taking a toll on her professional reputation:

> *Then I lost my whole page. So I had to go through an email, I had about 60 followers paying 10 bucks a month to be on that page, so I to go through and email them all and be like, hey, sorry. You can have it, you know I gave them like a discount to my Snapchat because I felt so bad that some of them had just paid and then they didn't even get to use my stuff. So it was ripping off my clients that I didn't want to give that image that I was stealing. So I tried to make sure that they were still happy.*

She also expressed a loss of labour and a resume of sorts as her account had been an accumulation of three years' worth of written blogs, which can act as a portfolio of work and lead to future work opportunities:

> *I'm disabled, and I need a lot of health care and just life is expensive, you know, and it's hard. So I've lost a lot of money as a result of being censored. I've probably lost*

out on a lot of really amazing job opportunities as a result of it. My Instagram was really my online resumé for my writing. . . .Those three years' worth of mahi. Gone.

The participants here describe the varying areas in which censorship affects their income and business potential. Each describes different scenarios and degrees of impact but suggests there is a direct or indirect correlation between censorship and income for them.

Mental Health

This section details the way that censorship has affected the participants mentally and emotionally. Sam detailed the particularly intense effects that censorship had on her mental health. She details an instance when her account was deleted after she spoke out about a traumatic event. She explains how being censored affected her mental health:

> *I attempted to take my own life because I mean, I was coming to terms with the fact that I'm ADHD and I've lived my whole life not being diagnosed ... Being stuck in the lockdown was really bad for my PTSD in regards to the sexual assault that I experienced. I was sort of reliving it every night and I would try to make posts about it and it just kept being deleted. And it just felt like. It was happening to me all over again and having my voice taken away, the one thing I have is my voice and I'm very proud of it. And every time I get told that I'm, you know, putting out hate speech into the world, it was very triggering.*

She also describes the way censorship of her body is triggering, which took a toll on her mental health, but also friends who had bodies that are typically not socially accepted and who had done a lot of work to reverse the belief that they are unacceptable:

> *It's like it's literally feels like it's illegal to have a body these days. And I think the most triggering thing is being a sexual assault survivor. Being told that my body is offensive content is really triggering. And it's very triggering for my friends who have done so much work to love their bodies and now they're being told it's offensive. This is especially for my friends with bigger bodies, or they're POC or they're disabled. Sex work made them feel better about their bodies. And then they post to the internet and it's like, no, you're offensive.*

Jordan shared the same sentiment about the way that censorship affected their perception of themselves and the progress they had made with body image issues:

> *I put so much work into loving my body and who I am and when I'm expressing that in a way that they're telling me it's not acceptable. It's really hard sometimes and when it gets in the way of being able to do my job and earning an income is hugely stressful. This platform is such an effective tool for this work, but being constantly under the threat of losing it or having content that have worked hard to produce removed, just feels degrading.*

Kai also describes how censorship of her body affects her psychologically:

> *Having posts taken down because of my body for breaching the guidelines, when I see other women posting the same stuff and getting praised for it, makes me feel like there's something wrong with my body. Which, yeah, is not a great feeling.*

She also describes the stress of having her account jeopardised that she relies on to make ends meet which adds to the effect on her mental health:

> *Especially during lockdown when I was heavily relying on my OnlyFans for money to pay my bills and having my account suspended was so scary and quite unsettling in an already really stressful time. It really is a business. And having the threat of that being taken away takes a toll for sure.*

Loss of community

A particular effect that was pertinent to the participants was losing a sense of community with other users on Instagram who share similar life experiences.

Sam feels a loss of connection to her audience through which she provided supportive and educational content and felt a sense of community with after her account was deleted.

> *Three years' worth of gathering a community. Gone…I'm a disabled woman who really depends on the sex work community. As my chosen family, I don't speak to my dad. He disowned me. I disowned him. I've lost a lot of friends doing sex work. So being a part of this community means a lot to me and feeling like I was unable to connect with them. I just got in my head and that was on top of all the other trauma. Yeah, I did attempt to take my life. I wouldn't say it was just because of the censorship. It was a multitude of things, but that definitely made it harder for me to reach out and ask for*

help because I was being censored all the time and shadowbanned and I just felt lonely and isolated.

She also believes social media can be a great place for activism and to give people a voice who have been erased throughout history due to patriarchy and white supremacy. She was proud that she made others proud to be a sex worker and had aspirations of initiating a collective for strippers that would support, educate and create a community and feels a loss of those ambitions due to the deletion of her account where she had amassed a following:

I wanted to start a strippers collective here in Aotearoa because we have NZPC, but I wanted one specifically for online sex workers and strippers because NZPC helps everyone, but it's very prostitute based and it's just as someone who came about, I think I'm the generation of online sex workers. I wanted to give that insight and to host monthly Zoom meetings where I educated people on their rights and everything.

Kai describes the importance of the sex worker community on Instagram and feels as though censorship keeps her from that:

The sex worker community too is really strong on Instagram. And there are so many helpful community pages that spread information and connect us all and make us feel less alone, so Instagram is a really important place for us to find community. They try so hard to keep us from that [connecting with other sex workers] by censoring us more than other communities on Instagram. . . . it's just frustrating because you can put so much time and effort and emotional effort more than anything and it just feels like it's for nothing.

Jordan also shares a similar sentiment and describes the effects that the potential loss of community has on them:

Mostly this is the place where I come to for support and to connect with other creators and my Friends. So to have that community be taken away or threatened of being taken away is terrifying and definitely takes a toll on my mental health. Like those are the people that helped me accept who I am.

Sex Worker Power

A natural discussion that transpired from the semi-structured interviews was that of the participants feeling a sense of empowerment and agency through online sex work, or in sex work altogether. They discussed skills and tactics that they deploy to manipulate their online presence to avoid censorship, which demonstrates tenacity in the face of oppressive structures. All five participants described sex work as empowering for varying reasons but also expressed an important distinction that sex work doesn't need to be empowering to be valid. This theme addresses the findings of how the participants counteract the experience of censorship to be able to assert a level of autonomy over their lived experiences.

Sam reflected on how sex work gives her a sense of regaining control over her sexuality, explaining that she has been sexually harassed in every job she's had and feels as though sex work is a way to monetise that for her own benefit:

> *I've been sexualized in every single job I've had. I figured I might as well be able to put a price on it and earn a decent amount.*

She also details sex work as a job that supports those who typically aren't compatible with the standard Westernised working week:

> *I'm on the neurodiverse spectrum, I'm also disabled. This industry really helps support my lifestyle, and you don't need any experience, work experience, job experience, degrees or anything into this industry. So it really helps benefit low-income working class folk. Yeah, it gives us a lot of autonomy that I think people are afraid of.*

Sam used social media and porn to explore her queerness and sexuality growing up and suggests that it's a place where others can explore that too. She also suggests it's a place where people can learn about ethical porn where the sex workers are paid directly, consent

has been given, everyone is safe, not being exploited and it’s porn that isn’t for the male gaze:

> *I'm a big advocate for ethical porn. That’s porn that is made. You pay the content person directly. Everyone's consented to it. Everyone's safe. It's not just for the male gaze. No one's being exploited.*

Kai enjoys the freedom online sex work gives her to explore different parts of herself and feels a greater sense of safety and control over her body and identity:

> *Being able to use an alias, I'm able to almost have a different identity or just a different version of myself that feels just as authentic as other parts of my identity do, so I get to be a really holistic version of myself and that's what I love about online sex work and it does feel easy to keep those kind of separate and in control over it.*

Riley feels like the type of sex work she does feels like getting money for nothing because she finds so much freedom and enjoyment from the type of work she does:

> *I’ve never felt so sexually free. . . .From the sexual side of it, it's given me so much power. Like, I can do what I want with who I want, when I want, within reason.*

Jordan reports that they make a fair wage relative to their workload and earns more doing sex work than in any other job they’ve had:

> *I think so. I'm also, I'm able to support myself better than I ever had at any other job. Like I work hard, but I'm also rewarded for that work. So I think, yeah, it's pretty fair. You can make a lot of money in this industry.*

These findings explore that while they believe to be censored and marginalised biasedly through Instagram censorship, they are able to generate satisfaction and empowerment in sex work through the use of Instagram. They describe instances of resistance to their identities but ultimately are able to draw power in amongst the structures that aim to silence them. Four out of five of the participants when asked if they find sex work empowering in the semi-structured interviews were clear to make a distinction between

how sex work can be empowering, but also how it may not be. They describe it as situational and recognise that at times, folks rely on sex work to survive and that can make them more vulnerable and less empowered. Sam is insistent that just because it may not be empowering, it doesn't make the work any less valid:

> *Yes, for me, but I also say that sex work doesn't have to be empowering to be valid. For some people, it's a means of survival. For some people, it's just a job.*

However, she finds it empowering to reclaim her body and assert agency over the way she has been sexualised, while also being able to customise a lifestyle that fits her needs:

> *So for me, I have found it empowering in the sense that I put a price on something that men feel entitled to free? And I'm someone that's been slut shamed a lot in my life. I have a lot of sexual trauma. I have a lot of body trauma and sex work helps me reclaim autonomy over my body. It's empowering in the sense that as a disabled person, I can work. I can make the amount of money in a full-time job. Not even part-time hours like I can sit on the internet and within three hours I've got enough money to last me the week. And that gives me time to work on other areas in my life. It gives me time to focus on my disability. It gives me time to I want to return to study next year. I get to do my writing. I do my performance artistry. So it's definitely empowering in that regard. But I also acknowledge that I am a cis, thin, white woman, and I think it's a lot easier for people that look like me to find the industry empowering.*

Riley also expresses that empowerment through sex work is proportionate to the reasons for doing it:

> *Maybe for some aspects of sex work, that is true. And if you need the money and you need that work, then you don't have power at all. And it's very situational.*

But for her own journey and sex work, she finds sex work to be freeing and empowering. She explains that she feels complete autonomy over her sexuality, body and identity:

