

Community Under Surveillance: Impacts of Marginalization on an Online Labor Forum

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Abstract

A breadth of literature has examined how gig workers use online forums. The past literature focuses primarily on how gig workers for mainstream corporate platforms leverage forums. Yet, marginalization, stigma, censorship, and criminalization all shape how people, including gig workers, use digital technology. In this work, we seek to take a first step toward understanding how marginalized, stigmatized, digitally censored, and in some cases criminalized gig workers leverage the affordances of online public forums to build community and increase their welfare. To do so, we conduct a qualitative analysis of 4,000 posts and 25,851 comments shared over four months in a large online public forum used by sex workers for peer support. Sex workers sit at the intersection of multiple marginalized communities, and thus offer a lens into the broader use of forums by marginalized labor communities. Our findings offer insight into how these workers use moderation to preserve their safety and community. Further, we highlight similarities and differences between how this community utilizes the forum platform and prior scholarship on the use of online forums by gig workers.

Introduction

Various scholarship highlights how online forums provide a means of information sharing across independent contractors in the gig economy (e.g., Pitcher 2015; Wood et al. 2019; Frith 2014). Gig workers use forums for support, basic information sharing, and community organizing (e.g., labor unions). However, this diverse population faces overarching structural barriers that remain unaddressed by the online community around career development, isolation, and developing in-person connections.

Existing work lacks a deeper engagement with informal workers who sit outside of traditional corporate gig environments and whose knowledge-sharing practices and peer-support networks take place under targeted surveillance. Castells (2000) stresses the importance of social, cultural, economic (capitalism), religious (puritan values), and political factors (criminalization) in shaping the way technology defines modern societies. Therefore, understanding how such factors influence the affordances of online forums for supporting community building among marginalized workers is critical.

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We take a first step toward understanding how gig worker communication patterns in online forums may be shaped by marginalization, surveillance, and in some cases criminalization, by studying the discourse on a large public online forum used by sex workers for peer support (hereafter referred to as ‘the forum’ for brevity). Studying sex workers’ use of online forums can offer initial insight into the community-building methods and challenges of stigmatized, censored (Barwulor et al. 2021; Blunt and Wolf 2020), and marginalized communities, at the intersection of which many sex workers find themselves: many sex workers identify as women or non-binary, Black or Brown, and lack stable housing and economic security (Stardust 2018). Specifically, we draw upon digital media theory on networked publics and counterpublics to conduct a qualitative analysis of 4,000 posts and 25,851 replies to understand 1) how sex workers build community and share knowledge in a public, anonymous forum, and 2) how the observed discourse differs from existing literature on gig workers’ use of online forums.

Background & Related Work

The sex trade functions on a continuum of work autonomy. On one end of the continuum, independent sex workers maintain agency. On the other end, sex is traded under conditions of human trafficking with little to no autonomy (Shift 2021; Leigh 1998). Our study is concerned with individuals who have autonomy in their labor within the sex trade – hereinafter referred to as sex workers (Leigh 1998) – and their use of peer support via an online forum.

Sex work as labor. Sex work overlaps and diverges from other gig economies (Jones 2016). Sex work tends to fall within the informal and unregulated economy, although sex workers can also be classified as independent contractors or self-employed professionals (West and Austrin 2002; Pitcher 2015). Like other gig workers, sex workers do not receive benefits such as employer-provided health care, vacation, or retirement packages. They balance administrative work such as marketing, client communication, and problem-solving, as well as a shifting legal landscape (Brewis and Linstead 2000; Pitcher 2015). However, while both independent sex workers and gig workers share the benefits of flexible work hours and – for some sex work-

ers – the ability to work remotely, the criminalization, stigma and surveillance of sex work create an environment where poor working conditions, exploitation and lack of essential worker protection may be present regardless of support networks or financial resources (Rand 2019). Scholarship on gig workers highlights the importance of online forums and sense-making (Alkhatib, Bernstein, and Levi 2017). However, little is known regarding how community-based learning in an online setting happens between gig workers (Watkins 2021).

Sex worker’s use of digital media. Prior work focuses on how sex workers use the internet for business development, communication with clients, advertising, and brand development (Sanders et al. 2018; Pitcher 2015; Barwulor et al. 2021; Sharp and Earle 2012). Further, sex workers around the world use social media to exchange health and safety information, advance social relationships and develop cyber communities, and organize (Sanders et al. 2018; Bernier et al. 2021; Barwulor et al. 2021).

While the internet can offer significant improvements in labor conditions and autonomy for sex workers by, for example, allowing easier ways for sex workers to work independently and avoid management (Sanders et al. 2018), sex workers face significant barriers to online participation due to stigma, censorship, and surveillance (Barwulor et al. 2021; Blunt and Wolf 2020; Blunt et al. 2021). Sex workers are frequently removed or banned from using digital platforms such as Airbnb and Instagram, even if they do not use these platforms for work (Blunt and Wolf 2020; Barwulor et al. 2021). The terms of service of multiple companies now ban conversations about sex work and even sex education, in some cases removing sex workers’ ability to find peer-support online (Albert 2021). Additionally, sex workers who face barriers to technological access (e.g., mobile-only users or those who share devices) or language barriers are unable to easily utilize online resources (Hacking//Hustling 2021). The compounding of stigmatization, criminalization, and subsequent de-platforming gives rise to dangerous conditions of isolation (Jackson 2019; Bernstein 2007; Musto et al. 2021). Barwulor et al. (2021) find that the lack of sex worker support networks “may exacerbate the internalization of stigma,” perpetuating anxiety towards being discovered doing sex work. These findings are supported by sex worker writings both in and outside of academic venues (Liu 2020; Mac and Smith 2020; Sharp and Earle 2012).

