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The Struggle with Stigma in Sex Work: Webcam Models' Strategies for Stigma Management

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Abstract

Sex work is a highly stigmatized profession. Previous research has highlighted how stigma shapes the lives of sex workers, such as the negative effects on mental and physical health and lack of access to housing and employment. Moreover, stigma plays a large role in shaping laws and policies which govern sex work. Earlier research on the impact of stigma on sex workers has primarily focused on full-service sex workers. In recent years, online forms of sex work have boomed, but there has yet to be extensive research on online sex workers.

This chapter is based on interviews with 23 webcam models in North America. It explores how webcam models navigate and manage the stigma associated with their work. This chapter also examines whether the online domain potentially mitigates the stigma experienced by sex workers or creates new opportunities for it.

Keywords: Webcamming, sex work, stigma management

Introduction

Sex work is portrayed in the media as inherently linked to exploitation, enslavement, and criminal activities, and the media helps to shape the stigma around sex work (Benoit et al., 2020; Desyllas, 2013; Weitzer, 2018). Sex workers are commonly stereotyped as dirty, criminal, a threat to the public, or vectors of disease (Abel, 2011), and the ‘whore stigma’ is widely ingrained in society (Pheterson, 1993). Previous research on sex work and stigma has primarily focused on in-person forms of sex work such as stripping, escorting, and full-service sex work. In this chapter, I explore a relatively new form of sex work, webcamming.

Webcamming started in the 1990s and has since evolved into a global industry (Jones, 2020; Senft, 2008). Webcam models earn money via tips or pay-per-minute shows, and the viewer(s) may have a lot of control over the performances (Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2020). Part of the appeal of webcamming is that it is live, interactive, ‘amateur’, and personalized. Models draw in fans eager to interact with them and their unique personalities (Nayar, 2017).

Some research has shown that there are differences between the experiences of webcam models and other types of sex workers. Jones (2021) described how respondents felt webcamming was more socially acceptable than in-person sex work such as stripping or escorting because it took place online in a virtual space. In their comparative work on students who do sex work in the UK and Australia, Simpson & Smith (2021) found that there were major differences in the experiences of escorts and webcam models and how the Internet shaped their experiences of stigma. Escorts could use the Internet to increase their privacy and avoid stigma. At the same time, for webcam models, it made them more visible and therefore increased their exposure and experiences of stigma.

This chapter aims to understand whether and how webcam models experience stigma, and how they manage it using stigma management techniques. This chapter also aims to uncover whether the online realm creates or mitigates opportunities for stigma compared to

other forms of sex work. More broadly, this work will shed light on the ongoing challenges experienced by webcam models and how they work despite their limited control over their working conditions and the constant legal and political threats to their work.

This chapter starts with an overview of stigma and sex work. Then it will describe respondents' experiences of stigma and their stigma management techniques.

Stigma and sex work

Goffman (1986) described stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting”. People who are stigmatized can feel like they are less accepted or valued in society, and Goffman described this as having a “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1986). Link & Phelan (2001) took Goffman's definition a step further by including “power” and “discrimination” as key factors that shape how people are stigmatized. Stigma is relational and complex, and how people experience it is shaped by time, place, context, and power relationships (Link & Phelan, 2001).

In the United States and most places around the world, sex work is highly stigmatized, which has potentially harmful consequences for sex workers (Sallmann, 2010; Weitzer, 2018). Sex work has an occupational stigma, which means that the stigma is attached to the work itself (Blithe & Wolfe, 2017; Goffman, 1986) but workers often internalize the negative discourses about themselves because of their work (Corrigan & Watson, 2002).

A great portion of previous research on sex work and stigma has looked at stigma's impact on health, safety, and violence (e.g., Benoit et al., 2020; Jiao & Bungay, 2019; Krüsi et al., 2016; Pinsky & Levey, 2015). Prostitution is illegal in almost all of the United States. Its criminalization is rooted in sex work stigma (Nencel et al., 2021) and reflects the broader socio-cultural beliefs that all sex work is exploitation and synonymous with human trafficking (Weitzer, 2018). Because of this stigma, sex workers are seen as both degenerates and victims in need of saving (Koken, 2012). Laws and policies, which further increase their stigmatization

and vulnerability, are made without their input (DeLacey, 2022; Musto et al., 2021). Even if people want to transition out of the sex industry, it can be difficult to access the mainstream labor market due to the stigma of (formerly) being in the sex industry (Berg, 2016; Ham & Gerard, 2014; Koken, 2012), and women may face even more challenges than men (Berg, 2016). Moreover, it can be difficult to find work that offers the same flexible schedule and high income, especially in the mainstream market.

The fear of stigma or being stigmatized can shape the behavior of sex workers and their willingness to be open about their work. Some sex workers may not disclose their job because of anticipated stigma (Ham & Gerard, 2014; Pitcher, 2015; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Consequentially, this can result in social isolation due to keeping their work secret from those around them and the resulting lack of social support (Begum et al., 2013; Koken, 2012; Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022). Selectively coming out can lead to strained relationships for sex workers, leading some to go back into ‘the closet’. Moreover, those around them are at risk of vicarious stigma (Morrison & Whitehead, 2007). Some sex workers cope with stigma by selectively disclosing their employment information to a few close friends or family members (Ham & Gerard, 2014) or by telling it only to people who are also sex workers (Koken, 2012).

In Benoit et al. (2020), the authors described how Canadian sex workers reframed or rejected stigma by highlighting the positive benefits of their work. Reframing helps reduce stigma by focusing on the important aspects of the work, such as helping people, being valuable to society, and having many personal benefits such as a flexible work schedule and high income (Morrison & Whitehead, 2005). In Benoit et al. (2020), sex workers also reflected on how sex work positively impacted their self-esteem, sexual identity, self-confidence, and feelings of empowerment. They described how sex workers saw their work as a viable profession because it gave them power and control over their lives and a sense of independence. Other research

found that many sex workers report that they enjoy their work, find it emotionally fulfilling, and are proud of their services (e.g., Adams, 2020; Jones, 2020; Koken et al., 2004).

