Perceived Stigma and Stigma Management Strategies Among Online Male Sex Workers

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Abstract

Technological advances like the Internet and Internet-enabled devices, such as smartphones, and the dating and hookup websites and apps available to the users of them, have transformed the nature, organization, and practice of sex work in fundamental ways. Some scholars have argued that these changes have contributed to a normalization of male exchange sex (i.e., providing sex in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, or goods), and in so doing, have diminished the stigma historically associated with it. However, little empirical research has focused on how male sex workers (MSWs), including those engaged in what might be called informal or incidental or casual sex work and primarily use dating/hookup websites and apps not designed for commercial to meet clients experience and manage stigma. To help fill this gap, we analyzed interview data from 180 MSWs who engaged in exchange sex and met their client on dating/hookup websites and apps. Most participants felt that sex work was still highly stigmatized in society at large, but many also felt it was generally accepted—if not completely normalized—within the gay community. Nevertheless, many struggled with the emotional impact of engaging in a stigmatized practice and most employed one or more of the following stigma management strategies: information management, distancing, discrediting the discreditors, asserting no other option existed, and challenging or reframing stereotypes and narratives. These findings indicate that MSWs, even those engaged in informal or incidental sex work, who meet clients on dating/hookup websites and apps are still strongly affected by sex work-related stigma and seek to manage it in various ways. Future research should investigate the sources of internalized stigma among this under-studied population of sex workers.

Keywords Stigma · Men who have sex with men · Male sex workers · Stigma management

Introduction

Engagement in exchange sex (i.e., providing sex in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, or goods) has historically been highly stigmatized (Benoit et al., 2018; Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Sanders, 2008). For male-for-male sex workers (MSWs), the stigma ascribed to commercial sex may be compounded by the stigma associated with homosexuality, resulting in what has been referred to as a “double stigma” (Kumar et al., 2017; Minichiello et al., 2013; Vanwesenbeeck, 2013). The deleterious effects of stigma on both mental and physical health have been examined across a number of different stigmatized identities and practices. Among men who have sex with men (MSM), researchers have found that experiencing stigma is positively associated with anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, substance use, reduced use of health services, and engagement in HIV-related risk behavior (Eaton et al., 2018; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2011; Oldenburg et al., 2015; Stahlman et al., 2016). Though fewer studies have examined the impacts of stigma on MSWs, their findings are largely consistent with those of MSM, revealing associations between sex work-related stigma and depression as well as engagement in condomless anal sex (Oldenburg et al., 2014; Valente et al., 2020).
Recently, some scholars have claimed that technological advances have brought about fundamental changes in the nature, organization, and practice of male sex work that have contributed to its normalization (MacPhail et al., 2015; McLean, 2015; Minichiello et al., 2015). The advances that perhaps have had the greatest impact are the Internet, mobile technologies, and Internet-enabled devices such as smartphones, as well as the dating and hookup websites and apps available to the users of these technologies. Although the Internet has created many forms of technology-mediated sex work, the current study focused on the use of online technologies for facilitating in-person commercial sexual exchanges.

It has been argued that the Internet has greatly increased the visibility and accessibility of commercial sex between men, allowing it to be both presented and perceived as “an everyday commodity in the marketplace” rather than transgressive or clandestine behavior (MacPhail et al., 2015, p. 483). In addition, the greater anonymity, safety, and earning potential associated with Internet-based sex work, as compared to street-based sex work, has likely increased the number of men willing to participate in the practice, making it much more common (Bimbı, 2007; Jones, 2015; Minichiello et al., 2013, 2015). Indeed, Cunningham and Kendall (2011) have argued that the growth of online sex work is not primarily accounted for by the migration of outdoor workers to online environments but rather assert, based on their empirical work, “Overall, online solicitation appears to represent an augmentation of the prostitution market, not simply a displacement of street walkers” (p. 274).

Moreover, the advent of the Internet and mobile technology, particularly smartphone technology and dating and hookup websites and apps, have also contributed to the rise of what has been referred to as “informal” (McLean, 2015) or “incidental” (Morris, 2018, 2021) sex workers. These include sex workers who primarily engage in occasional, casual, and unsolicited commercial sex usually arranged through social media platforms (Morris, 2021). This form of sex work allows users of dating/hookup websites and apps to solicit or accept propositions for paid sexual encounters without ever advertising or even identifying as sex workers. As McLean (2015) noted, the considerable frequency with which such online solicitation occurs has likely normalized transactional sex for many of the users of these sites.

If technological advances have in fact largely normalized male sex work, this could have important implications for how Internet-based MSWs experience and manage sex work-related stigma. Indeed, MacPhail et al. (2015) argued that the digitalization and subsequent normalization of the male sex work industry was in some ways a “positive development for managing [the] stigma” traditionally associated with commercial sex (p. 491). They noted that the ability to advertise online has not only increased the popularity and visibility of male sex work, but also has taken many MSWs off the streets, weakening the associations between sex work and violence/deviance and affording MSWs a greater sense of safety and legitimacy. In addition, they noted that the anonymity associated with Internet-based sex work allowed MSWs to avoid harassment or embarrassment related to their engagement in a stigmatized practice. McLean (2012), however, noted that Internet-based MSWs are more prone to social isolation than other MSWs, a circumstance which he argued could exacerbate the internalization of sex work-related stigma. While both of these claims are plausible, more empirical work is needed to fully understand how Internet-based MSWs, particularly those engaged in informal or incidental sex work, perceive, experience, and manage sex work-related stigma.

Previous work on stigma and male sex work has covered several topics: MSWs’ awareness and perceptions of the stigma associated with commercial sex; the extent to which such stigma is reproduced or challenged within the gay community; the extent to which MSWs experience internalized or felt stigma; and the ways in which MSWs manage and/or resist the stigma they encounter.

**Male Sex Workers’ Awareness and Perceptions of Stigma**

Findings regarding MSWs’ awareness and perceptions of sex work-related stigma suggest that regardless of the venue through which they meet clients, most MSWs believe that sex work is looked down upon by society as a whole (Benoit et al., 2020; Koken et al., 2004; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007). For example, in a qualitative study of 46 male Internet escorts in New York City, investigators found that 56% were highly aware of society’s negative view of sex work. One participant commented that society believed sex work was “wrong,” while another contended that the term prostitute connoted a “criminal identity” (Koken et al., 2004, p. 21). Similarly, in a qualitative investigation of 30 Australian sex workers operating through a variety of different venues, both male and female participants identified several disparaging attributes commonly ascribed to sex workers by society, including drug addiction, promiscuity, disease, and lack of agency (Nolan, 2015). However, there is also evidence that MSWs believe street-based sex work carries more stigma than other forms of sex work (such as Internet or agency-based sex work) (Argento et al., 2018; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007; Oldenburg et al., 2014). For example, a qualitative study of 21 Canadian Internet and agency-based MSWs revealed that while most participants felt that sex work was stigmatized, many attributed such stigma to “public representations that focused on street prostitution and ignored other aspects of the industry—in particular, gay male escorts” (Morrison & Whitehead, 2007, pp. 207–208). Similarly, in a qualitative study of 39 street and Internet-based MSWs, several participants indicated that online sex work was more desirable and less stigmatized than street-based sex work.
One participant in particular said that engaging in street-based sex work would make him look like a criminal. In contrast, Internet-based sex work felt “more in line with [his] normal everyday world” (Argento et al., 2018, p. 2001).

**Perceptions of Sex Work within the Gay Community**

Findings regarding the extent to which MSWs believe sex work is stigmatized within the gay community have been somewhat mixed (Koken et al., 2004; McLean, 2012; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007). In their study of male Internet escorts in New York City, for example, Koken et al. (2009) found that while participants were aware of the societal stigma surrounding sex work, some “argued that subcultural norms within the gay community framed being paid for sex as a sign of prestige” (p. 223). However, in Morrison and Whitehead’s (2007) study of Internet and agency-based MSWs, participants expressed a variety of opinions regarding how sex work was perceived within the gay community. Some felt that gay men held views about sex work that were equally, if not more, disparaging than those held by heterosexual men. Others believed that gay men were less likely than members of the general public to denigrate MSWs, particularly those who were considered “higher end” workers (p. 209). Similarly, in a report of findings from a qualitative study of 23 Internet-based MSWs in Australia, McLean (2012) noted that while one participant “believed many gay men harbored negative perceptions of sex workers,” another had received “polarized” responses after disclosing his engagement in sex work to gay male peers (i.e., some found it sexy, others found it distasteful). McLean (2012) argued that such accounts reflected the “paradoxical tension between the sexualisation and stigmatization of sex work in the gay milieu” (p. 73).

