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Intimate Insights: The Transformative Power of Emotional and Aesthetic Labor in Escort Work

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Master's Degree in Sociology

Supervisor:
PhD Margarida Barroso, Integrated Researcher
ISCTE-University Institute Lisbon

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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

Department of Sociology

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To Hannah and Tim, for their unwavering support and friendship.

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Resumo

Na indústria de serviços, o trabalho sexual continua a ser um tema de interesse, com perspectivas variadas sobre as suas implicações. Esta tese, realizada por Flora Van den Bergh, estudante de mestrado em Sociologia no ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, revisita o quadro feminista binário que historicamente definiu o trabalho sexual como inerentemente opressivo ou empoderador. Orientada pela questão de pesquisa: "Como é que as acompanhantes que se identificam como mulheres navegam entre os seus clientes, o eu e o estigma, usando estratégias de trabalho emocional e estético?", esta tese explora como o trabalho emocional e estético afeta não apenas a experiência do cliente, mas também a vida pessoal das acompanhantes. A pesquisa, fundamentada na análise qualitativa, aprofunda a relação recíproca entre as acompanhantes e os seus clientes, lançando luz sobre as estratégias utilizadas para enfrentar os desafios da profissão. O trabalho emocional e estético vai além do encontro com o cliente, servindo como mecanismos para lidar com as exigências da profissão e fomentar o empoderamento. Através de entrevistas aprofundadas com trabalhadores do sexo, esta tese de mestrado desvenda a natureza transformadora e encorpada do trabalho emocional e estético. As acompanhantes utilizam essas estratégias não apenas para satisfazer as expectativas dos clientes, mas também como ferramentas para o crescimento pessoal e a resiliência.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho sexual, Trabalho emocional, Trabalho estético, Feminismo, Resiliência, Empoderamento.

Abstract

In the service industry, sex work remains a topic of interest, with varying perspectives on its implications. This thesis, conducted by Flora Van den Bergh, master's student in Sociology at ISCTE-University Institute Lisbon, revisits the binary Feminist framework that has historically defined sex work as either inherently oppressive or empowering. Guided by the research question: “How do female-identifying escorts navigate between their clients, self, and stigma using strategies of emotional and aesthetic labour?”, this thesis explores how emotional and aesthetic labour impact not only the customer experience but also the escorts' personal lives. The research, rooted in qualitative analysis, delves into the reciprocal relationship between escorts and their clients, shedding light on strategies employed to navigate the challenges of the job. Emotional and aesthetic labour extend beyond the customer encounter, serving as mechanisms for coping with the demands of the profession and fostering empowerment. Through in-depth interviews with sex workers, this master's thesis uncovers the transformative and embodied nature of emotional and aesthetic labour. Escorts harness these strategies not only to meet client expectations but also as tools for personal growth and resilience.

Keywords: Sex work, Emotional labour, Aesthetic labour, Feminism, Resilience, Empowerment.

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Introduction

With the boom of the service economy, scholars have extensively explored the embodied labour experiences of professionals within this sector. Occupations ranging from nurses, and teachers, to flight attendants have all undergone analysis, particularly in the context of understanding the implications of emotional and aesthetic labour in late capitalism. Notably, the service industry occupied with one of the most intimate aspects of human life – sexuality – has garnered substantial attention. From the First Wave of Feminism onwards, feminist scholars have been engaged in a discourse that explores the intricacies of sex work, with a specific focus on the complexities related to agency, consent, and the enduring issue of stigma in the context of client interactions. However, during the tumultuous period known as the “porn wars” in the 1980s, feminist scholarship became markedly polarized, ultimately resulting in a binary debate framing sex work as either inherently oppressive or as a source of empowerment. This master’s thesis aims to revisit and deconstruct this binary perspective by seeking to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted and embodied labour experiences of female-identifying escorts in navigating between their clients, their selves, and the societal stigmatization of their field.

Examining the lived experiences of sex workers holds significant importance within the field of Sociology. While contemporary studies of this profession are abundant, there remains a dearth of interpretative, qualitative analyses. Beyond its academic significance, this research addresses a perspective that is often marginalized in political discourse and policymaking concerning sex work. This is particularly relevant in the current landscape of debates surrounding the criminalization, decriminalization, and legalization of sex work. Thus, the relevance of this investigation extends beyond academic boundaries and carries real-world implications. Moreover, in a society that still tends to undervalue service-related skills compared to technical skills, this thesis underscores the intricate nature of emotional and aesthetic labour. It emphasizes how those engaged in emotional labour are tasked with embodying specific professional expectations and, in many respects, surpass the traditional definition of service labour. Consequently, this work seeks to shed light on the historical lack of recognition that sex work has endured and advocates for a reevaluation of its societal worth.

Concretely, the research question is the following: ‘How do female-identifying escorts navigate between their clients, self, and stigma using strategies of emotional and aesthetic labour?’. In the context of legalized indoor escort work, this thesis investigates the embodied and reciprocal relationship between the self and the client and in what ways this relationship might influence sex workers’ personal lives and self-identity. Beyond this, this research aims to identify the strategies of resilience used by sex workers to navigate the challenges of their jobs, as well as the opportunities for self-development and self-actualization. As this topic is rooted in qualitative analysis, this thesis deliberately focuses on the subjective experience of sex work and is therefore profoundly interpretative.

This thesis follows a structured approach to address its objectives. It begins with an extensive review of existing Feminist literature, focusing on the historical stigmatization of sex work. Second, it

delves into the meanings associated with emotional and aesthetic labour. Following the literature review, the research methodology is outlined, describing the qualitative, interpretative approach employed. This involved conducting in-depth interviews with five sex workers and the founder of an escort agency. The subsequent section discusses the process of transcribing and coding the interview data, followed by an explanation of how thematic analysis was applied to identify significant trends and patterns within the participants' responses. The findings from the interviews are then compared to the theories and concepts present in the existing literature. This comparative analysis allows for a grounded conclusion to be drawn. By connecting theoretical frameworks with the tangible and personal narratives of the participants, the empirical analysis provided valuable insights into the research question.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

1.1. Introduction

To investigate female-identifying escorts' lived experiences, a comprehensive understanding necessitates a synthesis of theoretical foundations from feminist perspectives and the existing body of research on sex work. First, this literature review defines the terms "sex work" and "escort work", establishing the foundational concepts underpinning this research. It then delves into the historical evolution of these definitions within the context of feminist scholarship on sex work, tracing their development from the First Wave of Feminism. This historical overview serves as a crucial context in the investigation of contemporary societal stigma and self-stigma – imminent pressures to most sex workers' lived labour experience - and outlines the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed within the community. Subsequently, the literature review also emphasizes the embodied nature of sex work, rooted in two distinct forms of service labour: emotional labour and aesthetic labour. It offers a comprehensive investigation of the challenges and opportunities associated with these labour aspects. Finally, this chapter synthesizes the variety in theoretical traditions and perspectives throughout the review, culminating in the development of the theoretical framework that serves as the foundational structure for the subsequent empirical analysis.

1.2. Making meaning of sex work

1.2.1. Escort work: the commercialization of intimacy

The term 'sex worker', coined by sex worker and activist Carol Leigh in 1978 (Mac & Smith, 2018), applies to a wide range of occupations where people fulfil erotic desires for goods or money (Ferguson, 2015). Examples of such occupations include but are not limited to erotic dance, brothel work, porn performance, BDSM work, phone sex, (window) prostitution, and escort work (Chapkis, 1997, p. 7; Mac & Smith, 2018). Put succinctly, sex workers are people who sell or trade their sexual *labour* - not their *bodies* - in exchange for a multitude of resources - such as money, drugs, alcohol, or shelter (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 1). Within the scope of this research, sex work is defined as the voluntary exchange of sexual activity for monetary compensation between two consenting adults (Pinsky & Levey, 2015; Grittner & Walsh, 2020). Within the sex worker's community, the location of work is a key differentiator, since it largely determines working conditions, degree of safety and access to resources (Burnes, Long, Schept, 2012). The biggest distinction that is made in literature is the one between 'outdoor' and 'indoor' work, where outdoor sex workers often attract customers and perform labour on the street, and indoor sex workers work in pre-defined locations. The second most influential determinant is whether individuals work independently or are managed by an agency (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). Where a sex worker who works for an agency is, to a certain extent, bound to the prescribed

working conditions of their agency, independent sex workers have more freedom in choosing their compensation rates, clientele, work rhythm, and more. While independent sex workers may enjoy greater autonomy in their work, they are not protected by occupational health and safety regulations (Burnes, Long, Schept, 2012). Finally, the geographical context of sex work as criminalized, decriminalized, or legalized is crucial in understanding the labour experience of sex workers. In the criminalization approach, the purchase and selling of commercial sex is illegal and penalized. In the decriminalization approach, all penalties against commercial sex are eliminated. In the legalization approach, all penalties are eliminated and there is a legal, regulated market for commercial sex (Joulai, Zarei, Khorsandian, Keshavarzian, 2021).

One typology within indoor sex work is the umbrella of escort work. In escorting, clients contact escorts via phone, e-mail, or third-party agencies, and the sexual service is provided in a pre-arranged location – ranging from the escort’s private home to a hotel to the clients’ home (Koken, 2012). Escort work is the most covert form of sex work and is generally considered to be the safest and most lucrative type of sex work (Koken, 2012). In the past decades, the flourishing escort industry has resulted in an increased variety of services involving companionship, conversation, and physical affection like kissing and hugging. Among these offerings is what is known as the ‘girlfriend experience’: a central component of the sexual services offered by escorts. In providing the girlfriend experience, skills rooted in emotional intelligence, empathy, and perceived authenticity prove of immense importance to the customer experience (Carbonero & Garrido, 2017). This experience blurs the boundary separating a financial exchange from an intimate partnership (Bernstein, 2007). As such, escorting services provide an interesting lens on the evolution in late capitalism, where emotions that were previously limited to the domestic sphere, are now commodified in emotional service labour (Carbonero & Garrido, 2017).

1.2.2. Feminist theoretical frameworks on sex work: a brief historical account

In contextualizing the current labour experience and stigmatization of escort workers, it is helpful to understand the evolutions in the meanings of sex work throughout feminist and wider academic discourse. Sex workers have had a major influence on feminist movements and organizations - with strikes, protests, and alliances around sex workers’ rights being key to the development of feminism as early as the Middle Ages (Mac & Smith, 2018; Kissil & Davey, 2010). After the first wave of feminism and the political institutionalization of women’s suffrage, during the mid-nineteenth century, a crucial paradigm shift occurred with the entry of (middle-class) women into the professional public sphere, altering the economic but also social role of femininity in society (Mohajan, 2022). From this moment on, attitudes towards prostitution have periodically shifted between eras of tolerance and eras of denunciation, influenced by evolutions in the broader feminist discourse (Kissil & Davey, 2010). The following sections aim to give a brief historical account of the interdependent relationship between feminism and the conceptualization of sex work, from the 1960s onwards. It adopts the ‘wave analogy’,

associating each wave of feminism with a specific paradigm shift in the feminist discourse concerning sexuality, gender, and sex work.

