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## Article

# Money, Agency, and Self-Care among Cisgender and Trans People in Sex Work

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**Abstract:** Many qualitative studies about the exchange of sex for money, drugs, and less tangible outcomes (i.e., social status) contend that this activity contributes to high levels of internalized stigma among people in sex work. The cis (n = 33) and trans people (n = 5) who participated in our project about health, violence, and social services acknowledged the stigma associated with sex work but were not governed by the dominant discourse about its moral stain. They shared nuanced insights about the relationship between sex work and self-respect as people who use their earnings to mitigate the struggles of poverty and ongoing drug use, and care for themselves more broadly. This study sheds new light on the ways that cis and trans people negotiate issues of money, agency, and self-care, contributing to the literature on consensual sex work that examines different aspects of stigma, safety, and health with a nuanced, non-binary gender analysis.

**Keywords:** sex work; money; agency; self-care; gender; transgender; subjectivity



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## 1. Introduction

Many advanced capitalist societies today are marked by diversity, profound inequity, and a shrinking welfare state alongside a transition from manufacturing-based economies to those that are dominated by the service sector, as well as cultural and creativity industries (Campbell et al. 2019; Crouch 2019; Stoletov 2016). With the upsurge in digital and gig economies, sex industries have also become increasingly diversified along technical, spatial, and social lines (Benoit and Unsworth 2020; Benoit Cecilia et al. 2017; Bernstein 2007; Sanders et al. 2016). Camera modelling or camming (Jones 2020b), sugar dating (Nayar 2017), and “gay-for-pay” (Phua 2010), for instance, have recently become popular among people seeking mobile, highly accessible ways to make money, often from their own homes. Whether cam models or straight men selling gay sex on social media sites like Only Fans identify as “sex workers” is variable and determined by several factors, ranging from the criminalization of sex work and marketing strategies to personal preferences. The same is true among individuals in street-based and transactional settings, some of whom refer to their work and/or themselves using words like “working”, “call boys” (Lasco 2018), or “hooker”, which may be reclaimed as an empowering self-ascribed identity (Benoit et al. 2018; Orchard et al. 2013).

We recognize consensual sex work as an occupation that involves the exchange of labour for socio-material returns, examples of which include escorting, massage, dancing, street encounters, domination, and digital interactions. The term “sex work” is employed by researchers, policy makers, and many people with lived experience to acknowledge the sexual labour and economic context of the work, in contrast with the moral gloss often applied to the industry (Benoit Cecilia et al. 2019; McMillan et al. 2018; Van der Meulen et al. 2013).

An array of motivations and meanings are woven into this complex occupation, and those involved have their own ways of understanding and referring to the exchanges they engage in. For instance, [Wardlow \(2004\)](#) Papua New Guinean research demonstrates that women engage in sex work not only for financial need but also because of their anger about and resistance to the inequitable distribution of resources and reproductive agency that disempowered them. Similarly, among women in northern India, their identity as mothers usurped that of “sex workers”, which carried problematic connotations of HIV/AIDS and maternal neglect ([Basu and Dutta 2011](#)).

Exploring the socio-economic conditions that impact sex work ([Orchard et al. 2018](#)) and the attendant self-cultivation that is required for cis and trans people in the sex industry to survive and flourish is an important task that forms the basis of this paper. To that end, we adopt a unique non-binary analysis of sex industry earnings and self-care, a term used to highlight the ways in which our participants cultivated a sense of independence, integrity, and resilience through sex work. This paper contributes novel empirical insights to the current sex work literature about money, agency, and subjectivity in late capitalism. It is also one of the few studies to include cis and transgender participants. This is significant because although there is a wealth of research conducted with cis women, trans people are often invisible in sex work studies despite the fact that they may comprise 7% of the sex work population in Canada ([Benoit Cecilia et al. 2017](#)) and up to 0.6 % of the adult population in the US ([Conron et al. 2012](#); [Fitzgerald et al. 2015](#); [James et al. 2016](#)). There is a small body of research that explores how trans sex workers experience trauma, HIV/AIDS ([Budhwani et al. 2017](#); [Cai et al. 2016](#); [Chakrapani et al. 2018](#); [Nemoto et al. 2004](#)), and transnational mobility ([Butler 2018](#); [Howe et al. 2008](#)). Of the few Canadian studies that exist, most are based in metropolitan centres ([Fletcher 2013](#); [Laidlaw 2018](#); [Lyons et al. 2017](#); [Namaste 2000](#)), which differs from the medium-sized cities where our study was based.