While prior work notes that sex workers use – and are sometimes banned from accessing – online communities, missing in this prior work is an in-depth examination of how specifically they manage to support each other and build community through digital technology. Our work contributes to the body of literature on sex workers’ use of digital media by filling that gap and contributes more broadly to the body of knowledge on how stigmatized, criminalized, and surveilled communities use digital media for support.

Networked Publics & Counterpublics

Networked publics consist of communities with similar interests, experiences, identities, and/or perspectives who

gather in virtual spaces. These digital networks facilitate decentralized and distributed relational structures (Fraser 1990; Varnelis 2008; Nelson 2019; Warner 2002; Boyd 2014). Given the interest of our study, we draw upon the term *counterpublic* which describes a space in which “members of subordinated social groups” gather, both in-person and online, to discuss, share, and craft “counter discourses” to imagine new ways of living and working together, particularly as it pertains to their marginalized identities, interests, and needs (Castells 2015).

Online forums are ideal for facilitating these networked counterpublics. Online forums increase connectivity through (1) asynchronous communication, where participants have access to the forum at times most convenient to them; (2) anonymous interaction via “throwaway accounts;” (3) hiding of visible sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, racial or ethnic identity, income, and social status; (4) increased access for those with physical disabilities; in ways that are (5) not limited by spatial or temporal constraints (Gritsenko 2016; Morrow 2006; Frith 2014).

Prior work has explored the benefits of online communities specifically for marginalized people, finding that a variety of different groups including those who are marginalized by their race, mental health (e.g., depression), or experiences (e.g., survivors of sexual abuse, adolescents who are pregnant) leverage online forums to seek out information, support, and even to encourage each other toward political action, especially in the face of ostracization and a resulting lack of face-to-face support (e.g., Bostwick, Liao, and Lee 2019; Andalibi et al. 2016; Dosono 2019).

Separately, scholarship has examined gig workers’ use of online forums to promote collective organizing; provide psychosocial support; combat isolation and fragmentation; and disseminate work-related information sharing about e.g., new technologies, markets, methods for improving labor conditions, platforms for alternative work arrangements and discerning between exploitative requesters (Irani and Silberman 2013; Gray, Garvey, and Lane 2016; Rani and Furrer 2021; Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta 2017). By organizing outside of the platforms’ own infrastructure, gig workers in online forums take part in what Carliner (2012) calls “contra-professionalization,” often subverting gig platform infrastructure to develop skills, share information, and organize in ways that gig-platforms strategically seek to prohibit (Chung 2020; Wood et al. 2019; Watkins 2021). However, these gig work spaces tend to focus strictly on economic productivity (Wood, Lehdonvirta, and Graham 2018). Perhaps as a result, Rivera and Lee (2021) find prevalent lack of communication and collaboration amongst workers despite these public gathering spaces, resulting in little opportunity for long-term career development.

Prior work has not, however, examined the use of online forums at the intersection of these two groups – marginalized communities and labor communities – as we do here.

Methods

We qualitatively analyzed social data from a public forum used by sex workers that is hosted on a popular social media platform. As discussed further in our Ethics Statement

at the end of this paper, we anonymize the platform's name to protect our participants, in line with prior work on digital resources for marginalized populations (Razi, Badillo-Urquiola, and Wisniewski 2020; Barwulor et al. 2021).

Forum Selection & Data Collection

The forum was created in 2014 and at the time of data collection consisted of approximately 85,000 members. All posts were written in English and the majority of the disclosed locations were in the United States and Europe. The moderators and community endeavor to ensure that members posting are sex workers (e.g., all new posts are flagged by an automated bot and screened by moderators). Posts on this platform are automatically archived after six months, meaning they are still visible but cannot be interacted with. Volunteer moderators manage the online community, enforce community-specific rules, remove posts and comments that violate these rules, and keep discussions on topic. The content on the forum is constantly in flux: discourse frequently moves from the public (forum) to the private space (direct messages) or even disappears. Users can delete their own posts and comments and moderators can prevent posts from receiving comments, archive content, or delete it.

We used a python script to automatically collect four months of data on the forum from February 1 - June 1, 2019. Our dataset consisted of 4,000 posts and 25,851 comments replying to those posts.