Second-wave feminism and the sex wars

Whereas the first wave of feminism was predominantly focused on the social and political power of women in society, the second wave of feminism extended its scope to the meanings of sexuality, identity, and gender roles. Influenced by evolutions in poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, feminists shed light on society's structures determining women's lived experiences (Malinowska, 2020). For this reason, the period between the 1960s and the early 1990s is often described as the 'sexual revolution' (Mohajan, 2022). Although there was a general element of community and a shared consciousness around the socially constructed nature of sexuality, feminists debated on how to best deconstruct the patriarchal meanings of sexual expression and agency. In this increasingly polarizing debate, prostitution and pornography played an essential role. One group of feminists - radical feminists, anti-sex work feminists and/or abolitionists - warned of the dangers of prostitution and porn, their tendency to perpetuate gender inequality, and their objectification of women. Another group - sex radicals, sex-positive feminists and/or pro-sex feminists - shed light on the empowering, liberating potential of sex work and pornography, calling for a redefinition of female pleasure and agency (Showden, 2016). Friction between these two approaches culminated during the so-called 'sex wars' or 'porn wars' in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, where the two opposing perspectives debated, first and foremost, the question of agency and second, the appropriate legal consequence: decriminalization, legalization, or complete abolition (Kissil & Davey, 2010).

Abolitionist or anti-sex work feminists argued for the criminalization of sex work and the total abolition of pornography, based on the premise that these were rooted in the exploitation of women under male domination. In this view, all forms of prostitution - whether it be voluntary or involuntary - are considered oppression, since they are believed to never be entirely consensual (Gerassi, 2015; Showden, 2016). Abolitionists' attitudes towards porn and sex work were nurtured by the analogy: "*Pornography is the theory and rape is the practice*". In their view, the production and consumption of pornography were seen as acts of violence rooted in internalized misogyny. Any type of commercial sex inhibits a positive, reciprocal sexual experience for the individual performing it (Chapkis, 1997). Through so-called purity campaigns, anti-porn feminists pushed for the eradication and criminalization of all forms of pornography and prostitution. By oversimplifying women's role as passive recipients of male domination, this perspective has been criticised for reaffirming and reproducing the very beliefs they intend to counter (Chapkis, 1997).

In its turn, the abolitionist perspective was challenged by 'pro-sex' or 'sex-positive' feminists, who argued that pleasure, sexual liberation, and sexual autonomy are essential components of women's empowerment. In this perspective, women can deconstruct the binary relationship between female submission and male exploitation and redefine it by exploring and expressing their sexuality without

societal judgment or restrictions (Chapkis, 1997; Showden, 2016). The meaning and legitimacy of both private and commercial sex are dependent upon the context, the individual involved, and their interpretation of what is wrong and what is right (Chapkis, 1997). Accordingly, this perspective emphasized the importance of informed and enthusiastic consent in all sexual interactions and believed that individuals should have the agency to make their own choices about their bodies and sexual activities, including sex work. Hence, like all working women, female-gendered sex workers negotiate the terms of their job – a dynamic that is ignored in the anti-sex feminist rhetoric. They believed that penalizing sex work could harm sex workers and advocated for harm reduction and legal reforms instead of criminalization (Showden, 2016). In its turn, this perspective received considerable criticism for ignoring systemic structural gendered imbalances in the experience of sex and consent (Chapkis, 1997).

While the second wave was an undeniably essential period in the production of discourse on the relationship between sex work and feminism, it primarily based its analyses on the lived experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women and lacked diverse representation in age, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic status, and gender (Parry, Johnson, Wagler, 2018). On top of that, the distinct contrast between abolitionists and pro-sex advocates often presented an oversimplified and stigmatizing version of reality (Mac & Smith, 2018). For these reasons, second-wave scholars have received considerable critique for reproducing one-sided, judgmental, and polarizing views on sex work. In the backlash of this increasingly sensitive and divisive debate, feminism entered its third wave.

Third-wave feminism: pluralism, self-determination, and intersectionality

Between the 1990s and the early 2000s, a more diverse range of voices emerged (Mohajan, 2022). Third-wave feminists sought to reconcile the core principles of feminism which, according to them, had gotten lost during the sex wars: pluralism, self-determination, gender equality, sexual freedom and non-judgment (Snyder-Hall, 2010). Third wavers were generally more inclusive due to their pluralist nature, recognizing and respecting a multiplicity of perspectives, feminist ideologies, experiences, and sexual identities. Based on individual characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, people perceive and interpret experiences differently - leading to various intersectional meanings of feminism and agency: *‘Third-wave feminism accepts the reality that multiple definitions of feminism exist simultaneously’* (Snyder-Hall, 2010, p. 259). In this perspective, everyone has the freedom to determine what feminism, agency, and empowerment mean for them - and consequently what sex work means for them. Whereas the second wave was primarily focused on women and sex workers as collectives, now, the focus is more grassroots-oriented, individualistic, and micro-level (Mohajan, 2022; Parry, Johnson, Wagler, 2018). Accordingly, one of this wave’s main critiques is its lack of collective action and its exaggerated focus on individuality, which has been argued to perpetuate division instead of connection through the universality of ‘womanhood’ (Parry, Johnson, Wagler, 2018).

The fourth wave and contemporary debates: sex work as a service- or rescue industry?

Throughout the 2000s, the internet played a focal role in the development of feminist attitudes towards sex work. For the first time, individuals could share their local experiences on a global scale using social media (Day & Wray, 2018). This allowed the increase in collective movements, extending the third-wave individualist focus to a more interconnected and intersectional one (Parry, Johnson, Wagler, 2018). Fourth wavers used globalization and technology to blur racial, ethnic, and national divides and succeeded in raising global awareness on topics such as sexual violence and the gender wage gap (Ibid, 2018). Technological advancements also influenced the speed by which debate and conversation happen, leading to an increasingly fast-paced and heterogeneous response to situations of sexual discrimination or violence (Ibid, 2018). Specific to the feminist discourse regarding sex work, the fourth wave continues the efforts of third wavers to destigmatize and decriminalize the field. Whereas the debate used to be somewhat more limited to feminist circles and policymaking, it has since the fourth wave of feminism increased in significance in the wider public through (social) media coverage and the internet (Ibid, 2018).

Even though the fourth wave has allowed for more pluralist and intersectional debate, the binary debates of the sex wars remain influential. Many contemporary publications still pose the question of whether sex work constitutes a type of conscious, physical labour *or* reflects a system dominated by patriarchy and capitalism wherein male power exploits women's bodies (Sanders, 2005). The abolitionist perspective that was key to the sex wars period paved the way for neo-abolitionist perspectives such as radical feminism and marxist feminism to develop (Gerassi, 2015). Often, current analyses of sex work tend to pathologize individuals' motives to engage in commercial sex. When this happens, the economic motives of the sex worker are overlooked and even denied, and instead, personal and mental struggle is assumed to be the underlying motive for sex work (Mac & Smith, 2018). This sex worker-as-victim narrative has led to the increase of political and academic discourse fuelled by the 'rescue industry', a term coined by Laura Agustín (2008). The rescue industry relates to Augustin's critique of the current network of organizations, institutions, and individuals involved in the business of presumably saving or rescuing individuals who are perceived as victims of sexual exploitation. In her view, actors in positions of power (both symbolic and political) often oversimplify complex situations, view all sex work as inherently exploitative, and disregard the agency and autonomy of the individuals involved (2008). Economic necessity is the primary imperative for commercial sex - or any job. When this is acknowledged, the discourse of the pathologized, weak woman in need of redirection can be replaced by one where a woman makes a conscious, rational decision regarding her livelihood (Mac & Smith, 2018).

This view aligns with the libertarian perspective - a contemporary evolution from sex-positive feminism - where sex workers are defined as 'erotic professionals' (Mac & Smith, 2018). Erotic professionals, often women, are vocal about their occupation, and their perspectives and motives are rooted in sex positivism, pleasure, and desire. In some cases, their job testimonials uncover a certain

vocational or emotional “calling” (Ibid, 2018, p. 31), where they emphasize the satisfaction, physical, and emotional fulfilment that comes with their job. This view has received considerable critique for underestimating systemic gender inequalities by putting the responsibility of sexual activity entirely on the woman – potentially victim-blaming women when unpleasant sexual interactions occur (Chapkin, 1997). It sustains the illusion that workers and clients share the same motives and interests throughout their interaction, with the danger of the client’s needs and desires overruling the professional and material needs of the worker. On another level, this perspective can be hard to rhyme with the sex worker’s rights movement and can potentially lead to greater polarization between workers in the field (Mac & Smith, 2018).

1.2.3. Stigma and societal labelling

Rooted in this century-long continuum of agency, consent, control, and coercion, sex work is often stigmatized and considered an illegitimate form of employment. It is widely acknowledged that stigma plays a central role in maintaining and perpetuating the violence and discrimination that sex workers face. Female-identified sex workers in particular experience a great deal of pejorative societal labelling and marginalization (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). Because of stigmatization, the identity of an individual as a sex worker becomes the only lens through which society perceives them, causing other aspects of their identity to be ignored. This all-encompassing identity ultimately leads to individuals facing adverse external judgements and social exclusion (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). As such, sex workers’ bodies are often reduced to ‘commodities’: *“In commercial sex, the body is being sold as a consumption product, or at least body parts are rented out for an exchange of money ... Sex workers are well aware of the possible damages and dilemmas of selling their vaginas, their breasts, their anuses, and their mouths but not their feelings, thoughts, personalities and minds”* (Sanders, 2002, p. 561). Such harmful analogies in their turn perpetuate stigma on two levels: in wider society - through public stigma - and on the individual level - through self-stigma (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). Public stigma hinders sex workers from social opportunities through direct discriminatory action and through self-censorship, where sex workers themselves stop utilising services because of past negative encounters. Self-stigma, on the other hand, refers to the internalization of those negative societal labels, leading to feelings of shame negatively affecting self-esteem and self-respect (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). The ways through which stigma maintains and perpetuates social inequalities include but are not limited to social isolation, lower income, lower rates of employment, public embarrassment, victim blaming, estrangement from friends and family, worse mental and physical health, self-identity rooted in feelings of shame and guilt, and an overall lower quality of life (Grittner & Walsh, 2020).

