Experiences of U.S. Transgender/Nonbinary Young Adults Doing Online Sex Work: An Occupational Health Perspective

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Abstract

Online sexual services, like livestreaming and sexual content creation, are common forms of sex work—yet little is known about the occupational health of workers providing these services. There is a particular need for research with transgender/nonbinary (TNB) online sex workers, who may face distinctive marginalization-related challenges. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 U.S.-based TNB young adults, ages 22-30 years, who had done online sex work. We triangulated interview data through focus groups with 17 participants who were clinicians and/or advocates working with TNB people and/or sex workers. Using thematic analysis, we developed five themes addressing positive dynamics in online sex work: Skill and career development, artistry and craft, social connection, self-exploration, and promoting healthier sexual norms. We also developed six themes addressing stressful dynamics: Sexual stereotypes and market pressures, negative viewer and customer interactions, conflict and exploitation, volatility in engagement and earnings, restrictive rules and opaque enforcement, and sex work stigma. Finally, we developed two themes addressing protective factors: Financial and housing stability and longer-term sex work experience. Results point to the importance of recognizing the diversity of TNB young adults' online sex work experiences, opposing restrictive laws and policies, and advocating for social safety net programs.

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Since at least the late 19th century, sex workers in many parts of the world have organized to challenge restrictive laws and stigmatizing attitudes (Cabezas, 2019; First National Conference of Sex Workers in India, 1997; International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights, 1989; Mgbako, 2019), achieving recognition of sex workers' working conditions as an important public health concern (Mgbako, 2019). Across various national contexts (Yang et al., 2024), including the United States (Aggarwal et al., 2021), sex workers who are transgender (i.e., whose gender identity does not match sociocultural expectations for the sex they were assigned at birth) and/or nonbinary (i.e., whose gender falls outside the Western binary categories of boy/man or girl/woman) face distinctive threats to their health and wellbeing. For instance, transgender and/or nonbinary (TNB) sex workers have described discrimination, harassment, and violence from intimate partners, fellow sex workers, social service professionals, and law enforcement (Yang et al., 2024) and limited access to health information and services that consider their intersecting gender affirmation and sexual health needs (Aggarwal et al., 2021). Today, many TNB sex workers do at least some of their work in online modalities, such as livestreaming ("camming") and sexual content creation (Stenersen et al., 2024). However, relatively little is known about TNB people's experiences in online sex work—particularly in relation to their health and wellbeing.

Online Sex Work

Coined in 1978 by sex worker activist Carol Leigh (Leigh, 2004), the term *sex work* encompasses full-service sex work (sometimes termed prostitution) as well as "indirect" sex work that does not involve genital contact with customers (e.g., stripping, lap dances, performing

in pornography; Carr et al., 2024). Today, many forms of sex work take place entirely online, including livestreaming, sexual content creation, live chats, and fetish or kink services (Jones, 2015; Sanders, 2018; Swords et al., 2023). While the term "online sex work" sometimes encompasses sexual services advertised online and provided in person (Jones, 2015), we use it here to refer to online-only services.

Livestreaming, in which sex workers perform on camera in real time for individuals or groups of customers, has been a primary form of online sex work since the 1990s (Jones, 2020). Sexual content creation, defined here as online distribution of self-produced sexual content, also has a long history—but has grown considerably in scope and prominence over the past decade (Hamilton et al., 2023). While sexual content creation often involves photos or videos, it differs from traditional pornography in that performers largely plan, produce, and market their own content rather than contracting with producers and studios (Pezzutto, 2019). The early 2010s saw the emergence of prominent online platforms where independent creators could sell their content (e.g., OnlyFans, ManyVids; Pezzutto, 2019), laying the groundwork for the present-day sexual content creation market. The field then expanded markedly in the early 2020s as the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted many in-person jobs (Hamilton et al., 2023; Rubattu et al., 2023). This growth continued at a more moderate pace in subsequent years, with OnlyFans (the market's largest company by revenue) reporting that total payments to creators grew 9% between 2023 and 2024 (Spangler, 2025).

Numerous studies have addressed the health and wellbeing of sex workers who advertise online (Argento et al., 2018; Bernier et al., 2021), but this literature has largely focused on those providing in-person services. However, several studies—primarily but not exclusively in the Global North—have explored sex workers' motivations and experiences in online modalities,

primarily livestreaming and sexual content creation (De Gioannis et al., 2025; Jones, 2020). This research has highlighted negative and positive dynamics in online sex work that may have occupational health implications. In terms of health risks, research with livestream workers and sexual content creators has drawn attention to unpredictable income streams, high workloads, online harassment, concerns about being "outed" as sex workers, and the risk of stalking (Hamilton et al., 2022; Jones, 2020; Rubattu et al., 2023). Indeed, in one study with European and North American sex workers who had provided both online and in-person services, participants described high workloads, "outing" concerns, and mistreatment by clients as more problematic online than when working in person (Hamilton et al., 2022). On the positive side, workers have identified various benefits of online sex work relative to other available jobs (e.g., gig work, customer service work), including flexible work hours (Hamilton et al., 2023; Rubattu et al., 2023), the ability to set boundaries with customers (Hamilton et al., 2023; Rubattu et al., 2023), and fewer barriers for disabled and neurodivergent workers (Hamilton et al., 2023). Moreover, some workers describe online sex work as enjoyable and fulfilling, with personal benefits such as exploring one's sexuality (Hamilton et al., 2023; Jones, 2020) that can outweigh the stressors they encounter (Jones, 2020).

The literature on online sex work has highlighted structural factors with implications for workers' health and wellbeing, including cultural factors (particularly sex work stigma), laws, and corporate policies (Jones, 2020). A major focus in this literature has been laws that directly or indirectly hinder sex workers' use of online platforms—particularly the 2018 U.S. federal law known as FOSTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act; Albert et al., 2021), which imposes liability on technology companies when their platforms are used for sexual exploitation. FOSTA-SESTA is believed to have led

technology companies to restrict a broad range of sexuality-related content, creating considerable instability for sex workers, who report losing access to business-critical services—including their bank accounts—without notice or recourse (Beebe, 2022; Swords et al., 2023).

In contrast to the robust literature on structural factors, there has been less attention to individual-level risk or protective factors shaping online sex workers' health and wellbeing. The broader global literature on sex workers' health has identified a range of potentially modifiable health-protective factors for those doing in-person sex work, such as financial and housing stability, social support, and involvement in sex worker organizations (Deering et al., 2014; Martín-Romo et al., 2023). These or other protective factors may also be relevant in online sex work, and identifying protective factors could highlight additional opportunities to improve online sex workers' occupational health.