**Internalized/Felt Stigma**

Studies that have examined the extent to which MSWs internalize sex work-related stigma or otherwise feel shame or guilt about selling sex (internalized or felt stigma) have also yielded mixed findings. For example, in their study of male and female sex workers in Canada, Benoit et al. (2020) found that 25% of participants reported “the acceptance of stigmatising labels and stereotypes” or admitted “to their own ‘differentness’ due to feelings of shame and blame” (p. 87). However, they also noted that some participants highlighted the positive components of sex work and were able to derive a sense of power from their engagement in the practice. Similarly, both Morrison and Whitehead (2007) and Koken et al. (2004) found that while some participants experienced negative feelings about their engagement in sex work, others felt quite positively about the fact that they sold sex. Indeed, one participant in Koken et al.’s (2004) study insisted that he was not ashamed of his engagement in sex work, describing it instead as a “wonderful thing” (p. 22). In his study of Internet-based MSWs, McLean (2012) similarly noted that some participants “portray[ed] an air of ‘glamour’ inherent in their work, enjoying the opportunity to fraternise with ‘rich, rich regulars.’” However, he reasoned that these participants may have actually been attempting to “offset stigma” by depicting sex work in such a manner, as many felt shame despite having a wealthy clientele (p. 73).

**Stigma Management Strategies**

One finding that has been fairly consistent across studies is that MSWs often employ stigma management strategies in order to mitigate the potential emotional and social consequences of engaging in a stigmatized practice. The most commonly cited strategies (all of which have been found to be employed by street-based MSWs, Internet-based MSWs, and indoor/agency-based MSWs) can be grouped into three broad categories: information control, distancing techniques, and reframing or challenging traditional stereotypes and narratives. Information control, a term that was originally coined by sociologist Goffman (1963) in his seminal work on stigma management, involves attempts to avoid judgement, rejection, ridicule, or negative treatment by concealing information about one’s engagement in sex work from all individuals or all but a select few (Benoit et al., 2020; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Koken et al., 2004; McLean, 2012; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007; M. D. Smith et al., 2015). For example, in their study of male and female sex workers, Benoit et al. (2020) noted that the most frequently reported stigma management strategy was information control, with over half of participants either completely or partially concealing their engagement in sex work from others. Similarly, in his study of Internet-based MSWs, McLean (2012) noted that few participants were “truly open” about their engagement in sex work (p. 73). Goffman (1963) labeled the strategy of hiding one’s stigmatizing condition as “passing” because the individual tries to avoid stigmatization by passing as a “normal” (i.e., someone without the condition).

In addition to information control, scholars have also found that some MSWs employ distancing techniques to manage sex work-related stigma (Dawthorne, 2018; Henriksen et al., 2020; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005; Oselin, 2018; M. D. Smith et al., 2015). That is, they seek to separate themselves from others engaged in sex work whom they perceive to be less reputable, thus diverting stigma away from themselves and onto others. Based on the available literature, this strategy appears to be particularly common among Internet and agency-based MSWs who seek to differentiate themselves from street-based and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged sex workers (Henriksen et al., 2020; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005; M. D. Smith et al., 2015). For example, in a qualitative study of 21 (primarily) Internet-based MSWs in Denmark,
Henriksen et al. (2020) found that several participants “sought to clearly dissociate themselves from those who sell sex out of need in general and female sex sellers in particular” (p. 449). One participant even said that MSWs should not be considered “real prostitutes” because they, unlike their female counterparts, sell sex by choice. By creating a boundary between himself and “real prostitutes,” Henriksen et al. argued that this participant “actively resisted the stigma of selling sex. He distanced himself from those who, unlike himself, are in need [of] care and whose subjectivity aligns with the discourse of sex selling as a social problem” (p. 449). However, this strategy is not necessarily exclusive to Internet and agency-based MSWs. In fact, in a study of street-based MSWs in Chicago, Oselin (2018) found that participants who identified as heterosexual often managed stigma by distinguishing themselves from gay/bisexual MSWs or MSWs who derived sexual pleasure from their commercial sexual encounters with men.

Lastly, scholars have found that some MSWs manage (or even resist) stigma by challenging or reframing negative stereotypes or prevailing narratives about sex work. A number of different reframing/challenging techniques have been identified in the literature. For example, several scholars have found that MSWs try to resist stigma by reframing sex work as a legitimate profession, thus challenging the notion that it is any less respectable than other forms of employment (Benoit et al., 2020; Browne & Minichiello, 1996; Koken et al., 2004; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005; Oselin, 2018). Other MSWs have been found to reframe sex work as a valuable service that meets the needs of others, allowing them to view commercial sex as a meaningful occupation instead of one that warrants embarrassment or shame (Benoit et al., 2020; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Koken et al., 2004; M. D. Smith et al., 2013). Finally, scholars have noted that some MSWs resist stigma by rejecting the notion that sex work involves exploitation, coercion, or desperation, portraying it instead as an occupation involving agency and choice (Dawthorne, 2018; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005; N. J. Smith, 2012).

The studies described above all offer useful information regarding how MSWs experience and manage the stigma associated with commercial sex. They also provide some evidence that while Internet-based MSWs may experience or perceive less stigma than their street-based counterparts, they are still affected by sex work-related stigma and still employ a variety of stigma management strategies. Notably, however, none of the studies cited above that included Internet-based MSWs paid specific attention to a potentially very prevalent (McLean, 2015) form of technology-mediated sex work—informal or incidental sex work. In contrast to more professional Internet-based MSWs (such as those who use sites that are explicitly designed for sex work), MSWs engaged in casual or more informal/incidental sex work using dating/hookup websites and apps may typically only sell sex sporadically or opportunistically (e.g., when approached by others making unsolicited propositions) and may not identify as a sex workers. Given that in most of these cases, commercial sex may not be a central feature of their day-to-day lives or identities, they may experience and/or manage the stigma associated with sex work in different ways than other Internet-based MSWs. To our knowledge, only one study (Morris, 2018) had examined the experiences and management of stigma among this specific population. Using data from interviews with 50 young sexual minority men from England and Wales who met paying partners after being solicited on dating/hookup websites or apps, Morris (2018) found that most participants avoided adopting conventional sex worker identity labels (e.g., sex worker, escort, etc.). Though they had all engaged in transactional sexual encounters, many argued that their engagement was too irregular, infrequent, or incidental to be considered professional sex work. Others emphasized that they did not advertise paid sexual services or solicit paid encounters. As such, they did not consider themselves to be professional sex workers. However, their avoidance of conventional sex worker identity labels did not mean they were not aware of or affected by sex work-related stigma. In fact, Morris noted that several participants had internalized such stigma. In addition, he argued that participants’ avoidance of conventional sex worker identity labels may have actually been a stigma management strategy.

Morris’s (2018) work is informative and a valuable contribution to the literature. However, his sample were all young (none older than 28, median age 22), all came from cities in England and Wales, and only included MSWs who were solicited for paid sex (i.e., those who had never advertised or solicited themselves). Consequently, his results may have limited generalizability to the broader population of MSWs using dating/hookup websites and apps to meet paying partners. Further research on how this new, understudied population of MSWs experience and attempt to manage sex work-related stigma is therefore needed. Such work is important given the potential adverse consequences of stigma (noted above). In addition, scholars have argued that while some stigma management strategies may mitigate its harmful effects and enable MSWs to feel unashamed, if not proud, of their work (Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Koken et al., 2014), others may cause social isolation or emotional stress or preclude MSWs from engaging in services designed for sex workers (Henriksen et al., 2020; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Koken & Bimbi, 2014; Koken et al., 2004; McLean, 2012). As such, understanding which stigma management strategies informal/incidental MSWs use is also of particular importance.

**Method**

**Participants**

The data for this report come from a study of 180 MSM who had engaged in exchange sex during the prior three months.
and primarily met clients on dating and hookup websites and apps not designed for commercial sex. Exchange sex was defined as providing sex in exchange money, drugs, shelter, or goods. To be eligible for study participation, respondents had to: (1) have assigned male sex at birth and currently identify as men, genderqueer, or nonbinary; (2) be 18–45 years old; (3) self-report never having tested positive for HIV; (4) self-identify as Black/African-American, White/Caucasian, or Hispanic/Latino of any race; (5) report being fluent in English; (6) reside in the areas of Atlanta, GA, Baltimore, MD, Boston, MA, Chicago, IL, Detroit, MI, New York City, NY, Philadelphia, PA or Washington, D.C.; (7) report having engaged in exchange sex with at least two different male partners in the prior three months; (8) report anal sex (protected or unprotected) with at least one of those two exchange partners from the prior three months; and (9) report having initially met at least one of their exchange partners (of the past 3 months) on a hookup/dating app or website.