Different forms of sex work may be more or less stigmatized, and some describe this hierarchical organization as the ‘whorearchy’ (Herrmann, 2022; Knox, 2014; McNeill, Maggie, 2012). “The whorearchy is arranged according to intimacy of contact with clients and police. The closer to both you are, the closer you are to the bottom (Knox, 2014).” Webcam models sit near the top of the whorearchy: webcamming is seen as less dirty than other forms of sex work because it takes place online and it is legal (Rodriguez, Tori, 2022; Scortino, 2016; Weitzer, 2009). Sex workers involved in multiple aspects of the industry may strategically present only one part of their work because of their higher social standing—such as identifying as a porn star instead of an escort, even if they do both (Berg, 2016). Sex workers may differentiate themselves and other sex workers in the same line of work to manage stigma (Herrmann, 2022; Parreira, 2021; Sanders, 2005).

Methods

I collected the data for this article as part of my larger doctoral research project on the adult webcam industry in North America. This chapter is based on interviews with 22 webcam models in the United States, and one in Canada. Participants were recruited through social media platforms (n=20), referral sampling (n=2), and in person (n=1). When I refer to participants, I include their pseudonym, age at the time of the interview, and their reported approximate length of time working in the industry (e.g. Anna, 28, 1 year).

I identified potential participants on social media by looking at social media profiles and the type of content that they posted. In doing so, I surmised that they would likely be webcam models. Then I sent a message to them explaining that I was looking for webcam models who lived in the United States or Canada to interview as part of my doctoral research.

Most messages were not read (likely due to message filtering on social media) or not responded to. If people asked questions, I answered them thoroughly: I tried to be as transparent as possible about who I am and my research. I shared my full real name, links to my university profile, and social media accounts (which used my real name as the screen name).

In my initial message, I stated that I was searching for webcam models. I allowed people to self-report that they were webcam models, and I did not ask them to verify by sending a link to their profile. I did this to protect their privacy and identity. Many of the people I spoke with were very concerned about being identified and wanted to participate in the study anonymously.

How people defined being a webcam model differed. Some worked exclusively on platforms designed for webcam models (e.g., Chaturbate, MyFreeCams, and LiveJasmin). In contrast, others performed live-shows one-on-one with clients via non-adult video chat platforms (e.g., Skype, Snapchat). Moreover, most of the people I spoke with were also (formerly) involved in other forms of sex work, such as selling content, phone sex, stripping, and full-service sex work. None of the models I spoke with worked at a webcam studio¹.

Interviews all took place over video chat platforms. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 4.5 hours, with the majority of interviews lasting between 2 and 2.5 hours. A few respondents opted not to turn their cameras on during the interview. I kept my camera on in all but one instance when the respondent specifically requested to speak “on the phone²”. I thought it was important for respondents to see me so that they could verify my identity and see my

¹ Webcam models can either work from home using their own equipment or they can work from a place called a webcam studio. Webcam studios typically offer a place to work and the tools needed to live-stream (e.g., camera, Internet). They may also offer training, support, and other amenities such as a gym, hairstylist, and makeup artist. Webcam studios are uncommon in North American and more common in places such as Eastern Europe and South America (Matache, 2018; Franco, 2022).

² We spoke using a video chat platform that he requested and neither of us turned on our cameras. I met this respondent in person, so he already knew who I was and was comfortable with me.

facial reactions and body language³. Respondents were informed at the beginning of the interview how their data would be used, and that they could discontinue the interview at any time. During the interviews, I also verbalized that it would be okay for the participants to end the interview if they wanted to, even if I had not covered all the topics I wanted to ask them about. However, we continued the interview if they indicated they still had time to speak.

Interviews were semi-structured, and I had broad categories of topics I wanted to speak with respondents about, such as general working experiences, interactions with viewers, the use of social media, online communities, and privacy concerns. However, I also adapted the questions during the interviews based on the respondents' areas of expertise or to reflect their experiences. Some respondents brought up stigma on their own, or I asked direct questions about stigma based on the context of the conversation. In some interviews, I did not ask directly about stigma, but it became visible while analyzing the interviews. Overall, the interviews felt more like conversations. The respondents were very open, and many of them spoke at length without much intervention from me.

It is important to note that almost all of the interviews took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021)⁴. Some respondents were in lockdown during the interview, and almost everyone had limited social contact and/or limited time spent outside the home. Due to health concerns, I was in a very strict lockdown during the interviews, and sometimes respondents were the only people I had spoken with that day. I believe that this shared experience helped create rapport with many of the respondents.

Respondent demographics

	N
Age	
18-20	1

³ My cat, Mila, was present for many of the interviews. She was frequently a topic of discussion, as were the pets of the respondents. She helped develop rapport with respondents, and comforted a respondent who began to cry. Her commentary can frequently be heard in the recordings of the interviews. Photos of Mila are available @ScreamingMila.

⁴ 1 interview took place in 2019.

21-25	8
26-30	9
31-35	1
36-40	2
Older than 41	2
Gender	
Male	3
Female	19 ⁵
Non-binary	1
Length of time in the industry	
Less than one year	7
1-2 years	9
3-5 years	2
6-10 years	0
10+ years	5
Education (highest level attended)	
Not specified	1
High school	2
Trade school	2
Bachelor's	14
Master's / equivalent	2
PhD	2

The amount of time that respondents worked as webcam models varied. Some did it occasionally for a few hours at a time; others worked full-time or up to 16 hours a day. Some respondents reported their working hours specifically in terms of hours spent live-streaming on a webcam platform. In contrast, others included all the additional time spent advertising, communicating with clients, building social networks, creating content, and other work-related activities. The income of participants was difficult to determine due to factors such as fluctuations in income, being new to the industry and unable to calculate an average, and lumping together income from all sources of adult work. Some participants also did not disclose their income. Most participants (n=13) earned more than \$3000 per month, and of those, five earned more than \$10,000 per month; one reported over \$25,000 per month, and another reported earnings in the “mid six figures annually”.