Transgender/Nonbinary People and Sex Work

Among 27,715 TNB adults who participated in the 2015 United States Transgender Survey, 19% had done sex work in their lifetime, of whom 50% were transgender women, 19% were transgender men, and 30% were nonbinary (James et al., 2016). Some TNB people do sex work in a context of economic necessity, such as to secure food or shelter (James et al., 2016; Kattari & Begun, 2017). Discrimination in the mainstream job market often contributes to these needs; in one survey, TNB adults who lost a job due to anti-TNB bias were three times as likely to do sex work as TNB adults who had not lost a job for that reason (Fitzgerald et al., 2015). Beyond discrimination, TNB people may have other reasons for pursuing sex work. TNB people may prioritize certain values in their career choices, such as self-direction, authenticity, and freedom (Goldberg et al., 2021; Woodruffe-Burton, 2018); for some, sex work may align with those values (Orchard et al., 2020). In addition, sex work can also be affirmative of TNB sex

workers' gender identities (Capous-Desyllas & Loy, 2020), and some transgender women and transfeminine people find that their gender expression and embodiment are sought after by clients (Orchard et al., 2020). However, desirability can tip into fetishization, where clients' sexual interest in TNB people is accompanied by objectifying and stigmatizing attitudes, often leading to frustrating and hurtful interactions for TNB sex workers (Capous-Desyllas & Loy, 2020).

Many TNB sex workers do at least some online sex work: Among 2,153 TNB adults in the 2015 United States Transgender Survey who had ever done sex work, the two most common modalities were livestreaming (37%) and pornography (31%; Stenersen et al., 2024). A handful of studies have addressed TNB people's online sex work experiences, generally from a sociological perspective (Chib et al., 2021; Jones, 2020, 2021, 2023; Theunissen & Favero, 2021); like the broader online sex work literature, this work has focused primarily but not exclusively on workers in the Global North. These studies have found that TNB online sex workers encounter both structural and interpersonal cissexism (anti-TNB marginalization) in their work (Chib et al., 2021; Jones, 2020, 2023), sometimes in combination with sizeism and/or racism (Jones, 2020, 2023). For instance, as a result of cissexist stereotypes, transgender women doing online sex work have been excluded from some livestreaming platforms and online sex worker communities (Jones, 2020) and may disproportionately experience objectification, harassment, and stalking (Chib et al., 2021). Transgender men have discussed facing limited earning potential in online sex work (specifically livestreaming; Jones, 2021; Theunissen & Favero, 2021) unless they present as cisgender women. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that TNB online sex workers experience unique stressors, but these studies were not designed to explore the full spectrum of occupational dynamics shaping these workers'

wellbeing.

Current Study

The goal of this study was to characterize U.S. TNB young adults' experiences with online sex work from an occupational health perspective. We focused on young adulthood as a life stage in which many U.S. young people are expected to establish careers and financial independence (Scales et al., 2016) and many TNB people undertake substantial self-exploration regarding gender and sexuality (Hereth et al., 2020). As a U.S.-based team, we limited our scope to the U.S. so that this work could inform state and national policy advocacy.

Most occupational health concerns for online sex workers fall under the umbrella of psychosocial work stress (Jiao et al., 2021; Sanders, 2018)—which, in research with broader working populations, has been shown to impact key health domains including mental health (LaMontagne et al., 2010), immune responses (Nakata, 2012), and cardiovascular disease (Kivimäki & Kawachi, 2015). We therefore organized this study around work stress as conceptualized in the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which holds that detrimental work stress stems from challenging job dynamics (e.g., interpersonal conflict, job insecurity). The model further holds that detrimental work stress can be counteracted by job dynamics promoting workers' success and development (e.g., autonomy, social support) and individual-level protective factors (e.g., self-efficacy; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Guided by the Job Demands-Resources model, we set out to address the following questions: (1) *What do TNB young adults find fulfilling or beneficial about online sex work?*, and (2) *What challenges do TNB young adults face in online sex work?* During analysis, we recognized that the balance of fulfillment/benefits and challenges varied considerably, both between participants and over the course of a given participant's sex work experience, and that it would be valuable to identify

factors that contribute to these differences. We therefore added an additional question that also aligned with the Job Demands-Resources model: (3) *Which protective factors help TNB young adults navigate online sex work?*

Method

We generated primary data in two ways: in-depth interviews with TNB young adults doing online sex work, accompanied by focus groups with policy advocates and mental health clinicians who work with TNB people, sex workers, or both.

Interview Participants and Procedures

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with TNB young adults doing online sex work. To be eligible, participants had to be 18-30 years of age, live in the United States, speak English, identify as transgender and/or nonbinary, and have posted a sexual video or photos of themself online in the prior three months; these could be free, directly monetized, or advertisements for other services. The present analysis includes 14 of 19 original interviews. Because this analysis focused on sex work, we excluded four interviewees who posted sexual content for free without doing any paid sex work. We also excluded one interview in which the interviewee did not discuss any specific experiences related to either online sex work or being TNB, leading us to conclude that the participant had likely provided inaccurate eligibility information. Interviewees were recruited via TNB and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/nonbinary, and queer (LGBTQ) social media communities (e.g., Lex app, Reddit TNB and LGBTQ subreddits). Based on a screening form, we selected interviewees for diversity across ethnicity, race, and gender. Specifically, because nonbinary and non-Hispanic White young adults were highly represented among those screening eligible, we invited all prospective participants with a gender identity other than nonbinary, all who identified as Hispanic or Latinx,

and all who identified with a race other than White.

Interviewees' ages ranged from 22 to 30 years (M = 25.8 years, SD = 2.4 years). In an open response format, interviewees described their gender identity as nonbinary (n = 8), trans (n = 4), transfem[inine] (n = 3), woman (n = 2), agender (n = 1), female (n = 1), gender fluid (n = 1), male (n = 1), neutral (n = 1), and transmasc[uline] (n = 1); many used more than one term. Interviewees described their ethnicity and/or race as White (n = 8), Latinx, Latino, or Hispanic (n = 4), multiracial or mixed (n = 3), Black (n = 2), Asian, specifically Vietnamese (n = 1), and Jewish (n = 1); several used more than one of these terms. Interviewees were diverse in sexual orientation, though none were heterosexual. Six interviewees described themselves as disabled or discussed a long-term health condition that limited major life activities. We present full demographics of the sample in Table 1.

Most interviews (n = 11) were conducted in May-September 2022. The initial sample size was based on the amount of funding available for participant compensation and interview transcription. To correct a gender imbalance in the initial sample, we later obtained funding to interview more women and/or transfeminine participants, completing these additional interviews (n = 3) in February-March 2024. All interviewers had prior community-based or research experience with TNB young adults, and each completed semi-structured interview training, including two practice interviews. Two interviewers were TNB and two were cisgender. Their genders included man, woman, and nonbinary/gender fluid, and their racial and ethnic identities included White, Latinx, and Asian. None of the interviewers publicly identified as a current or former sex worker.

We developed an interview guide based on the literature on online sex work and aligned with the Job Demands-Resources model of work stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; see above).

Topics included personal circumstances (e.g., other jobs); online sex work experiences, including motivations, positive experiences, and stressful experiences; and existing and desired sources of support. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasting from 59 minutes to 78 minutes (M = 68 minutes; SD = 6 minutes), and were audio-recorded, then transcribed.

Procedures were approved by the Yale University IRB. Participants gave written informed consent and were compensated $60 USD in gift cards. To reduce the risk of re-identification, we present quotes with participant-selected pseudonyms rather than full demographic details for each participant. Participants were asked not to choose pseudonyms that could identify them.