## 2. Literature Review

It is well documented that exchanging sex for cash or other material items is an expedient way for people to support themselves within the context of limited socio-economic supports, substance use, trauma, and caregiving responsibilities ([Boels 2016](#); [Bourgeois and Schonberg 2009](#); [Dewey 2011](#); [Watson 2017](#)). In street-based settings, sex workers are often caught in unforgiving cycles of subsistence sex work activities and substance use ([Ditmore 2013](#); [Knight 2015](#); [Maher 1997](#); [Maher and Curtis 1992](#); [Shokoohi et al. 2018](#); [Sterk 1999](#)). In environments where paid and sexualized hustles are customary, exchanging sex for cash can be seen as an honest way of earning money that is legitimized within local socio-economic and moral economies ([Anderson 2000](#); [Bourgeois 1995](#); [Caputo 2008](#); [Dewey and Germain 2017](#); [Rosen and Venkatesh 2008](#)). Additionally, sex work monies can be “extra” earnings that supplement other sources of income like government assistance and paid employment ([Benoit Cecilia and Jansson 2015, 2020](#); [Dewey and Zheng 2013](#)).

Most analyses of money in sex work focus on survival or the fulfillment of immediate needs, what in earlier decades was referred to as ‘wage slavery’ among the working classes ([Hallgrimsdottir and Benoit 2007](#)), to the exclusion of satisfying other material and consumer desires ([Zembe et al. 2013](#)). This can have the unintended effect of collapsing the diverse experiences of people in sex work, who have different motivations for doing sex work and unique interpretations of their participation in the industry. It also leaves the impression that people might only engage in sex work out of financial desperation, whereas research shows that sex workers, including those who identify as cis and transgender, have many reasons beyond sheer survival to participate in sex work ([Benoit Cecilia et al. 2017](#); [Day 2007](#)).

There are some exceptions, however. Through the lens of affection and kinship in North Eastern Brazil, [Garcia and Olivar \(2020\)](#) reveal how trading sex for money is normative among cis women and understood as an agential use of their bodies to support themselves and sustain cultural notions of helping and motherhood. Likewise, [Kay Hoang \(2011\)](#) demonstrates how female workers and their male clients in Ho Chi Minh forge

distinctive types of intimate relationships that are structured by class, capital, and duration of encounter. Similarly meaningful experiences are documented among trans workers, for whom the sex industry can be a space of social bonding (Matthen et al. 2018) and gender affirmation (Bunch 2014; Levitt and Ippolito 2014; Lyons et al. 2017; Poteat et al. 2015; Sevelius 2013; Weinberg et al. 1999). Sex work participation can also provide opportunities for trans people to feel empowered and confident, which may help deflect or manage transphobia and racism (Fletcher 2013; Laidlaw 2018; Lyons et al. 2017). The sex market may additionally enable trans workers to mobilize certain social markers associated with their marginalization in broader society, including pleasure and embodied power: “Being ‘beautiful’, feminine and virile gives them an advantage within the market as they can simultaneously negotiate and control their own bodies, sexualities and pleasure” (Vartabedian 2019, p. 239).

The ways in which people in the sex industry describe their work and sense of self varies widely. Rachok (2020) uses the term entrepreneurial subjectivity when analyzing how her Ukrainian participants wove ideas about authenticity, honesty, and “usual” notions of work into their narratives about doing sex work. Their embodied capital is within their control and enables them to generate income that is vital for their survival and the acquisition of mundane items of everyday life. The transactional literature examines how factors like peer pressure and the normalization of “sugar daddy” arrangements shape the social and material desires of young women, who trade sex to access items associated with living a “modern lifestyle” (i.e., fashion, alcohol) and establish financial independence (Ranganathan et al. 2018). They may also use their earnings to renegotiate aspects of class inequality such that they appear “equal” to other socially mobile, economically well-off young woman in the community (Zembe et al. 2013). Women in these settings often refer to themselves as girlfriends or lovers, not sex workers, which is also seen in studies about “sugar dating”, where the sexual exchange is positioned as a lifestyle choice (Nayar 2017).