⁵ One participant identified as female but was questioning her gender identity.

Coding

I thematically coded interview transcripts using ATLAS.ti. I applied codes that described how stigma was experienced by webcam models, how they managed stigma, and factors that shaped how they experienced or managed stigma. Following this, I broke each of these codes into more specific groups to illustrate central themes of how participants managed stigma.

Experiences of stigma

Performers experienced stigma on a personal level. They were also aware of the more widespread social stigma attached to sex work, and the negative portrayals of sex work in the media which shapes the common discourse about sex work (Weitzer, 2018). They also said that they heard stories of things that had happened to other performers and read news stories about people who had lost their jobs because their OnlyFans account was discovered.

Many participants talked about how they thought through their decision to become a performer in light of the stigma attached to them. When Veronica (30, 11 years)⁶ started, she knew that this was a major decision, and if she were going to do it, she would have to go *all in* because her image would be online indefinitely. Other respondents also discussed webcamming and the potential implications with their partners before starting, partly because stigma can be attached to those who affiliate with a stigmatized person (Morrison & Whitehead, 2007; Pryor & Reeder, 2011). Before starting to webcam, Quinn (24, 1 year) talked with her boyfriend about the long-term implications of webcamming, and each of them ‘came out’ to their friends and family.

⁶ (Pseudonym, age, reported approximate length of time in the industry)

Anna also carefully weighed the decision to become a webcam model and felt secure with her choice because her husband supported her.

Anna: So it was after I made that decision that I was comfortable with it and being married helped because I was like “I’m not scared. As long as my husband doesn’t care, I don’t care what people say” (Anna, 28, 1 year).

Katherine (30, a few months) was very aware of the sex work stigma, which shaped her life in her community. She lived in a conservative area, and she had to be extremely secretive about working as a sex worker, or it could jeopardize her other businesses, and her relationships with friends and family.

Katherine: I wouldn't be able to run my business here, essentially, it would just deteriorate. People just make terrible assumptions around sex work and they're like “Oh, they're on drugs! They're doing this because they're desperate for money!” (Katherine, 30, a few months).

Social media sites were cited as a major challenge for respondents. Social media is widely used by webcam models to advertise and communicate with clients (Jones, 2020; Stuart, 2022). However, performers were constantly under pressure because of the ever-changing rules on the websites and efforts to remove sex workers from many platforms. Twitter and Reddit were mentioned as more sex worker-friendly sites, but other platforms such as Instagram were known to be very strict about their use by sex workers, and performers were regularly banned or shadow banned⁷ from various social media sites. Emma (26, 2 years) described how platform policies were weaponized against her. It became known among people in her hometown that she was working as a webcam model. She said that some of the women she knew were jealous

⁷ Shadow ban is a term used to describe when a user’s account no longer shows up in the search results but they are still able to use or access their account. Others can only find their account if they have a direct link (Cole, 2018b).

and felt like she was trying to lure their boyfriends, so they reported her posts on Instagram, even though they complied with community guidelines. Instagram then flagged Emma's account, and she said this led to her account being constantly under scrutiny from the platform.

The sex work stigma also created problems for models to access banking and payment processors. Many payment processors, such as PayPal or Cash App, explicitly forbid their services from being used for adult services (Beebe, 2022). Webcam models in this study reported that they still used these payment processors but with the knowledge that their accounts could be frozen and they could lose their money (Blunt et al., 2020). Veronica (30, 11 years) talked at length about the challenges faced by adult performers and having access to payment processors.

Veronica: I think that the systemic stigma is a different one than the stigma we face as performers, and I know many performers who have had their bank accounts shut down with no reasoning, with no notice. (...) There's various banks that are particular about that, that always do it. (...) Some days it feels like there's less safe spaces for us, and other days it feels like we're making moves forward and it's going to be okay. In the middle of all that, you just kind of juggle and hope for the best. Try to think of what could happen and prevent it before it happens (Veronica, 30, 11 years).

Veronica acknowledged that many businesses face similar problems with the banking system and that companies need to "adapt or die". However, she also described the broader systemic issues and how they are influenced by religious organizations that have an outsized influence on laws and policies that impact the adult industry. The refusal of banks and payment processors to work with the adult industry is linked to a stigma against sex work, pressure from outside organizations who conflate all sex work with trafficking or exploitation, and the belief that the adult industry is 'high-risk' (Bernstein, 2018; Cole, 2018a; Stokes, 2021). The adult

industry continues monetizing its products by using businesses that act as a middleman to guarantee payments (e.g., CCBill; Epoch) in exchange for a high fee, which cuts into the profits of adult performers (Graver, 2022). Adult platforms are also at constant risk of being demonetized (Cole, 2021, 2022). More broadly, stigma shapes how the adult industry can operate, such as limiting businesses' access to mainstream services, and it shapes the laws which govern the adult industry and the policies on platforms (Beebe, 2022; Stegeman, 2021; Voss, 2012).

Respondents said that they felt that there were ongoing cultural shifts and that digital sex work was becoming more widely known and accepted in culture (see also: van der Nagel, 2021). This shift was linked to online communities of sex workers and other sexually open individuals speaking publicly, and celebrities' mainstreaming of the sex industry and blurring the lines between adult performers and mainstream content. Veronica (30, 11 years) has been in the adult industry for over a decade. She said that she has felt a noticeable shift in stigma due to the rise of OnlyFans⁸.