Despite these detrimental effects, scholars have identified ways in which sex workers resist, diminish, and reconfigure the stigma they encounter (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). On a structural level, sex workers may be vocal adherents of the decriminalization of sex work, public and educational awareness of sex work, and initiatives of legal and financial support. Within their communities, they might organize

meetings and sex-positive networks with peers, redefining their labour conditions and sharing experiences (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). On the individual level, sex workers tend to be cautious in separating their personal lives from their professional lives to distinguish between their job as a service or ‘performance’ and their true self to protect their inner selves. As such, a significant fraction of sex workers selectively discloses information about their employment to avoid stigma and denunciation from strangers, friends, and family, possibly socially isolating them (Grittner & Walsh, 2020). A more vocal strategy lies in actively reframing and redefining what sex work means for them, emphasizing the positive aspects of their job while keeping its challenges more the background. This way, individuals actively rewrite the narrative of sex work by providing an alternative picture of sex work as aligning with their personal values (Grittner & Walsh, 2020).

In conclusion, even though contemporary third- and fourth-wave feminism is increasingly rooted in the libertarian sex-positive tradition, sex workers continue to experience large degrees of stigma and symbolic violence. The following chapter will investigate the role of emotional and aesthetic labour in the embodied labour experience of sex work, including the coping and resistance strategies individuals develop to deal with the challenges and stigmatization of their job.

1.3. The embodied labour experience of sex work: emotional and aesthetic labour in navigating the client, the self, and stigma

1.3.1. Introduction

As the labour put forth by sex workers is rooted in a great deal of human interaction, it requires a particular set of skills. The following chapter will elaborate first on the importance of emotional labour and second on aesthetic labour to describe the skills service workers and thus sex workers need to navigate their jobs.

1.3.2. Emotional labour: the commodification of intimacy

A definition of emotional labour

Dealing with arguably the most private part of people’s lives - their sexuality, desires, and pleasures - sex workers engage with people in profoundly intimate interactions. This requires them to gain clients’ trust and to comfort them in doing so, a skill which has been defined under the umbrella term of emotional labour. When emotions are commodified, they are subject to economic behaviour and the rules of supply and demand, and a ‘transmutation’ (Hochschild, 1983, p. 19) of the emotional system occurs. In the context of a booming service economy, Arlie Hochschild introduced the concept of emotional labour as “*the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display which is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value*” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). It refers to the effort, skill, and management involved in displaying certain emotions as part of a job role, particularly in service industries where interactions with customers or clients are integral. Hochschild defined three core features of job roles demanding emotional labour: (1) the position typically involves direct

interpersonal interaction, (2) it requires the cultivation of specific emotional responses in others, (3) it grants employers a means to influence and regulate employees' emotional expressions through training and supervision (1983). In essence, emotional labour is the process of regulating one's own emotions to meet the emotional demands of a job - a type of labour that touches on the deepest and most personal parts of people's personalities (Hochschild, 1983). Important in emotional labour is the impassioned way in which the service is delivered, as radiating devotion to the job constitutes a great part of the job itself. In the same way, feelings like tiredness or annoyance aren't allowed to be visible to passengers, as these disrupt the impression of the job being performed effortlessly. In doing this, the skill of emotion management (Hochschild, 1983, p. 18) is central: workers must detach their personal feelings from the feelings they are expected to display on the job and show a great deal of understanding towards the clients they are dealing with (Ibid, 1983). This type of labour is often described as coming more 'natural' to women because it involves skills like caring, negotiating, empathizing, alleviating conflicts, and working off the record (Guy & Newman, 2004). It is however important to understand that emotional labour cannot be reduced to a staged, inauthentic act but involves people's actual feelings on a deeper level, and not only their cast (Witz, Warhurst, Nickson, 2003). It requires the worker to get personal and partly expose themselves to carry out the service. Even though emotions are widely perceived as irrational feelings that don't belong in the workplace, regulating them calls for a high level of anticipation and planning, as well as spontaneity and flexibility (James, 1989).

Emotional labour and emotion management in sex work

Some of the first scholars to recognize the interdependence between emotional service labour and the sex industry were Kempadoo (1999), Doezema (1999) and Chapkis (1997). These theorists conceptualized sex work as the commercialization of intimacy and drew attention to the large degree of emotional labour needed in this occupation (Pinsky & Levey, 2015). When applying Hochschild's definition of emotional labour to the occupation of sex work, it becomes apparent that this profession is indeed rooted in this type of labour: (1) direct interpersonal contact most often constitutes a significant part of the job, (2) cultivating emotional states such as sexual arousal and satisfaction are a focal objective of a sex worker, and (3) the employer-employee relationship is dependent upon each sex worker's professional situation, but applies in the case of brothel work, escort work, erotic dancing, and many more (Dutton, 2004). Whereas there are many congruences between Hochschild's application of emotional labour on flight attendants and the emotional labour involved in sex work, there are significant differences as well. Both professionals are expected to suppress and manage their own emotions to make their clients feel comfortable. However, whereas the prototypical flight attendant conveys emotions to gain passengers' trust, the purpose of sex workers goes beyond this by maintaining a specific emotional atmosphere for their clients, invoking feelings of attraction, desirability, and sensuality. This involves simulating romantic interest, affection, or arousal even if the sex worker doesn't genuinely feel these emotions - also described as '*bounded authenticity*' (Pinsky & Levey, 2015, p. 439). For instance, a sex

worker might have to act enthusiastic, attentive, and engaging during encounters, regardless of their personal feelings at that moment - or in other words; 'fake it' (Dutton, 2004). The notion of perceived authenticity is crucial since it is related to the wider demand for authenticity in contemporary society. When escorts provide their service, they are not merely selling sexual pleasure. Their service commodifies closeness and intimacy – some of the most highly prized and meaningful aspects of human life in the context of late capitalism (Carbonero & Garrido, 2017). Based on these definitions, we can conclude that emotional labour and emotion management are essential to sex work.

The ways in which escort workers engage in emotional labour by providing services that are authentic in their core, but at the same time restricted in emotional connection, are multifold (Pinsky & Levey, 2015). Beyond altering the display of one's own emotions to gain the client's trust, conversation proves an important facet of the emotional labour performed. Topics such as family, work, personal challenges, music, politics, travel, and economics are all widely discussed between sex workers and their clients. Oftentimes, clients also show particular interest in the life of the sex worker, asking them about their life, background, education, and interests. In general, however, clients tend to talk more while sex workers prefer to fulfil their role as active listeners (Dutton, 2004). In addition to seeking companionship through conversation, clients also engage with sex workers to fulfil their emotional needs, which all require a different approach. Depending on the client's feelings - whether it be loneliness, happiness, frustration, or stress - the sex worker's strategy in validating them differs. Some clients seek companionship after a good day to celebrate, while others turn to a sex worker for solace during difficult times. Hence, when people participate in financial transactions with sex workers, their motives might exceed a physical desire by also pursuing meaningful conversations and emotional support (Dutton, 2004). Another commonly used narrative relates to presumably giving 'special treatment' to regular customers to make them feel special and unique through conveying (often false) information about the sex worker's private life, interests, or hobbies. By creating the illusion of mutual romantic interest, sex workers narrow the gap between themselves and their clients, making the interaction feel less incentivized and scripted, and more 'real' (Dutton, 2004). An important nuance to make is that on top of serving the purpose of providing a safe and comfortable environment for the client and oneself, economic incentives such as client retention also play a role in performing emotional labour (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). To acquire a level of client retention, it is crucial for the sex worker to actively build and invest in a relationship of trust with their clients, for which a significant amount of emotional labour is required. Besides guaranteeing job security, returning clients are also considered safer and more reliable for sex workers (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Hence, the professional habitus functions as a business model by safeguarding the sex worker's strategy of recruiting and retaining clientele (Sanders, 2005).

Surface acting and deep acting

Like in any professional context, degrees of emotional labour differ hugely among sex workers. For some, emotional labour is limited to centralizing the client's feelings over personal feelings. For others, emotional labour is only successful if it is or feels authentic to the client (Dutton, 2004). Hochschild's distinction between surface acting and deep acting is crucial in analysing this distinction and its impact on the embodied experience of sex work (1983). Surface acting occurs when an individual consciously engages in emotional labour, being fully aware of their actions. They essentially deceive their clients, without deceiving themselves (Hochschild, 1983). In contrast, deep acting involves responding expectedly to emotional demands but becoming so immersed in the process that the individual loses awareness of the emotional labour they are engaging in (Hochschild, 1983). As such, Hochschild (1983) outlined three simplified pathways through which workers navigate emotional service labour (p. 187): (1) The worker is so deeply invested in their job that they are not conscious of the emotional labour that they perform, risking alienation and burnout (= deep acting). (2) The worker differentiates themselves from the emotional labour in their job (= surface acting). However, in doing so, they may self-critically view themselves as 'just an actor' and question their sincerity. (3) The worker maintains a clear separation between themselves and the emotional labour job (= surface acting), avoids self-blame, and views the ability to act as something positive. In this case, there is some potential for the worker to become detached from acting altogether and develop a cynical attitude towards it.

As laid out by Hochschild, there are opportunities and challenges to be found within each of these three pathways to emotional labour. The distinction between surface acting and deep acting, however, is crucial, since the very moment when the emotional labour performed exceeds the sex worker's consciousness, the lines between work emotions, real emotions, and thus the sense of self get blurry - possibly impacting the sex worker on a personal, deeper level (1983). The following sections investigate the influence of emotional labour in sex work on the individual, uncovering challenges as well as opportunities for resilience and self-actualization in balancing deep and surface acting.

Challenges, coping, and resilience

There exist infinite publications on the challenges, dangers, and alienating properties of emotional labour on the one hand and sex work on the other - so one can imagine the paradigm that underlies research on emotional labour in the field that is the sex industry. Congruent to a neo-abolitionist perspective, many scholars are critical of the risks of alienation, dissociation and denial that come with sex work, potentially manifesting in symptoms of PTSD, depression, eating disorders, and feelings of self-blame, guilt, and a loss of self-identity (Sanders, 2004; Farley, Baral, Kiremire, Sezgin, 1998; Bagley, 1999; Cooney, 1990). In this view, the sex-positive notion of meeting a client's emotional demands as a deliberated, rational choice that exists separately from the sex worker's identity is criticized for being a dangerous oversimplification that underestimates the embodied nature of emotional labour. The produced emotional responses that sex workers use to navigate the client interaction bridge

personal and professional life, making it hard to distinguish between these two spheres and to let go of professional emotions after working hours (Hochschild, 1983; Knudson, 2016). Faced with this danger of internalizing their clients' expectations generalizing these onto their private relationships, it is often argued that sex workers 'become their work' and have a hard time sustaining healthy private romantic relationships (Dutton, 2004). Some may experience trouble separating sex for work from sex for pleasure and their relationships may be hampered by feelings of guilt, jealousy, disapproval, criticism, and disrespect from their partner, fuelled by the existing social stigma surrounding the sex industry. Sex workers tend to refrain from telling romantic partners about their jobs to avoid the former (Sanders, 2002; Bellhouse, Crebbin, Fairley, Bilardi, 2015). This often has a counterproductive effect since the societal pressure that keeps sex workers from speaking out about their experiences (whether they be positive or negative) also deprives them of support and understanding (Bellhouse et al., 2015). When an individual and their partner do develop a healthy attitude in this regard, there remains the element of stigma and marginalization in their wider communities and society. As such, sex workers often feel pressured to keep their professional experiences to themselves, complicating their private relationships with friends, partners, family, and acquaintances (Dutton, 2004).

