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**Article — Published Version**

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Gender, Work & Organization

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*Suggested Citation:* Schuchmann, Swana (2025) : Elites of the Whorearchy - OnlyFans Creators' Power, Identity and Sex Work Stigma Negotiation, Gender, Work & Organization, ISSN 1468-0432, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 32, Iss. 6, pp. 2308-2321, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70010>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/330198>

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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Elites of the *Whorearchy*—OnlyFans Creators' Power, Identity and Sex Work Stigma Negotiation

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the rapid expansion of the digital sex industry, little is known about how digital sex workers navigate identity and stigma, particularly in the German context. This study examines how German female OnlyFans creators (aged 21–28) construct and maintain positive social identities amid societal stigma and hierarchical divisions within the sex work industry. Drawing on five semi-structured interviews and applying Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]) and stigma management strategies in *dirty work* (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), the findings reveal four key strategies: (1) social buffer networks, (2) *passing* and *strategic ambiguity* to conceal one's profession, (3) *reframing* work in alignment with personal values, and (4) *social weighting* (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). This study extends the dirty work framework and *whorearchy* (see Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022) concept to digital sex work, illustrating how platform affordances, *sex work mainstreaming* (Bretns and Sanders 2010), and the rise of supplementary erotic gig labor in neoliberal capitalism shape stigma management strategies and identity construction.

## 1 | Introduction

Sex work has long been the subject of polarized debate, oscillating between narratives of exploitation and empowerment. Abolitionist perspectives frame it as a reinforcement of patriarchal oppression, positioning sex workers as both victims (Dworkin 1989; Pateman 1988; Srinivasan 2022; Beauvoir et al. 1949; Butler 1990) and betrayers of feminist principles (Herz 2005; Sanders et al. 2016). Weitzer (2017) observes that dominant media portrayals of sex work tend to emphasize abuse and coercion, thereby reinforcing a pathologizing view of the industry. In Germany, this stigma is reflected in public opinion, with only 47% of the population viewing sex work as a legitimate profession (Langenbach et al. 2023).

Yet, the industry's heterogeneity means that different types of sex work carry distinct stigma attachments, prompting the use

of tailored stigma management strategies (see Daniel et al. 2023; Weitzer 2010). Against this backdrop, this study explores how OnlyFans creators navigate and manage stigma, drawing on their own experiences and narratives.

### 1.1 | OnlyFans and the Digitalization of Sex Work

Technological advancements have reshaped sex work, enabling independent digital *sextrepreneurs* to engage in erotic labor on their own terms (Attwood 2011; Henry and Farvid 2017; Rand 2019). Trends toward amateurization and decentralization (Hardy 2008; Saunders 2019; Cardoso and Scarcelli 2021), for example, through subscription-based adult content models (Sanchez 2022; Safaei 2021) and interactive live-streaming (Hamilton et al. 2022; Litam et al. 2022) have expanded the industry.<sup>1</sup> These trends facilitate self-employment and *sex work*

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*mainstreaming*<sup>2</sup> (Bretns and Sanders 2010), attracting individuals who may have previously dismissed in-person sex work (Jones 2015; Sanchez 2022; Hamilton et al. 2022; Cunningham and Kendall 2011).

OnlyFans capitalizes on these trends and presents a glamorized model of sex work, profiting from celebrity endorsements and high social media visibility (Litam et al. 2022; Uttarapong et al. 2022; Hamilton et al. 2022) while strategically avoiding explicit branding as an adult entertainment platform (Safae 2021; Rouse and Salter 2021). Instead, (OnlyFans 2024, 1) markets itself as a ‘revolutionizing force’ within the creator economy, “empowering creators to [...] express themselves freely”. Creators retain control over their content, pricing, and revenue streams (such as pay-per-view features) while OnlyFans takes a 20% commission on monthly subscription fees—similar to other gig economy platforms (Uttarapong et al. 2022; Sanchez 2022; Hamilton et al. 2022; Döring 2008; Safae 2021; Litam et al. 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated OnlyFans’ growth<sup>3</sup>—surpassing 1.5 million creators and 150 million registered fans by 2023 (OnlyFans 2023), underscoring its relevance as a contemporary research subject.

## 1.2 | The German Context

Germany presents a compelling case for studying digital sex work, given its legal recognition of in-person sex work under the “Prostitutionsschutzgesetz” (*ProstSchG*) (Czarnecki et al. 2014; Schmitter 2013), contrasted with the absence of explicit protections for online sex workers. Although Germany has a comparatively liberal stance on sex work (Megias et al. 2024)—with high engagement in digital erotic consumption (Röttgerkamp 2018)—the digital sector remains legally ambiguous, leaving creators vulnerable to (transnational) restrictive platform policies (e.g., FOSTA-SESTA, see Beebe 2022; Jones 2022) and social stigma. The European Parliament’s endorsement of the *Nordic Model* has further intensified debates among German policymakers (Hoffmann et al. 2022)—largely ignoring the voices of sex worker collectives (Berufsverband erotische und sexuelle Dienstleistungen e.V. (BesD) 2024; Weitzer 2005) and evidence showing restrictive policies exacerbate economic precarity and stigma (Woodward et al. 2004; Sanders 2005; Shrage 1994).

## 1.3 | Research Gaps and Contribution

Despite OnlyFans’ popularity, research on digital sex work overall (Jones 2015) and OnlyFans creators in particular (Hamilton et al. 2022) remains limited—especially in Germany (see Steffan et al. 2015). Prior to this study’s commencement in February 2023, no empirical work existed on the German OnlyFans market. Although a growing body of research recognizes the benefits of digital sex work and its correlating rise in self-employment—including increased autonomy and flexibility (Ray 2007; Grov and Smith 2014; Döring 2008; Safae 2021;

Bernstein 2007; Njeim 2021), safety (Lee-Gonyea et al. 2009; Hamilton et al. 2022; Litam et al. 2022; Jones 2015; Sanchez 2022; Ford 2022), and inclusivity (Cornell 2000; Bretns and Sanders 2010; Banerjee and Sathyanarayana Rao 2021)—little is known about how digital sex workers negotiate stigma in a platform-mediated labor market.