Veronica: So with the whole rise and trendiness of OnlyFans, we've seen a lot of mainstream Instagram influencers pop in the space, dip their toe in the water. And then we've seen also in the last, you know, maybe three to five years, a lot of sex workers get mainstream brand deals for things on Instagram like Fashion Nova collaborations and stuff. (...) So we're in an exciting time where I think the more that line gets blurred, the more stigma kind of falls off a little bit piece by piece. So I think it's changing, but those things always come at a slow pace. (Veronica, 30, 11 years).

⁸ OnlyFans.com is a subscription-based platform where users pay a monthly fee to access the content created by different content creators, including photos, videos, live-streams, and they can also send direct messages to creators. The platform allows all forms of content but it is primarily used for adult content (van der Nagel, 2021).

Blaire (34, 1.5 years) recounted a story of over-hearing people at the bar talking about a friend who did OnlyFans.

Blaire: I was out with a friend, like a few weeks ago, and I was just kind of like listening in over, eavesdropping like a nosey bitch, let's be honest, and started hearing like "Oh, she has an OnlyFans." "Yeah? How much money is she making off of that?" "Oh, when did she start it?" Like? Wait a minute? How do you know that she has an OnlyFans? How do you know how much money she's making? How do you know her subscriber count? Like how do you know this? (...) It's normal. And in just such a weird way, it's part of zeitgeist (Blaire, 34, 1.5 years).

Based on their conversation, it was clear to her that it was something normal and socially acceptable in their friend group. However, these changes were not visible to all performers. Whitney (26, 2 years) came from a conservative background and she spoke extensively about the stigma about sex work and pornography in her social group and where she lived.

Whitney: I think most people (...) don't understand it and are disgusted by it. Same with, you know, anything in the porn industry. And everyone consumes porn, basically everyone. It's very hypocritical. (...) I think that the general vibe in the US is definitely sex negative. Maybe (...) in modern, like cities like Austin or Seattle or whatever. Like, there's some communities of sex positivity, but most people just like don't have a lot of sex and judge people who do have a lot of sex and hate porn and hate sex work, and think everyone's being sex trafficked but yet at the same time everyone is like addicted to porn. (Whitney, 26, 2 years).

Despite her currently pessimistic view, Whitney (26, 2 years) had hope that the culture, laws, and stigma would eventually change with new generations.

Whitey: It's just like all the lawmakers are old, prudish men and women who are terrified, of like sex, and terrified of their own bodies and also religious. So like, yeah, once they die, maybe it'll get better, like that's all, that's the only hope I have, is like these old lawmakers dying (Whitney, 26, 2 years).

Broadly, the experiences of webcam models that I spoke with show how they experience stigma at a personal and societal level, as well as systemically through the various institutions with which they are forced to interact to do their work.

Stigma management techniques

Information control

Respondents strategically controlled the information they shared with others to mitigate the effect of the occupational stigma associated with webcamming. Unlike other research on sex work, all the respondents in my research were open to at least one person in their life about their work. However, respondents had different levels of openness with people around them and different motivations or triggers for 'coming out'.

Passing and concealment

Sex work is an invisible stigma, meaning that it is a stigma that is not based on visible characteristics, and it is possible to be concealed (Benoit et al., 2020; Koken et al., 2004). The stigmatized person can often decide whether to disclose their stigmatized status. Passing is when a person does not reveal their stigmatized identity, and they *pass* for a member of an unstigmatized group. Deciding whether to share their stigmatized identity can be crucial for information control (Goffman, 1986; Koken, 2012).

Most of the respondents were only open to people in their close groups of friends or family members. Respondents used a variety of cover stories to explain what they did for work.

For example, Natalie (24, 3.5 years) told people she was a creative director and model, and Blaire (36, 1.5 years) told people she did content creation and marketing.

Parents and in-laws were the people respondents most commonly concealed their work from. Blake (20, 6 months) was very open to most people in his life about webcamming, except for his parents. He decided not to tell them to protect them and because he did not think they would understand.

Blake: I don't want my parents knowing because they grew up in rural [North America, HD], and they don't quite understand that kind of thing, like even if I did explain it to them in like a proper way, then they don't quite understand it because they're a little bit old school (Blake, 20, 6 months).

Unfortunately, due to trying to protect his parents, he could not cam as much as he would have liked to. He could only do it when they were out of town or when he was staying with his friends. These restrictions potentially impacted his ability to be a successful webcam model due to his inability to be online regularly.

Becky (22, 2 months) didn't want to come out to her parents because they would be concerned about her. She knew they loved her unconditionally but would not accept her work and would pressure her to quit.

Becky: [My parents would say, HD] "We will accept you if you find your self-worth and stop doing this." So, it wouldn't be like "We, we don't accept me anymore." But it's almost like they would treat it as like "You're walking down the broken path." (...) Like "You don't need to be doing this. Like you have support, like are we not doing enough for you? Why are you choosing to do something so negative?" (Becky, 22, 2 months).

Some respondents benefitted from their parents not being tech savvy. Blaire (34, 1.5 years) told her father that she was a content creator, and she knew that he would not have the wherewithal to look for her work online so she felt safe.

Doxing, or having one's personal information released online (Cole, 2018b; Jones, 2020; Swords et al., 2021) is a real concern for webcam models as well as other sex workers. Doxing can give people with ill intentions the tools to stalk, blackmail, harass, or physically harm sex workers. It can also result in the sex worker being outed. Given these risks, many respondents went to great lengths to conceal their identity. For example, Samantha (26, 1 year) did not show her face on camera, and she covered any marks that could be identifiable. She knew that if her work was discovered, it would have a very negative impact on her future career in a niche male-dominated STEM field.