Data Analysis

We qualitatively analyzed these posts and comments in three steps. First, we conducted an open reading of all posts in MaxQDA. Of these, 674 irrelevant posts (advertisements, spam, harassment, or previously removed posts) were discarded, leaving 3,326 posts for analysis. We conducted an open reading of the posts to identify posts where an individual indicated they were seeking another's viewpoint, advice, experiences, or general support; these included direct requests for support (e.g., advice please, what would you guys do in this situation, can anyone offer any advice or words of comfort?), indirect requests (e.g., has anyone else ever heard of this, don't know where to go from here, sound familiar?), and any posts asking a question. Out of the 3,326 posts analyzed in this first stage of analysis, 37.0% (n = 1,231) requested support from the online sex worker community. The other posts included stories, sex work memes, relevant new articles, entertaining stories, and screenshots of conversations with clients.

Second, we thematically analyzed these 1,231 support-related posts: the first author performed a combination of open and inductive coding, grouping conceptually similar support-seeking topics under codes (e.g., insecure housing, filing for taxes, earning assessments) and then further into higher-level themes (e.g., basic necessities, financial assistance, working practice), respectively.

Third, to understand the patterns in the different types of assistance received, we inductively coded the comments left in reply to these posts into a second set of thematic codes that illustrate a spectrum of peer-to-peer support and

align with linguistic literature-based characterizations of advice (Morrow 2006), which are described in more detail in the "Support Given" section. To account for all layers of continuous dialogue in the comment section (Reeves, Kuper, and Hodges 2008), we coded these replies in context of the original posts, frequently referring back to the original posts and between the comments. We embrace dynamism throughout our coding: a single post or comment can be coded with multiple themes based on context. In line with ethical guidelines (Proferes et al. 2021), we include our full codebooks here: <https://osf.io/2k7tj/>.

Limitations

There are limitations to each step of our approach. First, we had to adapt to the dynamic nature of the dataset. 16.8% (n = 674) of the posts we initially collected were irrelevant posts, including deleted posts, for which we could not see the original content. Thus, as our dataset is retrospective, we do not fully capture the in-the-moment nature of the forum. Second, while our codebooks try to capture significant themes from the posts, the vast array of discourse, topics, and identities found in sex workers' posts are impossible to fully capture in a codebook. Third, we are not able to analyze sociodemographics. Because the platform does not collect personal data, there is no breakdown of demographic distribution. However, members sometimes revealed facets of their identity and in those instances we included this information in our analysis.

Support Requested

We find that the support sex workers request in the forum falls into two high-level thematic categories: professionalization and personal advice.

Professionalization

Professionalization posts focus on requesting support with the ongoing process of managing and attaining industry knowledge (Carliner 2012). Forum members specifically requested professionalization support related to Working Practice and Safety Practice. The overwhelming majority of support requests (81.3%, n = 1001 / 1231) were from members seeking advice about sex worker professionalization. Of the professionalization posts, over two-thirds were work practice (71.3%, n = 714) and the rest (28.7%, n = 287) safety practice.

Work Practice. Many questions related to work practice focused on building a business, either through finding an ideal set of cities in which to work or through effective use of (primarily digital) media to advertise. Replies to these posts frequently offer context-specific advice (e.g., neighborhoods to avoid, lucrative months, benchmark prices, rates, and earnings potential in different locations) and often transition from public discourse in the comment section to using private messages to discuss personal experiences and detailed logistics. Forum members seeking assistance with marketing and digital media typically asked for help with troubleshooting platforms, payment complications, and advice on best practices for promoting their business.

Other work practice posts focused on handling existing clients. These requests for advice were met with far more diverse responses. Some replies offered “copy n paste” template responses for dealing with troublesome clients such as a list of “rejection phrases” to send to clients: “I apologize, but I am not comfortable providing the services you are seeking. I truly wish you the best of luck in finding your ideal provider.” Other replies offered emotional support when a boundary violation occurred. For example, one member asked for advice when a client did not respect their physical boundaries, then left a bad review. The poster received words of affirmation from their peers, validating their anger and offering comforting advice such as, “the second this work makes you feel unsafe, unhappy, or unstable it’s time to make a change.” On the forum, safety is frequently emphasized as the top priority: members encourage each other to put themselves and their personal well-being first.

Safety Practice. Safety practice posts ask for advice on both online (e.g., digital bad client lists, online screening practices, subverting algorithmic censorship and de-platforming) and offline safety tactics (e.g., sex-worker-friendly hotels, safety supply kits). Safety practice replies and posts explain why and how to engage in safety and communicate community norms. For example, members unanimously post about the need to screen clients (i.e., perform background checks through various means). These digital practices are part of a long history of peer education and support surrounding safety practices in marginalized communities; see for example, *The Ultimate Guide to Internet Safety for Sex Workers* (www.theorganisedescort.com/internet-safety-guide) and resources provided by sex work research collective Hacking//Hustling (hackinghustling.org/resources/).

Other online safety advice focused on avoiding online censorship and de-platforming (Blunt et al. 2021). For example, forum members would break down a platform’s terms of service for each other and highlight potential issues and risks of using that platform. In addition to offering subversive tactics, community members bonded over their shared experiences with de-platforming. Finally, some posts on online safety focus on traditional security and privacy approaches like creating secure passwords, finding the best encrypted sites to communicate with clients, and avoiding facial recognition software that scrapes sex worker advertisements.