Transgender and female sex workers were not included because they use different venues for finding clients, have different risk considerations, and have unique issues related to sex-work stigma associated with their gender identity; thus, both populations would be better investigated with a different study design. The lower age limit was set at 18 because the hookup apps/websites where MSM meet exchange partners require users to be age 18 or older. The upper age limit was set at 45 because data we had previously gathered from MSM recruited through social media platforms indicated that recent exchange sex was uncommon above that age. Participants were also required to self-report never having tested positive for HIV (i.e., have either only tested HIV-negative or never have been tested) because one aim of the larger study from which the data for this report came was to inform the development of HIV prevention interventions for MSWs. We limited participation to men who identified as Black non-Hispanic, White non-Hispanic, or Hispanic/Latino (of any race) because at the time of the study’s initiation, these three racial/ethnic groups accounted for a large majority of HIV-positive and at-risk MSM in the US (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Asian/Pacific Islanders were not included because they comprised only a small percentage of residents of the metropolitan areas from which we recruited participants (Census Public Use Microdata Sample, 2010), which would have made it extremely difficult—as supported by preliminary survey data we had collected on MSM engaged in exchange sex—to enroll a sizeable number of them. Participants were required to be sufficiently fluent in English to complete the data collection. As the majority of Latinos and nearly all non-Hispanic individuals ages 18–45 report they speak English well or very well (Census Public Use Microdata Sample, 2010), this criterion should not have significantly limited our ability to obtain a diverse sample of Latino men. The inclusion of the eight selected cities was intended to enhance generalizability of the sample, while preventing cases being sparsely distributed across the country. Participants were also required to have engaged in exchange sex with at least two different men in the past three months specifically to obtain money, drugs, housing, food, or other goods. The focus on partners of the past three months was intended to increase the likelihood of accurate recall of sexual behaviors. We required participants to have had at least two clients in the past three months to ensure that they had not simply experimented once with selling sex or were not having sex with just a single steady exchange partner. Additionally, participants were required to have had anal sex with at least one exchange partner because MSM who engage in only oral sex are at low risk of HIV acquisition. Finally, participants had to report having initially met at least one of their exchange partners (of the past 3 months) on a hookup/dating app or website because the use of these platforms to meet clients was a focus of the larger study. Quota sampling was employed to ensure a diverse sample in terms of age, race/ethnicity, and riskiness of sex with clients. The characteristics of study participants, all of whom were included in the analyses for this report, are presented in Table 1.

Recruitment of study participants occurred between October 2018 and February 2020, during which time paid study advertisements were posted on social networking and dating/hookup websites and apps popular among MSM. The advertisements, stated that researchers at the investigators’ university were seeking to interview MSM about how they negotiated sexual encounters with other men they meet on apps or websites, and directed respondents to a 3–5-min confidential screening survey. The survey elicited demographic information as well as information about respondents’ sexual practices, including engagement in exchange sex. All respondents were informed of their eligibility upon completion of the screening survey. Those determined to be eligible were asked to provide contact information so that a study staff member could reach out to them, answer any questions they might have, and provide instructions for completing the study procedures outlined below.

**Procedure**

After informed verbal consent was obtained over the phone, participants were asked to complete a 20–30-min telephone interviewer-administered questionnaire that confirmed their study eligibility and gathered additional information about their sociodemographic characteristics, sexual health, and sexual behaviors. Participants were then emailed a link to a 20–30-min online self-administered questionnaire with more specific questions about recent sexual behaviors as well as standardized questions about mental health and substance use. Lastly, participants were asked to complete an in-depth qualitative telephone interview (mean duration = 88 min).
The interview guide was developed by the study team members based on a careful review of the literature on MSW, preliminary survey data they had gathered, and their collective knowledge of the sexual behavior of MSM based on many years of research with this population. The interviews were conducted by two members of the study team who introduced themselves to participants as researchers from [blinded] University. During the interview, participants were asked to discuss (among other topics) their perceptions of the stigma associated with sex work, whether they felt such stigma affected them personally, and their disclosure or concealment of their involvement in sex work to others. Participants who completed all three study components were emailed a code redeemable for $100 on Amazon.com. Data for this report come from the in-depth qualitative interviews with participants. All interviews were conducted between October 24, 2018, and April 1, 2020. Data collection was not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic as all but 6 cases were interviewed before the March 2020 lockdowns began in U.S. cities.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded using ATLAS.ti. During the first round of coding, the two individuals who conducted the interviews identified and coded all sections in which participants answered interview questions that pertained to stigma (described above). This coded material was then used by the study team to develop a set of keywords to help identify other sections of the transcripts in which the theme of stigma might emerge. The keywords chosen included words such as dirty, guilty, gross, shame, embarrassed, whore, ho, slut, etc. The two initial coders then applied these keywords as search terms to all transcripts and read through the sections that were flagged, applying the “stigma” code when relevant. All material captured under the “stigma” code from both rounds of coding (totaling 365 pages) was then extracted. Next, it was read multiple times and coded into categories related to participants’ perceptions about the stigma associated with sex work in society at large, their perceptions of such stigma in the gay community, their feelings about their own participation in sex work and the emotional impact of those feelings, and their efforts to manage, resist, or challenge the stigma associated with engagement in sex work. Material in the final category (efforts) was conceptually grouped, through an iterative process, into a set of strategies that ranged from passively accepting the stigma associated with sex work and attempting to hide one’s involvement in it to openly and directly challenging that stigma.

While MSM engage in a variety of kinds of online sex work, our focus in this paper is on those who provide sex in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, or goods and mainly meet clients on dating/hookup websites and apps not designed for commercial sex; particularly, we were interested in how these men, experience, and manage sex work-related stigma. While many of the study participants engaged primarily in informal or incidental sex work some were more formally and actively involved in sex work and a few did advertise on more traditional sites where sex workers sought clients. Dating and hookup websites and apps (not designed for commercial sex) were their most common source of clients. Our hope is that findings from this study, which is based on one of the largest qualitative samples of MSWs to date, will contribute to a more up-to-date and comprehensive understanding of how technological advances have impacted Internet-based MSWs’ experiences and management of stigma.

| Table 1 Participant characteristics (N = 180) | n   | %   |
|-------------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Age group (in years)                      |     |     |
| 18 to 24                                  | 59  | (32.8) |
| 25 to 29                                  | 44  | (24.4) |
| 30 to 35                                  | 47  | (26.1) |
| 36 to 45                                  | 30  | (16.7) |
| Race/ethnicity                            |     |     |
| White, not Hispanic                       | 68  | (37.8) |
| Latino, any race                          | 66  | (36.7) |
| Black, not Hispanic                       | 46  | (25.6) |
| Born in the US                            | 155 | (86.1) |
| Gender identity                           |     |     |
| Cisgender man                             | 170 | (94.4) |
| Gender nonconforming                      | 10  | (5.6) |
| Sexual identity                           |     |     |
| Gay/Queer                                 | 154 | (85.6) |
| Bisexual/Pansexual/Heterosexual/No label  | 26  | (14.4) |
| Residence                                 |     |     |
| NYC                                       | 85  | (47.2) |
| D.C                                       | 23  | (12.8) |
| Philadelphia                              | 22  | (12.2) |
| Chicago                                   | 19  | (10.6) |
| Baltimore                                 | 9   | (5.0) |
| Atlanta                                   | 10  | (5.6) |
| Boston                                    | 6   | (3.3) |
| Detroit                                   | 6   | (3.3) |
| Education                                 |     |     |
| High School or less                       | 31  | (17.2) |
| Some college or Associates                | 59  | (32.8) |
| Bachelor’s                                | 56  | (31.1) |
| Graduate                                  | 34  | (18.9) |
| Currently in school                       | 48  | (26.7) |
| Number of clients in the past 3 months    |     |     |
| Mean                                      | 6.9 |     |
| Median                                    | 4   |     |
| Interquartile range                       | 3–7 |     |
Perceptions of Stigma Associated with Sex Work in Society

Most participants felt that sex work was looked down upon and generally regarded with disdain by society as a whole. For example, one participant said the way sex workers were talked about in society was “almost dehumanizing”:

I think usually people’s immediate assumption is it’s someone that’s poor, that they’re uneducated, that this is the only way that they’re able to make money for themselves, that they’re full of diseases. Any of these negative tropes that this person’s just—it’s almost dehumanizing, the way we talk about sex workers (23 years old, White).

Another participant identified a pervasive societal narrative in which sex workers were depicted as low functioning, addicted to drugs, or unable to find alternative sources of income:

Well, society teaches you to think they must be on drugs, they must be crazy. Yeah, there’s stereotypes of someone who does it. You have to be stupid or you can’t get a job, that’s why you do it. They can’t understand someone doing it as a real choice like they made an intelligent decision to do it. They always think it has to be some type of victimization (33 years old, Black).

Other participants also drew attention to the negative stereotypes with which sex workers were often forced to contend. When describing how they thought sex work and sex workers were perceived in society, participants used words such as “dirty,” “immoral,” “dangerous,” “disgusting,” “seedy,” “low life,” and “without self-respect.” As one participant vividly put it when asked what he believed the general population thought about sex workers: “That they’re trash. They’re scum of the bucket. That they’re pus bumps who are waiting to bust” (45 years old, Black). When another participant was asked the same question, he replied: “That they’re just lazy and nasty and all have diseases” (25 years old, Black).

Some participants emphasized the erroneous yet common conflation of sex work with drug addiction. As one participant explained: “Well, I think the stereotype, of course, is someone like a drug addict or someone without self-respect” (26 years old, Black). Another commented:

I think they’re more inclined to believe that [sex workers] look like meth heads or crackheads on the street. They don’t really think that they look like your normal Joe, or a person walking down the street. I think they would be inclined to think that they were shady. And like super high with eyes bulging out (19 years old, Latino).