> *I'm the one that gets to make decisions. I can take the risks that I want, I can do the things that I want, and I've never been able to do that in real life. I feel more myself as Ruby than I do as my actual self, which is kind of depressing sometimes. . . .I'm glad that found an avenue to express myself and find myself, cheesy but yeah.*

Alex also expressed that she finds sex work empowering and customisable to her lifestyle which is affected by disabilities, but also shares the opinion that survival sex work is a reality which can affect how empowering it is:

> *I mean, survival sex work exists and I see it you know. And that's the reality. And I've been on disability myself and I can't survive on that. Nobody can. So engaging in sex work as someone with chronic illness and mental illness, this is really the only job that I can do. I choose my hours. If I can't work, I can't work so I don't. So survival sex work is very real. But a lot of the girls too are survivors of sexual abuse and sex work is a means of reclaiming autonomy and sexual power. I would say through the use of social media, is a way to connect to other empowered sex workers. So there's sort of like this connectivity of community to maintain your empowerment.*

Jordan shares the same sentiment that the empowerment felt by sex work is circumstantial:

> *I think that it can be a bit of a complicated word. I think being able to take control over our bodies and the way we want to use it is really empowering. I'm going to be sexualized no matter what. So being able to take back control over that situation and profit from it is an empowering feeling. But I think there's also cases though where it's not. I think it depends on the reason why you're doing it and who you're doing it for. I think especially in the online sex work community, there's a lot of folks who feel empowered. And I would hope that it can trickle down to the other types of sex work, like street-based work that may not typically feel as empowered, but yeah, I think there's so many factors that make up why a person might turn to sex work. And it's for reasons that help you feel like you're taking back control over something, then that's empowering. Whether your body, your life, your income, those things are life or death at times. So it can, but also it can, not too. It really just depends.*

Jordan does though feel as though they are empowered in the type of sex work they do:

> *I'm in control of it all. What I do and don't want to show, the persona I want to be on any day, how private I want to be. I feel like I'm the most authentic version of myself online and in this line of work in general.*

Kai also asserts that it helps her feel in control and more comfortable with her body and enjoys the benefits of being in control of her work and finds online sex worker to be safer because it’s not determined by someone else:

I really enjoy this work that I do and find it really uplifting. It makes me feel more comfortable in my body and I have more control over my body, especially with online sex work, like OnlyFans. I get to be my own boss and kind of create content, I feel comfortable making.

While the participants describe feeling empowered in their work, they also describe awareness of the risks and take caution with their online presence. All five participants go by alias' for safety and privacy reasons, Alex explains that it also helps establish boundaries and reinforces the professional nature of the interaction:

We all use fake names. Just as a degree of separation too. And a lot of the girls that you know are out as sex workers and you know, use their face and images, having a false name is a degree of separation for clients too, the knowledge that you know that's not their real name, and that the relationship that you're forming is the professional one.

Kai also goes by an alias, also to maintain a degree of separation and ensure safety:

I go by an alias and I don't post my real name and I made a new email address and everything to use as my contact for my Instagram page so that my page can't be tracked to any personal information about me. And I don't link my tattoo page or anything to make sure no one turns up to my workplace or whatever.

Sam doesn't link any other social media to her sex work account and uses an alias for concern of clients becoming obsessed or stalking her. However, she finds it easy to manage safety on the Internet:

But I feel it's I feel it's quite easy to monitor my safety on the internet. That's something I haven't really struggled with

Riley is a non-facing sex worker and takes measures to ensure her anonymity online. She signed up with a different email address so that it can't be tracked, removes her tattoos from photos, and if meeting clients face to face or working with photographers, she makes them sign non-disclosure agreements to ensure they are unable to share her identity to anyone else and so that she can have the final edit of the content:

I have an NDA about there about anonymity as well as the Copyright of who owns the content and stuff like that as well, like how it can be used and what shows in it as well. I get final say on all images. I think it's easier for me to have that power because I can say to them, I'll just edit it. It's fine. It's not a big issue. But I can imagine other people in my situation if they didn't have that skill set.

She’s also in control of the price she chooses to charge and adds an inconvenience fee if it is something that doesn’t necessarily interest her creatively:

So I'll quote them depending on what the shoot is and what I want to do. And I usually add in like an inconvenience fee if I'm not actually interested in the work for my own personal creative interests. So I'll charge what I want for that and that's fine.

The tools the participants describe enable them to conduct their work on Instagram in a safe manner that provides protection and a sense of privacy. The findings suggest the participants employ various tools and tactics to operate within the digital-scape as online sex workers. Three out of the five participants discussed the benefits of using a photo-centric platform to promote their work:

Jordan said:

Yeah, even just being able to message with people via Instagram is a helpful tool, but also being a photo-based app in an imagery or visual-based industry is obviously massive. Like being able to post photos and videos and stories is so helpful to engage with my audience. . . . So I pretty much use Instagram as an avenue for informal advertising, essentially.

Alex uses Instagram to promote current updates to garner engagement from clients:

We do utilise stories because it’s 12 hours you know. We can quickly promote who's on, or updates about the you know like it's really hot today but we’re still open we've got AC you know, so we do utilise things like stories. . . . Instagram was a tool for updates and you know we're open later tonight. And without that presence, I think in terms of a business, you know, that's our advertising you know.

The participants reported having a social media presence across multiple platforms to counteract the harsher censorship on Instagram. Sam said:

I've sort of switched to Twitter to promote everything else. Instagram's now very much me ranting about the state of the world and wanting to burn the patriarchy and then my Twitter is like, here's my tits and you know fuck the world, burn patriarchy.

Riley also described using multiple platforms to run her business:

I think a lot of the income I do from work online is actually from Twitter, and they don't censor as much, so they do censor, and they do have their own version of the 18 plus setting, and that does like it effectively shadowbans you because it shows you to way less people, which might be for the best.

Critical Contextualisation of Sex-Worker Based Issues

The final theme that was pertinent to the research question, *what are the lived experiences of sex workers who are censored online* is the understanding they shared of being able to contextualise their issues within a broader frame of reference. They were aware of how dangerous the effects of censorship are and demonstrated engagement and desire for improvements to be made that they believed would better the experiences for sex workers. This section will explore the suggestions made by the participants as to how they believe the censorship and treatment of sex workers should be improved.

When online sex workers are unable to do their job online, it can force them into precarious situations, or situations beyond their comfortability. Some sex workers do online sex work as a means of economic survival or stability. If that avenue becomes compromised through censorship, they may turn to alternative forms of sex work to find the money. It forces them into potentially dangerous situations that are not as controllable as online sex work. Sam shared her position on the dangers of censorship to sex workers:

It makes it really dangerous. It's the way I view if you make abortions illegal, it doesn't stop abortions. It just makes them backyard and dangerous. Sex work is decriminalized, not all. We have a right to work and earn money through sexual labour and on the internet.

It's actually really good for my mental health and the censorship and the restrictions are really dangerous and really forcing a lot of sex workers into dangerous situations outside of the internet, where they're maybe agreeing to things they wouldn't agree to, usually because they don't have the choice and they need the money, they just need the money, especially in these times of the pandemic

Sam believes the common argument as to why sex workers are censored so heavily is to do with not exposing the youth to things before they are ready. She believes that Instagram should create R18 pages, and suggests there should be better education around sex and porn, she said:

Censorship doesn't protect kids, it protects grown-ups from having uncomfortable conversations with kids. I think us as humans underestimate what teenagers in particular are able to absorb, and I don't like treating the youth, especially teenagers, as it's like we're entering this, what's the word, celibate society with that same like sex education is oh, just don't have sex instead of here's how to have safe sex. I think we could easily be teaching the youth about ethical porn, and having these conversations with them that porn is a fantasy, and it's not meant to be recreated. It's meant to just stimulate your mind in ways that you know, might not work physically. But it's all the look, it's the aesthetic of it.

She believes access to this type of content normalises different types of bodies and sexualities and helps them not only see women through the male gaze but through self-made content:

I just think it's really frustrating that Instagram claims that they're trying to protect the youth, but they're really doing the opposite. So I think they really just need to go about trying to, make the age verification and I don't know, maybe if you're under the age of 18, you cannot see these porn stars. . . . .So, it's just set your age to Instagram, and if a kid lies, that's on them like, you know, it's the parent's responsibility to be monitoring what their kids are looking at. It's not me as a 25-year-old woman to be worried that a teenager is going to, you know, see my shit on the internet and it's going to fuck up their psyche. It's really not.

Riley also discusses the issue of exposing youth to too much too soon but believes that's Instagram's problem to fix, not hers to be taking the brunt of it as an online sex worker:

> *I do understand they need to protect youth from things that they might not be ready to see, but at the same time, they need to be a lot clearer and provide space for adults to do what adults want to do. We're not children, even though some children use their platform. So that's kind of their problem that they need to fix, and they're a big enough company with enough money that they should be able to do that.*

Kai says she doesn’t think sex work should be promoted everywhere, but also believes greater education around the topic is needed to counteract the taboo nature of sex work:

> *I'm not saying promote sex work everywhere or anything, but I think if we can educate people on sex and safe sex and the porn industry as well and have a realistic understanding of it, then I don't think it needs to be such a taboo thing that platforms try to hide. It can still be restricted in some way, of course, but definitely not to the degree that it is at the moment.*

Sam doesn't believe sex work should be so marginalised and believes there is room for both sexual empowerment and sex education on the internet, without corrupting the minds of the youth and suggests that further marginalisation only makes things more dangerous for sex workers:

> *I say that censorship is as blocking out evolution. Humans as a race were existing with the internet. It's the way that the future is going. We need to integrate it. It doesn't need to be kept separate. We can have sexual empowerment and sex education on the internet without corrupting the minds of the youth. But keeping us in the dark about it is how people end up being assaulted is how people end up not learning about how their bodies work and that's why women end up in shitty toxic relationships and why so many queer folk don't even know they're queer and don't know it's safe for them to explore that. It's just.. it's actually dangerous. Censorship is dangerous for the human psyche and human development.*