While the majority of the online safety advice was directive (e.g., suggesting which platforms, words, and hashtags to avoid), advice about offline (physical) safety instead took the form of general suggestions. A common topic for in-person safety was “sex worker-friendly hotels” that do not actively punish sex workers for meeting clients there (e.g., report them to law enforcement).

Safety suggestions for overnight appointments included how to roll cash to fit inside a tampon, using a Velcro bag because it is noisy if someone tries to open it, and links to locking make-up bags. Comments frequently offered unsolicited suggestions such as: “consider bringing earplugs in case the client snores,” “wear tight full-coverage underwear before sleeping” to prevent sexual assault, and “keep belong-

ings in one place of the room for a quick escape.”

Finally, some posters sought advice about specific dangerous or suspicious clients and situations. Responses to these posts were unanimous and directive: “NO he is not worth your time,” “be careful,” “block him immediately, I can already tell he’s giving you anxiety.” Due to the public nature of the forum, when providers ask for safety advice or discuss a negative experience, their posts and the subsequent replies serve to educate the larger community. The line between protecting oneself and protecting the community is intertwined; as one provider writes, “All we can do is warn each other. Stay safe girls.”

Personal Advice

Aside from professionalization support, the other type of support requested on the forum (18.7%; $n = 230$) is personal advice. Personal advice posts address several types of requested assistance: (1) Financial: e.g., money management, government surveillance, personal finances, best fiscal practices (4.14% of posts, $n = 51$); (2) Legal: e.g., laws pertaining to sex workers, avoiding law enforcement (3.33%, $n = 41$); (3) Medical: e.g., treatment of physical needs, concerns with sexual health, general questions related to the human body (3.41%, $n = 42$); (4) Mental Health: e.g., mental stability, balance, and primary care (4.87%, $n = 60$); (5) Non-Sex-Work Employment: e.g., acquiring and maintaining non-sex work jobs (1.54%, $n = 19$); and (6) Basic Necessities: posts asking for help with material conditions such as housing, food, or childcare (1.38%, $n = 17$).

Financial. Forum members felt strongly about their own personal financial practices and willingly offered lists of best practices. Financial-related posts focused on sex-worker-friendly banks, depositing money (what to do with cash), proof of income, tracking expenses, boosting credit scores, and crypto-currency suggestions, which were often direct and resource-based. Comments on posts about personal financial literacy recommended escort podcasts on finance and Lola Davina’s book *Thriving in Sex Work*. When one member asked for tips for saving money, another responded with a meticulously detailed spreadsheet of the money they saved by doing weekly meal prep. When members felt unable to answer a question, they often “outsourced” to other forums, directing the poster to: “lookup sex worker-friendly accountant on...,” “search ‘filing taxes’ or ‘accountant’ in the forum to find more resources,” or “become a member of [x platform] to access sex-worker friendly attorneys.”

Legal. Posts asking for legal assistance primarily focused on trying to understand the legal consequences of disclosing information about one’s profession (e.g., in settings with medical professionals or romantic partners), although other posts focused on concerns around criminalization. Some replies to legal posts involve lengthy, tense back-and-forth discourse. Other questions were resolved via a single directive such as a link to a website or widely accepted industry norms; for example, questions regarding patient confidentiality were often redirected to resources provided by the American Psychological Association. For individuals who had been arrested, the responses directed members to seek

professional advice via institutionalized resources (e.g., seek out a local Sex Workers Outreach Project chapter, sign up for a LegalShield plan), plead the 5th, and hyperlinked YouTube videos on individual rights. Members also recommended looking for a family lawyer because of their greater likelihood of supporting a sex worker.

Medical. Medical assistance posts centered around STI prevention tips (e.g., herpes scares, HIV positives), latex allergies, condoms breaking, preventative sex health practices (e.g., probiotics for vaginal health, sexually transmitted disease testing, PrEP, urinary tract infections, vaginal tears, yeast infections), and medical advice on the topic of rape and sexual assault. The responses to these posts consist of a spectrum of assertive directives, shared personal experiences, and empathetic community building. One woman lamented that she spent hundreds of dollars trying different kinds of lube, met with various doctors, and was still struggling with vaginal dryness. Replies consisted of a wide spectrum of recommendations with links to Amazon, CVS, and Walgreens products, as well as home remedies such as saffron liquid herb, coconut oil and pills with a combination of “horny goat weed and maca.” Amongst these recommendations exists a community practice of quality control as well. For instance, one user quickly cautioned against a previous recommendation to use coconut oil as a lubricant because it “degrades latex condoms” and “makes them more likely to break.” In another instance, a female-identifying user wanted to know how to use protection for women-on-women sex. Another user replied with step-by-step instructions on how to make a dental dam out of a latex-free condom. Personal experiences and home remedies often accompany the unanimous directive to reach out to one’s doctor. The responses to posts asking for medical advice exhibit a range of industry-specific knowledge, as well as creative “hacks” and personal expertise that, at times, exceeds advice from medical professionals and suggests a gap in institutionalized medical practices, including access and dissemination (or lack thereof) of medical safety practices for sex workers (Bernier et al. 2021).