In this paper, we extend these insights about the diverse socio-material, class-oriented and gender diverse uses of sex work earnings by threading in attention to self-care, an issue that is under-explored in the literature. Against dominant notions of self-care as the commodified management of physical health, well-being and safety (Michaeli 2017), we use this term to highlight how the cis and trans people in our study cultivated a sense of agency, integrity, and emotional resilience through sex work. Thus, participating in the sex industry emerges as a technique of self-care that reflects peoples’ decision-making about sex work (Burnes et al. 2018) and other socio-material desires related to their gendered subjectivity and independence as flexible workers in the post-industrial economy.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Participant Profile

Our qualitative study included cis women (n = 33) and transgender people (n = 5). The cis women were between 18 and 55 years old, with an average age of 34 years. The majority identified as White, while a minority identified as Indigenous, and two participants said they were as Women of Colour. The trans participants were younger, averaging 27 years of age, and all identified as White. Most participants had finished high school, and some had taken college courses in the fields of nursing, accounting, medical technician training, and office administration. One third of our sample was originally from the research site of Kitchener-Waterloo and most grew up in nearby towns or small cities. Several participants were from other provinces and in three instances other global regions, including Europe and the Caribbean.

The initial study focus was street-based sex work. However, during the interviews it became clear that both participant groups had taken part in multiple kinds of sex industry work, which was important to include in our analysis to round out our understanding of their diverse experiences. This is common in other studies we have conducted on the sex industry in Canada (Benoit Cecilia et al. 2017, 2020; Orchard et al. 2012). The cis women struggled with securing safe housing and many had experienced homelessness

and emergency shelter stays at some point in their lives. At the time of the study, five of these participants lived in motels. These locales were some of the primary places where their sex work occurred, as well as in cars, clients' homes, parks, and massage parlours.

The duration of sex work involvement among the cis participants varied from between two months to twenty years., and among trans workers it ranged from a few months to five years. Compared with cis participants who only sometimes used digital platforms to mediate their exchanges, transgender participants relied heavily on online sites and apps, alongside private parties or events. In conjunction with sex work and other kinds of formal and informal employment, many participants received government support related to their financial need and, in some cases disability-related supports, related to physical injury as well as mental health conditions. Below we report on making money and self-care, the two main themes emerging from our thematic analysis.

### 3.2. Thematic Analysis

#### 3.2.1. Making Money

##### The Basics

The amount of money many of our participants earned was significant. The cis women made between twenty-five and fifty U.S. dollars per transaction, which were often quick exchanges that lasted between 5–15 min. They saw four or five clients daily, giving them an approximate daily income of two hundred dollars, which is more than twice what they would make working for eight hours at a minimum wage job in the province of Ontario (where the minimum wage is \$14.25/h). The amount of daily earnings varied depending upon on services rendered and time spent with clients. As Layla said: "A couple hundred depending up to, like, it could be thousands depending on who you got, what you charged and what you did, how many you got also". In some encounters sexual services were not exchanged, like when Poppy was offered five hundred dollars from a client who "doesn't want to come or touch anywhere near me. He just wants me naked in a pose while he is high". The recurring motif of "easy" and convenient was used by many participants to describe making money through quick, well-paid transactions. Emma clearly laid it out, "It's become this big thing that it's all about money for me, easy money".

While trans participants did not specify with as much detail the amount they made per transaction, nor their average number of transactions, in general they reported fewer clients and charged higher rates than cis women. Among these participants, cash was not always the primary motivation. As Jade said: "I don't do it for a living, um I just get extra stuff. I got a nice leather jacket from a guy . . . I got clothes from a few guys let's just say". Similarly, Ari had traded sex for an assortment of nice things: "I've posted an add to have casual sex without money. When somebody says that they are generous then I'm like, 'What do you mean by generous?' . . . It's not always money and I'm ok with that because I like all sorts of things".

Some cis participants, including Kelsea, framed sex work as a viable way to earn "extra money" that enabled her to get beyond subsistence living and buttressed her moral standing as good mom:

It is extra money that I do need because, living on your own one of the things that you love to have is the nice things. I have a 13-year-old son who I adore, so I buy whatever he wants, whatever he needs. You know I'm a very good mom, I'm a good person.