This study addresses these gaps by applying Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]; Ashforth and Mael 1989), stigma management in *dirty work* occupations (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), and Toubiana and Ruebottom’s (2022) *whorearchy* framework to digital sex work, asking:

1. How do OnlyFans creators construct and maintain positive social identities amid societal stigma and power hierarchies within the sex work industry?
2. What strategies do they employ to resist or challenge stigma?

To contextualize these questions, the paper defines sex work terminology before reviewing stigma management research. The methodology and findings follow. Given persistent gender disparities in sex work (Saxena et al. 2001)—where men primarily consume erotic services while approximately 90% of sex workers identify as female (Henry and Farvid 2017; Litam et al. 2022; European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion among Migrant Sex Workers (TAMPEP) 2009)—this study focuses exclusively on individuals identifying as women.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 | Sex Work Terminology

The conceptualization of sex work remains subject to ongoing negotiations among practitioners, authorities, and advocacy groups (Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022). Leigh (1998) introduced the term *sex work* to challenge stigma and reframe it as legitimate labor within the service sector, emphasizing the skills required to fulfill physical, social, and emotional needs—paralleling other bodywork and service occupations (Sanchez 2022; Döring 2014; Weitzer 2009). Sex work functions as an umbrella term encompassing various forms of paid erotic labor, including stripping, webcamming, erotic online content creation, and a range of interactive sexual services (Berufsverband erotische und sexuelle Dienstleistungen e.V. (BesD) 2015; Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022; Banerjee and Sathyanarayana Rao 2021; Jones 2015; Myketiak 2015; Waskul et al. 2000). The term also challenges masculinist and heteronormative frameworks that prioritize penetration as the defining feature of sex industry services (Mavin and Grandy 2013).

For this study, sex work is defined as consensual remunerated erotic labor (Berufsverband erotische und sexuelle Dienstleistungen e.V. (BesD) 2015) among legal adults (Gerheim 2020), facilitated through digital technologies. Forms of non-consensual sexual exploitation, such as sex trafficking, fall outside the scope of this study and require dedicated investigation.

### 3 | Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 | Stigma and *Dirty Work*

Stigma, as defined by (Goffman 1963, 13f), refers to attributes that are “deeply discrediting” to groups or individuals within society. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]; Tajfel 1982) posits that individuals derive their self-concept from group affiliations and seek favorable comparisons between in-groups and out-groups to maintain a positive identity (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]; Tajfel 1982). Sex work is categorized as a *dirty work* occupation, due to its association with tasks that are “physically, socially or morally” tainted and considered “a symbol of degradation” (Hughes 1958, 122). Benoit et al. (2014) argue that sex work bears one of the most severe and persistent forms of occupational stigma. Even as digital sex work gains mainstream visibility, its practitioners continue to face judgment and social exclusion (Benoit et al. 2017; Steffan et al. 2015), making stigma management strategies essential for mitigating negative perceptions and preserving self-worth (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999).

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) outline several strategies through which individuals in stigmatized occupations construct and maintain positive social identities. These include *reframing*, *social weighting*, and *role distancing*. *Reframing* involves redefining the occupation in more socially acceptable or neutral terms (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). For example, digital sex workers may challenge victimization narratives and instead emphasize entrepreneurship and financial autonomy.

The concept of *social weighting*, formulated by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) and informed by Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986] work on in-group/out-group dynamics, describes how individuals elevate their in-group by contrasting it with a perceived inferior yet similar out-group—onto which stigma is displaced (Mavin and Grandy 2013). This process entails the selective recall of negative stereotypes and the rationalization of social hierarchies (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Toubiana and Ruebottom (2022) apply the concept of *social weighting* to the sex work industry. In their six-year qualitative study of 71 Canadian sex workers, they identify three intersecting stigma dimensions along which sex workers are both ranked and rank one another: physical, socio-economic, and moral. *Physical stigma* increases with the degree of nudity and bodily proximity to clients, peaking in full-service sex work. *Socioeconomic stigma* reflects income, education, and class. *Moral stigma* privileges those performing sex work for a ‘higher purpose’, such as empowerment, enjoyment, or artistic reasons, over those driven by financial necessity. As a result, cam workers typically face less stigma than full-service escorts, and ‘classy’ burlesque dancers less than strippers (see Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022; Weitzer 2010; Daniel et al. 2023). OnlyFans creators, accordingly, may seek to position themselves near the top of the *whorearchy* by distinguishing their work along these three dimensions.

A third strategy, *role distancing*, involves separating one’s personal identity from the stigmatized occupational role (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Closely related are concepts of *role buffering*

and *compartmentalization* (Ashforth and Mael 1989), which describe the contextual separation of competing role demands (e.g., professional vs. family life) to reduce cognitive dissonance and maintain functionality across roles. For OnlyFans creators, these “double standards” (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 35) may be exacerbated. As digital creators are expected to signal availability and intimacy by sharing private insights (Safaei 2021; Hamilton et al. 2022; Laurin 2019; Marwick 2013), the boundary between public and private selves may become difficult to uphold. Moreover, in a digitized *panoptic society* (Foucault 1995), where visibility is both a prerequisite for economic success and a source of stigma (Stahl and Yang 2024), questions arise about how identity management and role conflict manifest within platform-mediated labor contexts.