Riley believes better education and more open conversations would fight against the stigma of sex work:

> *And because it's so taboo, People just get scared of it and they react in an animalistic way, like fight or flight, and they'll try and get rid of it in any way they can, so that they don't have to deal with it. It's always your problem, not theirs as well.*

All five participants asserted that they believe the way Instagram enforces its censorship needs greater equality, consistency and clarity. Riley said:

> *At the very least clarify their rules and actually stick to it? I don't think it should be that hard for them to draw a line in the sand and actually follow that and actually have a better review process that explains specifically what's wrong.*

Jordan said:

> *I think they need to be fairer and more consistent in how they roll out their guidelines and who is censored. It's too subjective at the moment.*

They also said they want a better response process:

> *Have a better response team so that there can be better dialog between Instagram and its users.*

Kai said she wants more control given to the users:

> *Introduce better restrictions that give users more control over the content that they do and don't want to see instead of having the platform make all the decisions. The sex worker community too is really strong on Instagram.*

Alex said she wants more equity in whose content is censored:

> *For the content that we produce to be treated the same as any other sexually suggestive image that's on Instagram.*

Jordan asserted that conversations offline also work to counteract stigma and greater support from Instagram is needed, but also suggested better representation in positions of power at places like Instagram would positively change things for sex workers online:

> *If platforms like Instagram are censoring sex workers and making us feel invalidated, then that perpetuates the stigma. I think conversations among friends, colleagues, whanāu, they all help take away some of the stigma that may make sex workers not feel as empowered, but there needs to be a much better show of support from companies like Instagram and Facebook, which would help with the empowerment of*

sex workers. Also putting sex workers, people of colour, queer folks, and positions of power in these companies.

These findings describe an established account of sex, and sex work, as a taboo topic. The participants asserted that greater education and conversation around these topics is the best way to combat this issue and that instead of being a place to marginalise sex workers, Instagram could be a vessel for positive change. They also maintain a belief that issues pertaining to the marginalisation of sex work are a society-wide phenomenon that is rooted in patriarchal and archaic moral sanctions. The findings demonstrate a strong sense of awareness from the participants of these issues and how they believe they can best be improved upon and better their experiences as sex workers.

DISCUSSION

Sex work is the fault in which society stores some of its keenest fears and anxieties.

- *Molly Smith*

Introduction/Context

This academic enquiry set out to explore the lived experiences of sex workers who are censored on Instagram. It intends to gain insight into the way censorship affects sex workers' mental health, their ability to work, their material resources, and the perception of how they are treated and perceived socially. The previous chapter presented the findings from the semi-structured interviews of five sex workers who have experienced censorship on Instagram. This chapter will now discuss those findings and situate them within a broader sociological frame of reference.

At the outset of this research, I hypothesised there to be an unequal way in which censorship practices were mobilised by platforms like Instagram. By this I mean that some users were disproportionately more exposed to censorship than others, I believe based on social identifiers such as being a sex worker. The idea that censorship practices by Instagram were applied unequally was initially identified through previous research I had conducted for a postgraduate course that investigated the way marginalised communities were censored on social media and then informed by the scholarship of Carolina Are (2021), Tarleton Gillespie (2018), and Madeline Henry and Panteá Farvid (2017).

This research takes an interpretive approach to examining the lived experience of censorship as described by sex workers, the interview data has been analysed and the findings are organised thematically. Through analysis of the data, it is clear there is a distinctly common experience among the participants of censorship bias. The participants unanimously explained feeling as though they were censored more or less based on aspects

of their identity, which shaped their lived experiences drastically. They described most frequently the negative effects of censorship on their mental health, economic and material positions, and the broader socio-political effects from the perpetual stigmatisation and marginalisation they experience. The participants believed these effects detrimentally impacted them as individuals and as a community. Consisting of mental health and financial deficits and a loss of a sense of community and connection. However, while the data showed a clear indication of socio-political detriments due to censorship, a natural continuation and important point that arose from the data was the tactics and methods that they deployed to counteract the negative effects of censorship bias. The participants described maintaining connectivity with their community as significant to a sense of relief and comradery amongst others who understand their experiences. They also insisted on the usefulness of Instagram as an effective space to advocate for better education and fairer censorship practices. Online sex work, was also discussed as a safer and more controllable avenue that allowed the participants greater privacy and autonomy. In particular, the autonomy afforded to online sex workers was a key aspect of feeling empowered in their work. These findings elicit an exploration into the historical and social structures that nurture the social context of sex workers who are censored on Instagram and how they have been approached theoretically by previous academics.

The marginalisation of sex workers is a long-documented phenomenon (Benoit et al., 2018; Sanders, 2004; Weitzer, 2018). Grounded in patriarchal values that believed sex should be sacred between man and woman, sex work was historically perceived as the great social evil (Walkowitz, 1980). It was purported to be corrupting the sanctity of intimacy, the divinity of womanhood, and was seen as the catalyst for the spread of venereal diseases

among soldiers (Walkowitz, 1980). Debates have long oscillated between sex work being deviant and a form of sexual slavery (Barry, 1979; Dworkin, 1981; Høigård & Finstad, 1992; Järvinen, 1993) with more contemporary debates advocating for sex work as a response to economic strain within a patriarchal capitalist society (Campbell, 1997; Høigård & Finstad, 1992; McLeod, 1982; Pheterson, 1986; Phoenix, 1999).

Feminist Approaches

Feminist discourses have been instrumental in the social constructions of sex work as an occupation due to its historically high female demographic. Primarily, the feminist lens rejects the criminalisation of sex workers, advocates for better working conditions and condemns the trafficking and entrapment of women into sex work (Liberato & Ratajczak, 2017; Newman et al., 2012). Within feminist critique, different approaches and systems of belief reconcile the impact of sex work on women in different ways.

Radical Feminism

Radical feminists believe that because sex workers operate within a patriarchal society that works to subjugate women for their bodies, sex work is inherently exploitative and weaponised as an instrument of patriarchal control (Liberato & Ratajczak, 2017).

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminists uphold the idea that sex workers can assert agency over their individual choices and recognise them as legitimate workers who should be afforded the same civil rights as other labouring citizens (Chapkis, 1997; O'Neill, 2013). Perhaps most significant to the argument of this research, is that liberal feminists believe sex work can be empowering for women (Chapkis, 1997; O'Neill, 2013), as opposed to radical feminists who

nullify empowerment at the hands of exchanging the female body for profit under a patriarchal regime.

Sex-Work Feminism

A third perspective, which this research employs, is the sex-work feminist perspective. Sometimes referred to as sex-work feminism within the sex worker debate, or middle-ground feminism (ICRSE, 2016; Liberato & Ratajczak, 2017), it claims that aspects of both doctrines are applicable. A sex-work feminist perspective acknowledges that sex workers operate within patriarchal structures and are inherently exploited and restricted within that system. However, they also maintain that sex workers are able to assert a degree of agency over their limited freedom and find empowerment in that (ICRSE, 2016; Jesson, 1993; Liberato & Ratajczak, 2017). Sex worker Priscilla Alexander (Nagle & Alexander, 2010) shares this perspective and while recognising the structures that oppress her, believes she should have equal rights to be sexually assertive and put an economic tag on it without fear of exploitation, assault, or being slut shamed. She also highlights the need for sex workers to be believed and have men be held accountable for their transgressions against them, which is often not the case. In a society that values female chastity and subjugation, sex workers and women live under constraints that are constantly negotiated, resisted and fought against.

Legal Frameworks

These puritanical and patriarchal discourses continue to shape the ideological constructions of sex workers contemporarily which torques social perceptions and infiltrates legal frameworks that reproduce the notion of sex workers as criminal and deviant (Sanders et al., 2009; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). While sex workers almost universally experience

intense stigmatisation, the legal treatment of sex workers varies geographically and spans in severity.

Criminalisation

The criminalisation of sex workers is the most common legal framework globally and is incredibly dangerous to the lives of sex workers (Armstrong & Abel, 2020). For fear of the legal repercussions, sex workers under this legal model refrain from reporting instances of assault, such as forced drug intake and physical abuse which are common in street-based sex work (Forestiere, 2019), therefore exposing them to increased exploitation and harm.

Nordic Model

Predominantly European countries employ the Nordic model which aims to counteract the risk of exploitation against the sex worker by making it only illegal for the buyer (Kingston & Thomas, 2018). This model was utilised to alleviate the volatile position of sex workers unable to report crimes under a criminalised model. This model has had some success in reducing harm to sex workers (Skilbrei & Holmström, 2016), but it still implies that sex work is a form of exploitation. Research has also found that anti-sex work ideologies in these geographical locations supersede legal frameworks and corrupt the successful enforcement of this model (Kingston & Thomas, 2018).

Decriminalisation

Aotearoa/New Zealand was the first country in the world to decriminalise sex work in 2003, which affords both the client and the sex worker full legal protection. Decriminalisation works against the notion that sex work is wrong and affords greater safety, support, and access to justice for sex workers (Armstrong & Abel, 2020). However, even under a decriminalised model, sex workers still report continual stigma and

harassment by the general public (Abel et al., 2007). These legal frameworks all shape the lived experiences of sex workers differently depending on the legal ramifications they incur and the social perceptions they facilitate, yet the stigma felt by sex workers is apparent under any legal model.

Stigma

Definitions

The perpetual stigmatisation of sex workers is a well-documented phenomenon (Armstrong & Abel, 2020; McCausland et al., 2020; Singer et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2011). Erving Goffman (1963) pioneeringly defined stigmatisation as the exclusion of an individual from full social acceptance. Goffman illustrated this idea through homosexuals as a site of stigmatisation. Propelled by their treatment as 'disease-ridden' by doctors and 'criminogenic' by police, they were subsequentially tainted and outcast from society. More contemporary definitions of stigma propose it as a process that depends on interrelated elements such as labelling, stereotypes, and discrimination that result in unequal outcomes for those individuals or groups (Link & Phelan, 2001). Recognition that discrimination and labelling are propagated from hierarchical social structures such as gender, class and ethnicity, is also significant to the understanding of how stigma operates (Scambler, 2009). As exemplified by the stigmatisation of sex workers, the social sanctions that normalise restrictive and submissive ideals of sex and sexuality ensure a marginalised position of sex workers who are perpetually discriminated against and outcast.