Focus Group Participants and Procedures

We conducted three focus groups with U.S.-based policy advocates and mental health clinicians supporting TNB people and/or sex workers. These focus groups served two purposes: Adding additional primary data from other relevant perspectives (triangulation) and confirming or challenging the research team's initial interpretations of the interview data (respondent validation/member checking). Focus group participants were recruited via the research team's professional networks, professional social media groups and email lists, and referrals from other participants. Among the 17 focus group participants, eight held policy advocacy roles (e.g., advocacy organization staff, law professor, community organizer), all involving sex work advocacy and five also involving LGBTQ advocacy. Nine participants had clinical mental health backgrounds (e.g., psychotherapist, social work trainee, counseling professor), of whom seven had a clinical and/or research focus on LGBTQ mental health and three had a clinical and/or research focus on sex workers' mental health. Most focus group participants also had lived experience as sex workers and/or TNB people.

Focus groups were conducted via Zoom in October 2022, following the primary round of interviews. During each session, two research team members presented preliminary results from the initial interview phase and prompted participants to discuss the findings in light of their own experiences (e.g., similarities, differences, policy and practice implications). Focus groups lasted 54–72 minutes (M = 64 minutes, SD = 8 minutes) and were audio-recorded, then transcribed. Procedures were approved by the Yale University IRB. Participants gave written informed consent and were compensated $60 USD in gift cards.

Analysis

We used template analysis, a style of thematic analysis in which a hierarchical coding template is established and iteratively revised as analysis proceeds (Brooks et al., 2015). Supplemental Table 1 presents details of this analysis. In brief, we developed an initial template of codes based on four interview transcripts (Brooks et al., 2015), then refined and organized the codes over four rounds of coding. The focus groups and the final three interviews took place after round 2, and the resulting transcripts were included in rounds 3 and 4, during which we were attentive to how the new data might expand or complicate the initial codes. During rounds 3 and 4, a secondary coder coded four randomly selected transcripts and reviewed discrepancies with the primary coder; the coders then revised the code definitions by consensus. Finally, we expanded the code definitions into theme summaries, interpreting the excerpts in the context of broader participant narratives and making connections with other themes (Brooks et al., 2015). Coding was performed in NVivo, versions 13-15.

Two of the three coders were TNB, and all were personally and professionally familiar with TNB young adults and their experiences. The coding team lacked firsthand experience doing sex work, though some coders had personal relationships (e.g., friendships) with TNB sex

workers. The coders' genders included man, woman, and nonbinary/gender fluid, and their racial and ethnic identities included White and Latinx.

We used several strategies to improve validity and dependability (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Miles et al., 2020). As discussed above, we triangulated and validated findings using focus groups, and we refined code definitions via team coding. We also sought negative/disconfirming evidence while developing theme summaries, revising claims to accommodate counterexamples.

We initially planned to focus on sexual content creation; however, early in the analysis phase, we expanded our scope to a broader range of online sex work experiences. We made this change because several interviewees primarily created sexual content to advertise other services, such that their discussions of sexual content creation were deeply intertwined with broader discussions of online sex work. While our analysis focused on online sex work, a few participants also provided in-person sexual services, and some of their comments refer holistically to their sex work experiences. We therefore label interviewees' quotes with both the online and in-person sex work modalities in which they had worked.

Epistemology

We approached the study from a subtle realist epistemological position, i.e., that there is a single shared reality, yet any knowledge generated about that reality depends on the perspectives of those creating the knowledge (Hammersley, 1992). This position accommodated our goal of creating generalizable, actionable knowledge while encouraging critical reflection on our roles in creating that knowledge. From a subtle realist position, incorporating multiple perspectives is often key to developing a credible and comprehensive understanding of a research topic (Mays, 2000). This principle informed our methodological choices during data generation (e.g., maximizing diversity in the sample, triangulating between interviews and focus groups) and

during data analysis (e.g., using a consensus-based team coding process).

Dissemination

To aid in disseminating findings from this research to policy advocates, clinicians, and community members, we developed research briefs targeting these audiences, available at https://sites.bu.edu/t4thealth/j4u-research-briefs/.

Results

Interviewees discussed various forms of online sex work: Nearly all had experience with sexual content creation, three had also done livestreaming, one had done sugar dating, and one primarily offered professional dominant services. At least four had also provided in-person sexual services, often advertised through their online sexual content. Reasons for doing online sex work were similarly diverse. Six interviewees cited sex work as their primary source of income, while five had one other job and three had multiple additional jobs. Nearly all named money as an important reason for doing online sex work; of these, several did online sex work for supplemental income, several described online sex work as a practical career choice among various options, and several identified online sex work as their *only* option after being pushed out of mainstream jobs because they were TNB, disabled, and/or neurodivergent. For most interviewees, financial motivations for doing online sex work coexisted with important personal reasons, such as enjoyment and personal fulfillment. Below, we discuss aspects of online sex work that interviewees found fulfilling or otherwise beneficial. We then discuss the challenges that interviewees faced in online sex work, followed by protective factors that contributed to less stressful and more fulfilling work experiences.

1. What Do TNB Young Adults Find Fulfilling or Beneficial About Online Sex Work?

All interviewees described one or more ways in which they found online sex work

fulfilling or otherwise beneficial—not simply in comparison to other jobs, but in and of itself. We developed five themes addressing these beneficial dynamics.

1a. Skill and Career Development

Several participants discussed how online sex work taught them satisfying and potentially valuable skills, particularly in photography, media editing, and social media marketing. Suzie (sexual content creation and full-service sex work) explained:

> I'm going to figure out how to get this app, I'm going to figure out how to get this edit, I'm going to figure out how to do this and that… Like, "Oh, this is the app people are using to get the lighting like this! Oh, that's the app they're using to making this transition."

Suzie likewise took pride in the social media marketing skills she had developed:

> One of the things I like the most is when I post something and people start commenting right away. So then, like, I nailed the algorithm… [K]nowing the right time [to] post on Twitter is super important, and so I started to master that.

A few participants were leveraging online sex work experience towards related professional goals. For instance, Jax (sexual content creation and escorting) was inspired to become a tax accountant for other sexual content creators:

> Content creators don't always file their taxes… I found out just from, like, [non-sexual] content creating… things that you can write off. I was like, oh shit, we can do this too—our equipment can be written off, our costs can be written off… I was like, this [service] doesn't exist, and I want to create it.

Jax was now studying for an accounting degree with this goal in mind.

1b. Artistry and Craft

Many participants appreciated the opportunities for creativity and craft that online sex work offered. Rain (sexual content creation and livestreaming) discussed how their work aligned with their passions in the performing arts:

> For me, the process of bringing all the things I love together, like, script and costumes from theater, performance of drag and burlesque, and then the sexuality of homemade porn, like, all that coming together is something I really love…

One reason that online sex work was artistically satisfying was that it could offer considerable creative freedom. Pecan (professional dominant services and sexual content creation) was among a few participants who remarked on this point, saying, "As an artist [doing online sex work]…I literally get to just make whatever I want, you know?"

Harley (sexual content creation and escorting) incorporated their interests in costume design and photography into photoshoots:

> Ever since I was a little kid, I've always been into both photography and costuming… I'm a Halloween gay, you know what I mean?… It works really well to put those two hobbies together and make some money off of it.