Others highlighted the perception of sex workers as “sluts” or “whores.” One participant, for example, noted that “there’s a lot of slut shaming, and people just sort of view you as a whore, or as a slut” (19 years old, White). Similarly, when asked what he thought the general perception of sex workers was said: “I’m sure it’s they’re nasty, slutty, they’re whores. They live in a gutter somewhere, they’re out there walking the street. That perception of being a slut” (32 years old, Black). One participant situated the construction of sex workers as “sluts” within a larger “heteronormative narrative”:

There’s definitely a negative stigma about sex workers. And I feel like it just plays in with society. And if you look at society, it’s a very heteronormative narrative that we have to follow, and that is always unfortunate . . . When you think of an escort you think of some slutty person who is working the corner and has some slimy pimp. And that’s not what it is. And so I definitely would say society has a negative perception of sex workers and what we do (18 years old, White).

A number of participants commented that sex work was not regarded as a legitimate form of work, but rather an “easy way out” for those who lacked ambition or drive. As one participant explained: “I think that a lot of people don’t think it’s real work... I think people de-legitimize sex work as a real job” (24 years old, Latino). Another felt that many considered sex work to be a form of “freeloading”: “I guess the number one word that comes to mind is freeloading, that there is either the inability or the lack of willingness to work that is brought on by something” (25 years old, White). Similarly, another took issue with the fact that sex work was considered an easy or “effortless” way to make money:

Another thing I don’t like that people tend to associate sugar babying with is that I’m lazy because I’m not lazy . . . It’s not something that is so effortless and the money’s just coming to my lap. I have to work for this money, too (22 years old, Latino).

Many also discussed the perception of sex work as a “last resort” for people who were “desperate” for money or drugs. For example, when asked how he thought sex workers were perceived by society, one participant said: “A lot of people think you’re trashy... trashy and desperate for money and drug addicts for sure, people think” (35 years old, White). When asked the same question, another participant responded:

I mean in general I think overarching opinions for sex workers are that they are either desperate for money in some way—It’s kind of last resort . . . It’s the last stop on the job train if you really need or are strapped for cash (27 years old, Latino).
Perceptions of Stigma associated with Sex Work within the Gay Community

Some participants volunteered that sex work was viewed less negatively in the gay community than in society at large. One participant who asserted this also explained that there were certain subsections of the gay community, such as the kink community, in which sex work was considered unexceptional:

Broader society really I don't think approves of sex work at all. I took a class on the ethics of sex in undergrad, and my professor who was teaching a class about sexuality, we had a whole lecture just like condemning the evils of prostitution and how it's morally degrading, and I'm like, "You are a liberal college professor. You should know better than that. How the fuck dare you." But then in the queer community, most people are much more . . . even if they're like, "That's a little bit gross," it doesn't carry the same stigma. And then in the kink community, it's like, "Okay. It is a Tuesday, so sure" (21 years old, White).

Several participants attributed the greater acceptance of sex work within the gay community to how common the practice had become, particularly in certain cities. As one participant explained:

It's become, especially in New York City, it's something that everyone's just doing. It's not what it used to be. I think, ten or fifteen years ago. But even then, it wasn't shocking. Now today it's just, you know, you go on another website and you see, "Oh my God. I know him. I know him." You don't get a big shock by any of this at all. "Wow, boy, he's doing [sex work] too. Okay." You know? (34 years old, Latino).

One participant claimed that there was practically no sex work-related stigma within the New York City gay community because so many people were engaged in sex work themselves: “Honestly in New York City, a lot of people do [sex work]... So it’s like, especially in the gay community, the stigma is not really there” (33 years old, Latino). Similarly, another participant said that sex work was so common in the D.C. gay community that having a sugar daddy as a young gay man was almost like an initiate ritual: “I think it’s a D.C. thing for a young gay, like a rite of passage to have a sugar daddy at one point” (22 years old, Latino).

One participant went so far as to say that sex work was not only becoming normalized within the gay community, but almost glorified as well:

I think we're reaching somewhat of a normalization, particularly really in the queer community, even if that's not among heterosexuals. It's in some ways almost glorified a little bit. In Chicago, there's some really famous people, at least in the queer community, that do [sex work]. You'll see them out at the bars, and everybody loves them. They're the people to hang out with. People think that they're fun, and they take pride in it, and that's kind of exciting (23 years old, White).

However, several participants painted a less accepting picture of how sex work was perceived within the gay community. One participant, for example, mentioned that there were “factions” in which sex work was viewed more negatively, but also said that many gay men were simply indifferent about the matter:

I think the gay community, of course there are factions that would have a negative view of it, but I think a lot of people, a lot of gay men don't care about it that much and don't really look that negatively on it (35 years old, White).

Another felt that if members of the gay community learned that he was engaged in sex work, it would diminish his social or cultural “value,” relegating him to a lower “caste”:

Well, sex workers are not venerated in [gay] culture for sure. So it would probably make them feel like I had less social or cultural value. It would put me in like a lower caste than I might otherwise be in based off my looks. Like, “Oh, he’s really hot.” “Yeah, but he's a sex worker.” So it’s like, oh, that puts me in the middle caste. Instead of the top caste (42 years old, White).

Similarly, one participant claimed that sex work had “bad connotations in the gay world” (33 years old, White) and another remarked, “Even if I tell any other gay guys, they look at you like, “Eww, you're prostituting yourself”” (32 years old, Black).

Internalized/Felt Stigma

A substantial number of participants reported feeling dirty, guilty, embarrassed, or ashamed about selling sex. In many cases, it was clear that such feelings were a result of the disparaging societal narratives surrounding sex work—narratives that participants had either internalized or were otherwise struggling to contend with. One participant, for example, who seemed to recognize that his negative feelings were a result of society’s condemnation of sex work, nevertheless admitted to struggling with a sense of “moral guilt”:

Because there's some guilt associated with being and putting myself in that situation . . . I mean, moral guilt. But I mean I guess moral guilt comes from what other people think to start off with, right? Where do we get our morals from? It's like from collective society, so it's like what other people think as well. What am I doing to myself? How am I respecting myself if I'm putting
myself through this? . . . It's putting a monetary value on your worth (29 years old, White).

Other participants similarly struggled with the notion that it was wrong to ascribe “a monetary value” to something as intimate and personal as sex. As one participant explained,

People look down upon [sex workers]. Like, “Oh, you're using your body to get monetary gain or what-not.” For me, I've always felt like doing it made me feel less of a person . . . because I was doing this for money instead of just doing this like everybody else does for pleasure and for connection (34 years old, Black).

Likewise, another participant said: “Every time I leave somebody's house, I cry... I just feel like a dirty fucking whore... Because I had somebody touch my body for money” (31 years old, Latino).

Several participants also felt embarrassed or ashamed about having resorted to sex work to support themselves. They seemed to have internalized the perception of sex work as a degrading and illegitimate form of work that one turns to only after all other options have been exhausted. For example, one participant explained that resorting to sex work had left him feeling like “less of a man.” In his mind, in other words, it seemed that engagement in sex work was indicative of his failure as a breadwinner:

Sometimes I get embarrassed or ashamed of myself for doing it . . . I just—no one wants to feel like they can't afford things that should be affordable. So, I don't know, it makes me feel like less of a man. I guess, I can't support myself and I can't support my family (23 years old, White).

Other participants struggled with the fact that they had decided to engage in sex work despite not being in dire financial circumstances. Their feelings of shame and embarrassment seemed to emanate from the idea that they were engaged in sex work for the “wrong” reasons; that is they did not do it as a means of survival or because they had no other options for earning money. One participant, for example, had a hard time reconciling his engagement in sex work with the prestigious educational background that afforded him ample opportunities to earn money in more socially acceptable ways:

As an amorphous concept, sex work's for other people. Sex work is survival sex. Sex work is stripping if you don't have a high school diploma, or if you do have a high school diploma and it just is the best alternative available to you fiscally and it makes sense for you. Like all of that I'm very fine with for other people, but there's definitely a sort of like, "Oh, well, I'm a college graduate and I'm going to an Ivy League law school,” and that sort of stuff that makes me feel like I should be better than that and then I'm not (27 years old, White).

**Stigma Management and Resistance Strategies**

To mitigate or avoid the potential emotional, social, and/or professional consequences of engaging in a stigmatized practice, participants employed a diverse array of stigma management and resistance strategies. These included information control, distancing techniques, discrediting those who held negative attitudes about sex work or sex workers, contending that they had no other choice but to engage in sex work, and reframing or challenging techniques. Most participants in the sample used at least one strategy and many used a combination of strategies.

**Information Control**

Managing who had knowledge of their involvement in sex work was a common strategy for avoiding stigmatization. By employing information control strategies that involved limiting who, if anyone, knew about their engagement in sex work, participants tried to protect themselves from potential criticism, rejection, negative treatment, or damage to their reputations, careers or employment opportunities.

**Passing**

Their ability to conceal their behavior allowed participants, in Goffman’s (1963) terms, to “pass” as a normal by keeping their engagement in sex work a tightly guarded secret. They feared disclosing such information would cause others to judge, reject, or disparage them or be damaging for their career or limit their employment opportunities.” For example, when asked if he had ever told anyone about his engagement in sex work, one participant responded:

No, I keep it to myself for the most part . . . People tend to judge, and I don't care what—it's not that I care what they have to say about me, but what people think about you dictates how they treat you, and I don't too much like being treated shitty. So I keep it separated (37 years old, White).