How Stigma Effects Sex Workers

The stigmatisation of this group creates a volatile environment that not only impacts their psyche but endangers their lives. It is a shaping force that drastically impacts the lives

of sex workers and other marginalised groups. Studies have shown that due to stigma, sex workers refrained from telling their doctors about their occupation, isolated them from friends and families, reinforced a marginalised position in society and contributed to low self-esteem (Abel et al., 2007; Pyett & Warr, 1997, 1999). Further, the categorical marginalisation of sex workers restricts the opportunities available to them and their potential to implement better policies that are specific to sex workers' rights and their needs, therefore perpetuating the cycle of stigmatisation further. The implications of stigma are so ideologically embedded in social perceptions, that they infiltrate intra-sex-worker relations through the sustenance of what has been coined the 'whorearchy' (McClintock, 1992). The whorearchy refers to the hierarchical organisation of sex workers based on classist ideals regarding chastity, privilege and stigma (Knox, 2014; Sciortino, 2016). The idea assigns greater prominence of stigma to those more proximate to client intimacy and those who sit at the intersection of marginalised communities (Sawicki et al., 2019). It acknowledges that the most privilege is afforded to sex workers such as cam girls and OnlyFans models, followed by strippers and sugar babies, with full-service street-based sex workers being a site of increased stigmatisation (Knight, 2022). This infiltration into the sex worker community is particularly dangerous because it diminishes the potential for support and unification against outside stigmatisation and exacerbates the isolation of an already vulnerable community. This is supported by media representations that facilitate the voices of predominantly indoor sex workers as opposed to street-based sex workers (Brunschot et al., 2000; Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006). Indoor sex workers are positioned as the 'lesser of two evils' and are afforded the privilege to speak about their lives and are recognised for the financial advantages of their work (Farvid & Glass, 2014). Kai also acknowledged the existence of this on Instagram, suggesting that thin white models are able to get away with

posting more risqué images on Instagram compared to sex workers who are more proximate to full-service.

Most significantly affected by stigmatisation are those who sit at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory aims to reconcile the tendency to overlook the experiences of those who experience increased harm due to compounding oppressive structures. Particularly, Crenshaw identifies the way the experiences of black women are unaccounted for within feminist debates because they fail to recognise the racial and sexist structures that synonymously work to oppress black women. They are, therefore, exposed to increased marginalisation and harm that manifests through increased stigma, profiling and incarceration (Fuentes, 2022). The data showed a distinct awareness by the participants of increased censorship for those who occupied multiple marginalised identities, particularly those who are of colour, LGBTQIA+ and bigger-bodied folks. Those who experienced increased censorship due to intersecting structures of oppression were more proximate to having their content removed, or their account deleted. The effects of which disproportionately impacted their income, mental health, connection to their community and sense of identity, and exacerbated the stigma they experience offline. This critique highlights the importance of resisting reductionist responses to sex worker issues and includes the way that racism, transphobia, homophobia, sexism and ableism co-exist in oppressive structures that affect the lives of sex workers differently (Lemoon, 2021).

Stigma also presents itself as a barrier to legal recourse, even under a decriminalised model, for fear of judgment and not being believed (Arnot, 2002). **Each aspect of**

stigmatisation encourages a deeper isolation and concealment of their identity that perpetuates vulnerability and danger (Wong et al., 2011). Sam supports this claim by suggesting that sex work isn't inherently dangerous, "it's dangerous because of how people treat us". The ongoing stigmatisation of sex workers indicates that patriarchal and puritanical ideologies are functioning beyond the jurisdiction of legalities. They function as the social structures that ensure sex workers remain ostracised and delegitimised in their work and identity. As an enquiry into the experience of sex workers online, this research offers an interesting point of entry to explore the integration of sex work into the digital space and how those structures dictate the online experience. Exploring the efficacy of social structures infiltrating online public domains also requires an interrogation of the role that platforms play in perpetuating offline hierarchies and reinforcing oppressive regimes.

Biased Censorship

As the internet promised to be a space of true democracy and freedom (Gillespie, 2018), it is forgivable to believe that it might escape the damning replication of the social structures that shape the offline world. However, these findings suggest reality is not nearly so utopian. All five participants are adamant that they experience biased censorship due to aspects of their identity and how they present themselves online.

The infiltration of offline socio-political structures to online domains has been a heavily debated topic (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Li et al., 2002; Putnam, 1995; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020; Turkle, 2011; van Dijk, 2005). However, the denunciation of a connection between the online/offline dichotomy is naïve and reductive. Platforms categorically torque and curate the digital public sphere (Gillespie, 2018). Through methods of censorship, and

algorithms which host and organise user-generated content (Roberts, 2020), the Instagram experience is void of pure objectivity and is instead manipulated to present a subjective user experience. The manipulation of content in this way customises an online experience that allows certain voices, identities and bodies to be seen and heard, while others are hidden and removed. This position is supported by the participants who detailed experiences of having their content flagged, deleted and hidden from other users based on aspects of their identity. By censoring them in this way, their public reach and digital presence are diminished, affecting their sources of connection, tools for online advocacy and the means to run their businesses (Hare-Duke et al., 2019). What also became apparent through analysing the data was the cyclic nature of censorship that relentlessly targeted the participants once they had experienced censorship for the first time. They described a cycle that mounts to a point where their existence on Instagram becomes near impossible. What this finding suggests is that Instagram uses moderation methods to draw out undesirable identities and flags them. Once those profiles are identified, they are then subjected to increased and intensified censorship until they are ultimately silenced. This process describes how Instagram uses its censorship as a production, or more accurately as a reproduction, of the hegemonic ideals that dictate the offline world. Through the reports by these participants of increased censorship of sex workers, LGBTQI+, POC and bigger-bodied folks, it is clear Instagram has recreated offline social hierarchies, online. When these methods of censorship are enacted unequally and at an intensified rate, the digital presence and ideological contributions of an entire community are diminished. The perpetual cycle of stigmatisation and marginalisation is then exacerbated for communities that are already vulnerable due to prejudicial structures that shape their offline experiences. The effects of such biased censorship practices is the manipulation of discourse and shared information in

an online public domain, which alters the public's knowledge and understanding of marginalised communities. As research suggests, they do so with very little external auditing or input (Gillespie, 2018), assigning immense control to a small group of executives who decide what is appropriate. Concerningly, moderation practices therefore allow platforms like Instagram an uninhibited amount of amassed cultural power to set the parameters of propriety.

Platform Bias/Safe Harbour Law:

The birth of the internet, followed by the boom of platforms bred a new public domain that facilitated a newfound mode of societal relations. More and more, public discourse is moved online, becoming a place to get the news, connect with friends, engage with community leaders and learn about trends. Increasingly, platforms have become a powerful medium for public discourse, and a few privately owned corporations are hosting, facilitating and curating the content we are exposed to. They yield an immense amount of power in shaping and producing culture, especially as social media has become a dominant site of news and education for users. Having the ability to set the trends, and norms and spread information, they have undertaken the position of cultural curators and do so without extenuating rules or regulations. As most platforms legally operate from the United States, they are privy to the broadest safe harbour laws in the world under Section 230 of U.S. telecommunication law (Gillespie, 2018). The safe harbour works in two parts. Firstly, it ensures that any platforms who act as intermediaries cannot be held liable for the speech of their users and they are legally regarded as mere publishers of content, rather than creators. This provides the freedom for platforms to denounce any explicit responsibility to its users, and to uphold equality and safety while on their platform. Instead, it allows them to moderate as they please with no legal consequences if they get it wrong. Secondly, if

platforms do choose to moderate, they are still protected under the safe harbour (Gillespie, 2018). This means platforms are absolved of any liability if they do, or don't, choose to moderate, allowing them complete freedom from any responsibilities, or limits to the way they moderate. They therefore, have the "right but not the responsibility" (Gillespie, 2018, p33), granting them the control of subjectively interfering with content and allowing them to decide the type of content and identities who will have the privilege to exist on their platform. This is exercised algorithmically, whereby users who have gained traction through participatory norms are rewarded with visibility, which propels a certain homogenised image of society on the platform (Bucher, 2012).

As the data showed, the participants described this type of biased interference with their online presence, which they reported was due to aspects of their identity. The biased censorship of marginalised identities is particularly harmful as social media platforms were promised as a place of democracy, and vulnerable groups found hope in the idea of a new means to connect with their peers. This perception of bias censorship also becomes problematic for platforms as it interrupts the guise of platforms as neutral conduits. To combat this perception, platforms instate guidelines to offer a sense of consistency and objectivity in the way that they practice moderation. However, the participants of this research claim that even in their best efforts to be within the parameters of Instagram's guidelines, they still experienced censorship. Riley is well versed in what the guidelines require and insists that her content does not breach the guidelines, yet still she experienced censorship. The participants proposed that they believe they are purposefully vague with their guidelines so that they can both be perceived as following a neutral set of rules, while in reality electing when to enact their censorship methods. Researchers suggest this to be

the case so they are able to employ an interpretation of them as they see fit (Cotter, 2018; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). Therefore, giving the guise of neutrality, while perniciously manipulating the online experience through covert forms of moderation like algorithms that code and curate the online user experience (van Dijck, 2013). This pick and choosing of when to enact moderation mechanisms corroborates the idea that platforms assimilate offline social hierarchies and reinforce them through subjective moderation tactics.

Further, the responsibility for review lies with those who have been censored. That is to say, if a sex worker has had content removed or flagged as breaching the guidelines, it becomes their responsibility to appeal the position and prove that their content is within the rules. This parallels the treatment of sex workers as described by Walkowitz (1980) who if accosted in public and accused of being a prostitute, had to be examined by a doctor to prove they weren't. Therefore, Instagram is able to manipulate the rules to their choosing and absolve themselves of the responsibility to remedy errors. It allows them immense power and control and relegates sex workers to a position of intense vulnerability.