Violet discussed the possibility of getting back into sex work should the need and opportunity present itself: "I don't do it anymore like I did but . . . if the opportunity presented itself, the money was right, there's a good possibility that I might". Her statement reflects the value and security afforded by the sex industry, along with the degree to which it was normalized as an occupational option. In the same vein, Nova mapped out her pathway to improved financial standing and secure housing, a plan that depended upon sex work: "I want to get good credit so I can get a place of my own. As soon as I get a place, I just want

to work until I find a job. I don't want to stop this and have no money because that will get me back in the shelter".

### More than Easy Money

Alongside discussions of easy money, our data revealed tensions pertaining to sex work as an activity that is routinized and potentially dangerous. As Phoebe, a cis participant, said: "Then you get used to it . . . And you kind of don't have the respect for money. I mean you work for it, don't get me wrong, you pay for it in a different way. Yeah, you know, it's fast, easy money". Similarly, Sage acknowledged the harshness of sex work and repeatedly described it in facile terms: "I just do it for the money now. And it's easy, like to have sex for money; it's not hard. It can be hard when you're getting robbed or beaten or something else, but the majority of it isn't". Sophia also referred to sex work as easy and noted the threats that sex work posed to her sense of propriety, which she navigated with considerable dexterity while folding sex work into her life and sense of self: "I had to pay a lot of bills and I had no money. I had to lower myself to do that, but once you get there, it's easy". One trans woman, Jade, was very clear about the dangers trans workers face, especially in street settings: "That's not safe to me, like I just don't see how a person feels safe doing that, and safety is really important, I don't need to be killed doing this. It's just like to make money, right"?

Other participants discussed how, as individuals with few economic options, the structural forces of poverty and gender impacted their decision to do sex work. An older cis participant, Mia, reflected on her initial foray into the industry in the mid-1990s, which was in response to unforgiving socio-economic cutbacks under the former premier of Ontario, Mike Harris:

I was getting a grade twelve diploma and getting a good job, there was never enough money with Michael Harris cutbacks. You had an apartment that was six hundred and a welfare cheque for six hundred. Where was the hydro going to come from? Where was the food going to come from? . . . Shit, oh well, I'll just do that once a week again, it won't hurt.

In our discussions the view emerged repeatedly that exchanging sex for money, shelter, and sometimes substances was an essential resource that participants had at their disposal to support themselves. As Kira, another cis participant, said:

Somebody without a full education and no skills for work, they have no other way to make money. The easiest way to make money as a woman is through selling themselves . . . Yeah, it's kind of gross but I'm keeping myself alive by sleeping with random people.

For some trans workers the economic hardships they experienced were connected to transphobia, which prevented them from realizing certain educational opportunities and more traditional forms of employment. Camilla pointed to the "employment boundaries" "financial obstacles" and mental health issues that kept her from "just having a quote unquote normal career".

### Trans Capital

Trans participants spoke extensively about trading on their gendered sexual capital, although the nuances of this depended on their gender identity and expression. They often linked their identities to a niche sex market that both advantaged and disadvantaged them in terms of earnings. Jade, a transwoman, spoke about "a market for trans women" and described being a "demand item". Ari, who is gender non-conforming used the terms "rarity" and "a unique flavor" to describe the marketability of their transness, which was enhanced by their racial uniqueness as one of the few "White T-girls". Cameron, a trans man, describes how "being an oddity can . . . work in my favour". Yet they also added that they would be "doing a lot better" if they were cis female, adding the insight that "If my gender reduced my ability to earn in this profession [that] is like crazy, to think that

even sex work is affected by being trans". This ambivalence gives a sense of the complex experiences among trans sex workers working in smaller cities, where earning significant sums of money was harder than in larger urban centres.

Some transgender participants, like Ari, linked their participation in sex work to underground sexual cultures that appealed to them for multiple reasons, including those related to making money. Indeed, they expressed a desire to do sex work "as a business", which included paying taxes: "I would love to pay taxes. I would love to charge taxes. I would love to contribute to the economy, it bugs me endlessly that I can't". They also indicated feeling joy, pleasure and belonging in the sex positive community they associated with sex work:

I see connection between the underground economy and other cultures that exist in our society. So, LGBT culture and trans culture typically is very under surface. Kink, swinging, multiple partners again under the surface. For me it's just a natural fit and I love it.