In contrast to participants who discussed developing skills like photography or video editing through online sex work (see Theme 1a), participants like Rain, Pecan, and Harley had long-term experience and passion in these areas. These artistically motivated participants appreciated that online sex work allowed them to spend more time on their creative pursuits and/or to approach them in novel ways.

1c. Social Connection

Many participants named social connectedness with peers and/or customers as a major benefit of online sex work. Lemon (sexual content creation and livestreaming) gushed about the

friendships they developed through the sexual content community:

> I've made so many lifelong friends… Like, one of my best friends in the whole wide world is also a sex worker, and we met through just, like, being in a shared DM group on Twitter… I just love the different people that I meet. And they're so creative… [S]ome of these folks are, like, genuinely artists with like their lighting, and the *shibari* [rope harnesses] that they do is, like, pure artistry, and the acting that goes into it… I'm just so proud of my friends.

Lemon also highlighted the practical support that online sex workers provide for one another:

> [Y]our community's going to be your biggest boon… in preventing burnout…and just, like, advertising and getting the word out… I wouldn't have made it, I would've burned out and not been nearly as successful…as just a matter of paying rent…without my community.

For Lemon and others, the online sex work community offered an invaluable mix of emotional support, practical advice, and collaboration. Some participants particularly benefitted from the community's support and affirmation related to being TNB. Evelyn (sexual content creation and livestreaming) reported, "It's been very affirming for my trans identity. I've felt so welcome within the community, being trans."

Jax (sexual content creation and escorting) was one of a few participants who described filming content with other online sex workers. He described these collaborations as one of his favorite aspects of online sex work, offering opportunities not just to "meet new people" but also to "connect in a new way" with people who shared his interests and perspective on sexuality.Many interviewees also described rewarding connections with customers. Some simply found it satisfying that customers enjoyed their work. Others, including Suzie (sexual content

creation and full-service sex work), described feeling more holistically appreciated:

> [T]he people that are for me are going to support me, and uplift me, and support my content, and push my content and share my content… I love that people support me and all the things that I've done, even outside of sex work.

For Suzie, sharing content was one concrete way in which customers expressed their support. Other participants described feeling supported when customers inquired about their daily lives—and particularly when customers engaged with them over many months or years. While these positive customer interactions were not universal, they were frequent and meaningful for the interviewees who discussed them.

1d. Body, Identity, and Sexual Self-Exploration

Several interviewees described online sex work, particularly sexual content creation, as facilitating exploration of their gender and other social identities, their relationship to their body, or their sexual desires and boundaries. Rain (sexual content creation and livestreaming) explained, "Sometimes it takes doing something on camera…to realize, like, 'Oh, this feels good! I want to do this more.'"

Some participants also found that doing online sex work helped them let go of anxiety or shame around their bodies or sexuality. Dreamer (sugar dating) described an improving relationship with their body:

> I'm just learning to love all parts of my body… I have stretch marks on my hips, and I don't have a flat tummy, and these are things that I felt really self-conscious about and felt like I needed to hide or alter. And now…I'm just super happy with it…

Lily (sexual content creation) discussed a similar process regarding sexuality:

> I sort of had a bit of a block for sexual things…kind of a shame, guilt associated with it.

> So it's kind of, in a way, therapeutic, trying to restructure the way I feel about myself, my body, how I engage with the world in a sexual way…which has been a very rewarding experience…

1e. Promoting Healthier Sexual Norms

Several interviewees discussed using their work to challenge social norms they viewed as harmful, including rigid body ideals and unrealistic depictions of sexuality. Some, including Ryan (sexual content creation), hoped their work would allow more TNB people to see themselves reflected in sexual media:

> If I, as a non-binary or a trans content creator, am putting out content, that means that [when] other trans and non-binary people are looking for content that, like, features themselves, there's more to pick from…

Some interviewees hoped to portray sex and body diversity in more genuine ways than mainstream general or sexual media, often using humor. Jax (sexual content creation and escorting) remarked, "I like being real, I like showing that sex is funny, sex can have certain things happen by mistake, and it happens, we all do it." Similarly, Poopoo (sexual content creation) told us, "If nothing else, I hope that I'm able to help other people feel more comfortable in their body, with whatever kind of body they have... Whether they have body hair, or a disability or whatever." Poopoo's recent work, which blurred boundaries between online sex work and fine art, was intended to prompt critical reflection about sexual media:

> I've been doing a lot with, like, concepts of fragmented bodies, and what it means to be whole… I want people to think about the images they consume… That's why I edit in crazy giant tits [and] laser flares and robot eyes… It's like, none of this is real—any sexy photo that you see is not real…

Finally, several interviewees challenged sex work stigma by being open about their identities and experiences. For instance, Harley (sexual content creation and escorting) explained, "I came out as nonbinary in my work persona…because…I think it's important that clients do see us [sex workers] as actual entire people who have the full range of identities…"

2. What Challenges Do TNB Young Adults Face in Online Sex Work?

Interviewees discussed a range of challenges in their online sex work, ranging from minor frustrations to serious concerns. We developed six themes capturing these stressful dynamics.

2a. Sexual Stereotypes and Market Pressures

Many participants discussed how the market for sexual content and services rewarded particular types of content and forms of self-presentation, prioritizing either socially privileged characteristics (e.g., thin, cisgender, White) or stereotypical depictions of marginalized groups (e.g., transgender women as hypersexual). These market pressures created stress by limiting participants' earning potential—or pushing participants to present themselves in uncomfortable ways. Gender expression was a prominent area in which these tensions arose: Participants perceived much greater earning potential for those who conformed to Western beauty standards for either transgender or cisgender women than for those who did not. This was most often problematic for transgender men and/or transmasculine participants, some of whom felt pressure to present as more feminine than they were comfortable with. Jax (sexual content creation and escorting) explained, "As a heavier trans guy who presents really masc and stuff…I get messages like 'Why don't you shave this?…Why don't you still have your tits like this person does?'" Jax felt frustration and self-doubt at seeing thinner, more feminine-presenting trans men and transmasculine sex workers receive markedly more attention and income than he did. He had

built a follower base that appreciated his body and gender expression, including fellow trans people and other men in the gay "bear" subculture. However, since each follower might pay little or nothing for a worker's content or services, a tailored audience like Jax's offered less earning potential than the much larger pool of heterosexual men seeking feminine trans or cis women.

Jax did not adapt his gender presentation to market pressures, but others did, sometimes in ways that made them uncomfortable. For instance, several participants discussed how market pressures complicated their decisions around gender-affirming surgery. Speaking to her own sex work experience, one focus group participant (LGBTQ and sex work policy advocate) related:

> To be a pull for online content, or sex work generally, as a trans person, I need to have my downstairs the way it is currently, mostly. And it's really fucked my head up the way that's interacted with my thinking around accessing surgery.