Platform Methods of Control Through Moderation

The promise of the internet was of freedom and democracy, and hosts of digital platforms work hard to maintain the guise of not interfering with that promise (Gillespie, 2018). This results in moderation techniques that unless you run up against them, are hidden and undetectable. Algorithms are one of these very sophisticated tools. They are computer-programmed systems that interpret data through a series of steps, which then return a specific outcome (Gillespie, 2014). They are ubiquitous and hidden from the user, but they are deployed as a moderation method which determines if content needs to be filtered out or removed (Gorwa et al., 2020). They also make targeted suggestions and rank

the order of appearance content will appear (Beer, 2009; Bucher, 2012; Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Gillespie, 2014). While algorithms are machine-operated, mechanisms of moderation whether human or algorithmic are never neutral (Gillespie, 2018; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). They are imbibed with social, cultural, economic and political factors through the engineers who design them (Just & Latzer, 2016). The decision of how algorithms will act and the specific types of things they identify as problematic is decided by Instagram. Determining that from top to bottom, there is a subjective philosophical worldview stitched into the operating systems that manipulate socio-political discourse (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011), rendering them orchestrators of their public domain.

A particularly sinister moderation tool that was frequently cited by the participants, was the use of shadowbans to hide users' content and diminish their reach. The user-generated term describes a mechanism deployed by platforms to algorithmically hide their content from explore pages and other users without the user knowing. Meta admitted they use this method for 'borderline' content that doesn't quite breach the guidelines but is deemed undesirable for their platform (Meta, 2018). The covert nature of this tool ensures that Meta is able to dictate the type of content that is afforded visibility behind closed doors and without any methods of recourse or review for the user. Shadowbanning goes beyond the jurisdiction of moderating based on safety and categorically operates as a means for Instagram to curate a desirable public sphere, subjective to their worldview. Carolina Are (2021) posits this is a tactic mobilised by corporations like Instagram to limit the risk for their citizens. Tools like shadowbanning and algorithmic ordering are particularly useful in reducing the perceived risk for users whilst on their platforms as they can present a 'cleaner' experience. But as this research shows, that is a monolithic, white-centric and

heteronormative space that resists the notion of sexual freedom, or empowerment. In doing so, they are curating, synthesising and producing a customised view of the world and social realities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011).

Platforms enforce their particular worldview as dictated by a small group of people who determine the potency of risk felt by certain content and identity types. Unsurprisingly, within a patriarchal society, it is women's bodies that are incessantly policed and those from marginalised groups who are antiquatedly deemed most threatening to the moral fibre of society. This is why we see a demonstration of militant restrictions against sexuality that repetitively target the sex worker community and perpetuate historical structures of oppression. Sam described the illusion that stems from this type of algorithmic curation is that all sex workers are thin, white, cis and able-bodied. This is intensified when accounting for the targeting of users who have previously been censored. Once a user is identified due to a breach, users are then stored and remembered by the algorithms, so that any future content can be monitored more closely, ensuring they are more proximate to censorship at all times (Instagram, 2021a, 2021b). This is a problematic tactic because it stereotypes individual users and groups as needing increased surveillance rather than making an objective assessment of content. The participants reported being at the mercy of this type of algorithmic tactic, suggesting that once the algorithms find you, it’s as if you’ve been blacklisted for targeted censorship and “they start shredding you”. They described being left feeling powerless at the mercy of censorship, regardless if they followed the rules or not. The intensity of this biased censorship is realised through the lived experiences of these participants who reported mental health issues, loss of income, loss of community and a sense of purpose.

Censorship Based on Identity

The findings demonstrated a strong indication that censorship practices are implemented unequally. The participants detailed experiences of increased censorship based on aspects of their identity, suggesting that offline social disparities have leeched into the design of Instagram's censorship methods. Gillespie (2018) supports this claim in his work investigating the inner workings of platforms like Instagram as intermediaries. He insists that, as soon as platforms alter the order in which users see things on their feed, target information or ads with algorithms, then they are no longer merely conduits of information, but curators. This distinction is critical to the responsibility that platforms undertake.

As this research has found, the participants unanimously conflated their offline experiences of stigma with their online experiences of censorship. All five participants described perceiving censorship bias and experiencing increased censorship if they exhibited identity traits that fell outside of what is considered the social norm. For example, Sam deemed that it is indigenous folk, people of colour, disabled folk, fat bodies and sex workers that are censored more intensely on Instagram. This is in line with the other four participants who also shared experiences of increased censorship and occupied a marginalised identity. The participants described the experience of censorship as feeling silenced and marginalised and insisted that the silencing of sex workers online is dangerous and isolating. They reported feelings of isolation, fear of being found out and being further ostracised, losing their homes, family and friends, and being slut shamed. Sentiments which directly reflect the experiences of offline sex workers (Nagle & Alexander, 2010). Alex added to this argument by explicitly stating that censorship online is a direct continuation of

patriarchal values that uphold offline social hierarchies. The intensity of the censorship was also increased if they sat at the cross-section of multiple marginalised identities. Kai describes intensified censorship because she is Māori and queer, representing identities that occupy a marginalised position offline. Jordan shares the sentiment that they are censored more than cis white folks on Instagram, which unanimously correlated to worsened mental health and having a negative impact on their income. Their perceived experiences of censorship based on their identity demonstrate a social bias infused into the governing ideologies and belief systems that uphold the online framework of propriety. The infiltration of offline social disparities into the online space is a significant phenomenon to investigate. Platforms like Instagram aim to disguise these governing social hierarchies behind a careful façade of free democracy, but the biases that exacerbate social inequalities, as evidenced through this research, are dangerous and harmful. They are perpetuating health issues, financial hardship, loss of community, and restricting access to education and support for communities that are already vulnerable. This is particularly destructive because the internet is regarded as a safe place for vulnerable communities to connect and find support among others who face similar struggles or experiences (Ahmed et al., 2021; Brusilovskiy et al., 2016; Duke et al., 2018).

Effects of Censorship

Income

Platforms have become a hot spot for businesses and individual users to gain and interact with an online audience to help grow their brand. Influencers are an iteration of this type of marketing method, who post content to garner high engagement in exchange for social or financial capital. They are a type of micro-celebrity in the social media space who

use their large follower base to influence their followers in things like beauty, fashion, health and wellness (Senft, 2008). As a photo-centric app, Instagram is a lure for these types of users to produce engaging visual content. The birth of this type of marketing and interaction is an effective contemporary method of marketing which is heavily utilised by online sex workers (Rouse & Salter, 2021). In this space, followers equate to greater social capital. The more followers a user has then, the more social capital they can harness for financial gain through things like brand deals, affiliate links and other marketing opportunities (Abidin, 2015). For users, like sex workers, who rely on Instagram as a place to gain audience traction in return for economic support, maximum visibility and engagement are critical.

Each of the participants described their use of Instagram for their sex work as driven by creating business opportunities. Jordan described using Instagram as “an avenue for informal advertising”, the other participants used Instagram to grow a following that they could translate to OnlyFans subscribers, or work with brands on Instagram. They each detailed the different methods they employed to attract followers and how they interact with their followers to maintain engagement, such as posting content to their stories and sharing third-party links also associated with their brand (Rouse & Salter, 2021). These methods of growing and maintaining engagement demonstrate the importance they place on their following to establish social capital. Once they have accrued enough social capital they can then harness it to generate more subscribers or avenues of income through brand deals. The participants expressed their use of Instagram as a marketing tool and reported increased stress and weariness of censorship because of the value they placed on their Instagram as something they worked hard for. It is a way for them to provide a stream of

income, connect with others who share similar experiences and advocate for their community. Therefore, when Instagram is deploying censorship biasedly, through algorithms or human moderators, it becomes a direct threat to their livelihoods. Sam stated she earns less now due to censorship diminishing her levels of engagement and through the loss of tools she used to produce content for her brand partnerships. Kai shared that the sentiment of losing the ability to go live on Instagram affected the engagement she could conjure on both Instagram and OnlyFans which translates to a loss of income. Riley agreed that a loss of engagement due to censorship manifests as a loss of income, but added that she also faces a loss of labour hours due to the extra unpaid labour to ensure her content is safe for the internet and in keeping with the guidelines.

For sex workers operating online also enables them to promote their own work and negates the need to be managed by a brothel or a pimp who may reduce their earning potential (Jones, 2016). Social media platforms provide sex workers with an alternative method of engaging in sex work that is safer and more diverse (Al-Rawi & Zemenchik, 2022). It affords them greater creative control and power over their working conditions (Mathews, 2017). Therefore, when censorship practices threaten the existence of their working portfolio and client interactions, it puts online sex workers in an increasingly vulnerable position. Particularly in the wake of Covid-19 lockdowns that disproportionately affected the labour markets for women and sex workers (Rouse & Salter, 2021) and caused an influx of sex workers relying on social media platforms to maintain an avenue of income with physical contact off-limits (Johansson & Scaramuzzino, 2019; Navarrete Gil et al., 2021). Further, with sex workers not being afforded the same economic and labour support as

other working professionals (Lam, 2020), they can be heavily reliant on the income from their online sex work.

Mental Health

Perhaps the most significant impact felt by each participant was the toll censorship took on their mental health. Research shows sex workers are exposed to higher rates of violence, exploitation, degradation and daily stigmatisation, causing an increased rate of mental health issues, particularly mood disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation (Gu et al., 2014; Rössler et al., 2010; Roxburgh et al., 2006; Sanders, 2004; Surratt et al., 2011). The biased censorship that sex workers face on Instagram perpetuates the mental health burden they are laden with and increases the vulnerability of an already marginalised group. Sam suffered a sexual assault and when she shared a post to her Instagram page that discussed it, it was removed citing hate speech. She described feeling as though her voice was being taken away from her which along with other life events, triggered a severe adverse mental health event. She reflected on the way censorship affects her relationship with her body by insinuating there is something wrong with sharing it online. Kai and Jordan described a similar experience, after putting so much work into loving their body, the insinuation that it is offensive and having it removed, takes a toll on their mental health and reignites past issues. Conflated with the pre-existing physical judgement and treatment of sex workers as less-than, the inference that their body or image is offensive is potentially dangerous. A shared sense of community can go some way toward mitigating the potential dangers, but this too is under threat when censorship practices are experienced on a platform where communication is fundamental.