Although Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) framework provides a strong foundation for understanding stigma management, broader stigma literature suggests additional strategies. One such strategy is *passing*—the concealment of stigmatized attributes to avoid discrimination (Goffman 1963). The pervasive social and legal stigmatization of sex work (Brewis and Linstead 2000; Wege 2021; Schmitter 2013) compels many sex workers to lead “double lives” (Benoit et al. 2017; Steffan et al. 2015) and hide their professions out of fear of social rejection or professional repercussions (Benoit et al. 2014; Ford 2022; Stutz et al. 2024). Because OnlyFans content is paywalled and produced from home, creators may be able to *pass*—at least partially—in social situations.

Lastly, this article uses the term *social buffering* to describe peer-based coping strategies observed throughout the literature. In-group solidarity and peer networks can serve as protective mechanisms against prejudice, stigma, and exclusion (Goffman 1963; Ford 2022; Benoit et al. 2014; Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022; McCracken and Brooks-Gordon 2021). Among digital sex workers, such collective practices—ranging from emotional support to knowledge sharing and professional collaboration—are widely documented (see studies by Hamilton et al. 2022; Jones 2015; Laurin 2019; Safaei 2021; Litam et al. 2022; Uttaraopong et al. 2022). These communities also hold the potential to drive collective empowerment and societal change, particularly in combating sex work stigma (Henry and Farvid 2017; Jones 2015).

#### 3.2 | Extending Stigma Management to Digital Sex Work

Although stigma management in *dirty work* has been well theorized, its application to digital platform-mediated labor remains underexplored. The platform economy introduces unique conditions: creators must balance hypervisibility and privacy, managing their personal brand while minimizing reputational risk (see e.g., Stahl and Yang 2024). Unlike traditional sex work, which often involves localized physical interactions with clients, OnlyFans creators operate in a globalized, digitally archived, and highly commodified environment, where content permanence and platform policies further complicate stigma management.

This study examines how OnlyFans creators navigate occupational stigma and construct positive identities at the intersection of sex work and digital platform economies.

## 4 | Methodology

This study employs semi-structured questionnaire-based interviews with five female OnlyFans creators residing in Germany (see Table 1). Given the exploratory nature of the research and the scarcity of empirical studies on OnlyFans—particularly in Germany—this method was chosen for its balance between standardization and adaptability (see Guest et al. 2013). The structured format ensured consistency and comparability in question wording and sequence while retaining the flexibility to explore emergent themes and enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences.

### 4.1 | Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were selected based on defined criteria: they self-identified as women, were active on OnlyFans for approximately one year (post-2019, coinciding with the pandemic-induced platform growth), resided in Germany, and catered primarily to a male audience. These criteria ensured a degree of comparability and a minimum level of platform experience. Eligibility was verified through profile details and initial personal contact.

Recruitment was conducted via Instagram using hashtags such as #OnlyFansGermany. A snowball sampling strategy expanded outreach by reviewing the ‘following’ lists of initial candidates to identify additional potential participants. Between March 17 and April 5, 2023, over 200 female-presenting OnlyFans creators were contacted. Of those, 24 replied, but due to scheduling conflicts and hesitancy about participating in academic research—possibly influenced by the researcher’s ‘outsider’ status to the sex work community (see Neville 2022)—only seven initially expressed interest. After preliminary video calls to build trust and explain the study in detail, five creators ultimately agreed to participate.

## 4.2 | Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in April 2023 via Skype, each lasting approximately 60 min. Entry questions were designed to establish rapport before transitioning to more sensitive topics. Participants responded to open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed reflections on both their personal and professional experiences. These included their motivations for joining the platform, any prior involvement with explicit content creation, and the evolution of their occupational identity as OnlyFans creators. Further questions explored self-perception and self-presentation, the role of peer networks and collaborations with other sex workers, as well as the impact of platform structures on their labor and audience interaction. Participants also discussed their perceptions of social acceptance, experiences of stigmatization in both online and offline settings, their openness about their profession across various social contexts, and the influence of external judgment on their identity construction. Finally, they reflected on the emotional, financial, and social consequences of their work on OnlyFans.

To contextualize participant profiles, supplementary data—such as follower counts, subscription fees, and content volume—was collected on June 20, 2023 (see Table 1). To ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, with any personally identifiable information and social media handles removed during transcription.

### 4.3 | Coding and Data Analysis

Interview recordings were manually transcribed, anonymized, and translated into English. Transcripts were read multiple times to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data. A qualitative content analysis approach (Mayring 2014) was employed, combining deductive coding—derived from the interview guide and theoretical frameworks—with inductive coding, aimed at capturing themes emerging from participants’ narratives. This method follows an abductive logic (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), which iteratively integrates empirical data with theoretical concepts and supports reflexive conceptual refinement.

TABLE 1 | Participants.

Creator	Anna	Sarah	Lisa	Julia	Marie
Age	25	28	25	21	24
Months active on OnlyFans at time of interview	9	11	24	24+	24
Full-time or part-time in sex work (considering all platforms together) at time of interview	Part-time	Part-time	Part-time	Full-time	Full-time
OnlyFans likes	28k	5,6k	2,9k	48,6k	1,6k
Number of pictures available to fans	173	306	209	1,2k	1,3k
Number of videos available to fans	66	94	43	65	208
Number of other platforms used	4	2	0	3	5
Monthly subscription fee per user	16,24 USD	10,50 USD	10,00 USD	10,00 USD	10,00 USD
Additional free OnlyFans profile for marketing available to potential customers	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

The full coding process began with over 70 detailed subcodes, reflecting the broader study's exploration of multiple facets of OnlyFans creators' experiences.<sup>5</sup> As this article focuses specifically on identity construction and stigma negotiation, relevant subcodes were grouped into thematic clusters, leading to the identification of four key stigma management strategies, which structure the findings. A simplified overview is presented in Figure 1.