For transgender women and transfeminine participants, the market rewarded conforming to dominant female beauty standards while also representing sexual stereotypes of transgender women, such as taking an insertive sexual role ("topping"). Evelyn (sexual content creation and livestreaming) expressed ambivalence about this expectation:

> I actually don't even have gender dysphoria with [topping] at this point. I did before… The industry's kind of forced me to top, which is fine, as it turns out…

Some participants appealed to sexual stereotypes to earn much-needed income and were troubled by potentially perpetuating those stereotypes. Lemon (sexual content creation and livestreaming) recalled:

> When I first started, I realized quickly, like, if I labeled myself, like, transfemme or a trans woman or whatever, that it didn't attract as many folks as if I [used labels] like "femboy"… [J]ust kind of being like, "Okay, well, am I selling out, or am I just keeping

myself safe and fed?" And having to navigate that was tough.

Two participants described similar internal conflicts around emphasizing their race, which attracted customers but raised uncomfortable questions about racial fetishization. Pecan (professional dominant services and sexual content creation) explained, "I'll include, like, 'Asian dom' [in my marketing]… And then I kind of get frustrated because I feel like I'm turning against my values and my identities, you know?"

2b. Negative Interactions With Viewers and Customers

Many interviewees discussed stressful interactions with people viewing their content. Some interviewees, like Harley (sexual content creation and escorting), felt dehumanized by pushy or demanding customers:

> They want exactly what they want, exactly when they want it. And they don't often see me as a person. They see me as, like, a sex doll who is made up waiting in bed for them to contact me…I don't sleep, I don't eat, I don't have friends… And that doesn't feel great.

Lily Astra (sexual content creation) speculated that TNB workers experience more of these demanding, dehumanizing interactions: "[I]t feels like…people are a little ruder, they're a little more demanding…when you're sort of marginalized identities like trans, non-binary…"

Several interviewees described denigrating or fetishizing comments related to gendered and racial sexual stereotypes. A few participants observed that stereotypes painting transgender women as hypersexual contributed to objectification and sexual harassment. In a particularly intense manifestation of this dynamic, two participants—both women—described being stalked by customers. Clara (sexual content creation) described being shaken by the experience:

> [W]hen that was happening, I basically took a break for a couple weeks because I was

> like, just, "I can't. This is too much." It was too stressful. It was impacting my sleep. It was impacting my normal life…

The incident continued to affect Clara even after the perpetrator had gone quiet: "I still technically don't know if they've moved on, because it's, especially on the internet, kind of notoriously difficult to get rid of stalkers…"

2c. Conflict and Exploitation in Sex Work Networks

While interviewees generally worked independently, some discussed mutual marketing arrangements, filming with other creators, or working with producers and studios. These generally positive working relationships occasionally became stressful or dangerous. Suzie (sexual content creation and full-service sex work) related:

> At first I thought we was going to…[film] a threesome… She bought my ticket to New York… And then she brought me around her friends… They didn't know I was trans [and I] had to, like, pass myself off as a cisgender woman… It could've been very unsafe…

During the trip, Suzie saw warning signs of a plan to exploit her financially:

> …It looked like her man was…controlling her money… One person did know I was trans because [my friend] was talking to him about…getting me to work and stuff. And I was like, "Oh, I don't know if I want to have a guy do my dealings…"

Another participant, Evelyn (sexual content creation and livestreaming), did experience exploitation. After becoming homeless due to anti-TNB hostility, she was "lured" to another state and coerced to do online sex work, a "horrific" experience. Notably, both Suzie and Evelyn were induced to travel under false pretenses, distancing them from their in-person support networks.

Other interviewees described more general interpersonal challenges within the field. Jax

(sexual content creation and escorting) described one such conflict:

> [W]e had a bad falling out… People I was supposed to collab with, or other trans folks that I was super excited to get to know and were excited to get to know me, started working with him under his company, and he had them all block me…

Jax's experience speaks to the potential ripple effects of conflict within the tight-knit TNB online sex work community.

2d. Volatility in Engagement and Earnings

Several interviewees, primarily sexual content creators, described fluctuations in their viewership or earnings as a source of stress. Lily (sexual content creation) explained that subscriptions or purchases could change markedly without an obvious cause:

> …I've lost nearly half my subscribers over the past month… [I] try and remind myself that…[y]ou're always gonna see waves of subscribers coming in and leaving. But those times can be very stressful.

Beyond the financial implications, these fluctuations affected interviewees' body image and overall self-confidence. These self-attributions seemed particularly problematic for interviewees who prized genuine self-expression in their sex work personae. As Lily put it, "Especially since I'm trying to make [my content] more authentic… when people pull back from that…it's easy to imagine that there's something wrong with myself…"

These experiences may highlight an inherent psychological challenge of marketing one's work via social media. Because the algorithms that promote content to other users are largely inscrutable, creators like Lily may blame themselves for changes beyond their control:

> It's had its moments where I felt, like, overwhelmed or bad about it, like I don't know what I'm doing… I can get self-depreciating in a way… Maybe the whims of the

> algorithm are just the way things go, but…it's easy to try and, like, let it be a reflection on yourself… Like, "What am I doing wrong?"

As Lily explained, changes in popularity could harm content creators' self-esteem even when they knew intellectually that they had limited control over these outcomes.

2e. Restrictive Rules and Opaque Enforcement

Many interviewees highlighted restrictive platform rules regarding sexual content—and the seemingly arbitrary ways those rules were enforced—as a major source of stress. These issues arose with multiple types of platforms: sexual content platforms, general social media platforms, and payment platforms. The most prominent concern was with general social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter/X, which participants found indispensable for marketing. Harley (sexual content creation and escorting) explained: "Even right now you are allowed to post, like, full porn…on Twitter. But that doesn't mean that they don't shut people's accounts down all the time…." Platform bans expunged one's follower list, which could take months or years to develop. Poopoo (sexual content creation) described this issue as "literally the only stressful part" of online sex work, and Harley remarked, "I would like to stop having to live in fear that my entire way to make money—Twitter—could be taken from me at any moment."

Several participants believed social media platform rules were enforced inequitably against TNB, fat,[1] and/or racialized users, and several raised concerns about bias-based "shadowbans," punitive actions in which platforms allow a user to continue posting while secretly hiding their content or limiting its reach. Dreamer (sugar dating) related:

> I see Black creators, especially...silenced by the algorithm, like, their work gets less engagement... There's [also] differences between body types... [V]ideos get flagged more

[1] Echoing interviewees' language, we use "fat" as a non-pejorative term for larger bodies.

> if they have bigger bodies and they're acting sexy, versus a thinner person acting sexy. Like, there's all sorts of intersections on how the algorithm rules over us.

Similarly, a focus group participant (sex work policy advocate) commented:

> [S]omething I see…is frustration over being shadowbanned…because they're BIPOC [Black/Indigenous/People of Color] and trans…and not knowing, like, "Is it the content that I'm sharing that's not as popular, or am I being targeted by the algorithm?" …How do you plan your finances when it feels so out of your own control?