One of the 'least out' participants was Vicky (49, 1 year). She was aware that it was inevitable that she would be exposed, and she was prepared for it to happen. However, she was not worried about her friends finding out.

Vicky: I also think that if any of my friends found out and they were like—I'm going to be 50 years old [in a few months, HD], and I think they'd just be like "Really? You go girl!" (Vicky, 49, 1 year).

She went on to say that because of her age, appearance, and stage of life, she did not feel the same pressures as she expected someone younger would. She took pride in the fact that she was successful as a webcam model.

Vicky: I could just be like "I had cancer and I'm going to go in bed and die", you know? But I didn't. Instead, I'm online and people are paying me! (Vicky, 49, 1 year).

By concealing their work as webcam models, these respondents could avoid the occupational stigma of webcamming in much of their lives. Respondents were motivated to

conceal their work to protect themselves from the stigma and to protect people they cared about from discomfort and vicarious stigma. However, concealing their work came with downsides, such as limiting when they could work, the kind of content they could make, and how much they could advertise. It also led to personal discomfort, and it exacerbated feelings of shame.

Coming out

Respondents had various reasons for coming out to their friends and family members, and they had different levels of openness with the people in their lives. Coming out can be valuable for sex workers because they no longer have to be secretive about a portion of their life, increasing their social support (Lee, 2015). However, it can also negatively affect their relationships (Morrison & Whitehead, 2007).

For some respondents, coming out came with a lot of forethought and consideration of how the information would impact those they cared about. Sophie (23, 3 years) had a brother on the autism spectrum. She talked to him about her work so that he did not find out from someone else, so she could make sure that he knew she was happy and safe.

However, not all respondents had the luxury of planning how to come out to their friends or family. Becky (22, 2 months) didn't intend to come out to her sister about her work. However, one night when she was filming content, her sister urgently needed a ride to the ER. Becky didn't have time to change out her outfit and makeup, so she was forced to explain the situation to her sister on the drive to the hospital.

Becky: But she [my sister, HD] thought it was hilarious. She thought it was so funny because she and I are very open about things like that and so she was just like "Oh my..." I think she posted that on her Snapchat story. She was like "This is hilarious! (...) What a great sister, like pausing her OnlyFans shoot to take me to the emergency room!" (Becky, 22, 2 months).

When Jenna (25, 1 year) started working as a webcam model, she tried to hide it from her family, with whom she did not have a great relationship. However, Jenna felt that keeping it a secret was too much of a burden because she always had to lie.

Jenna: So I told them [my mom and sister, HD], it was really not pretty. It left me a mess and feeling just awful about myself and took me a long time to get out of that (Jenna, 25, 1 year).

However, after some time, Jenna was happy that she was out. She no longer had to expend energy lying about her life, and she could be honest with her family. Jenna intended to be open with her friends and any future romantic partners moving forward as well. It was more important to her to live freely than to try to hide from sex work's occupational stigma. Melanie (26, 2.5 years) shared a similar viewpoint and said she would be open with all potential romantic partners. Melanie felt that it was better to be honest and that it would help weed out people with whom she was not compatible.

From the beginning, Veronica knew that she would have to be open about being a webcam model because everything would always be online, and she knew that there was a strong stigma attached to sex work. She was thankful that she had support from her friends and family from the start.

Veronica: But I just felt like I had the [whore, HD] stigma attached regardless because I'm an attractive woman in society, so I might as well capitalize on it. Seems silly not to. And then I had a really good support system. My boyfriend at the time, I asked him how he felt about me going into webcam, he supported it. And then my mom at the time, she actually picked out my first stage name. She was all for it. She had me, she had my back (Veronica, 30, 11 years).

However, Veronica was soon forced to come out completely because a viewer online was threatening her. Her experience demonstrates that some people may be compelled to come out before they want to.

Veronica: There was this guy on cam that was just trolling me so hard. And he actually came into my Twitter DMs and threatened to, you know, dox me and publish my real name and my real location if I didn't give him like all my content now and forever for free. And I was like "Mmm... it's going to be a hard no. I'm just going to dox myself." And I put my real name out there and I've been [using my real name, HD] ever since.

Hannah: In order to avoid being blackmailed, you just put it out there?

Veronica: I don't play with terrorists (Veronica, 30, 11 years).

By associating herself with her real name and being as open as possible, Veronica could take power away from the person threatening her, and anyone else who might try to do this in the future.

Other respondents also said they were open about their work because it gave them a layer of protection against harm from people who wanted to blackmail or dox them. Emma (26, 2 years) said that she felt protected from being blackmailed because most of the people in her life already knew what she was doing and were supportive. Paige (29, 10 years) shared similar sentiments and was completely out to her parents and most other people in her life.

Paige: But my main safety concern is that like someone's going to find out who I am and then try to blackmail me by telling my parents? But if my parents already know, I'll be like "You're wasting my dad's time. You're not going to get money. My dad already knows what the fuck is going on!" (Paige, 29, 10 years)

The decision to come out to friends or family was often shaped by the expectation of how they would react. For Paige (29, 10 years), it was an easy decision because her parents both worked in different facets of the sex industry. However, some respondents did not expect that they would receive support from their parents or friends because they had more conservative backgrounds and beliefs, held disparaging ideas about sex work, or did not understand what webcamming was.

Only a handful of respondents were open with people outside their social circles or openly identified as a webcam model. By being honest with people in their immediate social circle, respondents could gain social support, feel less shame, expend less energy lying, and protect themselves from being blackmailed by viewers. However, being open to wider society did not come with added benefits. There were also many risks associated with it, such as the impact it could have on future careers, or being ostracized. It could increase harassment and the dangers associated with it. Those who were open tended to be very successful career-models, and it would have been difficult for them to conceal their work.