For this participant, sex work took place in a context removed from the expectations of mainstream heteronormative society and was experienced as a positive expression of sexual and gender identity. Alongside participating in an alternative economy, Ari flagged the importance of legitimizing sex work through government financial regulation similar to other forms of paid labour.

### 3.2.2. Self-Care

#### Reclaiming Identities

Rather than focus on commodified practices of bodily calm, psycho-social healing and emotional regulation that are often associated with the term "self-care" (Michaeli 2017), we use this term to highlight how our participants cultivated a sense of agency, integrity, and emotional resilience through sex work. These sentiments were reflected in Olivia's description of the positive impact of sex work on her identity formation: "It has made me the person that I am . . . I feel like I am a good person and I contribute to being a good person and to helping other people out". The term "self-care" is also used to acknowledge the ways that our participants reclaimed their subjectivities as valuable people through the practice of sexual exchange. This reclamation is significant given the pervasive socio-economic, sexual, and gendered stigmas associated with sex work, which often presuppose that only desperate people who have little-to-no care for themselves participate in the industry (Pheterson 1996; Yu 2013). Our findings reveal that the opposite is true.

Take Ava's account of feeling good about who she was and taking care of herself, both of which were directly tied to sex work participation: "I feel better about myself because I have enough money and I can take care of myself. I got my nails done, like I feel gross when I don't have my nails done . . . I can take care of myself, so". Kelsea's reflections were equally self-affirming and reflect her emotional resilience: "I've accepted it, like hey you know if I want to do it, I don't find nothing degrading or bad about it... I was wanting [attention] from everyone else, like if nobody else cares why should I care? I woke up one day, I picked myself up. I'm very strong, I cared for myself". Similarly, Ruby framed sex work as a special part of who she was, such that she wanted to share this aspect of herself with a future partner: "It's important for me and I do think it is an important part of me and hope I could share that with someone".

Where Olivia, Ava, Kelsea and Ruby are all cis women, Camilla, a trans woman, echoed these feelings of self-respect as she described her shift from internalized stigma to self-acceptance: "One of the large differences between then and now is how much I value what I do and how much I respect myself. I'm worth it!" Jade, another trans participant, highlighted how doing sex work enhanced her mental health: "I actually feel like being able to do sex work has given me a major mental health boost". Notably, unlike research that demonstrates how sex work can be gender affirming for trans workers (Fletcher 2013), our participants did not describe sex work in this way. This was, in part, because they spoke of their gender identity as a given and as something established. However, Camilla

did point out that her perceived desirability to clients in sex work contrasted with a sense that she is undesirable due to her gender in her personal dating life.

Exchanging sex for money allowed our study participants to take care of themselves better than with casual employment or social assistance because it demanded less time and garnered far more income. Sex industry work also generated opportunities for them to express their autonomy and self-worth in ways that were not possible in other aspects of their lives. Sometimes this meant contesting mainstream society's negative ideas about people in sex work. Isla, a cis participant, resisted this stigma by recognizing it as a form of discrimination and choosing to not spend time with people who judge her. In doing so, she expressed an agential desire to cultivate self-respect and have respectful relationships: "I'm not going to feel guilty for the rest of my life. I'm not going to feel shame. If you can't handle that, that's too bad. There's no room for you in my life". Sage, another cis participant, also rejected narratives that cast her as an object of pity: "I don't like other people feeling sorry for me because I can't change anything about it. Like, you can't go back and fix anything. You just have to move on. You can't forget that it happened, but it's a lot easier than talking about it".

#### Propriety along the Continuum

The people who took part in our study spoke about certain personal qualities that were important to their sense of self-respect and ability to manage life's ups and downs. Humor, in particular, emerged as a critical source of emotional resilience during periods of heavy substance use, which Isla reflected on with gritty wisdom: "There is one thing I can say this drug has not taken from me, my sense of humour. Because if you lose your sense of humour you are fucked... I don't see humour in everything in life, but if I don't look at it as a little bit of laughter in there somehow, then I can't live". Likewise, assertiveness and good communication skills were highlighted as key to cultivating self-confidence and personal safety. Zoey, a different cis participant, discussed these traits with pride as someone working in settings where it is rare and sometimes dangerous for women to stand up for themselves:

There is one guy in particular that follows me, and I will say 'stop following me' because I'm direct like that. Whereas a lot of the girls wouldn't feel comfortable to do that and like it's such a frowned upon thing that somebody has the self-confidence to say: 'You don't get to treat me like that.'