Financial service companies' policies on sex work and sexual content were another key element of these discussions. Several participants posited that sexual content platforms' restrictive policies were driven by banks or credit card processors. One focus group participant (psychotherapy trainee and adult entertainment professional) remarked, "The credit card companies are very selective… The 'how do we make our hands clean', right?" Participants likewise raised concerns about the policies of third-party payment platforms (e.g., PayPal, Venmo, Cash App), which largely prohibit payments for sex work, including legal online sex work. Participants who accepted payments through those platforms feared having their earnings confiscated. Blue (sexual content creation) remarked, "There is nothing illegal about…creating porn or whatever…but then when you try to get paid for that, it's a problem. People are, you know, losing their bank accounts, losing their safety around their income…"

Several interviewees and focus group participants discussed the perceived influence of FOSTA-SESTA, the 2018 U.S. federal law that makes technology companies liable for use of their platforms by sex traffickers, on the policies and practices of general social media platforms, sexual content platforms, and financial service companies. Harley summarized the situation:

> I would love for FOSTA-SESTA to stop existing because that has made online content a

> lot more difficult to navigate. You can't fucking do anything anymore because all the credit card processors think that they're going to get arrested for trafficking if they allow sexual content on their platforms.

Focus group participants pointed out that platform-based unpredictability can cause workers to accept higher-risk clients, with one (sex work policy advocate) explaining, "The insecurity of platforms, not knowing about your livelihood… [makes sex workers] more likely to take clients that they would deny otherwise, if they felt more secure. They're more likely to change their risk assessment to prioritize economic stability."

2f. Sex Work Stigma in Professional, Clinical, and Social Settings

Numerous participants described stressful experiences rooted in stigma against sex workers. One key concern was employment discrimination in mainstream jobs, as Harley (sexual content creation and escorting) explained:

> [T]here is the idea that like, those pictures are out there forever and they can haunt me if I choose to ever leave the industry, because we live in a world that really discriminates against sex workers… [T]hat is frustrating and makes me anxious…

Stigma put sex workers in a double bind when applying to jobs: Not disclosing sex work might reduce the risk of discrimination—but would leave applicants with gaps in their work histories and difficulty highlighting transferable skills. One focus group participant (psychotherapist) observed: "A lot of my clients…love the skills that they've learnt engaging in sex work, but they have trouble moving…to different fields and naming those skills and, like, where they got them."

Several participants reflected on stigma in medical or mental health care, particularly assumptions that sex work was harmful or risky. Dreamer (sugar dating) explained, "The most common response [from clinicians] is a sense of alarm, panic. And they just see the negative

aspects, and they don't recognize the positive things." Regarding mental health care, Harley (sexual content creation and escorting) described how assumptions about the harmfulness of sex work can threaten the therapeutic alliance:

> One of my closest friends was told by one of her therapists, "Well, if you're just going to keep re-traumatizing yourself, we can't ever process through your old trauma." And she was specifically referring to her being an in-person sex worker… I've heard that from a lot of [sex workers] who've sought out mental health care.

In the focus groups, mental health clinicians confirmed that negative judgments about sex work are widespread in their field. One focus group participant (psychotherapy trainee and adult entertainment professional) explained how these attitudes discourage sex workers from openly discussing their work experiences with therapists:

> Part of the reason why clients don't want to disclose if they're doing sex work is that they're afraid that if they…say that they're having a bad day at work, the therapist is going to tell them… "Well, just get out of sex work, then."

A few participants also mentioned stigmatizing reactions from friends or family, though several, including Zu (sexual content creation), described neutral or supportive responses:

> My mom knows about it and so does my sister, so they both are pretty okay with that… I think the most disappointed that [my mom] was, was that how much I was charging people for… It was kind of funny how she just came out and just said, "Uh, this is not enough for you and your partner."

3. Which Protective Factors Help TNB Young Adults Navigate Online Sex Work?

Interviewees varied in their overall feelings about online sex work: Some felt frustrated and exhausted, others expressed enthusiasm and commitment, and most fell between these

extremes. We developed two themes capturing protective factors associated with less stressful online sex work experiences.

3a. Financial and Housing Stability

Financial and housing stability were crucial determinants of participants' sex work experiences. Several participants described having started sex work in response to a financial or housing crisis, generally after losing their jobs or housing due to being either TNB or disabled. Evelyn (sexual content creation and livestreaming) shared one such experience:

> When I first came out [as trans], I lost my job, got kicked out of my house, everything. And I was living in my car and that's all I could do… So I posted stuff and then just [worked on] getting subscribers.

Many of the most troubling experiences that participants reported, such as stalking and exploitation, occurred during these periods of crisis-driven sex work. As Harley (sexual content creation and escorting) explained, insecurity in one's housing and finances could push sex workers to work in ways that were highly stressful or even unsafe:

> When I was really barely scraping by, and dumpster diving for food and stuff like that, it was a lot harder to just be like, "Fuck you, I'm going to block you" [to disrespectful customers] because that money would've changed my ability to pay my rent or something that month.

Having a degree of financial security gave participants more latitude in these decisions, as Lily (sexual content creation) discussed:

> …I have seen some other creators who will kinda give way on things they don't necessarily feel comfortable with, but they feel they have to participate in to maintain their income… I thankfully have a bit more freedom in being able to say no, because I'm

> a little more secure financially.

Some participants attributed their current economic stability to combining online sex work with other income sources, such as full- or part-time jobs, gig work, or entrepreneurship. Lemon (sexual content creation and livestreaming) described how a full-time job allowed her to pull back from sex work when she felt burned out:

> I've been [at my current full-time job] for almost fifteen months. And I did keep updates... But then I had surgery in August, and…it kind of became very sporadic… I didn't really need it [anymore], and I was very glad to take a step away from sex work, because it definitely does wear on you.

A few participants had never relied financially on their sex work, giving them a good deal of latitude in the pace and content of that work. Rain (sexual content creation and livestreaming) discussed how having another full-time job had allowed them to center artistry and self-exploration in their sex work:

> I think my relationship to my work is different than someone who creates content that is focused on what is the most monetizable… By presenting work that is very specific to what I like, and very strange, and not necessarily universally sexually palatable, that is me expressing, like, "This is what I like and I'm not going to give more or less than that."

3b. Longer-Term Sex Work Experience

A second protective factor was having longer-term experience with sex work, during which participants developed strategies, followings, and relationships that made their work more sustainable. For instance, Pecan (professional dominant services and sexual content creation) described discovering a strategy that made their work less stressful:

> Up until, like, a couple months ago…it felt like, constant, 24/7…constant churning out

> stuff. Later, and as the months went by, I kind of would take the time to just kind of hoard content… like, "Okay, we're just going to take this many pics with these outfits…and then just bracket it for the next, like, couple weeks." So then I'm good on content, I don't have to necessarily worry…

More experienced interviewees had also honed their self-presentation strategies over time, balancing their identities and values with market pressures that rewarded conforming to stereotypes. For instance, Harley (sexual content creation and escorting) found that being open about being autistic was both meaningful and financially viable:

> I also say that I'm autistic in my bio. That was a huge risk, obviously. But again, I think that people should know that sex workers are people and we encompass the full range of experiences…And also I've had a lot of specifically autistic clients seek me out now, because they like that I can relate to them. So it actually boosted my business a little bit...

Among the biggest benefits of longer-term sex work experience was establishing a reliable customer base. Harley explained that growing their brand and Twitter following had substantially improved their financial and housing security, commenting, "The more established I've gotten… my financial security is not dependent on [any] one person... I have my rent made. I'm good." Poopoo (sexual content creation) spoke to the importance of these customer relationships from a more interpersonal perspective:

> [Now] I'm trying to just…work with people who I've had consistent financial relationships with over the years, because they get me, they've been watching me grow, they've been actually interacting and supporting the process.