Thematic saturation was assessed throughout the coding process. In line with Guest et al. (2006), who found that 94% of high-frequency codes in homogenous samples typically emerge within the first six interviews, the five interviews in this study—marked by strong thematic convergence and demographic similarity—generated recurring patterns early on. No new codes or themes relevant to the article's analytical focus emerged in the fifth interview, supporting the adequacy of the sample for the study's interpretive aims.

#### 4.4 | Research Ethics and Trustworthiness

The study adhered to ethical standards, confidentiality protocols, and data protection measures, and received ethical clearance from a faculty member affiliated with the Social Sciences Ethics Board prior to participant recruitment. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, both verbally and in

writing, with assurances that they could withdraw at any time or decline to answer specific questions.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, steps were taken to mitigate social desirability bias (Dalal and Hakel 2016), whereby participants might—consciously or unconsciously—present themselves in a more favorable light. Open-ended questioning and anonymity encouraged reflexive engagement and candid responses, and self-representation biases were critically examined throughout the analysis.

Although the sample size limits generalizability, the study prioritizes depth over breadth, offering nuanced insights into the lived experiences of a specific, under-researched group. Future research should aim to expand the participant pool to capture greater racial, cultural, gender, and class diversity, attending to intersectional dimensions of digital sex work and stigma, as further discussed in the Limitations section.

#### 5 | Findings

##### 5.1 | Strategy 1: Social Buffer Groups

Consistent with prior research on in-group solidarity among OnlyFans creators (Uttarapong et al. 2022; Safaee 2021; Litam et al. 2022), all participants actively engaged in peer support

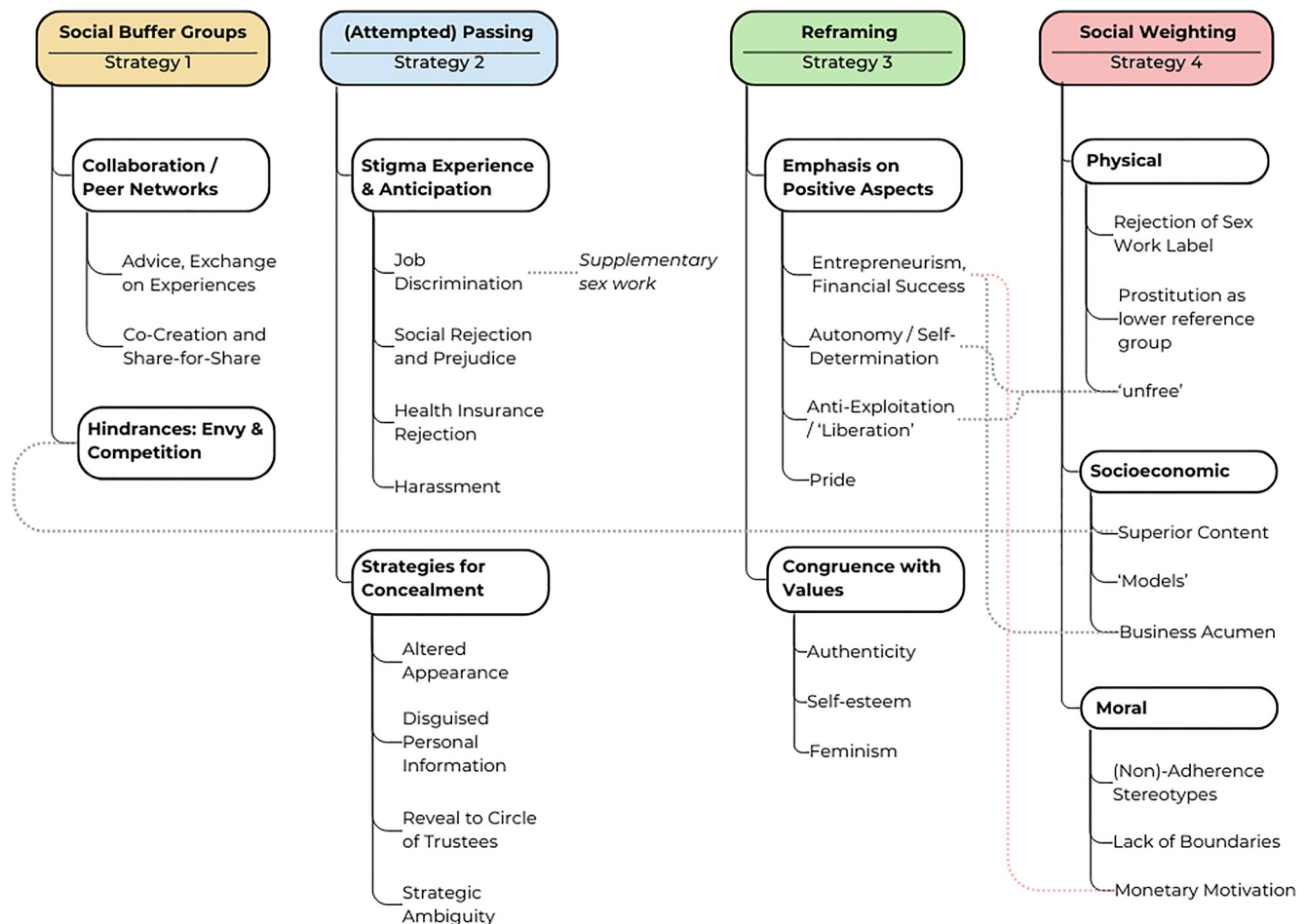


FIGURE 1 | Coding overview. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

networks to exchange advice on platform functionalities and social media algorithms, promote each other's content, and collaborate on (joint) content production. Telegram groups were commonly used for this purpose and deemed very valuable in the formation of connections with like-minded individuals. Anna emphasized the significance of these networks, describing that members "share everything (...) like best friends".