Reframing and resistance

Respondents used the stigma management technique of reframing—or putting their work into positive terms—to counteract the stigma associated with them or their work (Benoit et al., 2020; Weitzer, 2018). Many of the performers reported that they earned a good living, especially compared to what they would have earned in other forms of employment. Katherine (30, a few months) said that before doing sex work, she worked multiple jobs and was still barely able to earn enough to support herself. Natalie (24, 3.5 years) shared a similar story. She had worked over 60 hours a week as a bartender but struggled to earn enough.

Natalie: I set up an OnlyFans and I ended up making like I think \$10,000 in a day (...) That was like months of work for me that I made in the day. So I was like “Yeah, ok, I’m quitting—I’m doing this.” (Natalie, 24, 3.5 years).

The potential income⁹ that could be earned while webcamming shaped people’s beliefs about the work and their desire to continue working as a webcam model. Whitney (26, 2 years) felt that webcamming was extremely stigmatized and personally had a lot of disparaging beliefs about adult content. However, earning \$150 an hour helped her justify her work and reject the uncomfortable feelings. The earning potential also influenced others’ perceptions of webcamming. When some of the participants told their friends about how much they earned as webcam models, some of their friends also started doing it.

Favorable working conditions were another reason webcam models cited as a valuable part of their work. Unlike other forms of work, webcam models worked for themselves, and they did not face the same pressures put on them by bosses or hostile working environments¹⁰. Before webcamming full-time, Vicky (49, 1 year) worked in a high-pressure corporate environment. She described the work environment as abusive. In contrast, the people she spoke with on webcam were pleasant—or she could block them. This gave her a sense of autonomy and power over her working environment and whom she interacted with.

Several respondents said that they liked webcamming because it allowed them to accommodate their physical and mental health challenges¹¹¹². The labor market is not designed

⁹ There are great differences in the amount earned by webcam models, and there are not reliable publicly available statistics on the income of webcam models. In this research, over half of the respondents (n=13) earned over \$3000 per month, and five respondents reported earning over \$10,000 per month. A survey completed by a ReadySetCam.com found that in 2022, the average webcam model earned \$1,043 per week while working 18 hours, and the top earning cam models in the United States earned up to \$6,000 per week (Ramer, 2022).

¹⁰ Jones (2020a, pg. 84) described how webcamming is far from a “feminist, queer, or economic utopia” and there are problematic aspects of the working environment. However, when compared to other forms of work, there are many aspects of webcamming that make it preferable over other types of employment (Berg, 2016).

¹¹ Over half of the respondents in this study reported physical or mental health challenges, and a number of them explicitly stated that these were motivating factors for working as a webcam model.

¹² Hacking and Hustling found that 50% of online sex workers had a physical or mental health problem which prevented them from participating in the mainstream workforce (as cited in: Blunt et al., 2020).

for people with different physical or mental health needs, which often limits the opportunities for people or makes maintaining employment challenging (Beatty, 2012). There are very few opportunities outside of sex work that come with a similarly high-earning potential and flexible schedule, while working a limited number of hours per week (Jones, 2021).

Jenna (25, 1 year) struggled to work at a corporate job and manage her mental health. Webcamming allowed her to work when she wanted and improved her quality of life.

Jenna: I work probably 10-15 hours a week and make about 600, 700 dollars. (...) Yeah, it's awesome. It's like the only time I've been able to, able to put myself first in anything where I can be like "Hey, I feel bad today, I don't have to have a panic attack about telling my boss that I am having suicidal thoughts!" [laughing]. Like I can just give myself a day off. And it's really, really, really empowering. I can't imagine—kind of keep thinking about how maybe I'm a little bored you know because I do have that science mind but I just can't give up the freedom. I love it! (Jenna, 25, 1 year).

Megan (23, 1 year) reflected on sex work more broadly and how it benefits people from various backgrounds.

Megan: I think a lot of people in the sex work community are in sex work because they need that sort of independence because of like mental health problems and like, it's very just difficult to have a regular job and then that gets even more complicated when it's like, like women, but even more so POC [people of color, HD] and even more so like queer POC, like there's a lot of abuse that goes on and like probably a lot of workplaces and it's just like in a lot of ways, sex work is safer (Megan, 23, 1 year).

Respondents also described the positive benefits that webcamming had for them on a personal level. Veronica (30, 11 years) spoke at length about webcamming's positive impact on her and her self-esteem. She went through a difficult phase at the end of high school and

dealt with many body image issues. She said that being on webcam for hours a day and receiving a constant stream of positive comments from people helped her change how she viewed herself. Other respondents shared similar stories of how webcamming positively impacted their self-image and improved their mental health. Anna (28, 1 year) went as far as to call her fans her “cheerleaders” and said they gave her a lot of emotional support.

Sexual pleasure was a motivator for a number of respondents to work as webcam performers and it was cited as one of the benefits of webcamming (Jones, 2020). Sexual pleasure came not only from orgasms¹³ but also from the pleasure of being watched, desired, and exploring sexual fantasies. Quinn (24, 1 year) used her adult work to explore and discover new aspects of her sexuality. She enjoyed fulfilling the clients’ requests and filming content with new partners with divergent desires. Vicky (49, 1 year) said that she had a long history of having erotic conversations and video chats with people, and she started webcamming when she learned that she could also earn money from it.

Vicky: I was doing it recreationally for a long time, you know, and then, you know, ‘cause I was spending so much time on it like recently (...) that’s when I was like “You know, I can charge for this!” (Vicky, 49, 1 year).

She equated going to work with going to the bar for a fun night.