Trans participants also advocated for themselves to maintain their self-respect, which at times involved educating clients about their gender, sexuality, and interpersonal boundaries. Jade, a trans woman, shared the communication strategies she adopted with coarse clients who called her a tranny or talked about her body in offensive ways:

If I think they are gross, I let them know straight up, you know 'I don't appreciate that' or ... 'most people don't want to hear it called that' and then I just, like, have a quick conversation about it. Like, not that I'm trying to run around making everybody into a better person when they are fucking clients. But you know I just don't want, at the same time, I don't want to feel like crap when I'm around these people.

Importantly, not all of the interactions where trans participants had to educate clients were antagonistic. They also described being met with desire and curiosity by clients who lacked knowledge about trans bodies and sexuality. Educating clients, even when it seemed tiresome, was also framed as way of caring for themselves, as Cameron, a trans man, shared: "I actually get ... a ton of questions like just about everything to do with myself and my body". Similarly, Ari said: "The male penis is fairly simple. The trans female penis is a wildly different creature. I have to do a lot of education with different people".

Although vital to participants' sense of agency and propriety, these self-care practices did not cancel all negative associations with sex work. This may explain why many of

our participants did not identify as “sex workers”, including Rey, a cis participant who panhandled and traded sex: “I do it [sex work] occasionally when I am financially unable to make money because I don’t, um. I am not an escort or a working girl on the corner. I panhandle . . . when I don’t have enough money”. Some individuals’ non-identification as sex workers may also be linked with the intermittent, supplementary nature of the sex trade in their lives, along with its criminalized status in the Canadian context. When discussing their work, they typically used terms like “working”, “out here”, “on the streets”, and “prostitution”.

#### 4. Discussion

Using data from a qualitative study about health, gender, and sex work in two medium-sized Canadian cities, this article examined how cis and trans people reflected upon their experiences of making money and self-care, issues that are underexplored in the sex work landscape. The participants did not all identify as “sex workers” per se; rather, they talked about themselves as people who exchanged sex for money, substances, and other valuable commodities as their socio-economic and health-related needs arose. Doing sex work was essential to their financial independence and it shaped participants’ views of themselves as people with integrity and resilience, such that we position sex work as a form of self-care. This analysis of sex work earnings and self-care was conducted through a unique non-binary lens and contributes fresh insights to the current sex work literature about agency, gender, and subjectivity in late capitalism.

The study participants engaged in sex work of their own volition and with relatively little evidence of internalized stigma. This complicates the dominant discourse about the oppression and internalized stigma that is often assumed to be central to sex workers’ self-perceptions (Benoit Cecilia et al. 2017, 2019; Benoit and Unsworth 2020; Laidlaw 2018; Ross 2018; Serano 2007, 2013). People in the industry often refute sex work stigma by positioning it as something external to their self-identity, which enables them to attribute other meanings to it (Orchard et al. 2013, 2014). This was true for many of our participants who see themselves as practical people making choices to survive economic hardship, for some, to score the substances they need, for others, to acquire “nice things” through which they can gain social capital or be good mothers for their children, and participate as valued members of sexual/gender minority communities. In this light, sex work is seen as a job that supports and provides valid work (Burnes et al. 2018; Morcillo 2019).

Sex work ebbed and flowed in our participants’ lives and was determined by structural, social, and individual factors, including unemployment, substance use, interpersonal relationships, and their desires for additional money to support the life they wanted. Unlike research that positions sex work as a survival occupation that enables people to just “get by” (Laing et al. 2015; Maher 1997; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008), the cis and trans people in our study indicated that doing sex work helped them achieve short and long-term financial goals and gain access to various forms of social capital they desired for their own pleasure. This finding aligns with literature about how risk and integrity are woven into the ways that people manage their sex industry work: “We highlight the salience of emotions in sex work risk management, in which the preservation of dignity is of prime importance” (Simić and Rhodes 2009, p. 4).

Along with financial independence, the acquisition of material goods, and maintaining social and kin obligations, doing sex work was intimately associated with our participants’ ability to take care of themselves with pride. This was reflected across the sample, as cis and trans individuals discussed how vital sex work was to their sense of self, which was sometimes voiced in opposition to their experiences of sex work stigma, but not exclusively because our participants did not internalize this stigma in a wholesale way. They provided numerous examples of how sex work has enabled them to be the “good” people they are today, and in some instances, it improved not only their material standing, but also their mental health. These are powerful illustrations of the mutually constitutive relationship

between sex work and agency, integrity, and emotional resilience in the formulation of their subjectivities.