Community

Social media facilitates a hub of connectivity and community that is central to the vitality of sex workers (Duke et al., 2018). Particularly due to the increased risk for a stigmatised person to endure negative social encounters, finding support from fellow stigmatised peers is an effective way to manage the negative effects (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Goffman, 1963; Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013). It serves as a place to have open dialogue, advocate for sex worker issues and find a sense of belonging amongst folks with similar experiences (Al-Rawi & Zemenchik, 2022). Each participant echoed this and asserted that social media provided a place to connect with their community and was something they placed immense value on. Sam insisted she is heavily dependent on Instagram as a place to connect with her “chosen family". It's where she shares her story, uses her voice to advocate for sex workers' rights, and finds a sense of purpose. She describes the devastation of losing her account after working hard to establish herself and her work, but most importantly the connections she made that were pivotal to her sense of self. Kai expressed how crucial the online sex worker community was in helping spread important information and ensuring that folks felt less alone, and how frustrating it is that censorship practices can jeopardise that sense of safety. All of the participants shared in experiencing frustration with censorship bias that jeopardises their income and adds to the stress they encounter in relation to their work. These issues are exacerbated by the loss of support, community and purpose that was felt by the participants of this study due to bias censorship.

When censorship practices are applied widely, as a blunt instrument without clear and transparent criteria, it threatens the livelihoods of online communities like this one who have joined together to unify against the ostracisation they face in offline spaces. Social media offers a safe space for those who feel perpetually othered to find solace and kinship

in their identity. When those sacred connections are continually compromised, it paints a much darker image of corporate bodies doing all they can to dismantle vulnerable communities unionising against the structures that hold them down.

Platform Power

The very real-life ramifications of being beyond the limits of digital propriety are demonstrated in the effects felt by the participants. The participants reported a loss of income, a diminishing of their mental health, a loss of connectivity and community and an increase in issues with their body image and identity. These findings illustrate the effects of censorship that go beyond de-platforming their digital selves, but a direct correlation to their offline social selves. Describing moments of resurfacing body image issues after being censored for posting content centring their bodies, the participants felt re-traumatised and shamed for their bodies after working hard to feel at peace with it. Combined with the stress of the loss, or potential loss, of financial security and a sense of community (which they described as pivotal to combating the isolation caused by stigmatisation, mental health issues were intensified and exacerbated. More than harming their community, bias censorship creates a monolithic space of bodies and identities that uphold the social norm and leaves no room to challenge it. This reflects offline socio-political structures that subjugate and marginalise those who don't fit the hegemonic identity. The participants of this research explained that by only showing a certain type of person, you are normalising that as the epitome of the idealised person. Reflecting on the way that celebrities are afforded greater exposure and less censorship, Sam insists it feeds other users a heteronormative, monogamous, perfected idea of what a body should look like. By perpetuating these norms offline and online, it harms the validity and social acceptance of those who sit outside of those norms.

The scope of the issue is exacerbated when this research demonstrates a bias and intentional marginalisation of a community, evidenced by the experiences of the participants involved in this research who noticed differences between the censorship they experience and the type of posts that they see are permitted online, but also researchers who highlight the discrepancy between the volume of nudity and sexuality that is banned comparable to blatant hate speech and the harmful circulation of misinformation (Are, 2019a; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). Described as a disproportionate emphasis on freedom of speech contrasted with a moral panic-driven relationship to sex and sexuality that is rampant in American culture (Are, 2019a; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). Are (2021) documents the use of Shadowbanning as a tool for silencing and marginalising not only sex workers but LGBTQI, educators and artists. Shadowbanning allows the platform to partially or entirely restrict the visibility of users on Instagram, largely without the user knowing [2](Gillespie, 2018; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). All five participants expressed a belief they had been shadowbanned. Two common signs of being shadowbanned they described were significant drops in engagement and the need to search their full Instagram handle to find their profile. They noticed posts being removed even if they were tagged in another user's posts and noticed that it came into effect after being censored for the first

[2] As this research has occurred over the course of several months, it is worth noting that Instagram has since introduced a new feature called *Account Status* (Instagram, 2023b), where users can go to their account settings and check whether they are eligible to be promoted which refers to the use of a shadowban. Firstly, while this new feature offers greater transparency, you are not notified if you have been shadowbanned, so you may be shadowbanned for some time before you notice and check for yourself. Secondly, there is no effective method of reporting or reviewing this censorship tool. It still operates under the same policy as any other review process on Instagram.

time. Jordan expressed that it’s the worst form of censorship because it can be enacted without notifying the user.

Shadowbanning has reportedly been a common tactic to marginalise sex workers and activists (Are, 2021; Blunt et al., 2020). This tool is used for 'borderline' content that doesn't entirely meet the guidelines to require the removal of a post as per the guidelines but is deemed inappropriate and therefore, essentially hidden from other users (Are, 2021). Shadowbanning is particularly malicious to sex workers on Instagram because they are positioned well within what is deemed 'borderline' content. As a conglomerate that must appease stakeholders, advertisers and investors, Meta must maintain a level of trust in their ability to present a commercially safe platform (Gillespie, 2018) and sex workers are beyond the parameters of what is considered safe for public consumption.

Sex Worker Power

This academic enquiry explored the lived experiences of sex workers who are censored on Instagram. Each of the participants reported the ways censorship has affected their lives negatively and the discussion above places those themes within the broader social context that shapes their contemporary existence. This appraisal of sex workers illuminates the oppressive frontiers that they have relentlessly worked amongst and against. This section looks to explore the latter; how sex workers mobilise and deploy tactics to counteract systems of oppression and advocate for sex work as a legitimate form of labour.

Sex Work as Labour

The socio-political climate of the 1970s catalysed a change in perceptions of sex workers as ‘sexual slaves’ or deviant, to recognising them as legitimate workers (Chapkis,

1997). This aligns with contemporary discursive formations that reflect this shift by using 'sex work' or 'sex worker' as opposed to 'prostitution' or 'prostitute', which can carry negative connotations (Kempadoo, 2018; Zangger, 2015). It was a move away from the patriarchal ideologies that looked to shame and subjugate sex workers as morally corrupt folks who were of little social worth (Walkowitz, 1980). And a shift from radical feminist ideologies that dominated the social constructions of sex workers up to this point, as oppressed and exploited (Gall, 2007). This refocus on the labour aspect of sex work advocates for equal civil liberties to their labouring peers and recognises it as a reasonable response to economic hardship within a patriarchal society (Campbell, 1997; Høigård & Finstad, 1992; McLeod, 1982; Pheterson, 1986; Phoenix, 1999). That is to say that in a society that privileges male sexuality and desire, sex work is a form of labour that engages with that structure and mobilises it for economic gain. Academics have also contributed arguments central to this debate. Henry and Farvid (2017) refer to the aspects of sex work that require specific types of labour such as 'body work', or 'emotional work', which directly refers to the physical and emotional work required by being in the service sector (Abel et al, 2010; Hochschild, 1979; Sanders, 2004; Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Wolkowitz, 2002). Academics have recognised this labour in the boundary maintenance that sex workers establish to operate safely within physically and emotionally intensive occupations (Chapkis, 1997). The data reflected this maintenance of boundaries to keep themselves safe while working, with all five participants going by alias'. They referenced that doing so reinforces a boundary and the professional nature of the interaction. Other tactics they used to ensure their offline identity entailed creating new email addresses to sign up to social media with, keeping any personal social media pages separate and ensuring their faces were removed from content if they were a non-facing sex worker. Riley takes particular care with her privacy and

requires an NDA to be signed to ensure clients and anyone else she reveals her face to are contractually bound to preserve her anonymity. The findings of this study confirm that sex work is a form of labour, and specifically, describes the additional labour required to establish and maintain professional and privacy boundaries while online. The data reflected this maintenance and the ubiquity of labour present within online sex work. The participants insisted that sex work is just like any other form of labour and should come with the same respect and be permitted without judgment.

As a digital medium, online sex work occurs via a myriad of technological modalities of work. Sex workers can operate through webcams, instant messaging tools, video messages, text or telephone calls and the ubiquity of the internet facilitates accessibility to services at all times. The new-found modalities of work offer increased safety and creativity for sex workers that allow them to curate a presence and profitable lifestyle as they see fit. Now recognised as ‘sexual entrepreneurs’, they are a part of the enterprising class that harnesses the digital tools and resources to create a profitable online presence that allows them to self-manage their time and income (Harvey & Gill, 2011). Sam echoes this by reflecting on the flexibility that online sex work offers her as a disabled and neurodiverse sex worker. She finds she is able to assert a level of autonomy over her life that is not achievable in a standard Westernised work schedule. She also asserts that due to the accessibility of this occupation, it is beneficial to low-income folks who struggle or are underqualified for other jobs. Social media offers itself as a medium through which users can build an audience and support and promote themselves through a type of entrepreneurialism that directly provides economic vitality to the individual, as opposed to a company or government (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015; Marwick, 2015).