Vicky: So like while other people would be like “Oh, it’s Friday, let’s go to the pub and have a drink.” And I don’t drink, you know (...) so instead I’m like “Well, nobody’s here”, so instead of me wanting to go out, I want to go onto my camera. So I’m getting

¹³ Many of the respondents I spoke with said that they did not have orgasms while working. Their reasons varied from finding it distracting or tiring, to feeling like it impacted their personal sexual life, or just not wanting to. Despite the lack of orgasm, many participants still found their work to be sexually or emotionally pleasurable. Moreover, I feel that it is important to note that orgasms are not essential for pleasurable sex or sexual experiences. I would encourage the reader to explore pleasure-oriented sex rather than goal-oriented sex, and to develop a broader definition of what ‘sex’ is (e.g., Constantinides et al., 2019; Nagoski, 2015).

dressed up and I feel like I'm going to Cheers, that bar like where everybody knows your name (Vicky, 49, 1 year).

Vicky enjoyed the process of getting dressed up for her 'night out' and carrying on multiple simultaneous conversations with her viewers. She found pleasure in performing erotically for the viewers and making them feel good about themselves and their sexual desires. She paid specific attention to men to whom she was attracted. To Vicky, webcamming was her job, part of her social life, and a way to express and indulge her sexual desires.

Many respondents highlighted their work's value for viewers, and they felt that webcamming was an important service. For example, Emma (26, 2 years) said that her shows allowed people to explore their fantasies in a safe space, which she believed had positive benefits on their mental health.

Emma: One of the most liberating parts of this job is allowing people to explore parts of their sexuality that they can't normally explore in their normal day to day lives. And that's why I really don't like, like people who look down on others who pay for porn, or (...) pay for cam models. (...) They're given a safe space and an understanding individual to really play out fantasies that they've probably had their entire lives and they've never had an outlet for it. And they finally found somebody that they want to explore that outlet with and I think it's like a really vital part of like mental health and being able to like, like expressing those feelings and those thoughts (Emma, 26, 2 years).

Veronica (30, 11 years) also considered webcam models' work to be therapeutic. She said that webcam models became especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic when people were isolated and working from home or out of work. Many people turned to webcam models during the lockdowns for emotional support (Zane, 2020).

Respondents also highlighted the professionalization of webcamming and the skills required to be successful (Koken et al., 2004; Nayar, 2017; Rodriguez, Tori, 2022). Webcamming may be seen as ‘easy money’ to people outside the industry (van der Nagel, 2021). However, many models put a lot of time and effort into developing a personal brand, advertising, maintaining contact with clients, developing their skills, and planning performances. There is a lot of *behind-the-scenes* work that takes place to present a so-called “amateur” performance (Nayar, 2017).

Megan: I think I wish people knew that it is, takes a lot of work and it's not like something you can do without a brain. And it's not just sexuality or like flashing, it's really calculated and takes a lot of organization (Megan, 23, 1 year).

Respondents spoke about how much time they spent planning new shows and setting up their camming room. Layla (26, 1 month) was part of an online discussion group for cam models, and they frequently shared fun cam show ideas. Jim (71, 30+ years) dedicated much of his time to learning about the adult industry, maintaining connections with people in the industry, developing and marketing content, and attending industry events. Respondents demonstrated that webcamming, to them, was a serious job that required a lot of skill and dedication. These experiences challenge the pervasive belief that sex work is unskilled or a profession that someone would not willingly choose to do.

There are online communities of webcam models and other adult performers who share information about camming amongst themselves and to a wider audience. These communities support one another with their businesses and on a more personal level (Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018; Simpson & Smith, 2021). Some models spent time developing (free) educational material and mentoring (new) models or advising on help forums. The educational material and advice covered many topics, such as structuring shows, interacting with clients, marketing

and branding, content creation, and taxes. Others used their online presence to communicate with people outside the adult industry. By being open and vocal about their work in public spaces such as social media, sex workers could counteract the misinformation about their work.

Respondents were aware of the stigma associated with webcamming and sex work more broadly but focused on the positive aspects of the work¹⁴ (Koken et al., 2004). Performers said that webcamming was accessible and accommodating to their physical and mental health challenges, which was not something they found in other forms of employment. Some of the other beneficial factors which respondents highlighted were their ability to earn a high income, a flexible working schedule, it boosted their self-esteem, and they felt like they were helping others (Jones, 2020). Models also challenged the stigma associated with camming through professionalizing their work, highlighting the skills required to be successful, and integrating into and supporting the larger community of adult content creators (Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018; Simpson & Smith, 2021).

Limitations

A major limitation of this research is that I could only speak with people willing to talk with me. Most people I contacted did not reply to my messages (over 250 people were contacted). Many people I contacted were skeptical about my intentions and asked for me to verify my identity. Understandably; people would be skeptical or cautious about answering a message with a request for an interview from a stranger online. Moreover, sex workers may be unwilling to participate in research due to negative past experiences, distrust of academic research (Stuart, 2022), or concerns about speaking to a researcher from an unfamiliar

¹⁴ It must be noted that there are downsides to webcamming, such as stigma, low or inconsistent earnings, harassment from viewers, and it can be physically and mentally exhausting. The respondents that I spoke with were generally very positive about their work and spoke at length about how much they enjoyed their work. However, I was only able to speak with performers who were willing to speak with me, and this could mean that those who do not enjoy webcamming as much did not participate in this study. Moreover, respondents could have shaped the information that they shared because they were talking to a researcher, and for a myriad of other reasons (e.g., Nayar, 2017).

European university. I tried to combat some of these issues before reaching out to participants by making myself very visible and easy to find on social media.

As this research was exploratory in nature and examined the occupational stigma of webcamming, there were a number of areas that could not be explored in depth and warrant further research. This chapter only included webcam models from the United States and Canada, which are very specific social and cultural contexts. This research was primarily based on interviews with white or white-presenting cis-gendered women. Other research on sex work and stigma indicates that there may be differences in the working experiences of people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds and of varying gender identities (e.g., Jones, 2021; Koken et al., 2004; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007). Moreover, additional areas of investigation include, for example, the representation of webcamming in the media, other people who work in the adult industry (e.g., studio operators, webcam platform employees), geographical location and local culture, and social connections within the adult industry.