To manage the challenges of their job, sex workers often consciously and unconsciously construct professional defence and coping mechanisms that maintain professional boundaries, protect self-identity and private relationships, and resist stigma (Sanders, 2002; Bellhouse, Crebbin, Fairley, Bilardi, 2015). In essence, emotional labour is not only performed in line with a business strategy towards client retention but also as a coping mechanism. In investigating these emotion management strategies, we adopt a resilience-based lens to sex work. Resilience, as defined by Russ Newman, is "*the human ability to adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma, adversity, hardship, and ongoing significant life stressors*" (2005, p. 227). In contrast to exclusively attributing resilience to qualities or personality traits, Newman's approach to resilience is multidimensional and developmental. He recognizes that resilience can be built and sustained through complicated processes of behaviours and actions such as "*maintaining good relationships, having an optimistic worldview, keeping things in perspective, setting goals, and taking steps to reach them, being self-confident...*" (Newman, 2005, p. 227). As such, resilience is no one-fits-all, but instead, an individualized process that is dependent upon an individual's experiences, skills, and strengths (Ibid, 2005). Applying Newman's resilience-based lens allows an analysis of the stressors of sex work on the one hand while recognizing the influence of personal coping mechanisms and community on the other.

Many sex workers are particular about maintaining a separation between commercial and private intimacy to safeguard their emotional well-being and personal relationships. Perhaps the most widely used strategy in distinguishing intimacy at work from private intimacy, while at the same time protecting one's health and sense of self, is the use of a condom (Sanders, 2002; Bellhouse, Crebbin, Fairley, Bilardi, 2015). The condom fulfils a dual role in being an obstacle to sensitivity and intimacy - both physically and emotionally - by preventing skin-on-skin contact and reinforcing the barrier between sex

worker and client (Sanders, 2002; Bellhouse et al., 2015). In literature, preventing this skin-on-skin contact is vital to emotion management. Some authors even find that sex workers consider their clients' bodily fluids "contaminating and repulsing" (Sanders, 2002, p. 563). Holding this into account, it makes sense that the use of a condom often is less prevalent in the sex worker's private life – since it is tied to the clinical act of sex with a client and the feelings of distrust related to it (Murray, Moreno, Rosario, Ellen, Sweat, Kerrigan, 2006). Accordingly, condoms are used in commercial sex to give (back) the power and agency to the sex worker in a way where they can define and control the situation as well as their own emotions (Sanders, 2002). Various other strategies exist in distinguishing commercial sex from sex for pleasure. Some sex workers are particular about the set of emotions as well as the degree of emotional involvement they (allow to) feel at work versus in their private relationships (Bellhouse et al., 2015). This means that they might 'save' certain emotions for their private lives and hence limit the degree of pleasure they might experience on the job. Others even deliberately choose never to enjoy sex at work (Sanders, 2002). Linked to this is the strategy of determining '*bodily exclusion zones*' (Sanders, 2004, p. 326) in offering sexual services, where one limits the type of sex, the sexual positions, the physical energy needed for them, and the degree of nudity (Sanders, 2005).

Beyond incorporating these emotion management strategies, sex workers often embody a so-called manufactured working identity (Sanders, 2005). As a type of surface acting, creating a specific identity for work serves a multitude of purposes: to minimize adverse effects on emotional well-being, to promote business and brand, to safeguard privacy and safety against malicious intents from clients, and to keep activities in sex work a secret from family, friends, or social surroundings to avoid stigma and condemnation (Sanders, 2005). Often, this identity includes a pseudonym, an invented personal history, and a fictitious background. In this way, sex workers 'perform' the identity or role that they have attached to their job to maintain a separation between their fictional character and their authentic self. Often, the construction of this persona happens intentionally and consciously and is not static but changes throughout a career, as well as according to the type of desires a client expresses (Dutton, 2004). To guarantee authenticity and boost customer retention, sex workers pay close attention to the consistency of their professional identity. They are often careful in their decisions to convey real personal information to clients. Especially when dealing with recurrent clients it can be hard to sustain a manufactured identity. Important to note is that the degree of 'acting' differs hugely among sex workers - some prefer using a completely fake identity, while others allow and enjoy personal information or real personality traits to enter their job role (Sanders, 2005).

In conclusion, when discussing workers' emotion management strategies, it is important to recognize the diversity of coping mechanisms and romantic relationships that influence the embodied labour experience. Where some individuals find comfort in keeping their jobs to themselves, others openly discuss it with their partners, family, and friends. Often, however, there does seem to be a link between the approach to sustaining a work-life balance and having a supportive partner - where people

tend to view the effects of their work on their sense of self and their relationship as more positive when they feel supported by their significant other (Bellhouse et al., 2015).

1.3.3. Aesthetic Labour: the skill of impression management

A definition of aesthetic labour

With “*the aesthetics of corporate identity*”, Warhurst & Nickson describe how organizations and companies embrace a certain aesthetic or style in developing their brand (2001, p. 7). Organizational aesthetics are central to a company’s identity and involve their marketing, the physical environment they operate in, and most importantly their employees (Ibid, 2001). Accordingly, aesthetic labour revolves around the corporeal embodiment of service labour and is defined as “*the mobilization, development, and commodification of embodied dispositions*” (Witz, Warhurst, Nickson, 2003, p. 37), transcending both the Goffmanian interpretation and the Hochschildian focus on emotional labour in the service economy. In Bourdieusian theory, the embodiment of an organizational aesthetic is closely linked to the concept of habitus: an internalized set of dispositions that steer a social actor in the social world and influence their perception. These dispositions are durable ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking, and can include certain bodily displays (Nash, 1990). Hence, for someone to provide a service that holds aesthetic labour, they are expected to incorporate embodied actions that fit into the organizational habitus. Or in other words: the embodiment of an appearance suited for a certain work environment (Hofmann, 2013). In this way, people’s physical capital produces profit or economic capital in the labour process (Witz, Warhurst, Nickson, 2003; Hofmann, 2013).

The business behind aesthetics

Next to emotion management skills, a particular bodily aesthetic proves important for sex workers in developing their business strategy. Though not traditionally linked to the corporate world, sex workers in many ways engage in aesthetic labour as defined by Warhurst and Nickson, since their choice of aesthetics and style are “*intended to influence the perceptions of clients, to add value to the company, and, in competitive markets, to contribute to organizational distinctiveness* (2001, p. 8). Next to language and tone of voice, attractiveness has proven to influence employability and success in dealing with customers. Important to note is that this degree of attractiveness is not solely determined by physical features but relates to a series of characteristics that affect overall attractiveness or appearance - such as the way someone dresses, their manners and style, or the way their body is shaped (Ibid, 2001, p. 19). Essentially, next to ‘emotion management’, we are talking about “*impression management*” (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001, p. 10), referring to the totality of people’s appearance entailing physical capital (Shilling, 1991; Karlsson, 2012). Through financially capitalizing on their sexuality, many women in sex work proactively adjust their appearance, specific body features, and sexual behaviours to conform to the desired, often heteronormative commercialization of attractiveness. Often, sex workers align their work appearance with their manufactured working identity. As such, sex workers represent

their brand and develop an aesthetic identity that serves as a business strategy for attracting and retaining customers (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001, Sanders, 2005; Hofmann, 2013).

Resilience in appearance

Besides its business-related purpose, aesthetic labour has also proven to function as a successful resilience strategy for sex workers to distinguish between private and professional life to protect their self-identity and emotional well-being. To ensure a healthy work-life separation, the professional aesthetic appearance adopted by sex workers is usually not transferred to their private lives (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001, Sanders, 2005; Hofmann, 2013). For example, sex workers often immediately change their outfits and make-up when having finished work to touch back into their authentic selves (Bellhouse et al., 2015).

1.3.4. Opportunities for self-development and self-actualization

Whereas emotional and aesthetic labour in sex work is often pathologized, reduced to ‘ego-work’, and viewed as reproducing patriarchal gender roles, alternative literature sheds light on the conscious, strategic positions of sex workers in navigating their professional role. Increasingly, researchers shed light on the opportunities for self-development and self-actualization that exist in sex work. Like in any job, sex workers can capitalize on their emotions and sexuality without losing their sense of self or developing feelings of guilt or estrangement. Conversely, the commodification of emotions and physical presentation can also result in both personal and professional fulfilment. It is seen as a deliberate strategy employed by sex workers to leverage their own sexuality and align with the cultural expectations of their clientele, rather than merely conformity or exploitation (Sanders, 2005). As such, many sex workers make a rational, intrinsically motivated professional choice and consider their people-oriented job as a form of social service, rather than as a way of selling their body or identity (Dutton, 2004). Performing emotional labour can have a positive effect on the sex worker’s work ethic and emotional well-being as well. Where the scripted, exaggerated display of positive emotions in sex work is often given a negative connotation, it might boost the sex worker’s self-esteem and well-being: when sex workers act friendly, amicable, loving, and joyous, they might start to feel this way about themselves (Dutton, 2004). Besides this, studies have shown that sex workers may also experience their job to have a positive impact on their relationships by boosting intimacy with their partner, as well as their self-esteem and confidence (Bellhouse et al., 2015).

Of course, the extent to which sex workers successfully exploit their sexuality to obtain financial gain depends on certain material conditions such as the location of work as well as people’s backgrounds and experiences (Sanders, 2005). A holistic analysis acknowledges, on the one hand, the structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy that underline society as a whole and inevitably sex work as an occupation, and on the other, the opportunity of self-determination in the capitalization of one’s sexuality.