These peer groups served both as business resources and as *social buffers* against stigma. However, participants also reported the absence of a structured support network. It is worth noting that there is no organized lobby or advocacy group representing (German) OnlyFans creators. Although virtual interactions among OnlyFans creators were common, in-person meetings were rare, and there was no mention of exchange with other non-OnlyFans sex workers. Moreover, participants highlighted the competitive and often volatile nature of these networks. Sarah described some members as "bitchy" due to fears that "you take away the customers," while Lisa noted that competition was so intense that "you need a thick skin."

[There is] super big competition - so everyone is somehow afraid that the other person will take something away from you. So it's extremely difficult to find such collaborations.

(Marie)

Failed collaborations sometimes even escalated into legal disputes. Marie, drawing from personal experience, recounted a case in which a collaborator demanded the removal of a video after it disproportionately increased one party's visibility and success.

Anna reinforced this perspective, explaining that the overall structure of peer networks remained "very shaky":

There is also a lot of competition and envy. [...] You have to be careful. Some try to make you look bad in order to be more successful themselves.

(Anna)

Thus, while all participants benefited from peer networks, they also remained cautious of interpersonal conflicts. It is worth noting that participants often described other OnlyFans creators as lacking professionalism, while at the same time disparaging other forms of sex work—a phenomenon explored further in Strategy 4.

## 5.2 | Strategy 2: *Passing and Strategic Ambiguity*

All participants reported experiencing stigmatization and described the social acceptance of their work as either minimal or entirely lacking. Julia mentions:

I think there is a lot of discrimination. [...] I rarely hear encouragement or anything positive.

(Julia)

All participants described experiences of doxing, harassment, and threats on social media. Creators disguised personal details such as name, age, family status, and residence, and some altered their appearance online (e.g., by wearing wigs) as a risk management strategy.

Participants also voiced concerns about long-term reputational risks stemming from the permanence of digital content and the lack of effective safeguards against piracy or unauthorized distribution. They feared negative repercussions on their personal and professional lives. This was exacerbated by *content recycling*—a strategy well-documented in digital sex work (Hamilton et al. 2022) and the gig economy (Rosenblat 2018) to diversify revenue streams—and by the resulting visibility across multiple platforms (e.g., BestFans, MYM, 4Based, Fansly). Lisa states:

If the wrong person discovers my profile, I will have consequences in my 'real life'. I also know that - depending on what position I'm aiming for in my later working life—this can be a stumbling block for me [...] The stigma is still very big in society.

(Lisa)

Julia recounted losing a job offer after an employer discovered her OnlyFans account:

It was a slap in the face and it was very, very discriminatory, I think. Because I didn't see any logical reason why they shouldn't take me.

(Julia)

The lack of explicit protections for digital sex workers in Germany left participants vulnerable to both social and institutional discrimination. While Julia reported job rejections, Marie described repeated denials from health insurance providers, ultimately leaving her unable to obtain German coverage. Marie also recounted how her coworkers had attempted to get her husband—who acts as her cameraman—fired from his job, and expressed fears that her child might face bullying if Marie's profession were revealed. These accounts underscore the urgent need for targeted research into the legal and institutional challenges faced by digital sex workers in Germany, and the necessity of enforceable protections that reflect the realities of platform-mediated erotic labor. The findings also illustrate the ripple effects of stigma—what Goffman (1963) calls *stigma by association*. Past experiences and anticipated stigma, along with concerns about its impact on loved ones, contributed to participants' decisions to conceal their profession.

I must hide my job. I go to kindergarten and don't tell them what I do for work [...] Just to protect my child, because [my job] is not respected in society.

(Marie)

Although financial rewards were the primary motivation for joining OnlyFans, all participants initially viewed it as a side hustle. By the time of the interviews, Julia and Marie had transitioned to full-time content creation, and Anna anticipated

making the shift soon. Particularly creators with other jobs took careful measures to prevent their employers, colleagues, or institutions (e.g., universities, childcare facilities) from discovering their OnlyFans work. Lisa described being constantly vigilant about “who you are talking to”:

Depending on the kind of environment you’re in, you might not want to mention what you do.

(Lisa)

At work, [...] I’m employed, of course I won’t say anything! And I also hope that [my boss] doesn’t find out, somehow.

(Sarah)

I didn’t ever mention it to my boss (...), it’s actually none of their business.

(Julia)

Participants also employed what I call *strategic ambiguity*—being vague about one’s occupation or presenting aspects of it that are more socially acceptable—as a strategy for passing. Julia usually states she does “social media”, and Marie described:

In my private life, I always disguise it a bit and say ‘I do online marketing’ and stuff like that.

(Marie)

Stigma also influenced creators’ personal relationships. When creators spoke to family members and friends about their work, reactions ranged from curiosity and concern to outright rejection. Worried family members were a reoccurring theme: They frequently repeated narratives of exploitation in sex work, voiced fears about social descent, negative impacts on future career prospects, and challenges in forming romantic partnerships. Anna remembers:

My mother said if I did it just for the money, she would think it was really bad. [...] My aunt, for example... For her, this is exploitation and a very red flag. [...] [She said] she tried to teach me good stats and it didn’t seem to do any good... like I’m just this ‘bad job’ and nothing else. Like I’ve failed or something.

(Anna)

Marie experienced social isolation:

Many friends have turned away from me. [...] There is a lot of opposition to the work I do in general.

(Marie)

Even though some creators wished to share their professional success more openly, fear of stigmatization prevented them from doing so (for similar findings, see Daniel et al. 2023). Anna stated, “I don’t know exactly how to get it out there.” As a result, most creators (Anna, Sarah, Julia, and Marie) disclosed their OnlyFans profession only to close friends and, occasionally, to family members:

I’m just telling that to people I trust. [...] When I become closer with someone, I tell them, too—but not really to anyone else.