Finally, stigma was not originally the focus of my research but was a common topic throughout many of the interviews. These conversations triggered interesting thoughts about the experiences of online sex workers compared to the body of literature on in-person sex workers, and I decided to explore it further for this chapter. Since this was exploratory research, it is not representative of the community of sex workers or online sex workers as a whole. However, it provides an interesting starting point from which to explore this population and these themes further.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored webcam models' experiences of stigma and the stigma management techniques they employ. Webcam models I spoke with experienced stigma in various ways, including within their personal relationships, wider society, systemically, and at

a legal and policy level. These experiences shaped how they expected to be treated, and, in turn, how open they were about their work. To mitigate the impacts of stigma, webcam models used stigma management techniques such as information control and reframing.

All of the respondents in this research were open to at least one person in their life, and many were out to all of their friends and family. By coming out and being honest, webcam models could gain social and emotional support and shed the burden of being *in the closet*. However, few respondents were completely open about being sex workers in their day-to-day lives. There is still a strong stigma associated with sex work, and being a sex worker or a former sex worker can (unfortunately) have consequences for future employment opportunities, relationships, and other aspects of life. Because of the risk of being outed or doxed, webcam models employed various strategies to protect their real identities.

Respondents in this research also managed stigma by reframing their work to challenge or counteract the extent to which they experienced stigma. Some of these methods included focusing on the benefits of webcamming, such as a flexible work schedule, high income, and accessibility for people with different physical and mental health challenges. Respondents also highlighted the positive impact that webcamming had on their emotional well-being and self-image, and the value of the services they provided for the clients (e.g., Adams, 2020; Begum et al., 2013; Benoit et al., 2020; Koken et al., 2004). Reframing and rejection of stereotypes were common stigma management techniques used by sex workers in other studies (Benoit et al., 2020; Koken et al., 2004). In Benoit, et. al. (2020), sex workers of all types rejected the stigma because sex work provided them with a comfortable life, and they “rejected the notion that sex work was fundamentally different from other jobs.” Sex workers also reframed their work as a helping profession that was good for people and provided an important service to society.

Does the online environment mitigate experiences of stigma, or does it create new opportunities for it? I would argue that it does both. Working in an online environment alleviates some of the ‘whore stigma’ (Pheterson, 1993) attached to webcam models, as they perform a legal form of sex work and do not interact with clients in person. The stigma attached to full-service sex workers is in part linked to a risk of disease and that it is considered immoral, exploitative, or synonymous with human trafficking (Budhwani et al., 2021; Oldenburg et al., 2014; Weitzer, 2007). Many of these risks and the stigma are alleviated by working independently in an online environment.

Webcam models that I spoke with were largely accepted by the people in their lives whom they disclosed their work to. They felt that society was becoming more accepting of digital forms of sex work in general. Notably, two respondents I spoke with also did in-person full-service sex work. Both of them said they were a lot more cautious about disclosing this aspect of their work, highlighting that they felt the stigma attached to in-person work was greater than online sex work.

A notable difference between online and in-person sex workers was their experiences of harassment for being sex workers. Webcam models can block people harassing them in their chat rooms or on social media¹⁵. However, in-person sex workers do not have the same luxury, and they can face great danger to their physical and mental health due to this harassment and potential violence (Wong et al., 2011).

I would argue that the online domain creates new opportunities for stigmatization. Some forms of sex work can be performed without an online presence or a limited one (e.g., massage parlor, stripping, full-service sex work). Webcamming takes place completely online and

¹⁵ It is important to note that blocking users who are harassing or otherwise bothering performers is not always effective. Platforms may have a time-limited ban period, users may create new accounts, or they may contact performers through other means such as social media. Respondents I spoke with did not report harassment or stalking, but it is commonly discussed in other sources as a major risk of being a webcam performer (e.g., Fustich, 2017; Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018).

includes live-streaming video for hours at a time. Webcam models may also do other forms of digital content creation and use social media. By conducting their work in a digital space, they are at a heightened risk for digital surveillance (Blunt et al., 2020; Fukushima, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018). Online work means that a performer's image is on the Internet, which can lead to greater problems for them in the future, long after they have discontinued their careers, due to stigma against sex work(ers) and sexuality more broadly. This can be further exacerbated by platforms that record and resell content or users who reupload and distribute content (Cole, 2017; Stuart, 2022). This burden is felt even more by performers with intersecting marginalized identities (Blunt et al., 2020; Blunt & Stardust, 2021; Jones, 2020).

Similar to other sex workers, stigma shapes the laws and policies which govern the work of webcam models. In the case of brothel workers in Nevada (Blithe & Wolfe, 2017), laws control the movement of sex workers, the space they can operate in, and their behavior while working, while at the same time prioritizing the interests of business owners and the community. A similar dynamic is observed for sex workers who operate in online spaces. Policies and terms of service (TOS) on platforms are shaped by laws which are often created based on stereotypes and stigma. These laws and policies prioritize the interests of people from certain groups without consideration of the working conditions of sex workers or they actively work to de-platform and erase sex workers in online spaces (Blunt et al., 2020; Blunt & Stardust, 2021; van der Nagel, 2021).

Unfortunately, there is still widespread pervasive stigma which can have a negative impact on performers. Though the strength and resilience of sex workers is something to be admired, it is important to move beyond putting the burden on them to 'counteract' or 'manage' stigma and to start to dismantle the wider social structures which create this burden of stigma in the first place (Simpson & Smith, 2021). Moving forward, I hope that laws and society begin

to reflect the valuable contributions that these workers make and the importance of the services that they provide.

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