Another participant took fairly extreme measures to conceal his engagement in sex work from others, including keeping everyone in his life at a distance and choosing not to establish close friendships. In fact, he said that the study interview was the first time he had ever spoken openly about his experiences selling sex:

I don't ever speak about it. I don't think anyone knows. I keep it very private. I think that affects my relationships...
because I don’t want to try to keep close friends because otherwise they’d ask. I keep people at a distance just because of it. Just because I don’t want any judgment. It’s hard, I’ve never—some of these things I’ve told you, I’ve never said out loud, so it’s crazy (28 years old, Latino).

The thought of disclosing his engagement in sex work to others seemed somewhat absurd to another participant. He explained that he could not just go around announcing to people that he was paid for sex because doing so would make him look “less than” in the eyes of others:

Probably because I think [disclosure] would make me look less than at the same time. And because I’m private, too. I just don’t tell people that . . . It’s as if I would be a prostitute, a man-whore, or a male gigolo to certain people. I can’t go around and say, "Hey, I'm [name]. I just had sex with this person for $150 for three hours." People don’t conversate like that (30 years old, Black).

Some men also concealed their involvement in sex work out of fear that if this information became known to others it could damage their careers or limit their employment opportunities. For example, when asked what he worried about if people were to learn he engaged in sex work, one participant said, “About my career, people being judgmental” (32 years old, Black). Another, when asked why he had not told anyone about his engagement in sex work replied, “I think it would not be great for my image especially considering profession-ally and etcetera, and the things that I’m planning to do, and my career” (33 years old, Latino).

Selective Disclosure

Some participants chose to reveal their engagement in sex work to select individuals who they felt confident would not tell others or react negatively. While these participants still sought to pass in many environments (such as around family members or friends who might be judgmental), they indicated that there were certain individuals with whom they felt comfortable divulging their secret. As one participant explained: “I usually know who I can and cannot tell. I usually judge the situation, so if it’s someone my age, who understands, and knows, they get it” (29 years old, Latino).

Many who relied on selective disclosure chose to reveal their engagement in sex work to friends or acquaintances who had either engaged in sex work themselves or had considered doing so. One participant, for example, said he had only told three close friends about his engagement in sex work, two of whom were also sex workers: “I’ve told like three friends or so. Two of them were doing sex work themselves so they understand. They would just tell me to be safe and stuff” (20 years old, Latino). Similarly, another participant chose to disclose his engagement in sex work to close friends, many of whom were gay and had also “dabbled” in exchange sex:

The people I’ve disclosed it to are some of my close friends and a lot of them are queer, a lot of them are gay men. So it’s just something we’ve all talked about before. A lot of them have not necessarily experienced it, but have considered or dabbled in it. Like maybe they hooked up with somebody once for a certain amount of something. But yeah, everybody was pretty open about it. Like it’s not a negative issue for my close friends about it, but those are the only people I’ve told, so (23 years old, White).

Another participant had decided to tell the friends he had met through a 12-step drug and alcohol recovery program about his engagement in exchange sex. He explained that the environment fostered by the 12-step program and the fact that they all shared similar experiences (including exchanging sex for alcohol or drugs) made him feel assured that he could disclose without experiencing judgement:

Because I never would tell anyone that I had—if I had any inkling that there would be judgment, I would not [disclose]. In AA and 12-step it’s easy, because that’s the context. Everyone has had experiences like that most likely, and it’s just, we’re in a position to help each other, not to judge each other. So that’s clear from the start, those parameters (41 years old, White).

In a few cases, participants had disclosed their engagement in exchange sex to a therapist or priest. These likely felt like safe disclosures because these individuals were ethically and professionally bound to keep such information private. As one participant explained:

I tell [my therapist] everything . . . I feel like they don’t care about that stuff and maybe like the biggest thing for me is like betrayal of confidence, that’s why I don’t have a problem with therapists because I can sue if they betray my confidence (21 years old, Latino).

Distancing Techniques

Many participants used distancing techniques as a form of stigma management. For some, this involved differentiating themselves from “other” supposedly less respectable sex workers. For others it involved creating distance between their engagement in sex work and their sense of self.

“Other” Sex Workers

In order to resist or deflect the stigma surrounding sex work, a number of participants sought to differentiate themselves from “other” sex workers. Though they likely had different
personal definitions of the term, many referred to these “other” sex workers as “prostitutes.” For them, prostitution seemed to embody any and all the negative stereotypes associated with engagement in sex work, including drug addiction, promiscuity, crudeness, and an apparent lack of personal boundaries or self-respect. By drawing a distinction between “their” form of sex work and prostitution, participants were able to resist and ultimately separate themselves from these stereotypes. One participant, for example, took offense when his clients referred to him as a prostitute because he felt that prostitutes were much more “experienced” and “hardcore” than he was. In response to being mislabeled, he would attempt to “enlighten” his clients, explaining that he was engaged in a more refined and limited form of sex work than prostitution:

[Clients] will kind of ask the typical question, like, “Do you enjoy having sex for money? Are you comfortable being a prostitute?” They use that word specifically, and it kind of bugs me, and that’s when I kind of nicely let them know that that’s not what it is, that’s not what I do, and I kind of enlighten them, and they kind of get it . . . . Because, from my perspective, I feel like prostitutes aren’t really—they do what they do in exchange for money, but at the same time, they do a lot more than what I do. I’m very basic, I don’t do anything crazy, I don’t do drugs, I don’t do anything that’s hardcore . . . . I just feel like they’re a lot more, I guess, experienced in that field (23 years old, Latino).

Similarly, another participant said that although he identified as a sex worker, he did not consider himself to be a “traditional” sex worker. He explained that he engaged in “sugar babying,” which was different from what he understood as traditional sex work or prostitution because it involved much more than a simple exchange of sex for money:

I do consider myself a sex worker, but I don’t consider myself a traditional sex worker . . . I’m not just sex for money. You want a home-cooked meal? I got you. Do you want to go see a jazz concert or a movie? Do you want to go to the beach? Do you want to plan travel somewhere? You want to see a Britney Spears concert? I’m there . . . . I don’t like when people directly relate sugar babying to prostitution because sugar babying can take so many different forms than just straight up prostitution. I don’t like the mix between those two. Not to say that regular prostitutes, that I’m better than them. It’s the same kind of work, but you don’t call a doctor a dentist. Two different kinds of things, similar field (22 years old, Latino).

Like the previous two participants, another participant also sought to construct two distinct categories of sex workers: prostitutes and those who entertained “generous” men which is how he characterized his own engagement in sex work. What differentiated the two categories in his mind was the extent to which a personal connection was established with the client. By drawing this distinction, the participant was able to elevate “his” form of sex work above one that was, as he put it, “gross”:

[Prostitution] is like selling your body. It’s kind of gross, selling your body for sex, versus if someone’s generous, it’s just like you get nice things, and it’s like a relationship, you know? It’s not like random sex, it’s like you have a relationship with them. Not like a love relationship, but like a connection (20 years old, White).

Identity Management

Some participants responded to the stigma surrounding sex work by creating distance between their engagement in the sex industry and their sense of self. Though these participants acknowledged that what they were doing—receiving money or other things in exchange for sex—was essentially sex work, they were unwilling to that define or determine their identities. As one participant explained: “[sex work is] not something I’m ashamed of... It’s just something I did and something I’ve done, still willing to [do]. But it’s something like—it’s just not who I am” (25 years old, Latino).

Another participant appeared to rely on a similar strategy, arguing that although he engaged in sex work, he did not consider that to be a defining aspect of his identity: “Even though, considering what I’ve done, exchanging money for sex, I don’t consider that really who I am” (28 years old, White). Interestingly, for this and other participants, meeting clients through dating and hookup websites and apps not designed for commercial sex seemed to facilitate the use of this strategy; that is, it allowed them to participate in sex work without having to adopt the identity of a sex worker. As he explained: “Since I’ve never been on a site like that that is kind of more known as an escort site, I’ve never perceived myself to then be an escort” (28 years old, White).

Dating/hookup websites and apps appeared to serve a similar purpose for another participant. Not wanting to be reduced to a “gigolo,” this participant sought to define himself by his love of reading and college education, not the fact that he sold sex. To accomplish this, he chose to meet clients on dating and hookup sites, allowing him to “pretend” that he was “just another person” looking for an unpaid hookup online. When asked if he had ever considered using a website or app that was explicitly set up for sex work in order to meet clients, he responded:

I think I’m ashamed to do that . . . I think it would just be even more of a, I think a part of my brain when I’m on [name of app] can pretend that I’m just another
person on [name of app], where going on [name of website] would be like, wow, this is your life. You're a gigolo. I don't think I'm ready to have that as my identity . . . I'm just not that kind of person. I like to read and I went to college and those are the things that define me in my mind, so there's definitely a cognitive dissonance. There's, yeah, a not wanting to define myself by something that otherwise most people think as shameful and degrading (26 years old, Black).