1.4. Conclusion: bridging the divides towards a pluralist theoretical framework

The sex wars of the 80s were of great importance to the understanding of sex work, its relationship to feminism, stigma, and the evolution of sex worker's rights. Their polarizing pro-anti rhetoric, however, continues to influence academic discourse, policy-making, and public opinion on the occupation to this day. Perhaps the dominant framework by which research and policy change regarding sex work has historically been undertaken is rooted in the Oppressive Paradigm, where sex work is understood as inherently pathological, exploitative, and detrimental for the individual who engages in this type of work. Advocates within this tradition tend to call for criminalization of sex work, based on the premise that sex work is essentially abnormal and deviant (Burnes, Long, Schept, 2012). On the other side of the spectrum, the analogy of the "*happy hooker*" (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 35) exists. This perspective sheds light on the opportunities for self-determination and agency of the sex worker, who consciously demarcates their preferred working conditions, and hence supports decriminalisation.

In more recent times, the paradigm is undergoing a notable transformation, slowly moving away from this polarizing juxtaposition. Many scholars argue that the binary nature of the debate does not recognize sex workers with a diversity in experiences (Mac & Smith, 2018). In the same way, a negative experience cannot be equated to a call for criminalisation of the profession and its systems (Ibid, 2018). As such, several scholars have distanced themselves from the stigmatizing and merely academic debate between 'force' and 'choice', 'victim' and 'entrepreneur' and 'coercion' and 'agency', calling for a more comprehensive analysis of the embodied labour experience of sex work (Mac & Smith, 2018; Kissil & Davey, 2010). Through emotional and aesthetic labour and the construction of a working identity, sex workers navigate the demands of their jobs, fulfil the needs of their clients, and construct a business strategy for economic gain. In navigating their professional role, they must pay close attention to the display of both their internal emotions and feelings as well as their external appearances. This requires a complex and not-to-be-underestimated set of skills and perhaps personality traits since the manufactured identity is required to come naturally and seem 'authentic' to the sex worker's real personality (Sanders, 2005).

As such, the strengths of a resilience-based, pluralistic analysis become apparent: it allows the investigation of the personal and collective strengths that enable sex workers to navigate the challenges that come with the job, as well as the positive influences on individuals' personal lives and the opportunities for self-development. This degree of fluidity makes the conversation even more interesting since it allows sex workers to freely and without pre-defined narratives, share their embodied labour experience, rather than being limited to definitions of sex work as 'sexual slavery' or 'the culmination of a self-actualized sexual agent' (Chapkis, 1997, p. 12).

Methodology

2.1. Research design: Qualitative Research

Given the research question guiding this study – How do female-identifying escorts navigate between their clients, self, and stigma using strategies of emotional and aesthetic labour? – the decision for qualitative research is not surprising. It allows for an investigation of the embodied labour experience of sex workers in an interpretative and perspective-oriented tradition (Lune & Berg, 2017). An important characteristic of qualitative research is that its analysis is not focused on consensus, but instead highlights the importance of pluralism and allows the existence of various truths. Given the exploratory nature of the topic, and its profoundly intersectional nature, qualitative analysis proves a well-suited method for analysis (Gerring, 2017). Beyond this, qualitative research is rooted in understanding the meaning-making process behind symbols, social values, norms, and beliefs (Lune & Berg, 2017). Since this research aims to deconstruct sex workers' unconscious behaviour and patterns and analyse their meaning, qualitative analysis allows the researcher to look further than what is visible at first sight and go beyond this (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, Davidson, 2002).

2.2. Data collection: Semi-structured Interview

2.2.1. Recruitment and eligibility

Prior to reaching out to potential participants, I informed myself regarding best practices in contacting sex workers for a request for cooperation. I was in touch with multiple European-based organizations involved with sex workers' rights – including NGOs, sex workers' collectives, and escort agencies – whose advice guided me in the process of looking for my first participants. They provided me with written guidelines and rules on how, where, and through which medium to best contact people. Equally important, they informed me of practices, language, and behaviours that are considered 'not done' in the community. This was a crucial step in the process of composing my sample and helped me in determining the final sampling criteria: female-identifying sex workers of at least 18 years of age (self-reported), fluent in English or Dutch, with voluntary experience in escort work and male clientele, in a geographical context where sex work is legalized. First, I contacted several organizations located in Belgium and the Netherlands concerned with sex worker's rights to cooperate. Most organizations politely declined my request on behalf of their escorts for economic or privacy reasons. I quickly realised I had to be more creative in looking for participants and decided to turn to social media instead. Through various media – Instagram, TikTok and e-mail, followed by snowball recruiting, I was finally able to get in touch with potential participants. Considering the important distinction between voluntary and involuntary commercial sex, participants were approached deliberately and purposely and not through simple random sampling (Gerring, 2017).

2.2.2. Participant characteristics

The final sample comprises five female-identifying sex workers with escort work experience ranging from six months to five years, within a context predominantly involving male clientele. This aspect is particularly pertinent to the broader Feminist discourse concerning agency and coercion. The participants' ages fall within the range of 25 to 30 years, and they come from Dutch, Belgian, German, and American backgrounds. Four out of five participants have higher-education degrees or are currently finishing their higher education degree. Their motives for entering the field range from monetary motivations to finance higher education studies, to curiosity, and employment preferences. As such, they all consciously and voluntarily started working as a sex worker. Presently, four participants are actively engaged in escort work in Belgium, while one participant operates in Germany. To ensure confidentiality, the participants have been assigned pseudonyms: Lola, Amelia, Ingrid, Zoe, and Charlotte. Furthermore, recognizing the research's exploration of the commercialization of emotions and aesthetics, I interviewed a sixth participant, Marion, who founded her escort agency in the Netherlands. While Marion's insights were invaluable for understanding the organizational dynamics within the industry, it's important to note that her expertise was not integrated into the analysis of the lived experiences in emotional and aesthetic labour, as she lacks direct experience in commercial sex work herself.

2.2.3. The interview process

The interviews, following participants' informed consent, were semi-structured in-depth sessions that addressed various aspects of the participants' experiences in emotional and aesthetic labour, the interplay between their private and professional lives, challenges, coping mechanisms, and opportunities for empowerment. These interviews took place through platforms such as Teams, Zoom, and Skype, with each session lasting between 45 minutes and one and a half hours.

The choice of semi-structured in-depth interviews was motivated by their capacity to yield rich and nuanced data, particularly crucial in a subject as intricate as this. Unlike rigidly structured questionnaires, these interviews provided flexibility for participants to express their thoughts and experiences openly (Fossey, Harvey, Mcdermott, Davidson, 2002). This facilitated a comprehensive exploration of emotional and aesthetic labour, allowing respondents to emphasize aspects that were most meaningful to them (Patton, 2005). Throughout the virtual interview, I used “*sensitizing concepts*” (Van den Bulck, Puppis, Donders & Van Audenhove, 2019, p. 170) to help the participants formulate their answers to my questions. This encouraged a dynamic conversation where follow-up questions were adapted to participants' responses, promoting candid answers, and enabling me to pick up on non-verbal cues, such as body language and tone of voice, to gain additional insights (Opdenakker, 2006). Moreover, this method encourages a conversational rather than interrogative atmosphere, fostering a reciprocal interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Chapkis, 1997). Another asset of this method is that the participants' communication happens in real-time so that the respondent is expected

to answer immediately after the question is posed. This is beneficial to the spontaneity and the flow of the conversation. While semi-structured interviews offer numerous advantages in the context of interpretative, exploratory research, they are not without limitations. The potential for interviewer bias is a significant concern, as the researcher's perspectives can inadvertently influence the participants' responses. Throughout conducting the interviews, I experienced that when I shared personal information about myself on the topic of sexuality or romantic relations, this often resulted in a more personal answer on the side of the participant. However, even though these value judgments made by the interviewer may increase the trust on behalf of the interviewee, they might lead to biased responses (Opdenakker, 2006). Sex workers tend to reshape their labour experience in talking about it with researchers. Given the existing stigma and often negative connotations of the sex industry, it is common for individuals to partly disclose personal experiences intending to paint a more positive picture than the truth (Chapkis, 1997). In the same way, being transparent about negative work experiences is often equated to giving munition to political agents - since these testimonies, if wrongly interpreted, are used to justify the dismissal of sex work as real work (Mac & Smith, 2018). Another drawback lies in the external validity of the findings, as they may not easily generalize to other contexts or populations. However, this method excels in terms of internal validity, successfully elucidating the values, motives, feelings, and experiences of the participants (Van Selm & Helberger, 2019).

To mitigate the potential for interviewer bias, I approached the interviews with a high degree of self-awareness. Recognizing the influence of my perspectives, I aimed to maintain neutrality and objectivity throughout the interview process through constant self-reflection and adherence to ethical research practices. It was essential for me to ensure a faithful representation of the participants' voices and experiences, avoiding the creation of a voyeuristic or stigmatizing narrative. As such, I took care to frame questions in a manner that did not sensationalize or objectify the participants' experiences. This proved highly appreciated by several participants who shared they were pleasantly surprised by the content and structure of the interview questions. In conclusion, it is crucial to acknowledge that my position as a white, cisgender woman who lacks direct experience within the sex industry introduces a degree of bias in the research. My choice of words and presentation of information unavoidably reflects this perspective.

2.3. Data analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed, except for Lola's, who preferred not to be recorded. The analysis employed Reflexive Thematic analysis, chosen for its systematic and flexible nature in uncovering patterns, themes, and meanings in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach aligns with the theoretical pluralist framework, enabling themes to emerge organically from the data, allowing for the generation of rich, contextually sensitive insights. The reflexive nature of thematic analysis acknowledges the potential impact of the researcher on the interpretation of the data

– a highly valuable nuance in exploring the subjective experiences of the participants. At the same time, this degree of subjectivity proves one of the most impactful disadvantages of this method, especially since this research was conducted by me only (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A second disadvantage lies in its recourse-intensive nature, particularly in terms of time and effort required for the coding and analysis of data. However, the insights gained justify this investment. For the analysis of the transcribed interviews, I utilized NVivo, version 14, which is a widely recognized and trusted qualitative coding software. NVivo 14 facilitated a structured and organized approach to data analysis, involving several rounds of coding to systematically identify and categorize the main themes and subcategories of individuals' attitudes, experiences, and expectations. In the first round of coding, I focused on identifying words or phrases that were repeated across the data. This step aimed to capture the most apparent patterns and recurrent elements involving the research question. The second round of coding delved deeper into the data by identifying themes that grouped initial codes. Through this multi-layered analysis, the following themes emerged: Personality & skills, Emotional labour, Aesthetic labour, Private relationships & sexuality, Stigma, Challenges, Resilience strategies, and Opportunities for empowerment. These themes represent the core findings of the data analysis and form the basis for the subsequent discussion and interpretation of the research findings.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The study of sex work is a highly sensitive and stigmatized subject, demanding meticulous ethical considerations to protect the participants' well-being and identities. Prior to their involvement in the study, all participants were provided with informed consent forms that detailed the purpose of the research, the expected duration of their involvement, the use of audio-recordings, and their rights as research participants. They were given time to review and consider the information before voluntarily agreeing to participate. With the consent of the participants, audio-recordings were used during interviews to ensure accuracy in data collection. These recordings were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher to maintain participant confidentiality. This anonymity was a fundamental consideration in this research, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential risks associated with publicly addressing the sex work industry. To protect the identities of the participants, complete pseudonymization was employed, and any information that could potentially reveal their identities was removed. The interviews followed a dynamic and iterative approach, meaning that participants were given the freedom to decline answering any questions they felt uncomfortable with. After each interview, during the debrief, participants were asked for feedback regarding the questions and the overall interview experience. This allowed for adjustments to the interview guide and ensured that participants' comfort and satisfaction were prioritized. In the same line of thought, to address any potential psychological or emotional impact on the participants, a check-in process was implemented. A few weeks after the interviews, the participants were contacted and informed that they could reach

out with any additional remarks, concerns, or questions. This aimed to mitigate any adverse effects and maintain open communication.