Each of the participants cited this type of user-generated content and the extensive skills and effort that they invest in their online presence to boost their profit potential. Riley refers to all of the unchargeable hours touching up and regrading her content to protect her identity online, but also to avoid censorship. All of the participants referred to their use of Instagram's tools, particularly the tools preserved for business accounts such as going live and tagging brands in content on their stories. They reported making use of cross-platform interactions with their clients and offering a more personalised booking experience through the use of Instagram's tools and affordances. Sam described disguising the purchase of access to a more risqué Instagram page that was set to private under the guise of purchasing a coffee, to deter censorship. The propagation of user-generated content is critical for online sex workers to be able to promote their presence and build a loyal client base, or potential brand affiliations. This type of digital labour requires significant organisation and skill to prevail and maximise profits (Rand, 2019) and the data demonstrates a fluency in digital labour that the participants must have, to ensure the viability of their occupation and financial position as online sex workers.

Patriarchal Bargain

In a society that values female chastity and subjugation, sex workers and women live under constraints that are constantly negotiated, resisted and fought against. The oppression these values impose endangers the lives of sex workers who are afraid to seek help, or unable to seek help because they have fewer avenues of support offered to them. As a form of resistance, women may utilise tactics to bargain within patriarchal constraints. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) coined this a patriarchal bargain. It entails the awareness of the ways that patriarchy oppresses women, and women acquiescing to some subjugation in exchange for exploiting it in another way. The patriarchal bargain articulates the nuances of power

and how it is constantly contested. Sex work is perhaps the ultimate illustration of a patriarchal bargain within a sex-work feminism lens. Female sex workers acknowledge the sexualisation and exploitation that is forced upon them under a patriarchal regime, and in yielding to that are able to invert the power to assert a level of control over it and exploit the system that seeks to oppress them. There is a clear awareness of those forces and an equally clear acceptance, in exchange for agency, that is made by the participants in this study. Jordan articulates this point by admitting that “I'm going to be sexualized no matter what. So being able to take back control over that situation and profit from it is an empowering feeling”. Sam reiterates this point, suggesting that sex workers are shamed because they are putting a price on something that should be offered to men freely and submissively.

> *I've been sexualized in every single job I've had. I figured I might as well be able to put a price on it and earn a decent amount.*

By asserting control over the transaction, she posits that others find it intimidating or perceive her as a victim of patriarchy. She instead engages in a patriarchal bargain and sees it as exploiting and profiting off the male gaze, and interactions that have been imposed on her since her adolescence. This theme of empowerment found through sex work was a recurring theme throughout the data. The participants reported a sense of freedom, control and empowerment through their online sex work. Riley reflected on a deep connection with her online persona suggesting that she feels more herself when in that role than in her real life. Kai shared how empowered sex work makes her feel in her own body. She reflects on feeling more in control over her body by being able to actively decide to present her sexuality, rather than it being forced upon her. She has control over what type of content

she wants to share and greater control over who can access it. The data also suggests sex work is a helpful tool to reclaim autonomy over their bodies after instances of sexual assault or body image-related issues.

Across the data, the participants unanimously expressed feeling empowered, citing the agency and control that they are able to assert over their bodies, their economic situation, their lifestyles, privacy and their identities. This notion is supported by supplementary research in this field that cites the agency sex workers are able to assert over their bodies and the control over their identity elicits can be deeply pleasurable and empowering (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). In a society that works to repress female sexuality and shame sex workers, the autonomy afforded to them through online sex work is a powerful source of validation and freedom that is evident in this research. In this way, sex workers are able to counteract the oppressive forces that aim to subjugate them and find ways to take back a sense of control as they have done throughout history. While this research aligns with this frame of reference, it also deploys a sex work feminist framework that takes a more nuanced approach and avoids a reductive binary between the two feminist lenses. A critical lens recognises the inequalities and injustices that exist for women under a patriarchal regime but also accounts for the agency of sex workers and the validity of their work (Rand, 2019). Four out of the five participants shared this lens. They made a clear distinction that although they find sex work to be empowering, they recognise that it isn’t always. For some folks it is life or death, the difference between being housed or not, or an occupation not of their own free will. Sam insists that for some it's just a job and a way to make ends meet and need not be empowering to be valid. She, along with the other three participants, recognise the varying situations that sex workers are subjected to, and

the volatile nature of it that can be rampant. Therefore, while sex work has the potential to be empowering, for many it is not. However, it is important to recognise its validity as a job and the sex workers as people. The distinction made by the participants directly reflects a sex-work feminism frame. There is a clear understanding of the forces that may hold sex workers under subjugation, but there is also a resounding theme of empowerment that can still be possessed through sex work. It dually recognises patriarchal structures and the agency beholden by sex workers.

Critical Contextualisation of Sex-Worker-Based Issues

This research highlights the value of social media platforms for community, freedom, identity work and empowerment. It proves its ability to host and facilitate marginalised communities but reveals that it could do so with greater awareness and care. The participants unanimously expressed awareness of this context and suggested changes to be implemented by Instagram to make it a safer more inviting space for not only sex workers but other marginalised communities. A reoccurring notion was that of consistency. The participants expressed deep-seated frustration and defeat with the discrepancies in the guidelines and the unjust enforcement of censorship against them. They insisted they had read and abided by the guidelines, yet still encountered censorship regardless of their efforts. To rectify this issue, they suggested better consistency and clarity with their guidelines and how they will be enforced. An external auditing process could also neutralise some of the prejudices embedded in Instagram's censorship mechanisms. A second common suggestion was greater education. Starting in high school, learning not only about sex work but ethical pornography, consent, the illusion of pornography and sexuality. They aptly highlighted that stigma stems from ignorance and education was the greatest tool to

counteract the taboo nature of sex work. Open conversations not only in education settings but in workplaces and amongst our peers also was a suggestion to work against the stigma of sex work. A frequent issue that was discussed was the argument of keeping the youth safe from explicit content. While Riley understands the need to protect children from unsafe content, she insists that's not her responsibility and she shouldn't be bearing the brunt of that. Instagram could assert stricter age restrictions, set certain pages with age barriers, or have parents either keep them off social media or have open conversations about content they may encounter while on the internet if they are to be on it. Jordan suggested greater representation in Meta as a conglomerate and importantly in positions of power, would ensure that those from marginalised communities could have their perspectives represented. When major players like Instagram are perpetuating ideologies that work to marginalise sex workers and those from vulnerable communities, it fuels stigmatisation and perpetuates a society that is inherently dangerous to the livelihoods of those who sit at the margins. If they could mobilise the immense power they have for hosting open conversations and challenging closed-minded ideals, it would revolutionise the social media landscape for marginalised groups and work to combat the offline stigma these groups face.

CONCLUSION

Like many other marginalised groups in society, sex workers have constantly fought and negotiated for their rights within a system that was designed to exclude them. On the basis of patriarchal virtues, sex workers have historically faced stigmatisation and marginalisation. Those values have continued to prevail and have filtered into the contemporary fabric of society. This research aimed to capture this contamination by exploring the lived experiences of sex workers on Instagram in the face of censorship. The findings suggest that Instagram's censorship practices are enacted unequally. That is to say that the sex workers who participated in this study expressed instances of unwarranted censorship and increased censorship due to aspects of their identity. They unanimously reported increased censorship due to being a sex worker but also described intensified censorship if they sat at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities. This finding correlates to offline socio-political structures that replicate this notion of marginalising those outside of the social norm and encouraging the appearance of a monolithic society. It illuminates the hidden and largely unchallenged power that platforms hold in the digital era to be cultural curators and shape societal ideals.

The second finding outlined the detrimental effects that this type of biased censorship had on a community that is founded on historical marginalisation. The participants expressed negative effects on their mental health, their income, their sense of community and identity and a continuation of the stigma they experience offline. As an agent of marginalisation, censorship silences and isolates users when it is exercised unfairly and with bias, which as this research showed, is the case for these sex workers.

Digital marginalisation for a group that finds a strong sense of community online and job opportunities is acutely harmful and destructive. However, the third finding demonstrates the tenacity of sex workers to combat adversity and find empowerment within a prejudicial system. The participants find empowerment in reclaiming their body autonomy and have a strong awareness of skills and tactics to regain power despite censorship. The last finding of this research is the desire and passion the participants have for changes and improvements to be made. Particularly these changes focussed on education as a tool to combat both ignorant social practices, but also stigma, which proved itself to be a central pillar for perpetuating harm against sex workers.

This research has been an exploration into the lived experiences of sex workers but has also been a critique of the reckless use of power by platforms through censorship practices. It highlights a much bigger issue that affects not only sex workers but all other marginalised groups and those concerned with dispelling patriarchal power. The infiltration of offline social structures into the digital space is a phenomenon that needs greater attention and interrogation as platforms are increasingly the leading site of social and cultural discourse. It calls into question the ethics of the safe harbour law that affords these platforms such immense power which, as this research found, results in very real and tangible effects for those whom it doesn't serve. further research could do a great deal to bring awareness to and challenge this acquisition of power. A gap in this area that became apparent through this research was an analysis of how platforms are regulated. These powerful corporations go to great lengths to hide their moderation mechanisms: an example of the exercise of power that should be further interrogated. Further research into platform censorship could support and enable a commentary on the positive effects of

censorship in combatting terrorism and hate speech. This research also specifically focussed on Instagram to provide enough space for a deeper exploration of this platform, but an exploration of other social media platforms' censorship methods would also prove valuable to build a fuller picture of the practice.

More pertinent to the specifics of this research aim, is an opening to further investigate the lived experiences of other marginalised groups on social media platforms. Particularly the use of queer theory to frame a response as opposed to feminist theory. I realise there is a strong female-centric discourse threaded through this inquiry that overlooks a queer, or even male-centred response which limits this research, but it was simply beyond the scope of this work. I believe a focus or greater inclusion of male sex workers would also be a great asset to this area of research. Another limitation was the size sample size. Five sex workers were interviewed regarding their lived experience with censorship, and this allowed a deeper, more open-ended exploration into their lives which was critical to the qualitative nature of this research. However, both a larger qualitative study and/or a much larger quantitative study would provide the data to comment more generally on the ideas explored in this research.