**Discrediting the Discreditors**

Another stigma management strategy employed by several participants was discrediting those who disparaged sex work and/or sex workers. By emphasizing their narrow-mindedness, ignorance, and in some cases, hypocrisy, they were able to diminish the legitimacy of the claims of those who would disparage sex work. One participant, for example, argued that those who looked down on him because of his engagement in sex work were unfairly judgmental and had no appreciation or understanding of the circumstances that had led him to sell sex:

I feel there's a lot more to me than what their judgmental mind is seeing. They don't know the road that I've been down and that I've had to go down in order to make ends meet and to survive (39 years old, White).

Another participant labeled his discreditors as “haters” and emphasized how important it was to move past “black and white” thinking:

Not everything’s black and white, not everything’s 100% good or 100% bad. A lot of times you just sort of have to analyze things as what led me to do this, the process like what happened afterwards and then just to learn not to care what people think. Because obviously there's a lot of judgmental people who will judge you . . . just because they're haters or whatever (24 years old, Black).

One participant dismissed those who held negative attitudes about sex work as “puritanical” as well as hypocritical, arguing that they were likely engaged in behavior that was equally risqué themselves. He commented: “people are just being puritanical and they're full of shit anyway half the time 'cause half of them probably do all types of crazy stuff” (33 years old, Black). Similarly, another participant said he knew for a fact that many of the high powered politicians who looked down on sex workers were actually paying for sex behind the scenes:

There are a lot of people who are acting like it's very negative and all that, but those are the ones who are under cover doing it, because these congressmen—you

go in certain areas in D.C., they're all doing this. All the people from the White House are doing this. All of them. A lot of them . . . there's areas that you can go to and guys are all over there messing with them (38 years old, Black).

**No Other Option**

A number of participants resisted the stigma associated with sex work by emphasizing that they had never wanted to become engaged in sex work, but had been forced to by circumstances beyond their control. For example, one participant argued that he had been “trafficked” by the U.S. economy and education system, rendering his involvement in sex work the outcome of larger forces:

I have friends that are active sex workers, that have escort pages and things like that, that do porn. They have such an enjoyment for it. It is fulfilling for them in a way that it's not fulfilling for me. I try to acknowledge that because I also try not to shame or stigmatize anyone. But there's massive differences in there. One could argue that I was sex trafficked by the U.S. economy and our education system (32 years old, White).

By highlighting the uncontrollable or extreme circumstances that had befallen them, these participants sought to justify their engagement in sex work to both themselves and others, inviting understanding, empathy, and compassion instead of judgement or disapproval. As one participant explained, many people who sold sex were simply trying to survive:

I think people need to not judge so much. At the end of the day it's about surviving and paying your bills. For me, I probably thought that I was better than that at one point, but I just needed to survive. I lost my job. You never know what someone is going through (32 years old, Latino).

For a number of participants, adopting this narrative seemed to assuage feelings of guilt or shame about selling sex. One participant, for example, explained that he had been able to “work [his] way out of feeling bad” about engaging in sex work by emphasizing that his circumstances—including his inability to get a work permit due to his immigration status—severely limited his ability to find alternative employment:

I know that my situation especially with my legal status has made me and my pool of work really limited and this is just a way to keep my life under control, especially because I can't go out, look for a job. I don't have a car, I live outside of the city, so it's pretty hard to get a job and go to it (20 years old, Latino).
For another participant, emphasizing that he was only engaged in sex work due to extreme circumstances seemed to bring comfort in that it confirmed he was not the type of person who typically sold sex (someone who presumably had no education and came from a broken family). In his mind, in other words, he was still an upstanding person; he had simply been forced to do something out of character in order to survive. It is clear from this case that there may be some overlap between this particular stigma management strategy and the strategy involving distancing oneself from “other” sex workers:

I still feel it’s rather different circumstances than most, than the average sort of situation like that. Because I didn’t—I mean, I’m a college educated man, I came from a good family. I just, I chose to go my own way. And in the middle of that I had no safety net, and when disaster struck, disaster struck. And I didn’t have any support. And so I was sort of just out there free falling (39 years old, White).

**Challenging or Reframing Prevailing Narratives and Stereotypes**

Many participants appeared to manage stigma by challenging or reframing traditional stigmatizing narratives about sex work, including narratives about the types of people that engage in sex work, the reasons people engage in sex work, and the overall value of sex work. In doing so, they were able to challenge the notion that sex work was something shameful, deviant, and degrading and instead reframe it in their minds as something legitimate, normal, and even valuable to society.

**Not a Victim**

One narrative about sex work that participants sought to challenge or reframe was that which depicted sex workers as unfortunate victims who had been forced into an undesired occupation as a result of exploitation, desperation, or lack of financial alternatives. For some, this was accomplished by distinguishing engagement in sex work, which is entered into voluntarily and is consensual, from engagement in sex trafficking, which involves coercion or force. One participant, for example, clearly sought to distinguish sex work from “pimping people out,” insisting that he had never done anything against his will:

I don’t feel ashamed by it, and the only reason I wouldn’t tell more people is because it could be considered prostitution, which is illegal . . . I think pimping people out should be illegal, because then you get into fucking owning people like they’re slaves and people are getting hurt . . . But in terms of like if somebody wants to give somebody money to have sex, I don’t really think that anything is wrong with that . . . I do embrace the choices that I make, and if it’s a choice that I wouldn’t want to embrace, I try not to make it . . . So, for me, it is genuinely always me getting money for doing something that I want to do (23 years old, Black).

Another participant also emphasized that he had made a voluntary choice to sell sex, allowing him to reject the narrative of victimization and replace it with one of empowerment and agency:

I guess in my view sex work is always consensual, which is what differs it from sex trafficking. It’s me of my own fruition and free will getting money on my terms, and in a way that is conducive to my schedule and my life (19 years old, White).

Other challenges to the victim narrative were also identified. Several participants, for example, drew attention to the unique benefits associated with engaging in sex work, highlighting the fact that they had made an informed and rational decision about how best to meet their own needs. One participant emphasized how much he enjoyed engaging in sex work and said that if it ever stopped being enjoyable, he would pursue other opportunities. Far from being a victim trapped in an unwanted situation, he had simply made a choice to earn money in a manner he enjoyed:

It’s fun because I get to live like—I get to go to all these fun events and fancy restaurants and dinners sometimes. And then I get to have sex. And I get paid well. So it’s nice not having to worry about money or anything. I get to make my own schedule, which is lovely. I love being able to do that . . . I enjoy it. If I didn’t, I would stop. Once I stop enjoying it, I’ll stop . . . Occasionally I will have the thought, or just like the emotion, that I shouldn’t be doing sex work as my job, but I always come back to it and I’m just like, it’s something I enjoy and why shouldn’t I do something I enjoy? (18 years old, White).

**Sex Work Is a Job Like Any Other Job**

The idea that sex work was not real work and that people who chose to earn their living by selling sex were lazy, unemployed, or free-loaders was another narrative that some participants sought to challenge. For these participants, it was important to reframe sex work as a job that was just as legitimate as any other job and one that required a substantial amount of effort. As one participant put it:

I’m of the school that says sex work is work. You know what I mean? And I wouldn’t call a person a prostitute. I would just call them a sex worker. Whether they per-
form on film or whether they walk the streets or whatever, they're making a living like everybody else. And they're probably working harder than many people. You know what I mean? And it just so happens that they're doing the work that they do (39 years old, Black).

Another participant asserted that being paid for sex was no different from being paid to provide any other kind of good or service. In doing so, he was able to reject the idea that there was anything degrading about engaging in sex work:

Yeah, I mean, there's nothing derogative or I mean, it's a service and a good. I mean, I wouldn't call them a customer, but yeah they're just someone who has a need, and if I can fulfill that for money, then they're just someone that's helping me out (32 years old, Black).

Like the previous participant, many who employed this reframing strategy used occupational terminology to help situate sex work in the context of "real" work. As one participant put it, "What I say is like I'm working in customer service, basically. It's the most intense form of customer service you can imagine" (19 years old, White). In contrast, a small number of participants employed sex work-related terminology when speaking about other kinds of work, thereby suggesting that "legitimate" employment was no more respectable than sex work given that it also involved a kind of prostituting of oneself. One participant, for example, said, "I tend to think of every job as a form of whoring yourself out" (40 years old, Latino). Another commented: "How many of us have ever had a job that sucked ass but we did it anyway because we needed money? Just sex work sometimes literally means sucking ass" (32 years old, White).

**A Valuable Service**

A number of participants argued that by engaging in sex work, they were providing a valuable service to those in need. This reframing allowed participants to reimagine sex work as an occupation that was beneficial and honorable rather than seedy, immoral, or criminal, thereby reducing the need to feel shame. One participant, for example, asserted that there was no reason to feel bad about providing people with the sexual experiences they craved but would otherwise be unable to fulfill:

My boyfriend's gotten offers, he's just never acted upon it, because he's like "Oh, I feel bad" . . . He feels bad taking their money. Because he knows that they're usually desperate. And I'm like "Why?" I mean, in my mind, you're helping them out, right? Because if they are desperate, then you're giving them an experience that they wouldn't necessarily get (23 years old, Black).