Focusing on long-term customers allowed Poopoo to earn more money through lucrative commission-based work. Moreover, Poopoo felt genuinely understood and supported by these

customers, making their work more fulfilling.

Discussion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges and benefits that U.S. TNB young adults find in online sex work and the protective factors that help them work more safely and sustainably. As one of the first studies of online sex work to focus exclusively on TNB people, this study highlights how interpersonal and structural cissexism contribute to occupational stress for TNB workers. Furthermore, this study is among the first to focus expressly on occupational stress processes in online sex work, identifying a range of stressors, positive job dynamics, and protective factors that may be relevant to both TNB and cisgender workers. Below, we discuss implications for the broader literature on online sex work and health; for policy advocates addressing sex worker and LGBTQ rights, economic inequality, and disability justice; and for clinicians serving TNB young adults.

We found that TNB young adults doing online sex work face many of the same challenges as their cisgender counterparts, including income unpredictability, intense workloads, online harassment, and the threat of stalking (Hamilton et al., 2022; Jones, 2020; Rubattu et al., 2023)—compounded, in various ways, by interpersonal and structural cissexism. Most directly, interviewees described expressly anti-TNB comments and messages, which were often based on objectifying stereotypes of transgender women—reflecting not merely cissexism but *transmisogyny*, prejudice targeting transgender women and feminine TNB people (Serano, 2007). More generally, interviewees perceived a pattern of customers treating TNB workers with less respect, and paying less for their work, than cisgender workers. Interviewees also perceived anti-TNB bias in the algorithms and moderation practices of the social media platforms they relied on to promote their work, as we discuss in more detail below. Furthermore, echoing prior

studies with TNB in-person sex workers (Orchard et al., 2020), several participants began doing online sex work because they were pushed out of housing or other jobs due to cissexism. Because financial and housing security were crucial in allowing interviewees to make safer and more sustainable choices in their work, cissexism-related job and housing loss may put TNB people at heightened risk for broad a range of stressful and potentially dangerous experiences within online sex work. In light of these results, future quantitative research should test whether TNB online sex workers report higher mean levels of occupational stressors (e.g., income instability, harassment) than cisgender peers—and whether these stressors are further heightened for TNB workers subject to additional systems of marginalization, such as racism, sizeism, and ableism (Jones, 2015).

While perceived benefits of sex work are often overlooked (Treloar et al., 2021), the work stress literature suggests that such benefits can counteract stressful job dynamics (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), making them an important consideration for occupational health. In prior studies, online sex workers have described various benefits of online sex work relative to other available jobs, including flexible hours, more control over boundaries with customers, and fewer barriers for disabled and neurodivergent workers (Hamilton et al., 2023; Jones, 2020; Rubattu et al., 2023), and participants in the present study also raised these points. However, given our interest in occupational stress *within* online sex work, we focused on intrinsic, rather than comparative, benefits of online sex work. With this approach, we highlighted some benefits discussed in prior research, including social connection and self-exploration (Hamilton et al., 2023; Jones, 2020), and some that have received less attention, such as artistry/craft and promoting healthier sexual norms. Notably, interviewees' focus on promoting healthier sexual norms through online sex work is consistent with broader trends among TNB young adults, who

disproportionately seek careers involving advocacy or service to others and who may see being visibly TNB in their field as one way to make a difference (Goldberg et al., 2021). As online sexual media continues to shape young people's beliefs about sexuality, gender, and physical attractiveness (Currin et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2017), TNB online sex workers may indeed be well positioned to make a positive sociocultural impact.

Policy Implications

Online sex workers' working conditions are shaped by the practices of technology companies, particularly social media platforms, which are indispensable in advertising their services. These platforms use undisclosed content promotion algorithms that can produce sudden changes in viewer engagement (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). In prior research, content creators have attributed reduced engagement to discriminatory shadowbans: punitive actions in which platforms allow a user to post but covertly limit their content's visibility (Delmonaco et al., 2024; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Interviewees in this study were familiar with these concepts, yet many implicitly believed that their content's popularity reflected on personal qualities like effort, skill, or attractiveness. These self-attributions may afford a sense of control within unpredictable systems, but they led to distress when interviewees' audiences declined, raising concerns about the mental health impacts of content algorithms for entrepreneurs who market their work on social media.

Previous research has explored how social media algorithms may magnify sociocultural biases and systems of marginalization, such as racism and cissexism (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Karizat et al., 2021). In the present study, participants perceived these algorithms as selectively promoting representations of socially dominant groups (e.g., White, thin, cisgender; see also Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Karizat et al., 2021) and stereotypical representations of marginalized

groups (see also Karizat et al., 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Such biases may contribute to stressful working conditions for TNB online sex workers by reducing economic opportunities and incentivizing conformity to stereotypes. These biases may also diminish opportunities for TNB online sex workers to have a positive social impact by depicting their lives, bodies, and sexualities more authentically.

Platform restrictions on sexual content and sex work were another major stressor, given that social media bans can decimate an online sex worker's follower base (Swords et al., 2023), an essential and hard-won business asset, while being banned from payment services (e.g., PayPal, CashApp) can result in confiscation of earnings (Beebe, 2022; Blunt & Wolf, 2020). These practices undermine sex workers' financial security, pressuring them into work that is more stressful and potentially unsafe (Blunt & Wolf, 2020). Participants attributed platforms' restrictive policies in part to the 2018 U.S. federal law known as FOSTA-SESTA, which increased liability for technology companies that "facilitate" forced or coercive commercial sex (Albert et al., 2021). This study extends the literature on FOSTA-SESTA's consequences for sex workers (Blunt & Wolf, 2020; Jones, 2022) by showing that restrictive platform rules are a primary occupational stressor for TNB young adults doing online sex work, including work that is entirely legal under U.S. law.

Another relevant policy area is the existence, accessibility, and quality of social safety net programs addressing basic needs like income, housing, food, and healthcare. Extending similar findings with in-person sex workers (Deering et al., 2014), we highlighted financial and housing stability as crucial protective factors allowing interviewees to do online sex work more safely and sustainably. The U.S. has various state and federal safety net programs intended to bolster financial and housing stability (Chang, 2015), but eligibility and access to these programs are

often limited, and benefits can be inadequate (Chang, 2015; Morris, 2024). Improving access to longer-term programs (e.g., basic income, health insurance) would address the needs of online sex workers who experience chronic exclusion from mainstream work (e.g., based on disabilities). Similarly, improving access to short-term, low-barrier services would help TNB young adults weather the acute crises (e.g., job loss, housing instability) associated with the most troubling online sex work experiences.