2.5. Limitations

Finally, understanding and acknowledging the limitations of this thesis is crucial for maintaining transparency and integrity of the research process.

The first important limitations lie in the sample composition and the self-selection bias. The recruitment process involved reaching out to several potential participants who were already associated with sex worker communities or social media platforms. This self-selection bias might exclude voices of sex workers who are less connected to such networks or who choose not to be visible in online spaces. Congruently, the sample may tend to favour sex-positive interpretations of commercial sex. Participants in the study consciously identified as ‘sex workers’, and their willingness to participate may indicate a more positive view of their profession. This could potentially bias the findings towards a particular perspective within the sex work industry, possibly overlooking more negative experiences or viewpoints. Beyond these biases in the sample composition, the small sample size of five female-identifying sex workers and one escort agency founder, while typical in qualitative research, potentially limits the diversity in findings. Finally, the participants in this study were not compensated for their time and contribution. This might have implications for the willingness of participants to engage fully in the research, potentially affecting the depth of their responses.

Second, the research lacks diversity within the sample, leading to challenges to intersectionality. The sample does not include women of colour, and while there is diversity in social backgrounds, the participants mostly share educational backgrounds. This limited diversity may constrain the applicability of the findings to a broader range of sex workers with varying backgrounds. This relates to the broader limitation in generalizability of this research, where the findings are specific to the experiences of the participants within a particular cultural and legal framework, such as legalized sex work in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany.

Already touched upon in the sections on Data Collection and Data Analysis are the challenges related to interviewer bias, subjectivity in thematic analysis, and researcher positionality. The use of semi-structured interviews introduces the possibility of interviewer bias, as the researcher’s perspectives may unintentionally influence participants’ responses. Sharing personal information during interviews, even with good intentions, can lead to participants shaping their responses in a particular direction, potentially affecting the authenticity of their answers. This, combined with the fact that the research was conducted by one individual, introduces the possibility of bias in the interpretation of the data. Finally, my position as a white, cisgender woman with no direct experience in the industry introduces a degree of bias. The interpretations and presentation of information may inevitably reflect this perspective, potentially influencing the research outcomes.

Findings

3.1. Mirroring the Client through the Self: Navigating the Customer Experience

3.1.1. The intersections between personality, skills, and emotion management

The ways through which the participants navigate the client interaction are indeed, rooted in an extensive degree of emotional labour. When asked about the typical scheduling and time management of their bookings, a diverse range of responses emerged. While each participant has distinct methods for organizing their services and schedules, they collectively concurred that their work primarily involves a higher proportion of emotional labour compared to physical and sexual labour.

“I mean I think the emotional part is the biggest part of the job. A stereotype that people have is that it’s about how you look, that it’s about the hotness of your body. This is very very far from the truth” (Zoe)

“I think it is mainly emotional. Maybe 20% sexual and the rest emotional. Again, it depends a lot on the client. Sometimes, the sex only lasts 10 minutes of the date, or like 15 minutes max. The rest of the time is listening and talking and reassuring and stuff like that.” (Amelia)

“Hmmm, I would say the proportions are about 65/35. 65% of the job is providing that emotional service, and 35% is sexual.” (Charlotte)

“The main reason why people hire my service is for that verbal, emotional connection and the conversations that come along with it. When I spend an evening with my client, where we first go to a hotel and go have dinner afterwards, I’d say it’s about 15 minutes of touching in the hotel, and the rest is talking, talking, talking. In the car to the hotel, in the car to the restaurant, while having dinner – it’s all talking and listening.” (Lola)

“Yeah, it’s mainly conversations and everything. And listening. Most of the people just want someone who listens and want to have a great conversation. That’s the main part.” (Ingrid)

In describing what emotional labour practically means for them, the participants provided different lenses and examples to substantiate their experiences. As argued in the literature, small talk and conversation constitute a big part of the participants’ labour experience. Often, the participants engage in conversation about daily life, by asking about what their clients’ do for a living, what they have been up to lately, and how they have been feeling. Even though some conversations are more superficial than others, the participants indicated their capacity to show active interest.

“Everything. They wanted to talk about everything. About so many things. Normally they wanted to talk about really basic and really normal stuff. What happens during their daily life and everything. And sometimes people also told me a little bit about their experience and about their job and what they’re doing. And if you show interest, they will tell you so much more about this. You just always try to be interested in it and always try to connect it in this way.” (Ingrid)

The emotional responses produced by the participants are determined by the client’s specific emotional needs at the moment of the booking and are hence individual and context-dependent. The participants touched upon an extensive array of emotional needs from clients, all of which requiring different, personalized responses on behalf of the sex worker. There were however certain commonalities in the participants’ answers regarding their most requested emotional responses. Providing an environment of trust and a sense of security proved vital in all the respondents’

experiences. Through constantly exerting an honest, open-minded, non-judgmental energy, the participants make sure their clients feel safe, at ease, comfortable, and most importantly: heard. This environment allows clients to share personal feelings – a dynamic around which the participants act very carefully and consciously. Clients regularly asked for advice on profoundly personal and sensitive matters. Charlotte, for example, has encountered several clients who consciously book her service because of her transparency involving past trauma she’s had to go through in the context of sexual abuse:

“A while ago I had this client and he just came out of a relationship with a girl who had also experienced sexual abuse and he told me his story, and I listened to him and explained him how a similar situation had affected me and my relationships in the past as well. And because this was so relatable for him, it helped him to hear my perspective. And I have multiple clients in this situation. There’s really a lot of listening involved as well as giving advice when these situations come up.” (Charlotte)

On top of sharing personal experiences to provide comfort and advice, two of the participants indicated to be a source of support for people who are suffering mental and physical pain. In these situations, participants’ prime objective was emotionally and physically alleviating some of the challenges their clients were struggling with:

“There are so many different situations. Depressed people, people who are unsure about their future and just need a push, people who need to hear that nothing is wrong with them and they are enough... I also have people who live with a disability or with ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) who often also need more from me than just the physical service. In these instances, it’s really about affection.” (Charlotte)

“I had quite an interesting experience with one client that I had this summer, we met 2 times. He had quite serious erectile dysfunction and so he couldn’t have sex, and he just wanted to cuddle and kiss, and just stroke each other. ... It was a very non-verbal exchange, but it was clear that he just really wanted this physical touch and this sweetness and kindness...” (Zoe)

Beyond meticulously creating this safe space, Amelia highlighted some of her clients’ inexplicit cravings for approval, praise, and sweet talk. In her experience, interaction with clients is often centred around their ego: “They just want to have someone who listens and who is like ‘wow this is amazing’, I really do compliment them a lot”. Charlotte confirmed this, arguing that if she notices a client feeling insecure, she compliments their appearance. The concept of ego-work, frequently discussed in sex work theory, thus holds significant relevance in the experiences of the participants.

Four of the respondents drew links between their core personality and their ability to perform their job, arguing that their natural sense of empathy, curiosity and open-mindedness helps them in navigating between different personalities, interactions, and conversations. More so, some of them argued that being a sex worker entails a large degree of innate personality traits that cannot always be learned. This aligns with theorizations of sex work as profoundly embodied.

“I am like this in general. I travelled a lot when I was younger and was constantly around people that I had a very different worldview from. And this kind of helped develop me into being very tolerant, if I can say so myself. Just understanding that people have a very different world than my own and they come to very different conclusions and I might not agree with them but does it matter? No, like, we can still have a conversation.” (Zoe)

“I am very open myself, and the more you open up, the more that people around you will open up as well.” (Charlotte)

Some of the participants incorporate routines before bookings to feel emotionally and energetically prepared to meet their clients. Ingrid, for example, beyond putting on clothing and makeup, consistently

takes caffeine supplements and drinks coffee before seeing a client: “I always wanted to push myself a bit to be super social and everything and coffee helped”.

3.1.2. Surface acting beyond ‘faking it’

Next to the importance of empathy, curiosity, and intuition, emotional service labour requires the active management of the display of one’s emotional state. As such, the participants continuously navigate between touching into their real emotions, filtering out inappropriate ones, and producing the correct ones. The interviews established that all the participants considered filtering or consciously manufacturing their emotions – in essence; surface acting – as constituting a legitimate part of the customer experience. Interestingly, they all explicitly mentioned the tendency to act or filter their emotions even before I had articulated these very terms and concepts. They were vocal and transparent about the tendency to “perform a role” (Zoe), “live up to expectations” (Charlotte), or “give clients what they want to hear” (Amelia), regardless of their current emotional state or personal opinions:

“Always say ‘yeah, yeah’. Always say what they want to hear. Always agree. Always say ‘Yes, I definitely understand, I would do it the same, you’re definitely right’. Always be super nice and always be the friendly person. And afterwards I will go out and think to myself: ‘oh my god, what a horrible person, I could never accept his perspective in real life’.” (Ingrid)

“I think I am good at it (laughs). Especially with men, like acting as if I care and going into the ego. But also it’s not true, I am not really listening, it’s like kind of an act and I know it is an act.” (Amelia)

This ever-evolving balance between authenticity and acting should be tackled with great care and attention to nuance. Each one of the participants had a particular individual strategy in how they would perform their professional role. Accordingly, the motives behind and the degree to which the participants exposed their true selves throughout their services differs significantly among them. Charlotte expressed that the proportion of acting was quite minor for her. She described that for about 80% of her job, she would be honest – both during conversation and during sex: “If I had to fake too much, I wouldn’t do this job anymore” (Charlotte). Zoe argued that rather than producing entirely new emotions, she filters out her negative emotions and instead focuses on positive ones:

“It’s a fantasy that you are selling, people want to think that it’s not a fantasy. But it’s not about inventing entirely new emotions, it’s about leaving things out. I think I have a whole range of reactions to people, so if someone is being snuggly, one of the realms could be pitying them, or judging them, which doesn’t come super easily but I can see myself feeling that, but then I don’t focus on those, but I focus on the feeling of empathy and cuteness.” (Zoe)

Amelia, Lola, and Ingrid, by contrast, did emphasize their tendency to ‘fake it’ and ‘act’. Whereas Ingrid indicated to act or play a certain role for the totality of her bookings, Amelia checks into a certain role for specific parts of the client interaction: “It is an act, and I know it is an act, but for the sex part, which is different, I have this weird thing where if someone looks at me and tells me ‘I am attracted to you’, I am attracted to them. So, that is kind of not acted - I really desire the person and it's true. But the talking part is an act.” When being asked about the degree of acting in her client interactions, Lola made a compelling point: “Yes of course I act sometimes, but I think that with him I can be more honest than with the average boss behind the cashier in the grocery store for example” - a remarkable nuance in how

emotional labour theory can forget to acknowledge the similarities between sex work and other, more traditionally defined forms of labour.