Another participant emphasized the value of the sex industry in a similar manner, explaining that it provided an avenue through which people could experience the sexual fulfillment they deserved. Indeed, he found sex work to be a fulfilling occupation for this very reason:

I'm very pragmatic about sex, and I feel like I don't put a lot of—there could be a beautiful, emotional side to sex for sure, but it can also be like a good sneeze, and I think there are a lot of people who deserve sexual fulfillment, who for many different reasons are not getting it, and don't know how to get it outside of paying somebody to fulfill that need, and I do find that to be somewhat fulfilling (40 years old, Latino).

For some participants, this reframing strategy overlapped with the "sex work is a job like any other job" reframing strategy. One participant, for example, compared sex work to the work he used to do as a lawyer, asserting that the two were actually quite similar in that they were both "act[s] of service." By framing sex work in this manner, he was not only able to legitimize it as real work, but also construct it as an honorable profession:

I get a bubbly feeling in my stomach as a lawyer when I'm saving a client's home from foreclosure or eviction. I get that same feeling when I'm with a guy who is maybe insecure about himself or is lonely and I can just sit there and put on my music and dance around his room and make him feel comfortable and give him a good time. It's like an act of service. I'm a service-based person. I think that's why I was attracted to practicing law because I like making a difference in people's lives, and there really is a superficial distinction between making a difference in somebody's life in a suit and tie in a law office and making a difference in somebody's life in booty shorts in their home, like hanging out, you know what I mean? (29 years old, White).

A small number of participants took this reframing a step further, arguing that sex work was not only beneficial to those who purchased sex, but also to society in general. This seemed to give participants the rare opportunity to construct themselves as contributors to society instead of societal outcasts. One participant, for example, explained that one of the reasons he had decided to become a sex worker was because he wanted to educate people about how to properly engage in submissive/dominant role play. He said that he considered himself to be both a sex worker and a sex educator, and hoped that his clients took what they learned with him and applied it to their other sexual encounters. When explaining why he first became involved in sex work, he said:

I was struggling to find work. But at the same time, I noticed some issues in the sexual market in New York...
as I was running into these guys who claimed to be doms, who were just using it as an excuse to be abusive to their partners, whether male or female . . . this was something that came up in conversation with some friends of mine who had been sex workers for a long time. They said, "Well, if you want to make a difference, you can get involved in the industry. You can make a buck, but also try and enact some good and try and educate some people as well" (25 years old, White).

**Challenging Societal Stigma**

Though the stigma management strategies described in the previous section certainly helped participants resist the stigma surrounding sex work, they did not constitute attempts to reduce or combat such stigma on a societal level. Surprisingly, few participants made such attempts, and their efforts were typically small in scale or symbolic in nature. One participant, for example, said he included a photograph of himself on the profile he used to meet clients online in order to make a statement that there was no reason to feel ashamed about engaging in sex work:

A close friend of mine knows that I do [sex work]. He encouraged me not to include a photo of my face in my profile. I told him that, to not include my face is pretty much an admission on my part that this is something that I should be ashamed about, and that other people should be ashamed about. I think he still thinks that I should be careful and not include my face, but for me it’s more of a, it’s almost a political stance, that sex work isn’t a shameful thing, that it’s just like having a [name of app] profile, where many people put their faces on. It’s consensual sex between two adults, so I think he’s come around, in terms of, that particular friend has come around to sort of maybe accept my stance on it . . . and I think he—I was able to educate him a little bit more on it (36 years old, Latino).

Only a couple of participants mentioned that they were involved in any form of sex work-related social activism. One participant who did report that he had received a fair amount of backlash as a result of his efforts:

I try to do a lot of advocacy about sex workers’ rights. And usually that also involves being open and honest about it, at least in places where I can like social media, through platforms that I use my screen name as opposed to my legal name . . . But I’ve had people who’ve hit up my work line or my work email and just to verbally abuse me because of I guess my stance with stuff like that (29 years old, Latino).

Another participant had been involved in advocacy work but still struggled with how he felt about his own engagement in sex work:

I am a very sex-positive person. A lot of friends come to me with questions, with my experience in the medical and public health fields, I’ve worked with sex workers in the past and work with HIV patients, and like advocating for sex workers’ rights. But I still have a sense of, I don’t know if shame is the right word, but I feel like if I had other options, I should look for those (30 years old, White).

**Discussion**

Despite recent claims that the Internet and other technological advances like smartphone technology have contributed to a normalization of the male sex work industry (Argento et al., 2018; MacPhail et al., 2015), most participants believed that while this might be true to a greater or lesser degree among various segments of the gay community, it was still viewed very negatively in society as a whole. Indeed, they identified a number of what they believed were common societal stereotypes about MSWs, including that they were disease carriers, drug addicts, lacking in agency or self-respect, and lazy, promiscuous, desperate or destitute. They also felt that sex work was not viewed as a legitimate form of work, but rather a last resort or “easy way out” for those who lacked ambition or drive. These stereotypes and assumptions are largely consistent with those described by MSWs in previous studies, including those identified by street-based, agency-based, and Internet-based MSWs (Koken et al., 2004; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007; Nolan, 2015), suggesting that MSWs’ perceptions of societal stereotypes/views about male sex work have changed little even as the industry has become increasingly digitalized.

In contrast to their views about society in general, many participants felt that sex work had come to enjoy a significant degree of normalization within the gay community. Indeed, while a small number cautioned that not all gay men had necessarily held positive views about sex work (McLean, 2012; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007), several felt that sex work had become so normalized within the gay community (especially in certain locales) that there was hardly any stigma still attached to it. One participant even claimed that sex workers were beginning to be revered within the gay community, echoing participants in Koken et al.’s (2009) study who felt that sex work was considered a sign of prestige in the gay community. However, despite such perceptions of normalization within the gay community, many participants struggled with the emotional impact of engaging in a stigmatized practice, expressing feelings of guilt, shame, or dirtiness.
Almost all participants employed at least one stigma management strategy, and many utilized more than one. Information control was the most widely used strategy. Many completely concealed their engagement in sex work from everyone, while others only disclosed it to a very few select individuals who they trusted would not react negatively or judge them. The widespread use of information control as a stigma management strategy among sex workers has been well documented in the literature (Benoit et al., 2020; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Koken et al., 2004). As observed by Siegel et al. (1998) when discussing the stigma management strategies used by men living with HIV, those who relied on reactive or defensive strategies like information control “chose to acquiesce to the prevailing norms and values and accept life in the shadows, out of public scrutiny” (p 21). The reasons why MSW choose not to disclose their engagement in sex work deserve further examination, but it is likely that they do so because they have internalized the stigma attached to the practice.

Hiding might be particularly practicable for sex workers who use only dating and hookup apps or websites to find clients since they do not have to advertise themselves as sex workers or frequent public places or spaces associated with sex work (McLean, 2015). In addition, because sex work was in many cases only a peripheral or occasional part of participants’ lives, hiding this aspect of their life was quite manageable. Nevertheless, for sex workers who choose to hide their involvement with sex work, living what feels like a “double life” can be a source of chronic stress and/or lead to feelings of social isolation (Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Koken & Bimbi, 2014; Koken et al., 2004), that can leave them vulnerable to mental health problems. It should be noted that while our focus in this report was on participants’ stigma management strategies, information control may have also been used by some to shield themselves from physical harm from those who might choose to express their displeasure with their behavior—i.e., either their involvement in sex work and/or same sex behavior—through some form of harassment or physical harm.

Distancing was another important stigma management strategy used by study participants. For some, this involved distinguishing themselves, often in nuanced ways, from “other” sex worker more in the lifestyle so to speak, whom they often referred to as “prostitutes,” while rejecting that identity for themselves (Henriksen et al., 2020; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005; Oselin, 2018; M. D. Smith et al., 2015). By making such a distinction, participants attempted to resist the prevailing negative stereotypes associated with sex work and sex workers which, while they conceded might apply to others, did not apply to them. In the sociological literature this has been conceptualized as symbolic boundary work (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Although boundary work is not just used to resist stigma, individuals who recognize they may engage in behavior or belong to a group that may make them targets of stigmatization and social devaluation may seek to construct symbolic boundaries that separate them from those targets (Hochstetler et al., 2010). As Copes (2016) noted, “Boundaries allow those engaging in potentially stigmatizing behavior to distance themselves from the stigmatized” (p. 207). Participants in our study drew symbolic boundaries between the kind of exchange of sex for money or goods they engaged in and “real prostitution” in an effort resist stigmatization. Other participants who used distancing techniques sought to separate their engagement in sex work from their sense of self, a strategy similar to the one Morris (2018) observed in his study of incidental sex workers in which participants avoided adopting conventional sex worker identity labels. In a sense, these participants also engaged in a kind of internal boundary work by trying to draw a distinction between their true or authentic selves and the “performative” compartmentalized part of themselves that engaged in sex work. While similar forms of identity management have also been noted in other studies of MSWs (Dank et al., 2015; McLean, 2012), the use of dating/hookup websites and apps may facilitate this strategy; that is, it allows informal/incidental MSWs to engage in sex work while presenting and perceiving themselves to be like any other user of these platforms who meets partners for casual, usually unpaid sex. Schwalbe et al. (2000), who were interested in how inequality is recreated wrote about a similar phenomenon, “defensive othering.” They noted, “Defensive othering is identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group” (425). They explained that when those who are part of a subordinate group try to protect themselves “by othering those in their own group, the belief system that supports the dominant group’s claim to superiority is reinforced” (425). Distancing techniques can also have important implications for this population’s service engagement. Indeed, MSWs in previous studies have reported disinterest in engaging in services designed for sex workers because they felt such services were far for “other” types of sex workers, such as street-based sex workers or female sex workers (Henriksen et al., 2020; McLean, 2012). In addition, it is not unreasonable to assume that MSWs who do not identify as sex workers would also be unlikely to engage in such services. To minimize this potential issue, services for MSWs who meet paying partners on dating/hookup websites and apps may need to be advertised in a way that does not suggest they are for sex workers.