(Anna)

Participants’ stigma consciousness reflects what Goffman (1963) described as *selective disclosure*—the careful management of visibility and identity. Consistent with Daniel et al. (2023), disclosure was rarely a binary choice but highly context-dependent. *Passing* (Goffman 1963), identified in previous research as a common strategy among sex workers (see Benoit et al. 2014; Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022; Ford 2022), was particularly pronounced in square work contexts—for example, hiding the ‘side hustle’ from employers. *Strategic ambiguity*—sharing fragments of one’s occupational identity and task repertoire (e.g., online marketing) while withholding full disclosure—was more common in institutional contexts, such as in tax declarations, business registration, and health insurance applications, as well as in interactions with friends and family. These findings underscore how digital sex workers remain in a constant state of vigilance: although OnlyFans offers affordances such as paywalls and pseudonymity that facilitate *passing*, they do not fully protect creators from the social risks of stigma or the structural barriers embedded in institutional systems.

### 5.3 | Strategy 3: Reframing Work in Alignment With Personal Values

Despite facing rejection and stigma, all participants maintained a predominantly positive view of their work. Participants rejected narratives of exploitation. Anna stated, “Exploitation doesn’t fit at all. Nobody forces you to do that”. Sarah asserts, “It’s definitely not exploitation,” and refers to her motivation to engage in OnlyFans as a “liberating” choice precisely to avoid “being exploited” in a traditional 9-to-5. Anna, who transitioned to full-time work on OnlyFans shortly after the interview, described her work as a “ticket to freedom.” She resented how prejudiced views of sex work shaped perceptions of her:

I don’t think these people understand that I do this because I want to, because I stand behind it, because I enjoy it [...] I don’t understand what anyone could have against that!

(Anna)

Julia similarly expressed frustration at questions that, to her, revealed widespread misconceptions about her work:

‘How do you cope with selling your body?’ And I said: I’ve never sold my body! (...) I offer a service: pictures and videos, which I produce the way I want. Requests can be expressed, but I can also deny them (...) I don’t have to do everything men want me to do.

(Julia)

Anna mentions feminism as a pillar of her work, describing it as an effort to “pass on valuable content” and educate men about

female sexuality. In doing so, she positions herself not primarily as a sex worker, but as a feminist educator. Julia similarly frames her work as a self-determined endeavor aligned with her feminist values:

I personally find my work feminist because I can do exactly what I want!

(Julia)

Participants consistently emphasized the enjoyment and “fun” they derived from their work, including content creation and fan engagement. All creators expressed pride in their work—particularly Sarah, Lisa, and Marie took pride in their entrepreneurial skills and monetary rewards of running a self-sufficient business. Although monetary incentives were the primary reason for joining OnlyFans, participants framed these not as signs of necessity, but as strategic, autonomous choices reflecting entrepreneurial savvy. This aligns with Stahl and Yang’s (2024) research on digital sex work requiring and rewarding entrepreneurial skills, findings from Deutsche (2024) that sex work is primarily understood by practitioners as labor and a resource to make a living, and study findings by Huisman and Nelen (2014) indicating that up to 95% of sex workers consider themselves independent entrepreneurs.

This sentiment reflects a broader pattern of self-efficacy, autonomy, and self-determination observed across all interviews—benefits commonly associated with digital sex work (Hamilton et al. 2022; Uttarapong et al. 2022).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Anna, Sarah, Lisa, Julia, and Marie all mentioned acts of self-celebration, increased self-confidence, and body acceptance through their work, echoing findings by Weitzer (2005). Monetizing their *erotic capital* (Illouz 2011; Hakim 2010) independently gave respondents a sense of power and supported other motivators such as public self-realization, free expression, and sexual experimentation, all of which were also identified as the third most common motivator in a qualitative study by Hamilton et al. (2022) with 22 interviewed OnlyFans creators.

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the creators’ emphasis on authenticity. All participants underscored the close alignment between their professional and personal identities. Marie affirmed, “I don’t pretend,” while Julia elaborated:

Authenticity is very important to me. [...] That’s still my real personality. (...) and that was important to me from the beginning, I didn’t want to play a role [...] I think it’s really important to be completely honest and authentic in videos like this, and just generally, to stick to reality.

(Julia)

I want to be me [...] I don’t want to have to be a different person. And I think it’s important that you can stand by the person you’re showing [on OnlyFans].

(Lisa)

Participants’ emphasis on authenticity supports Bernstein’s (2007) notion of *bounded authenticity* and Abel’s (2011)

observation that personal traits often become professional tools in sex work, curated in marketable versions of themselves (Dean 2005). As McCracken and Brooks-Gordon (2021) assert, presenting authentic, yet “extended” versions of oneself allows workers to mitigate depersonalization while preserving a sense of self (see also Grandey 2000).

Overall, these findings support Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) framework of *reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing*, wherein individuals in stigmatized professions emphasize positive aspects of their work to counteract external and internalized stigma. In the case of OnlyFans creators, financial independence, entrepreneurial success, and authenticity emerged as key *reframing* mechanisms. It is worth noting that this strategy extended beyond professional self-concept, with some participants reinterpreting rejection from family and friends as a filtering mechanism that revealed who truly supported them.

## 5.4 | Strategy 4: Social Weighting

Lisa, Julia, and Marie cited the media popularity and normalization of online sex work as motivating factors to join the platform. Anna even described OnlyFans as part of the “zeitgeist” of her generation, thus confirming Brents and Sanders’ (2010) observation of *sex work mainstreaming*.

Creators called for more social acceptance of their work:

I expect society to simply not have any prejudices, no matter what a person does. [...] Just loosen up a bit! Because everybody fucks.

(Sarah)

It’s a job like any other. There’s nothing to complain or criticize about. You don’t have to do this yourself if you don’t want to—but let the others live in peace!