Dating back to medieval times, sex workers have been on the frontlines of feminism and activist movements fighting for their civil rights. Notoriously overlooked and disregarded, they relentlessly mobilise tools and tactics to manoeuvre through subjugation and find spirit in their identity and community. However, just as sex workers are overlooked, so too is the power beholden by social media platforms. I hope this research draws attention to this paradox and the capacity of platforms like Instagram to operate as cultural

gatekeepers, setting and reinforcing social norms. Disguised by the LED light of a screen, patriarchal ideologies are enacted via social media to silence and isolate a community.

However, social media is also a site of sex worker activism and comradery that allows sex workers to reclaim their voice and share their lived experiences, as demonstrated by this research. The participants placed immense value on their online community as a place to share stories, educate and support one another in a society that looks to silence and ridicule them. I hope this research serves as a snapshot of the way that social structures and ideologies contemporarily shape the lives of sex workers, but most importantly I hope it is a commentary on the way that sex workers are able to find empowerment and be resilient in the face of ongoing discrimination.

This research has highlighted the way that marginalisation and stigmatisation can have drastic and destructive effects on individuals within vulnerable communities. It is a pandemic that has proliferated from anarchic ideologies that aim to uphold social homogeny. I concur with the participants of this study that suggest greater education and open dialogue is the antidote to stigma and shame. Discourse centring marginalised communities and perspectives that challenge the status quo is the catalyst for change. While platforms abuse their position of power as cultural curators, they paradoxically hold immense potential to be a vehicle of change by presenting alternative identities and views. I would hope social media platforms would work to improve their censorship biases and hold space for different types of identities and perspectives. Combined with an effort to introduce and educate younger people about sexuality in schools, the next generation could be the leading generation for better representation and inclusivity.

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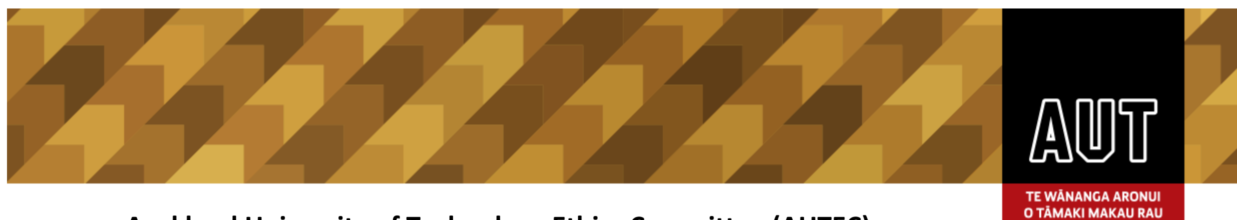
Appendix A: Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
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T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
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www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

16 November 2021

Jennie Watts
Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

Dear Jennie

Re Ethics Application: **21/380 A thematic analysis of the lived experiences of New Zealand sex workers who are censored on Instagram**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 16 November 2024.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: mtd8301@autuni.ac.nz; rufus.mcewan@aut.ac.nz

Appendix B.1: Indicative Interview Questions

Indicative questions

Sex work

1. Tell me about yourself and how you define online sex work
    a. Tell me about your online sex work
2. What is your perception of the stigma surrounding sex work?
3. I'm aware that some folk feel censored to a greater degree because of certain aspects of their identity, does that strike a cord with you?
    a. Because of your gender, sexual orientation, race, age etc.

Instagram

4. How long have you been on Instagram for?
5. How do you engage with Instagram?
    a. For personal use or as a business
6. What was your experience of being censored?
    a. How many times have you been censored?
    b. To what degree were you/or are you censored?
7. Are you aware of shadowbanning as a tool of censorship?
    a. Have you experienced shadowbanning?
    b. How did you know?
8. Has being censored had an impact on your mental health?
9. Has being censored had an impact on your occupation?
10. Have you ever read Instagram's community guidelines?
11. Does the threat of censorship impact the way you use Instagram?
12. Is there anything you would like Instagram to do differently regarding censorship?

Appendix B.2: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

30.09.2021

Project Title

On the corner again: an exploration into the lived experience of sex workers who are censored on Instagram.

An Invitation

My name is Georgia, I am 25 years old and am currently working towards a master's degree in Communication Studies – of which this research project contributes to and I would love for you to take part if you choose to.

I am looking for Instagram users who:

- **Live in New Zealand**
- **Are over the age of 20**
- **Are fluent in English**
- **Identify as a sex worker**
- **Have experienced censorship before**

Here, censorship refers to any of the following: flagged or deleted content, account suspension or deletion, or if you perceive to have been shadowbanned

I am working towards this qualification with the help and guidance of my project supervisor, Dr Jennie Watts.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of sex workers who are censored on Instagram as perceived by you (the participant). I am aiming to explore the different types of censorship practices experienced by sex workers, i.e. content flagging, removal and/or account-deletion by the platform, self-censorship and shadowbanning. I will be involving folk who define themselves as a sex worker with an active Instagram account and have experienced any form of censorship previously. With this research I am seeking to understand the potential material effects on the income of a sex worker who is censored online, as well as the social and mental effects.

The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations and is a contribution towards attaining a masters degree.

My ideological position:

It is important to recognise that I draw on critical theories that highlight systems of power that work to oppress and delegitimise marginalised communities. My position is centred on critiquing these systems of oppression and advocating for the full rights and autonomy of sex workers.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

There were two methods of recruitment used for this research which have led to you receiving this information sheet. As an Instagram user myself, I follow and have noted users in the sex worker community who have publicly expressed being censored. I had then asked if they would be willing to share this opportunity to participate in this research on their page, through which those who were interested have followed through to the digital form and progressed to here.

Secondly, you may be here as a result of an open call posted by NZPC, with which you may have taken an interest and wanted to learn more and has followed the same process as above.

If you meet all the criteria noted in the invitation section of this sheet, then you possess invaluable knowledge and experiences that I am seeking to explore for the purpose of this research. Please disregard this invitation if you do not meet ALL of the above criteria.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is completely your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

Appendix B.3.i: Consent Form

Consent Form

Project title: **On the corner again: an exploration into the lived experience of sex workers who are censored on Instagram.**

Project Supervisor: ***Dr Jennie Watts***

Researcher: ***Georgia Versey***

○ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 20/09/2021.

○ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

○ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

○ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.

○ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.

○ I agree to take part in this research.

○ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Participant's signature: ....

Participant's name: ....

Participant's email address: ....

Date: ..../............/............

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on** type the date on which the final approval was granted **AUTEC Reference number** type the AUTEC reference number*

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

Appendix B.3.ii: Oral Consent Form

Oral Consent Protocol

For use when interviews are being conducted by videoconference.

Project title: **On the corner again: an exploration into the lived experience of sex workers who are censored on Instagram.**

Project Supervisor: ***Dr Jennie Watts***

Researcher: ***Georgia Versey***

The participant joins the videoconference

- ○ Please state your name and contact details as a means to confirm identity?
- ○ Do you agree to my recording your consent to participate?

If they agree, then the record function will be activated and they will be asked the following:

- ○ Have you read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 20/09/2021?
- ○ Do you have any questions about the research?
- ○ Do you understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that the interview will also be audio-recorded and transcribed?
- ○ Do you understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (your choice) and that you may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way? This may be done by telling me you would like to terminate the interview, or you may end the call yourself.
- ○ Do you understand that if you withdraw from the study then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used? However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.
- ○ Do you agree to take part in this research?
- ○ Do you wish to receive a summary of the research findings? (please tick one): Yes○ No○
- ○ Do you want me to send you a copy of the audio recording for this consent? Yes○ No○
- ○ Please confirm you name and contact details (identity confirmation?)

Participant's name: ....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

....

....

....

....

I will now turn off the recording of the Consent and then will start a separate recording for the interview.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted AUTEC Reference number type the AUTEC reference number

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

Appendix C: Sample of Thematic Analysis

06:52	Especially for those of us that rely on it for a business and a way of connecting with our community.
	Are you aware of shadowbanning as a tool of censorship and have you experienced it and how did you know?
Full handle + drops of engagement = shadowban	Yeah, so this is such a common tactic that we're aware of now. You have to type in my full handle for my page to show up on Instagram and some days randomly my engagement will drop massively.
07:18 Secretive form of censorship that they don't have to disclose = unbridled power	So that's usually how I know, but that's one of the worst tools they use because they can just do it like they can just do it without ever notifying you that is happening or admitting to you that that's what they're doing.
	Has being censored had an impact on your mental health?
	Oh yeah, definitely. I think just making me feel like what I'm doing is wrong and unacceptable is like a fucked up feeling.
Effects on body positivity and identity affirmations Stressful to income = financial and mental impact	I put so much work into loving my body and who I am and when I'm expressing that in a way that they're telling me it's not acceptable. It's really hard sometimes and when it gets in the way of being able to do my job and earning an income is hugely stressful. This platform is such an effective tool for this work but being constantly under the threat of losing it or having content that have worked hard to produce removed just feels degrading.
Capacity to work for the better, but being degrading Instagram as a place of support, loss of that = effects mental health	But mostly this is the place where I come to for support and to connect with other creators and my Friends. So to have that community be taken away or threatened of being taken away is terrifying and definitely takes a toll on my mental health. Like those are the people that helped me accept who I am.
	And has censored had an impact on your occupation?
08:42 Loosing Instagram affecting work = financial impact	It has, but I think I've been lucky in the sense that when I made a new account after my first one was deleted, I've been able to grow my following past where it was before and I haven't had my accounts deleted again. But also on my first page, I was only working in the club. So it didn't affect my occupation too much, but now I work with brands and my Instagram page as a way to entice people to my OnlyFans. To lose it at this point, would definitely impact my work.
09:16	***Have you ever read Instagram's community guidelines?***
Purposefully vague so they can choose when to enforce the rules = power	Yeah, countless times to try and figure out what I'm doing wrong, but I think they're purposely vague so that they can pick and choose when they want to enforce the rules.
	Does the threat of censorship impact the way you use Instagram?
	I try not to let it affect what I post.
09:40	I definitely try my best to be within the guidelines, but like I say, I think they pick and choose when to enforce them. And it's more about deeper issues than whether that is offensive or not.