While many participants use used passive or reactive stigma management strategies that do not involve any attempt to challenge or dismantle the negative stereotypes that underlie the stigma associated with sex work, some used more active strategies. For example, many participants employed reframing techniques in order to challenge traditional
stigmatizing stereotypes and narratives of deviance, immorality, or exploitation. Like MSWs in previous studies, they reframed sex work as real work (Benoit et al., 2020; Koken et al., 2004; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005), as a valuable service that meets the needs of others (Koken et al., 2004; M. D. Smith et al., 2013), and as a practice involving agency and choice rather than coercion, exploitation, or desperation (Henriksen et al., 2020; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005). This strategy is somewhat akin to Scott and Lyman’s (1968) justifications, which is a type of account. Accounts are statements offered by individuals to explain behavior that would be socially frowned or that would be unexpected. When offering a justification, the individual acknowledges engagement in the behavior in question “but denies the pejorative quality associated with it” (p. 47). In reframing sex work as a valuable service that met important human needs that many clients could not have met other ways these participants were challenging and attempting to deconstruct at least some of the common stereotypes associated with sex work and sex workers.

Other participants sought to discredit those who had negative views about sex work and/or sex workers, a strategy that has been discussed in the literature on stigma management in other contexts (though not among MSWs) (Meisenbach, 2010; Roscoe, 2021; Siegel et al., 1998). These participants sought to fight back and resist stigma by providing a basis for devaluing or discounting the opinions of those who would seek to shame them. Still other participants managed sex work-related stigma by emphasizing that they had never wanted to become engaged in sex work, but had been compelled to by circumstances outside of their control. This strategy contrasts with those of male Internet escorts and independent/indoor MSWs, who have been found to stress their agency and free choice (Henriksen et al., 2020; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005; N. J. Smith, 2012). In fact, for some participants, like the participant who argued that he had been “trafficked” by the U.S. economy, this strategy appeared to be employed as a direct response to the narrative that constructed engagement in sex work as a voluntary choice. What this strategy suggests is that it may not always be affirming or destigmatizing to conceptualize engagement in sex work as a choice, as some MSWs, including those operating on dating/hookup websites and apps, do not consider it a choice they made freely. It is thus of ongoing importance for scholars and policy makers alike to continue to advocate for a broad understanding of male sex work, as a one-size-fits-all narrative may stigmatize and alienate some MSWs even while it empowers others.

Very few participants sought to combat the stigma surrounding sex work on a societal level by engaging in social activism, advocacy, or public education. It is unclear why this was the case, though the fact that most only engaged in sex work only occasionally, opportunistically, or casually might be a factor. For example, selling sex may simply not have been an important enough part of participants’ lives to motivate their undertaking efforts to dismantle societal stigma. Also, because many participants perceived the negative stereotypes and narratives about sex workers to be so widespread and longstanding, it might have seemed that such efforts would be unlikely to have much success. In addition, those who did not identify as sex workers may have felt that participating in forms of sex work-related social activism might force them to accept an identity that many rejected—i.e., that of a sex worker. Some may have also feared that taking part in social activism might “out” them as sex workers to their family or friends, or even their employers (McLean, 2012). Nevertheless, participants’ individual responses to stigma that were primarily defensive in nature and intended to avoid being personally stigmatized—e.g., those using information control strategies—ultimately have the effect of reinforcing the stigma associated with male sex work. That is, their choice to “hide” reflects an implicit acceptance of the prevailing societal judgements that engaging in sex work is discreditable and shameful behavior and therefore reifies those judgements.

Taken together, these findings indicate that stigma continues to be a salient issue for Internet-based MSWs, including those who meet clients on dating/hookup websites and apps and who may not identify as professional sex workers or consider sex work to be their full-time occupation. Though scholars have argued that the advent of the Internet and the development of dating/hookup websites and apps have helped normalize the male sex work industry (Argento et al., 2018; MacPhail et al., 2015; McLean, 2015), most participants felt that sex work was still stigmatized in society at large. However, many felt that the gay community was more accepting of sex work than society as a whole. Nevertheless, many felt shame or guilt about their engagement in sex work and most employed one or more stigma management strategies.

Future research should investigate several important questions that arise from the results. First, what kinds of resources or support would help informal/incidental MSWs manage internalized stigma or feelings of shame and guilt about their engagement in sex work? Second, to what extent do certain individual stigma management strategies actually preclude engagement in social activism or efforts to combat sex work-related stigma on a larger scale? What other factors prevent MSWs from more directly and openly challenging the negative societal stereotypes about sex work and sex workers? Lastly, what are the implications of the stigma management strategies noted in this study for providing services to sex workers? For example, do dating/hookup websites and apps make it more common for MSM to engage in sex work without perceiving it as such, and might that decrease their willingness to engage in services designed for sex workers? How exactly can such services be marketed in a way that is
inclusive and accessible to MSWs who may not identify as sex workers?

There are several limitations of this study that should be noted. Because the findings are based on a convenience sample, they are not necessarily generalizable to all MSWs operating on dating/hookup websites and apps. However, it should be noted that due to the sampling strategy used, the sample was both large and diverse in terms of age and race/ethnicity and geography. Another limitation is that sex workers, who might have brought a different perspective or offered additional insights related to the findings, were not involved in the design or conduct of the study. Still another limitation is that because participants had to have engaged in exchange sex in the prior three months in order to be eligible for study participation, these findings therefore may not represent those who left sex work for stigma-related reasons. Additionally, due to the sensitive nature of the topics of sex work and stigma, some participants may not have been completely forthcoming when discussing their feelings, self-identification, or experiences, despite interviewer efforts to establish rapport and trust with participants and assure them of confidentiality. A final limitation is that we did not systematically investigate differences in stigma experiences or management strategies that might have been associated with race/ethnicity and gender identity. Consequently, while it is our impression that these factors were not very consequential (although we had only small number of genderqueer and nonbinary sex workers), we cannot assert that with certainty, and this is a matter which should be investigated in future research.

Finally, while this report has focused on the experiences and management of stigma among MSWs in light of the recent technological advances that have changed the nature, organization, and practice of sex work, other forces have also been at work. Simultaneous social changes and cultural transformations have also had significant implications for behavior including sexual commerce and how it is perceived in society. One such change is the rise of individualization (Beck, U. & Beck-Gernshein, E., 2002; Howard, 2007; Bauman, 2000) which it has been argued has loosened both social constraints and the force of traditional values that previously confined individuals to narrower lifestyle choices. This has afforded people greater choice in their daily lives, including in the realm of sexuality as there is much greater fluidity in the social limits people operate under, including those related to morality. Attwood (2006) has noted that, “Late modern cultures are characterized by a move to more permissive attitudes to sex, though sex is also a regular focus or public concern in the context of an apparent disintegration of moral consensus around issues of sexual propriety” (p 80). For example, no longer are sexual relations regarded as only appropriately situated within committed, loving, or romantic relationships for the primary purpose of procreation; rather they can now be pursued strictly for the goal of pleasure. Others have written about broad social changes in the nature of intimacy, love and sexual commerce (e.g., Bernstein, 2001, 2007; Giddens, 1992) and how there has been a shift from a relational to a recreational paradigm of sexuality (Laumann et al., 1999; Bernstein, 2001). Bernstein (2007) has written about changes in the nature of the “purchase” in sex work and argued that many clients now are seeking more than simple sexual gratification in their encounters with sex workers, and are also pursuing “a genuine but emotionally bounded intimate relationship” (p. 398) which she labels “bounded authenticity.” This she suggests is part of a larger cultural phenomenon—an increasing blurring of the public and private spheres of life and sexual behavior. All of these macro-social changes have far-reaching implications for a wide-ranging set of issues related to sexual behavior including the buying and selling of sex. However, countervailing forces to these social changes also exist, for example in the form of what Weitzer (2019) described as a moral crusade against all types of sex work in the US and other countries. While Vanwesenbeeck (2017) has noted a “growing intention to control and punish” those involved in commercial sex work in some countries Europe and other parts of the world (p. 1632). So it remains to be seen whether the long-standing strong stigmatization of sex work will significantly wane over time in response to a growing liberalization on attitudes toward sex or if react forces will ultimately prevail to maintain or potentially even heighten it.

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