3.1.3. Deep acting and the opacity between private and professional emotions – challenges and resilience

Congruent with the extent to which participants perform a professional role that is or is not natural to them, they have varying opinions on (1) the need to separate between private and professional personality, and (2) the degree to which they do. Four out of five participants indicated having a rather blurry separation between these two spheres, arguing that they see their professional role as an extension of their true identity.

“Yes, there is a certain professionalism, but it’s not like my personality is affected to the level that I become a completely different person. It’s not as extreme as people think.” (Lola)

“I think that’s such a ridiculous question: ‘I want to get to know the real Charlotte’ because I am the real Charlotte. I also show my negative sides, the stupid shit that I do, my impulsivity, that’s all the real Charlotte.” (Charlotte)

“I think that I very much extend my real personality to my work. And the line between them is somewhere, but I don’t know where it is.” (Zoe)

Whereas Lola and Charlotte did not see the advantages in making a stark division between emotions at work versus emotions in their private life, Amelia and Zoe articulated how the opacity between the two had had an impact on their sense of self – shedding light on the potentially alienating dangers of deep acting:

“Sometimes you act so much that you don’t even know if you’re like acting or not. Like, do I really care? I don’t know. It’s complicated.” (Amelia)

“The only thing about the emotional part that was really hard for me at some times is when I got along with some clients and we had contact after the booking, I was still playing the same role. And I really liked them, but I knew that they liked the version of me when I was working, which is not me. And they were asking to see me outside of work, and that was really hard. There was especially one person that I actually liked a lot, who was really nice, but it was so hard because he was asking to see me outside but I know that he wouldn’t like me like he liked me at that moment. And that was kind of hurtful because I was like ‘Okay I please people when I am acting a certain way, which is not really me’ and that was a moment where my self-esteem was a bit bad. I was asking myself why I wasn’t acting like my work-me all the time. And then I remembered it was impossible, and it was just too tiring.” (Amelia)

“It goes too far as well where I don’t necessarily stand up for what I believe in. I mean this is more an issue personally, like I let everything slide, it’s also a people-pleasing type of thing. I would rather keep a situation pleasant than confront them, also outside of the work context. So I think it would be healthier if I did make a separation between the two. I take the path of least resistance, which is doing it like this. So far it’s working, but it’s something that I am figuring out.” (Zoe)

In a similar line of thought, Zoe emphasized the challenge of ‘logging off’ and being present in the moment. For her, it has been hard to distinguish working time and free time since all bookings and administration are taken care of through her phone. Since she does not want to miss opportunities or give the impression of being unavailable to new potential clients, she has a hard time logging off:

“What’s most challenging for me is the way that you are never ‘off’. Everything is in my phone. All of my real loved ones are in here, and then also all of my work stuff. And it also gives me a difficult relationship with technology I think, because it is the way that I make money or make plans to make money, and so it gives a lot of weight and dopamine rushes to go on there and to receive a big tip or to

receive a deposit for a date or whatever. So, yeah, I don't like that. And this is the way that you earn the most money, but it also sacrifices your ability to be present in the moment and to be off your phone. So, that's something that I am really kind of struggling with." (Zoe)

These testimonies substantiate the embodied nature of emotional service labour and how the participants have experienced the effects of their job on their self-identity, self-esteem, individual belief systems, and work-life balance. As such, it can be argued that existing literature on the alienating dangers within emotional service helps to identify the way that emotional labour has impacted the participants – at least those who explicitly expressed these challenges to me. Throughout the conversation, they touched on multiple strategies and measures that help to limit these effects, both consciously and unconsciously.

The manufactured working identity

To maintain a clear separation between 'work' and 'home', Ingrid adopts an entirely new, pseudonymized persona for every client, confirming literature on the creation of a manufactured working identity in safeguarding sense of self. Based on her perception of the client, their needs, and interests, she constructs an elaborately thought-out persona that guides her through the client interaction:

"I faked everything during my job. I was never really myself. I always tried to be someone else and made the character like the client wanted it to be. I first asked about their life and their job and then I thought okay – they don't know something about this subject, so I am going to pretend I am studying this. And I always switched my name. I found it fun to always create a new personality and to decide on new things to study or new things to do." (Ingrid)

Beyond the satisfaction she gained from successfully playing this role, the creation of that identity serves as a resilience strategy in separating reality from her professional role – an indisputable necessity in performing her job. Because of the stark differences between the invented characters and her true self, she found it easy to switch between those two. Moreso, she argued that the ability to make this distinction is a definitive prerequisite of sex work in general, indicating that without this separation, this job would be unsustainable and harmful to her:

"This helped me so much in separating my character from the job. When I left the hotel again, I was completely myself again, and I was super relieved. If you have this personality where you can switch, and you don't think about yourself at this time, then you can do it. If you would stay yourself, you would die because of this. It will not work. I think that is the only way that I could do it, by trying to not be myself. I think this rescued me. Never take it mentally, never let it be a part of yourself, it's a job. And after it's done, you switch it off, and you are back to who you were before. If you take it home, it will kill you. People who don't make this distinction, I think, will only do this job for a short time." (Ingrid)

Resilience in appearance

Another strategy for safeguarding the sense of self and distinguishing the self from the role of escort lies in the management of their appearance. In some instances, participants would allocate a certain aesthetic - including clothing, makeup, hair, and more – exclusively to their professional role as sex workers to maintain that separation. In other instances, the act of dressing up or putting on makeup before a booking was part of the individual's preparation to meet a client, increasing self-assurance and self-confidence:

“I’d rather be different. Cause it’s like dressing up, you know. That’s often a moment for me that I prepare myself. I love it, I love doing my makeup, doing a nice eyeliner with a bit of gold, because I love dressing up and when I do that I’m like: ‘Okay, now I can do this’.” (Amelia)

“Before seeing a client, I always put more makeup on because then I felt more unlike myself. And sometimes I wear high heels because then I had more confidence. And I always wore a dress, most of the time the same one, and really nice underwear and everything. Which I definitely would not wear normally. So yeah, there’s definitely a distinction.” (Miriam)

Likewise, several of the interviewees adopted a post-work routine to delineate the boundary between their professional and personal lives. After a booking, they would immediately take a shower, remove makeup, and change into different attire.

“First I go and take food with the money that I just got, and then I go home and take a shower, change into my pyjamas, and put on a movie, almost all of the time.” (Amelia)

“Take a shower. That’s always the first thing, wash everything off. Yeah, and sometimes twice: once in the hotel and back home again. And then I always try to wear something really big, that doesn’t feel tight to my body, something really cosy. And I look completely different. No makeup, no nothing.” (Ingrid)

Active client management

Another recurrent resilience strategy involved participants distinguishing between preferred clients and those they perceived as inauthentic, adjusting their service accordingly. For instance, Lola, Charlotte, and Ingrid shared instances of openly disagreeing with clients on ideological matters, challenging their political opinions, or expressing negative attitudes towards certain clients. This is a noteworthy revelation in the realm of emotional service labour, where the conventional expectation is to suppress personal emotions and adopt an 'acting' persona instead.

“People who are sincere to me, also get my sincere feelings. If you see so many people on one day, and you hear so many stories, you develop some sort of intuition and after a while you know who is sincere and who is not. I had this one client who during his booking was complaining to me about his cheating wife, while he was doing the same thing, you know. I was so disgusted by that. If a booking like that only lasts an hour, I can keep the appearances up and pretend to empathize with him. But if it takes longer than an hour and this person is acting like this, I decide for myself not to see that client again and will express my discontent with his attitude. Even if that means losing clients” ... “I do pay attention to that. If I had a booking, and I feel bad afterwards, I will never book that client again. So, I do protect myself in this regard. I only book clients of who I think ‘that’s a nice guy, or that’s a sweet guy’.” (Charlotte)

“And if I was really, really against it, I wouldn’t say yes to everything. If they were like, completely right, in terms of politics, I would never say I agree or I see it like this. I would say, no, I would say it is more like this in my opinion. So, I can’t agree, but I understand your point of view.” (Ingrid)

The participants are usually very careful in opposing clients since this has potential implications for their safety as well as their livelihood. Lola talked about how this is probably the hardest type of emotional labour for her – finding a balance between providing a successful service, and safeguarding your economic security, all while holding onto your belief system:

“When it comes to matters of racism, it’s against my nature to produce feelings or emotions or say things that are inconsistent with what I’m thinking. But when you work somewhere with a legal contract, and you get fired, you could argue that they discriminate you. But for me, it’s really: ‘if he doesn’t like it, I’m done’. So when I can’t accept what he is saying, and I check him or his ego, I can’t make him feel bad about himself, or towards me. So I still very much tone police myself to make sure that what I say won’t make him feel a certain way.” (Lola)

These testimonies are prime examples of how the participants negotiate their working environment as well as the terms of their employment. In their efforts to protect their sense of self, they define the boundaries of the emotional labour they perform and manage their clientele.

3.1.4. The business behind emotions and appearance

A noteworthy pattern that grew more pronounced during the interviews was the economic models underpinning the management of emotions and appearances. Beyond serving as mechanisms for resilience and coping, emotional and aesthetic labour were employed to align with clients' expectations, boost customer loyalty, and elevate the perceived authenticity of sex workers throughout their bookings.