(Lisa)

Anna and Julia situated stigmatizing attitudes toward their work within broader patriarchal structures, highlighting a gendered double standard:

Women who live out their sexuality independently are despised for it.

(Anna)

When a woman does that, she’s instantly put into the ‘you’re cheap’, ‘you’re selling yourself’ box. I think there’s still a long way to go.

(Julia)

Yet, participants showed a notable lack of solidarity with other sex work professions and individuals, thereby reinforcing hierarchical distinctions within the sex industry. Although Sarah, Julia, and Marie explicitly acknowledged their profession as sex work, Anna rejected the label entirely. Anna imagined “sex work more as something where you give even more of yourself”, contrasting OnlyFans with prostitution where “people are

forced more". She thereby reproduced the very same exploitation narrative she earlier criticized.

Sarah equated deeper involvement in sex work with a social descent and expressed:

When I was called 'hooker' and 'whore', I had a phase when I looked at my [OnlyFans] content and thought: 'Yeah, it's slutty'. Now I can laugh about it, but I was really emotionally hurt by it.

(Sarah, original emphases)

Sarah deflected these interpreted insults by asserting that she does not engage in activities associated with prostitution, particularly paid sexual intercourse. Similarly, Marie claims:

One should be more happy that men visit such platforms [like OnlyFans] instead of... I don't know... instead of letting themselves go and going to the nearest prostitute.

(Marie)

Another mechanism the creators employed to distance themselves from *physical stigma* (see Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022) was the linguistic choice to refer to themselves as "models". This alignment with the beauty and fashion industry as well as the digital mediation of intimacy allowed participants to curate an aesthetized and 'sanitized' version of erotic labor against the dirty work backdrop, marked by solo performances and collaboration with peers of similar socioeconomic and moral 'prestige'.

But participants not only distinguished themselves from full-service sex workers—they also positioned themselves as superior to fellow OnlyFans colleagues who, in their view, conformed to sex work stereotypes, lacked personal boundaries, and/or offered lower-priced services:

Many actresses do cater to negative prejudices [...] I want to clearly (...) distance myself from (...) some erotic actresses [as they] have no limits. For them, really, the money comes first. They do everything.

(Julia)

In conclusion, while *physical stigma* was more pronounced in downward comparisons to offline sex workers (e.g., prostitutes), moral gatekeeping functioned as a means of distancing oneself from perceived deficiencies in the socioeconomic and moral standards of other creators. These standards acted as proxies for self-worth and respectability—or the perceived lack thereof. This illustrates how multiple stigma dimensions intersect to reinforce internal hierarchies.

## 6 | Discussion

This study explores how German OnlyFans creators navigate societal stigma and hierarchical divisions within the sex work industry. Using the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]; Ashforth and Mael 1989) and stigma

management strategies from the *dirty work* framework (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), the findings highlight four key strategies: (1) *social buffering*, (2) *passing* and *strategic ambiguity*, (3) *reframing* the work in alignment with personal values, and (4) *social weighting* (Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022; Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), deployed in relation to both other OnlyFans creators and sex workers more broadly.

### 6.1 | Stigma Reproduction and Elite Positioning

Where previous research on *dirty work* occupations typically posits a binary between stigmatizers (outsiders) and social buffers (insiders) (Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022), this study shows that digital erotic content creators are not merely recipients of stigma but also active (re)producers of it. Participants engaged in strategies of *social weighting* and *reframing*, emphasizing morally and socioeconomically valorized aspects of their work—such as (feminist) self-determination, financial autonomy, personal enjoyment, creative freedom, boundary-setting, and authenticity. These qualities were framed not only as personally meaningful but as markers of superiority, used to distinguish their labor from more stigmatized forms of sex work and from peers perceived as morally compromised. Although such distinctions may have helped participants avoid *stigma by association* (Goffman 1963) through distancing from less privileged workers, they arguably intensify the latter's vulnerability to (peer) exclusion and social isolation. As noted by Waskul et al. (2000) and Toubiana and Ruebottom (2022), such distinctions contribute to the delegitimization of certain forms of sex work and reinforce patriarchal control over which forms of female sexuality and labor are deemed legitimate or respectable (see Hakim 2010).

It is worth noting that upward comparisons—contrary to prior research identifying both upward and downward comparisons in stigma management (Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022)—were absent. This suggests that participants positioned themselves at the apex of the *whorearchy*—a dynamic captured in this article's title, *Elites of the whorearchy*, and a key contribution of this analysis.

This elite positioning, however, was likely tied to further intersecting privileges: participants were young, White, cis-gender, and normatively attractive women with digital literacy. These characteristics also conferred an advantaged position within the gendered, racialized, and classed stratification of platformed eroticism (see McMillan Cottom 2020; Rand and Stegeman 2023; Glover 2017; Haywood 2022; McGarry and Kondratáitė 2025), enabling them to navigate the *whorearchy* and the broader terrain of erotic gig labor in ways unavailable to more economically or socially marginalized creators.

### 6.2 | The Role of Platform Capitalism

This study finds weak occupational identification: Few participants embraced the label "sex worker," instead opting for individualized and more socially acceptable titles such as "model" or "actress". According to Social Identity Theory, however, strong group identification is central to effective *social*

*buffering* (Ashforth and Mael 1989)—the lack thereof may heighten stigma vulnerability.

Although peer support existed, it was largely homophobic, limited to interactions with similarly privileged creators in micro-communities (see also Rand and Stegeman 2023). Interaction with sex workers outside this niche was notably absent.

Both the fragmentation of OnlyFans creators and digital sex workers more broadly may be understood through the lens of identity work in gig labor. Neoliberal platform capitalism encourages personal branding and individual responsibility for success (Rosenblat 2018; Marwick 2013) while discouraging collective organizing and solidarity (Kalleberg and Hewison 2012; Ravenelle 2019; Schor 2020). Amid the creator economy's broader competition and envy, these dynamics contribute to the fragility of OnlyFans peer networks.