Mental Health. Mental health-related posts illustrate recurring patterns that range from general inquires (e.g., seeking sex-worker-friendly therapists, lifestyle tips, and in-person support groups) to sensitive disclosures (e.g., coping with traumatic events, dealing with burnout, body dysmorphia, isolation, depression, or anxiety).

Members are generally conscientious of the spectrum of working conditions; thus, to avoid overstepping by assuming the experiences of others, members indirectly offer support through personal experiences and storytelling. Out of the 60 mental-health-related posts, a majority of the responses replied to posts with their own experience. Their testimonies offer more than anecdotal comfort: they often included a mix of organized resources and lifestyle practices, always included trigger warnings when appropriate (exhibiting a consciousness of their peers), elaborated on their support systems (e.g., best friends who took them shopping, coworkers who showed them the ropes), the triumphant feeling of financial stability, and struggles with internalized whorephobia, classism and ableism.

Amongst these intervention-focused conversations, there are moments of comedic relief. One member posting about their struggle with isolation wrote, “TL/DR I guess I should probably get a dog.” Another member jokingly replied to the post, asking if “a cat was out of the question?” The following 47 comments engaged in a lengthy discussion on the medical benefits of pets, crazy cat stories, volunteer opportunities at local animal shelters, and even the perks of having a ferret. While similar posts could appear in any online forum, work was always a consideration in the discussion: some members followed up with a well-researched analysis of the best breed of dogs compatible with their sex work schedule.

Individuals struggling with depression, anxiety, and burnout are met with recommendations of potential lifestyle changes such as spending time alone in nature, making art, meditating, changing sleep routines, taking turmeric supplements, smoking weed, taking a bath, drinking tea, removing carbs and sugars, etc. The mix of organized resources, D.I.Y. techniques, and lifestyle practices as a means of support giving ultimately allow the original poster to derive their own conclusions.

Non-Sex Work Employment. Posts focused on non-sex-work employment addressed the challenges of balancing civilian and sex worker jobs or transitioning out of sex work into a civilian job only. Members repeatedly discussed the pros and cons of quitting their “vanilla jobs” and becoming full-time sex workers. Many of these posts came from members who identify as university students. Posts ranged from general requests for advice such as mitigating “the risk of co-workers outing” them, to “what to write on a resume,” to “how to cope with being a single parent and sex worker,” as well as very specific requests (such as looking for a “study buddy” who has “passed the state insurance entrance exam”). When inquiring about filling the “gap” of work experience on their resumes, forum members offered a long list of self-employment cover ideas (e.g., social media brand ambassador, fashion blogger, social media influencer). This advice is consistent with other ‘cover’ gig work suggestions for filing taxes.

Basic Necessities. Forum members inquiring about basic necessities made up the smallest distribution of the collected data. Post topics ranged from housing insecurity to homelessness; judgmental roommates to affording groceries; as well as access to basic amenities such as clean water and electricity. In urgent instances, the community suggested gig work employment (Lyft, Uber, Wag, etc.).

The Role of Identity

Members on the forum typically are community-focused; as one forum member put it, they “want everyone to succeed.” However, there is an inherent “whorearchy” that systematically limits “everyone” from succeeding (Simon 2016). Those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (e.g., sex workers who are in racial minorities) often sought context-specific information and support about their work practice. Members regularly allude to their level of expertise, which serves to vet and legitimize the quality of advice they provide. For example, new sex workers often

started posts introducing themselves as “newbies,” while forum members often call in sex worker veterans to relevant threads to offer expert advice and use these titles to verify that the person replying to their call fits their request.

Providers with disabilities, providers of color, trans providers, curvy providers, and those experiencing gendered ageism often disclosed these struggles as a means of direct advice quality control (e.g., “looking for some help from primarily sex workers of color,” “I am a POC in a city that still places high value on white escorts though”) and indirect advice quality control (e.g., “I am a trans woman, so idk if that makes a difference. Do trans women just not get regulars??”). Forum members of similar demographics responded with their personal experiences, giving insight into lucrative international markets for specific identities, offering precautionary screening tactics, providing identity-specific promotional platforms, and general lived experiences. Further, moderators of shared identity remove racially-biased reviews. A few posts from Black sex workers inquiring about the best international markets generated a lengthy discussion about various racist interactions in some countries as well as the “luck” found in others. Other posts discuss the disparity in access to clients, “I notice other girls (primarily white and skinny) get a lot of messages and have the ability to ‘pick’ clients...”

Often these posts lead to community building where members offer personal connections, “...drop me an email @,” “DM,” or “chat on another platform.” These conversations intentionally and consensually remained in the public eye because, as one Black-provider writes, having “an open discussion on this forum can help others too.” Other forum members often commented “following” on these intersectional-identity posts, indicating that they, too, were interested in the comments and replies on these posts, as “no one ever seems to write much about it.” Black providers across the world share words of affirmation on these posts such as “I feel your struggle” and “anti-blackness is, indeed, worldwide.” Others shared Black-friendly blogs and websites for independent Black providers.

Methods of Support Giving

The spectrum of support offered in response to the requests described above ranges from confident and commanding answers which we code as (1) Assertive Directives, on one end, to posts that are archived or deleted by a moderator or the original poster, coded as (2) Moderated Advice. In the middle of the spectrum, support is found through (3) General Support/Suggestions and (4) Empathizing/Community Building.