Clinical Implications

Medical and mental health clinicians can be key sources of support for TNB young adults. Unfortunately, several interviewees in this study described stigmatizing interactions with clinicians, often involving assumptions that sex work was concerning or harmful (see also Pederson et al., 2019). In this context, patient-centered approaches—emphasizing holism, respect, patient individuality, and patient autonomy (Morgan & Yoder, 2012)—are particularly vital when working with TNB people (Soled et al., 2022) and sex workers (Singer et al., 2021). Because patients may fear that sharing concerns will reinforce negative stereotypes (Pederson et al., 2019), we suggest actively acknowledging experiences that contradict these stereotypes (e.g., "It sounds like your family has been really supportive"). As trust is established, clinicians and patients can work together to address any medical or mental health needs related to TNB identity or sex work, if present. Among the most helpful interventions may be to encourage connections and a sense of belongingness with peer communities of sex workers and TNB people, either locally or online, consistent with strength-based intervention models with TNB clients (Matsuno & Israel, 2018). This can include making referrals to local or regional organizations for sex workers, where such organizations exist. Complementing these strategies, we encourage clinicians to improve their understanding of sex work by seeking out media created by sex

workers and training opportunities that prominently feature sex workers' perspectives.

Limitations

The present findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. With respect to positionality, interviewers' lack of personal experience with sex work may have discouraged participants from sharing certain thoughts or experiences (e.g., to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes about sex workers), and the analysis team's lack of sex work experience could have led to oversights in data analysis—though current and former sex workers in the focus groups largely corroborated the team's initial interpretations of the interview data. Furthermore, while we highlighted factors that participants identified as being linked to more favorable online sex work experiences, this study cannot conclusively determine whether (or under what conditions) those factors causally affect participants' experiences or wellbeing.

There are also important limitations to generalizability. First, the results may not fully represent the present-day experiences of TNB online sex workers, since some political, platform, and cultural dynamics have evolved since 2022, when most interviews were conducted. For instance, the number of U.S. states requiring sexual content platforms to verify users' ages has grown considerably since 2022 (Colliver, 2024), and our data do not reflect how these laws may have impacted TNB young adults doing online sex work. Second, because this analysis focused on sex workers' occupational health, we excluded data from four interviewees who created sexual content but did not monetize it. There is also a need for research that considers the full spectrum of sexual content creators' experiences, both paid and unpaid, as we plan to do in future analyses of this dataset. Third, key subgroups of TNB young adults were not well represented: No interviewees were heterosexual, and few were trans men or transmasculine. (We originally interviewed six trans men and transmasculine young adults, but four did not monetize

their sexual content.) Fourth, because we recruited via social media, young adults who saw and responded to the study advertisements may differ in unknown ways from eligible young adults who did not see or respond to the ads, and interviewees may not fully reflect the broader population of U.S. TNB young adults doing online sex work. Most notably, only a few participants discussed crisis-driven sex work, which is common in the broader literature on TNB people's sex work experiences—suggesting that sex workers with more financial stability may have been overrepresented in this study (James et al., 2016).

Conclusion

TNB people are facing a renewed wave of political attacks in the U.S. and elsewhere. Nonetheless, TNB sex workers continue to advocate for their own rights, for their peers and communities, and for healthier and more equitable norms around bodies, sexuality, and gender. While a hostile political climate may tempt some advocates to downplay support for sex workers and other multiply marginalized TNB people, that support is particularly important as TNB people turn to sex work as an alternative to hostile mainstream workplaces. To better support TNB online sex workers, clinicians and advocates can acknowledge the heterogeneity and nuance in TNB online sex workers' experiences. They can follow the lead of sex work advocates in opposing restrictive laws—including FOSTA-SESTA and laws criminalizing sex work—and demanding changes to vague and inequitably enforced restrictions on sex workers' use of technology platforms. They can continue to advocate for improvements to safety net programs addressing housing, healthcare, and income security. Finally, they can uplift TNB online sex workers' contributions to broader movements towards healthy sociocultural norms around bodies, sexuality, and gender.

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Table 1. Characteristics of transgender/nonbinary young adults who completed interviews about online sex work, $N = 14$

Characteristic	***n***
Age	
22-25	7
26-30	7
Gender identity[1]	
Nonbinary	8
Trans	4
Transfem[inine]	3
Woman	2
Agender	1
Female	1
Gender fluid	1
Male	1
Neutral	1
Transmasc[uline]	1
Ethnicity and/or race[1]	
White	8
Latinx, Latino, or Hispanic	4
Multiracial or mixed	3
Black	2
Asian; Vietnamese	1
Jewish	1
Sexual orientation[1,2]	
Bisexual or pansexual	8
Queer	6
Lesbian or sapphic	3
Gay	1
Disability[2,3]	
Discussed disability	6
Not noted	8
Region(s) where interviewee grew up[1]	
Northeastern U.S.	8
Southeastern U.S.	4
Midwestern U.S.	5
Southwestern U.S.	2

Western U.S.	1
Current region	
Northeastern U.S.	9
Southeastern U.S.	2
Midwestern U.S.	2
Southwestern U.S.	0
Western U.S.	1
Types of online sex work[1,2]	
Subscription sexual content	9
Custom sexual content	4
Pay-per-view sexual content	2
Livestreaming	3
Professional dominant services (in dominance/submission kink)	1
Sugar dating	1
Currently, online sex work is…[2]	
Primary source of income	6
Supplemental source of income	
Alongside one other job	5
Alongside 2+ other jobs	3
Main reasons for doing online sex work	
Mostly for money	4
Mostly for reasons other than money	1
Both for money and for other reasons	9

[1] Some participants are included in multiple categories.
[2] Coded from interview data.
[3] Participant explicitly identified as disabled or discussed a long-term physical or mental health condition that limited major life activities.

Supplemental Table 1. Stages and activities in the data analysis process.

Stage of analysis	Activities
Initial coding template development	• GRM establishes coding template headings (e.g., "Stressors") based on research questions • GRM reviews four randomly selected interview transcripts and creates initial emergent codes (e.g., "Lack of customers") within each heading • GRM, BE, ZS, AG, and KC meet to review and revise initial coding template
Coding round 1	• GRM codes remaining interview transcripts based on initial coding template, continuing to add and revise emergent codes • GRM reorganizes coding template (combining and splitting codes and headings) based on emerging connections and conceptual distinctions • GRM drafts preliminary code definitions
Coding round 2	• GRM recodes all interview transcripts based on latest coding template, continuing to add emergent codes • GRM reorganizes coding template based on emerging connections and distinctions • GRM revises code definitions
Triangulation and respondent validation with focus groups	• GRM and BEE present preliminary results to three focus groups of policy advocates and mental health clinicians supporting TNB people and/or sex workers (total $n = 17$) • Focus group participants reflect verbally on results • Focus group transcripts added to dataset
Coding round 3	• BEE codes four randomly selected transcripts with latest coding template • GRM and BEE review coding discrepancies and identify ambiguities in code definitions • GRM revises code definitions • GRM codes all transcripts with latest coding template
Coding round 4	• Three additional interview transcripts added to dataset • AJA codes four randomly selected transcripts with latest coding template • GRM and AJA review coding discrepancies and identify ambiguities in code definitions • GRM revises code definitions • GRM codes all transcripts with latest coding template
Theme summary development	• GRM drafts theme summaries based on final code definitions and associated excerpts • BEE, ZAS, ARG, KC, and AJA provide written feedback on theme summaries • GRM revises theme summaries based on team feedback