Importantly, trans people in sex work grappled with different forms of gender discrimination than cis women, sometimes playing a role of educators about trans gender and trans sexuality with clients. Their experiences of sex work stigma were also often interconnected with transphobia, which the cis participants did not report. Additionally, the trans workers were unique in the ways that some of them identified sex work with their sexual identities, desires, and pleasures (Williams et al. 2016). Since very little research has been conducted with trans people in sex work in Canada, (Namaste 2000; Lyons et al. 2017; Fletcher 2013; Laidlaw 2018), our efforts to center diverse trans realities alongside cis women is novel. In doing so we introduce a queer/trans lens that invites us to look differently at interplays of money, labour and agency in terms of sex work subjectivities and narratives about the work itself (Benoit Cecilia and Jansson 2015, 2020; Orchard et al. 2013). This can help shift the focus from an imaginary “predicated on . . . the female worker and male client” (Smith and Laing 2012, pp. 518–19), to an industry that holds many motivations and meanings for people along a diverse gender spectrum.

Finally, our study found that there *are* trans people involved in sex work in smaller urban centres, and their daily realities may be, in some respects, both similar to and different from those in larger urban centres. As with trans workers in metropolitan cities, our trans participants understand themselves as constituting a niche market, albeit with fewer clients and a smaller community of other trans sex workers than is the case in large cities. Given the predominant research focus on trans women (including our own original criteria), it is noteworthy that of the five trans people in our study, one identified as male and the other as nonbinary. It is abundantly clear is that more research is needed to understand the experiences of various trans people in sex work in small cities and larger urban centres alike.

## 5. Materials and Methods

### 5.1. Study Setting

This project was set in the twin-cities of Kitchener-Waterloo (KW), which is home to approximately 560,000 people in an industrialized sector of Southern Ontario, the most populous province in Canada. Once dominated by automotive factories and manufacturing, the region has undergone significant socio-economic change in the past fifteen years. Technology and start-up industries now overshadow the industrial sectors, owing to various shifts in global and local post-industrial economies. Along with relatively affordable real estate, KW boasts several research-intensive universities and is home to a high caliber technical workforce. Our participants lived primarily in the downtown area, which is where the street-based sex work scene and many service provision agencies were located.

### 5.2. Data Collection

Our qualitative study was designed to learn about cis and transgender women’s experiences relative to health, occupational risks, and the organization of sex work itself. Purposive sampling techniques were used, and recruitment posters were distributed at local agencies that serve people in sex work. Staff members at these agencies also helped spread the word about our project. Our inclusion criteria were very broad (i.e., 18–60 years of age, identify as a cis or trans woman, live in the study area, have been or currently involved in street-based sex work), which helped generate a robust sample. While the recruitment materials specified cis and trans women, some trans respondents identified as non-binary or men during interviews. Between March 2015 and May 2016, individual interviews were conducted with thirty-three cis and five trans people, including three trans women, one gender non-binary person, and one trans man. We knew at the outset that our transgender sample would be small, for, as the literature shows, sexual and gender minorities tend to migrate to urban centres to avoid discrimination (Matthen et al. 2018). Despite this small sub-sample, the contribution these data make to the existing literature is

significant because of the gaps in research with trans people in sex work, especially those who identify as non-binary and men.

The individual interviews ranged from thirty to ninety minutes and took place in service agencies and restaurants selected by participants. Prior to beginning our discussions, we described the project aims and our interests in sex work research. The issues of anonymity, voluntary participation, and on-going consent were also discussed. The trans interviews were conducted by a local transwoman and the cis interviews were carried out with female cis team members. Along with the tape-recorded interviews, social mapping exercises were completed to understand the spatialization of health, risk environments, and sex work itself (See [Orchard et al. 2018, 2019](#)). The participants received \$60.00 for their participation and the study received Ethics Approval from the lead author's academic institution.