When giving Assertive Directives, forum members passionately espouse and uphold community norms. For example, they caution against harmful payment platforms (“Be careful! PayPal is not sex-worker friendly”) and emphasize the importance of STI testing (“Ladies! Get tested! Untreated syphilis can lead to lifelong brain damage”) and well-being (“the second you feel unsafe, take a break”, “always put yourself first”). Working practice, medical, legal, and financial-related posts in particular often received replies

containing assertive directives and resource lists (e.g., websites that detect fake phone numbers, sexual assault hotlines, successful adult content platforms, links to bitcoin wallets, personal references of photographers, tips for Do-It-Yourself professional photos, sex-worker-friendly lawyers).

However, sometimes the assertive directives given are in conflict with each other – especially those given on posts asking for legal advice, financial practices, and working best practices – and consequently trigger back-and-forth discussion. For instance, members engaged in a lengthy debate about “What to do with tons of cash?” Advice varied amongst forum members as they debated the merits of how much cash to deposit into a bank, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of legitimizing or declaring income. At the bottom of the comment thread, one member expressed their frustration: “Gaaah, conflicting suggestions!”

On the other hand, especially when responding to sensitive disclosures such as mental health episodes or forum members disclosing unfavorable work experiences, the community offered words of encouragement (General Support/Suggestions) and shared personal experiences (Empathizing/Community Building). The significance of sharing personal experiences is visible in one instance where a forum member disclosed they had lost a close friend due to substance abuse. The individual admitted that they considered “posting this in another forum” but “didn’t want to hear about the bashing of sex workers and drugs.” To the original poster’s surprise, the community stepped forward with similar experiences (“I had a best friend die from the same drug...it was absolutely terrible”) and personal accounts (“I almost died of an overdose the last time I used drugs and alcohol”). The original poster replied to all 23 comments, thanking each individual, “I swear it means more than you could ever know,” and updated the community that they will heed their advice, “Yes, I can take some time off and will do that.” Sensitive disclosures of assault or PTSD were often messaged via DM for anonymity purposes. Peers frequently left words of support and encourage their colleagues to take time off from sex work (“Allow yourself to cry, get it all out, don’t feel pressured to ‘stay strong’. Do what you need to get through, before you need to go back to work.”) and offered personal contacts (“If you need someone to talk to I’m just a DM away.”).

Forum members who could not directly relate to the experience were often hyper-aware of the original poster’s unique circumstance, prefacing their replies with phrases such as, “...I don’t know your whole situation, but in my personal experience ...”, “not sure if this applies to you, but I would...” When forum members felt unfit or unwilling to answer specific questions, they redirected those needing support to other forums for resources, “if you go to www ... there should be a post pinned to the top talking about it...It takes some getting used to here, but you’ll get the hang of it!”

Finally, some posts receive Moderated Advice, where the advice given is ultimately removed by forum moderators or where community members self-moderate, choosing not to provide public advice in order to safeguard information. Moderators often left comments explaining their rationale

for removing posts, while individuals did not.

Urgency. While there are a variety of different types of posts on the forum, not all are given the same priority for support. Despite being numerically outweighed by other posts asking for advice, forum members consistently prioritize posts having to do with basic necessities, safety, or legal matters as they are viewed as timely and urgent. The time-sensitive context alters the manner, engagement, and delivery of the advice these individuals receive. Posters often apologized for their typos, “I’m so sleepy and tired, forgive my typos.” Replies to posts about members’ arrests were sometimes written in capital block letters to emphasize the sense of urgency. In the case of a member who was “... getting kinda desperate as my current living situation expires in a week,” they received directives to resources including housing rental companies, short-term housing on Craigslist, or reaching out to local sex worker organizations. Forum members took the time to offer initial resources and follow up with specifics depending on their geographic location and access to material resources (a car, electricity, cellular data, etc.). Further, forum members sometimes engaged in real-time safety interventions. In one example, a member expressed concern about a “sketchy appointment.” To provide a quick exit from the appointment if needed, one member offered to stage a “fake emergency call” by pretending to be the original poster’s mom calling with a medical emergency.

Moderation as Preservation

We often think of moderation as an external impetus that maintains or enforces platform jurisdiction (Gillespie 2018). However, we observed informal communal moderation that extended beyond the designated forum moderators to preserve community safety, as well as platform guidelines.

Posts Removed by Moderators

We observed the highest degree of moderation on legal, mental health, and medical-related posts. For example, the moderators “have a moratorium” on posts related to positive STDs, STI, HIV, and bare-back services (a colloquial term for unprotected intercourse, a practice that is against the norms of most long-term members of the sex work community). Their explanation states that the “Moderators remove posts from feeds for a variety of reasons, including keeping communities safe, civil, and true to their purpose.” Moderators reviewed all legal advice and sensitive disclosures of self-harm to identify potentially harmful advice. As long as the content offered non-harmful information and advice, the post was permitted (Frith 2014). When moderators decided to remove responses or posts in these categories, it was unclear if the moderators reached out to the original poster privately or gave them clinically- or professionally-approved resources. However, the moderators post an automated warning about the dangers of uninformed legal advice or mental health suggestions. Additionally, the moderators established explicit rules about what one can/cannot post – for example, banning “how do I get started” posts – in an attempt to avoid criminalization for Inciting Prostitution (Blunt and Wolf 2020).