Even though participants shared critiques of low social acceptance of their work and expressed desires for societal change, there was a notable absence of initiative to form or join advocacy groups. Instead, participants sometimes enacted stigma management as a form of self-branding that resembled the “pick-me” girl trope—seeking (male) validation by presenting themselves as (morally or professionally) superior to other women creators. This tendency to cast other women as threats rather than allies reflects neoliberal and patriarchal narratives that reward (female) competition while eroding solidarity—ultimately reinforcing the very structures that marginalize and divide female sex workers.

This suggests that reduced capacities for *social buffering* and the observed reinforcement of sex work stratification may stem from both weak occupational identification and from structural features of gigified erotic labor itself.

## 7 | Conclusion

This study examined how German OnlyFans creators navigating stigma and hierarchical divisions within the sex industry, expanding the concept of the *whorearchy* to the context of platform labor. Applying the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]; Ashforth and Mael 1989) and stigma management frameworks in *dirty work* (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022), the study illustrated how creators engage in *social buffering*, *passing* and *strategic ambiguity*, *reframing*, and *social weighting* strategies.

The study contributes to scholarship on digital sex work and intra-occupational stigma. It suggests that the *mainstreaming* (Brents and Sanders 2010; Ford 2022) and platformization of sex work do not resolve stigma but, influenced by gig logics that disincite solidarity, shift it onto more marginalized groups (Grant 2014), reinforcing intra-occupational stratification.

## 8 | Limitations

This study offers an initial exploration of German OnlyFans creators' practices and attitudes, but has several limitations.

Although qualitative interviews and content analysis provide rich in-depth insights into individual experiences, they inherently limit representativeness and generalizability (Diekmann 2007). Additionally, some nuances may have been lost in translation from German to English or during content analysis coding (Flick 2007). The small sample size of five participants restricts external validity and reliability (ibid.), although data saturation suggests that key themes were adequately explored.

The sample's homogeneity—White, female-identifying creators aged 21–28—limits applicability to other demographic groups. Over half of in-person sex workers in Germany are migrants (Czarnecki et al. 2014), and only 20% of registered sex workers hold German citizenship (Statistisches Bundesamt 2021). Future research should investigate how digital and in-person sex work demographics differ and how these differences affect stigma management. Intersectional analyses with larger and more diverse samples would further enrich our understanding of how age, race, class, and other identity markers mediate access to digital platforms and position within the *whorearchy*.

Moreover, this study sheds light on the role of OnlyFans as a source of supplementary income: such as other erotic platforms—such as *AdultWork* (see Rand and Stegeman 2023)—*OnlyFans* initially serves as a flexible gig for participants. This needs contextualization within the broader mainstreaming of sex work (Brents and Sanders 2010) and the rise of the gig economy (Ravenelle 2019), where women and minorities in particular turn to platform-based side hustles as a strategy to navigate economic uncertainty (Duffy and Hund 2015; Nayar 2021; McMillan Cottom 2020). Since all participants were Gen Z, the economic context may have exerted more influence than participants acknowledged: financial precarity disproportionately affects women aged 18 to 29 in Germany, with a quarter of this demographic living below the poverty line (Goebel and Krause 2021; Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2023). Future studies should examine how the normalization of (supplementary) sex work is embedded in “broader social and cultural narratives” (Haywood 2022, 70) and within the contemporary “Zeitgeist” (see also Bowen 2015)—and how intersections of shifting generational attitudes, digital nativity, and economic distress among young adults (see also Smith and Mac 2018) shape these dynamics.

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### Acknowledgements

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

### Ethics Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all study participants, both verbally and in writing. This study was conducted as part of a master's thesis under the supervision of an Ethics Board member of the Faculty of Social Sciences. Ethical approval was secured prior to participant recruitment, and measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and data integrity throughout the study.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

Anonymized data, including interview transcripts and coding, is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. To protect participant privacy and safety, data containing any identifying information, such as online aliases, are not available.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> As Jones (2015) states in “Sex Work in a Digital Era”, the growth of digital sexual commerce is not due to existing sex workers migrating online, but rather because of the expansion of supply and demand in general.
- <sup>2</sup> Brents and Sanders’ (2010) *sex work mainstreaming* framework comprises two key components: *economic mainstreaming*, which involves the increasing legitimacy of sexual commerce as a conventional business, and *social mainstreaming*, where sex work is increasingly accepted as legitimate labor (see also Ford 2022). These transformations intersect with the rise of micro-celebrity and digital influencer culture (McNair 2013; McCracken and Brooks-Gordon 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> The surge in demand led to an influx of new customers and a remarkable 75% increase in creator sign-ups in April 2020 alone, coinciding with the enforcement of strict lockdowns and social distancing measures in many countries (McCracken and Brooks-Gordon 2021; Uttarapong et al. 2022; Banerjee and Sathyanarayana Rao 2021; Hamilton et al. 2022; Barry 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Following Butler’s (1991) critique of gender binarism as a mechanism of sexist oppression, this study grapples with the dilemma of reproducing binary classifications and their associated power dynamics. However, for comparability and consistency with referenced literature, the terms ‘women’ and ‘men’ will be used, albeit critically. All respondents were asked to state their pronouns and gender identification to avoid misrepresentation and ensure accuracy while remaining sensitive to gender diversity.
- <sup>5</sup> For an elaboration on *emotional labor* with the same sample, see Schuchmann (2025).
- <sup>6</sup> Autonomy, joy, and satisfaction have also been found as positive aspects of sex work in several studies (see McCracken and Brooks-Gordon 2021; Woodward et al. 2004; Daalder 2004; Hamilton et al. 2022; Henry and Farvid 2017; Sanchez 2022; Hardy 2008; Saunders 2019).

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