### 5.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was organized according to six principles for thematic analysis developed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), beginning with familiarization with the data by closely reading the interview transcripts and mapping information. The first, third, and fourth authors jointly coded several interviews to reach consensus about the textual information vis-à-vis the key study aims. The second author also engaged in detailed coding during the analysis. The data were organized into master code files, which were reviewed using line-by-line coding to identify emergent themes. The analysis concluded with defining our themes and writing up the findings, which were informed by critically oriented, queer, trans, and feminist approaches that highlight how intersecting structural and everyday factors impact the sexual, gendered, and emotional terrain of cis women's and transgender people's sex work experiences ([Bilge and Collins 2016](#); [Davis and Craven 2011](#); [Jones 2020a](#)).

It is significant that trans people who did not identify as women self-selected into the study, despite our intention to recruit only women-identified participants. This pressed us to reconsider how we were framing gender and asking participants to identify with gender categories, which resulted in a more nuanced analysis. By including the voices of trans participants along with those of cis women, we contribute to making visible the stories that are often erased. We deconstructed binary understandings of gender and decenter the heteronormative lens that positions people in sex work as sexual minorities because they participate in sexual practices that are outside White, middle class, heteronormative realities ([Bailey 2011](#); [Bailey 2011](#); [Ross 2018](#)). A non-binary gender analysis draws attention to unique dimensions of and meanings in sex work research.

## 6. Conclusions

The constituting distinction of sex work, what renders it an unacceptable, socially degraded form of labour, is that it involves paid sexual transactions in the public rather than the private sphere ([Benoit Cecilia et al. 2019](#)). Yet for our participants the income generated by sex work was not tainted because they relegated this stigma as something external to themselves. Not once did participants describe their earnings as "dirty" money or something they were wholly ashamed of, quite the opposite. Sex work income was described across the gender spectrum as easy, extra money.

Our study participants did not necessarily identify as sex workers, but rather as people who strategically participated in the sex industry when they needed to. This does not delegitimize sex work identities and labour; it merely highlights the fact that narratives about sex work and sex worker identities unfold differently in different contexts. These identification choices also draw attention to the fuzzy borders between sex work and other kinds of independent paid labour. This is useful to think about empirically in terms of what constitutes sex work through the eyes of the people doing it, along with the vital role sex work plays in the cultivation of self-care practices and agential forms of subjectivity employed by many of our participants.

Diverse socio-economic needs and desires, not just mere survival, drove study participants' intermittent participation in sex work. They exchanged sex to obtain various forms of capital that circulate and produce meaning in everyday life, and they spent their earnings on urgently needed items, luxuries, and things of medial value. Research on trans people in sex work show that sex work in itself can be gender affirming and contribute to social bonding and a sense of belonging (Chakrapani et al. 2018; Kulick 1998; Matthen et al. 2018; Nuttbrock 2018). While this was not borne out in our study, sex work did affirm the trans participants' self-perception as strong, competent, and entrepreneurial people with street savvy and the wherewithal to do what needs to be done with confidence and a sense of humor.

The analysis featured in this article acknowledges a separation between sex work identity and its practice and approaches gender as a heterogenous category, which helps make deeper sense of our findings that contest commonly held ideas about the relationship between sex work, money, and subjectivity. O'Connell Davidson (2014, p. 521) reminds us that more than labour is commodified in sex work because "the product of that labour—the 'thing' or 'experience' it produces and to which a monetary value is attached—is indivisible from the socially marked body of the worker". This is compatible with how our participants viewed their sex work involvement, which extends beyond the normative parameters of stigma, extinguished notions of selfhood, and the term "sex work". In doing so, they revealed pragmatic approaches to life, work, and who they know themselves to be within the context of social realities constrained by global capitalism. This suggests that the experiences in the exchanges are vital sites for continued exploration in future sex work research.

**Author Contributions:** The First Author (T.O.) was the nominated Principal Investigator of the study upon which the paper is based and she conducted the preliminary analysis and draft of the paper. This author continued to closely edit the paper as the other authors contributed and also managed the submission process. The Second Author (K.S.) was a key Research Assistant in the data analysis and writing up stages of the project, and she contributed significantly to the development of the manuscript. The Third Author (M.B.) was a Co-Applicant in the project and provided essential insights, analysis, and reference material to the manuscript as it took shape. The Fourth Author (C.B.) was the Co-Principal Investigator on the study and provided critical suggestions, edits, and leadership during the submission process. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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