Moderation by Community Members

Forum members often assisted moderators’ efforts in enforcing outlined forum rules, namely by redirecting new members to other areas to gather “getting started resources.” Further, members frequently self-moderate: they are careful and self-reflective when considering whether the content they post and their identity are appropriate for this digital space. For example, posters frequently preface their questions with phrases such as: “sorry if this post doesn’t apply to this group or is not allowed,” “not sure if this is the right format or place to be posting this.”

More broadly, the forum community self-moderates the sharing of safety methods, financial tactics, and screening platforms in public view. In the United States, in particular, the fear is that sharing these resources will allow them to be co-opted by law enforcement, or that workers will be banned from using their existing digital platforms if those platforms discover their profession. As one person wrote, “we want to keep the blacklist sites private because the forum is viewable by the public eye...” Another post warned, “Law enforcement gets smarter because they read and learn about our safety tactics!!!” The means of communication for these concerns vary depending on the length and detail of the posted information. Responses ranged from gentle reminders (“If you don’t want to share publicly, feel free to DM me”) and general suggestions (“I really wouldn’t publish screening tactics here, as it’s not a closed group and anyone can see it!”) to assertive directives (“please delete your comment about these sites or remove the names,” “If you think for a second that those who care are NOT reading, you are sadly mistaken!”). The lack of a formal set of rules regarding sharing such sensitive information prompted a series of back and forth discussions and heated debates about what should, or should not, exist in this digital public sphere. The back and forth that ensued reveals a core tension that mirrors the struggles of other targeted and marginalized communities who gather or organize in online public spaces (Mac and Smith 2020; Costanza-Chock 2020).

Posters also self-moderate by obfuscating the content they post. Sex workers develop and employ a variety of acronyms, emoticons, and colloquial phrases that (a) signal an in-group community dynamic (i.e., that “only sex workers will understand”), (b) aid in community-building, (c) subvert algorithmic moderation (Noble 2018), and (d) safeguard legally-targeted resources such as screening platforms (Blunt et al. 2021). Occasionally, when a new member is confused by the acronyms, peers redirect them to digital guides with hundreds of sex work-specific terms. In addition to these colloquial phrases and acronyms, emoticons are a consistent part of the lexicon used to subvert “explicit” terms that are disallowed by the platform on which the forum is hosted; their use also adds a bit of color, both literally and figuratively, to posts and comments (e.g., 🍷💰😭🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷, 8====D). Sex worker acronyms, phrases, and emoticons are not unique to this forum and have a long history as a subversive tactic in the face of state surveillance and algorithmic moderation (Morrow 2006; Blunt and Wolf 2020).

Discussion

In this work, we analyze the discourse of a large, public sex worker peer-support forum. Sanders et al. in *Internet Sex Work: Beyond the Gaze* quote a sex worker who describes online spaces as an “online water cooler.” The anonymized communication on the forum ultimately enables sex workers to support each other in previously less accessible ways (Sanders et al. 2018). At the same time the forum preserves the “break-room camaraderie” that is too often a casualty of atomizing gig economies (Watkins 2021).

Within the context of the digital water-cooler we study, there is no such thing as “too personal.” Post topics range from vaginal dryness to embarrassing sex moments. The self-censorship of inappropriate dialogue that may occur in other workplace settings is not the case on this forum. Not only are these discussions important for health and safety, but also, sex workers constantly deal with the taboos of sexuality, sex, and bodies (Almeida, Comber, and Balaam 2016; Gritner and Walsh 2020). Removing traditional workplace boundaries opens the door for forum members to seek advice about sensitive disclosures such as romantic relationships, abusive environments, medical conditions, and other socially-stigmatized workplace topics.

Our findings suggest that the crowdsourced nature of the forum accelerates the dissemination of information previously shared during in-person events. The forum in many ways takes the shape of a crowdsourced peer-education convention that transcends physical space, geographical borders, class, and other layers of privilege. For example, Jackson (2019) examines sex worker support networks at the 2010 Desire Alliance Conference. The event consisted of training for safer, more lucrative work: know-your-rights training for police encounters, ways to work with different clients (e.g., clients suffering from emotional or sexual trauma), and discussions of personal experiences like balancing sex work with parenting. The resources, conversations, and personal experiences shared at this peer-support conference are mirrored in the online forum. While online support may lack the organization of a structured convention (e.g., experts, panelists, activists), it offers advantages such as the ability to maintain anonymity, ability to include a wider variety of experiences and a wider audience, ability and willingness to disclose sensitive topics with reduced concern for stigmatization, and the creation of a lasting centralized repository of advice that can be easily searched.

This facilitation of information sharing beyond traditional workplace boundaries does not mean, however, that there is no consideration of digital safety nor that all information is freely shared. We observe a high degree of sensitivity toward digital safety among forum members, exemplified both in their focus on providing digital-safety advice to each other and their focus on safeguarding the sensitive information shared in the public forum. This emphasis on digital safety may be especially pronounced as our data collection took place in the wake of FOSTA-SESTA – legislation that aimed to reduce human trafficking by amending section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, but which legal and empirical analysis shows increased pressure on Internet platforms to censor discussion of sex-related topics (Blunt and Wolf

2020; Albert 2021).

Communal Learning in the Gig Economy

In the context of sex work, we find that community-based learning happens in the back-and-forth of comment threads where forum members engage in community sense-making; questions are answered, clarified, and contested; and valuable market data about rates, pricing, and payments are publicly distributed. Given that some kinds of information sharing surrounding sex work are directly criminalized (Blunt and Wolf 2020), sex workers are naturally skeptical of trusting others. Therefore, they rely on forums such as the one studied here as a safeguarded way of connecting with peers and gathering crucial information.

Our findings mirror prior research on gig work in that we observe significant discussion of pricing on this sex work forum. This finding differs from prior scholarship on sex work support and highlights the discrepancy between in-person and digital norms. Berg’s fieldwork highlights the “striking gap” between the “ease with which porn workers discuss issues most outsiders would think of as far more sensitive and many workers’ refusal to discuss money at all” (Berg 2021). On the online forum, we observed many forum members asking for and receiving frank information about pricing. It is possible this is due to differences in the type of workers in the forum – which may include but is not limited to porn workers – and/or that the breadth of geographic locations on the forum combined with the anonymity offered reduces fear of competition and barriers to sharing prices.

In contrast to conversations about pricing in other forms of gig-work, but not unlike other professions (e.g., models or athletes) where phenotypic descriptions of the human body can be indicators of their market, sex workers also often disclose phenotypic descriptions (race, ethnicity, body-type, height, hair color, bust size, etc.) as it informs the advice they receive (Moorman and Harrison 2016; Gritner and Walsh 2020). There is discrepancy between which posters feel the need to disclose this information: typically, it is providers who are not the “‘average’ sex worker...aka skinny and blonde,” as one forum member writes.

While there are similarities between our findings and existing knowledge in gig-work scholarship, the topics we observe in our analysis go beyond the typical “positive” or economically productive behavior observed in prior work on gig-work forum discourse to span both the personal and the professional (Wood, Lehdonvirta, and Graham 2018; Watkins 2021). Further, for sex workers on the forum, sense-making, information sharing, and moral support given in this forum is not just casual or make-more-money advice, but rather it is advice that can truly be the difference between life or death: forum members discuss how to screen for dangerous clients, protect others from a client who attacked them, avoid being harmed by law enforcement, and avoid digital censorship, as well as gain and maintain access to stable housing, banking, and social welfare.

Conclusion

This work explores in detail how online space can support a marginalized, stigmatized, digitally surveilled, and in some

cases criminalized, labor community. We note the similarities with other gig work forums: the frequent discussion of pricing, advertising strategy, and client management. Simultaneously, we highlight – in contrast to past findings on the use of online spaces by other gig workers – the breadth of topics discussed by the workers we observe, which both goes beyond the boundaries of the “professional” and directly replicates in-person events through which such information and support are commonly imparted. Further, we observe a profound community focus on safety and investment in safeguarding and preserving this hub of communication, information sharing, and peer support. We find that both moderators and community members take great care to safeguard information shared in this public space and that community members are faced with and prioritize high-stakes advice requests around housing instability, self-harm, and arrests.

Ethics Statement

Our work was approved by our institution’s ethics review board. Despite this approval, tension exists within the literature regarding the ethics of analyzing ‘public’ forum data and why, when, and how users may perceive public forum discussions as private (e.g., Proferes et al. 2021; Vitak, Shilton, and Ashktorab 2016; Eysenbach and Till 2001; Razi, Badillo-Urquiola, and Wisniewski 2020). In this work, we follow guidance from Cook, Ayers, and Horsch (2018) and Dym and Fiesler (2020) on preserving the platform’s anonymity and draw on the established framework from Eysenbach and Till (2001) to assess the ethics of our work.

Eysenbach and Till (2001) suggest three central aspects to evaluating the ‘private’ or ‘public’ nature of online sources. First is an assent of access to the forum: is registration necessary to view content or post? This specific forum is an ‘open’ forum and the social media platform does not require registration. Second, forum size; this forum had approximately 85,000 members at the time of data collection, which is between a medium- and large-sized forum for this platform. Third, Eysenbach and Till recommend assessing how members perceive the forum. It is difficult to gauge whether members perceive the forum as public or private. However, posts and comments often allude to the public nature of the content posted. For example, members warned each other not to post specific platform names in case law enforcement was monitoring the page and frequently suggested moving conversations out of public view to direct messages.

While our assessment along these three criteria suggests that forum members are aware of the public nature of the platform, to protect participants we omit usernames (Cook, Ayers, and Horsch 2018; Dym and Fiesler 2020), anonymize the platform and forum name, alter or paraphrase all quotes so they cannot be reverse-searched, and the names of social media sites, messaging applications, and other tools are intentionally removed from this paper to avoid any harmful repercussions to sex workers using those tools (Costanza-Chock 2020).

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