Commodifying emotions in ‘the authentic experience’

Whereas the participants recognized the importance of acting in providing emotional labour, their answers also revealed the pressure to be ‘real’ ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’ to retain clientele and get positive feedback. The focus on innate personality and authenticity is carried through in a business model within the wider industry of which participants proved highly aware. They shared the business opportunities and economic gain that lie in their individuality, personality, and authenticity, and how they attract their clientele accordingly:

“Emotional labour for me, it sounds... I would like a more expansive term for it. Because I think that it is also very much about your real personality. That’s the reason people like you or not, it’s your personality, your energy. That is your success in the industry or not.” (Zoe)

“It’s all about your personality and making people want to see you, and you do that through being public, being yourself, which is not actually yourself, but you know. Trying to show your quirks and uniqueness. It’s super wanted in the field from companies as well.” (Zoe)

“Of course, the sex is included, but the guy that I want to attract also wants that real, emotional part from me.” (Amelia)

“A lot of agencies are selling the image of this ‘real’ girl, authentic thing. So what is asked of me, is to be as authentic as possible, which has its own kind of whims, but that’s what has built me my own personal business: this persona that I’ve built. People want to feel like they really connect to you.” (Zoe)

The economic pressure that fuels this ambiguity from within the industry proves impactful on several participants’ experiences. Further research is needed to investigate the influence of this market demand, and the pressure it puts on workers to unveil the ‘realist’ version of themselves while at the same time protecting self-identity.

The embodiment of an organizational aesthetic

Marion’s, who had founded her own escort agency, shared the importance of appearance and presentability in meeting clients. Her view aligns with the general pressure within the industry for escorts to manage their appearance and market themselves.

“I think on average, preparing for a booking takes about half an hour to 45 minutes, but that doesn’t include all of it, because they often also exercise and makes sure their feet and hands are looking good, their hair as well. So I do think it is an important aspect. For every booking, they will think, what will I

wear, what do I feel like, what are the clients' preferences... So I do think that appearance plays a big role." (Marion)

All participants demonstrated a keen understanding of the significance of aesthetics in their profession, emphasizing the importance of appearance at various points in their careers. Notably, Lola stood out as the only participant who claimed to have never invested extra time in her appearance, simply stating, "I take a shower and get dressed. That's it." This divergence could be attributed to her unique experience of having a single, loyal client over the years, in contrast to the other participants with larger and more diverse clientele. Among the latter group, several physical attributes and practices were highlighted, such as makeup application, spray tanning, nail care, and the purchase of lingerie, all aimed at creating favourable first impressions for new clients. More so than ensuring "presentability" (Marion), the participants indicated adjusting their appearances according to their client's tastes and aesthetics. In fact, some participants have gone so far as to cultivate their unique 'brand' or 'niche' in escorting, a distinctive identity they persistently maintain. This practice resonates with existing literature on aesthetic labour, where individuals embody a certain organizational aesthetic to boost client retention.

"Yeah, I change myself on every level. I had someone who always wanted me to wear stockings so I would always wear this with him. You do what the person wants because he's the boss and he's paying you." (Ingrid)

"Some men have a foot fetish and then I think it is important for me to pay attention to my feet, have my nails done and so on. I actually started paying attention to my feet because of that one client." (Charlotte)

"I do very little about my appearance, but that's also my brand and the whole 'natural girl' thing. Which I don't even necessarily like, because I do like dressing up and I have a fantasy to be a fabulous bad bitch, but actually the natural girl thing sells better. So I feel a bit pigeonholed by this. My friend told me it's like having your own niche in escort work." (Zoe)

In the pursuit of embodying these aesthetics, Amelia and Zoe both conveyed experiences of feeling pressured by the expectations set by clients and managing agencies to an extent that it took a personal toll on them.

"I have a big shoot for a company on Thursday and they are making me shave my legs, which is a bit annoying, because they claim to be feminist and whatnot." (Zoe)

"One of the reasons I stopped escorting for a moment is because I gained weight and I felt like it was a lie, that like, I couldn't be attractive because I didn't like my body." (Amelia)

Furthermore, transcending its economic role, adopting a specific aesthetic had a profound impact on Amelia, who contended that it bolstered her sense of confidence and authority during client interactions. This observation holds particular significance within the context of the agency dilemma prevalent in the realm of sex work.

"What I want is for them to fantasize about me. So the more I think I look like what their ideal woman is, the more I feel like I have power over them. One guy that I saw a few times had a really gothic vibe and after seeing him for the first time I understood quite fast how to dress and stuff. And afterwards, when I dressed into that aesthetic full-on, it was quite easy. Like it gives me more power or something." (Amelia)

The interviews not only underscored the inherent challenges in emotional service labour concerning the preservation of one's authentic self and emotional well-being, along with the strategies of resilience adopted by the participants, but they also unveiled an additional layer of pressure emanating from within the industry that could exacerbate these predicaments. Escort workers find themselves in the paradoxical

position of being expected to engage with clients in an honest and authentic manner while simultaneously contending with the demands of specific aesthetics. Consequently, they may struggle with a dissonance between their genuine selves and their natural aesthetics and the professional identities and appearances they are compelled to embody. To examine the implications of this potential split habitus, further research on the internalization of these dispositions is warranted.

3.2. After Working Hours: Influences on Private Life – Stigma and Romantic Relationships

Having delved into the intricacies of the embodied labour experience, this section illuminates the impact of sex work on the personal lives of the participants, extending beyond the realm of client interaction.

3.2.1. Public stigma and self-stigma – changing the narrative

As stated in the literature, the societal stigma and denunciation of sex work take a significant toll on the participants. Throughout their career, they all have been confronted with harsh criticism and assumptions from within their close circles as well as wider society. Alongside Amelia and Ingrid, Lola found dealing with these painful confrontations the most challenging part of her job: “I think the hardest thing about it is the stigma about the job. If the job itself was hard, I couldn’t do it” (Lola). She shared an interaction with her doctor, exemplifying how stigma affects people in their daily lives.

“When I asked my general practitioner for an STD test, she gave me this weird look and told me that they only do STD tests every couple of months with sex workers. And then I was like, okay, yeah, then I am a sex worker, even though I had never told her that before. Because it’s not like I have sex with so many different people for my job, it’s only one person, but that doesn’t make me more or less of a sex worker. And if she wants to categorize it like that, shaming people for having sex with multiple people, then do so. At that moment, I really don’t feel like doing that type of emotional labour with the doctor to try to explain to her how sex work can look like. I just want my test, please.” (Lola)

In alignment with existing literature, several participants echoed a common coping mechanism, which involved maintaining secrecy and discretion when it came to disclosing their involvement in sex work to family, friends, and colleagues. Notably, a recurring theme in their responses suggested a potential link between such secrecy and experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Those who had concealed their profession to a greater extent often found themselves with limited access to social support.

“Uhm, I think the assumptions of people. I am talking as a white privileged woman that has never been forced to do this, who started because she wanted to, and I am not poor. I have to say that I am talking from this point of view. Of course, if you see this on a larger scale it is not my little stigma with my family that is the problem. But for me, that is the most difficult thing, with my family for instance.” (Amelia)
“Sometimes, even when I’m with friends, biases come out, which can be annoying, it can show ignorance. But I notice a big generational difference. Like I don’t tell older people what I do. And the older people I did tell, which are my parents, it was rocky. My dad was chill with it but my mom had quite a hard time. So it’s good now, but I just feel like that I don’t have the energy to have that conversation with more people than I have to, or who aren’t just gonna get it already. So I’m kinda like half-out, I guess.” (Zoe)
“I never talked about this with anyone except with a very good friend, who I shared my location with when I was seeing clients. When I tell people, I feel like shit. Yeah, I feel guilty because it’s a dark chapter in my life. Because everyone is always so judgmental about it. No one really says ‘OK, yeah, I understand why

it's like this'. And that's why I closed it because if someone from work figures this out, I'm done. I can't even ever talk to this person again.” (Ingrid)

These testimonies reveal a particular sense of awareness that was present in all participants' answers. They recognized the impact of stigma and discrimination on their personal lives and touched on the emotion management strategies needed to cope with similar interactions, as well as on the consequences stigma had had on their self-image. Ingrid shared feeling guilty and ashamed of her job at times.

“I think because of the stigma. The job is fun. Well everyone likes sex. The most challenging part is going into the hotel because you always try to avoid looking at people because you felt so dirty and bad, it's like a runway and everyone is staring and everyone knows that you are doing. This was the hardest thing ever. Or when you have to ask the receptionist for a card or whatever. This is so embarrassing. Yeah, the stigma is really the bad part of it.” (Ingrid)

Whereas it is crucial to acknowledge instances of self-stigma in the participants' testimonies to understand their psychological effects, it is important not to conform to the oppressive paradigm where individuals are reduced to victims. The participants emphasized the power and influence one has in distancing oneself from those stereotypes and negative assumptions. Lola shared that when she had just started escorting, she decided to keep it to herself completely. After a few years, however, she now considers herself a sex work activist and surrounds herself with people amongst whom she feels safe to talk freely and honestly about her job. She remains careful when talking to strangers, holding in mind the institutional bias and the potential effects on future employers for example, but her motives for secrecy are not fuelled by feelings of shame and guilt anymore. The same is true for Charlotte and Amelia, who often debunk the negative connotation behind sex work by changing the narrative and using labels like 'whore' themselves.

“I don't really experience it like that. Why? I stand my ground. I am a sex worker, I love my job, and I am proud of it. If someone judges that, I don't really care anymore. Or if someone calls me a whore, I use that word myself to debunk it, so people don't say it anymore, because they realise that it doesn't work. So for me, that stigma, it doesn't really exist anymore.” (Charlotte)

“I used to be secretive but now everybody knows. It's even a joke: when people ask 'What do you do for work' I say 'Ah yeah I am a whore' while looking them dead serious in the eye and seeing their reaction is quite funny (laughs). So yeah, now everybody knows.” (Amelia)

In changing the narrative and dealing with stigma, the support of friends proved of high importance to some of the participants. Amelia and Zoe shared how getting to know other sex workers had changed their lives in sharing experiences, coping with stigma, and feeling a sense of belonging.

“One of my best friends I will like call afterwards and we will talk about it, because she is also an escort. This is one of the first things I always do, I call somebody close to me and talk about it, explain the whole thing, and explain how it went, what happened. I love to talk, I talk a lot with my friends and with a lot of people. I think that's really the thing that helps me.” (Amelia)

“I think I am very lucky to be in an open-minded community. My friends are really chill about it.” (Zoe)

For Amelia, belonging to a wider sex worker community has helped her navigate stigma and develop a network of sex workers to share positive experiences, feel heard, and make a positive impact.

“The aspect of the community, we get together and do actions and stuff, with a lot of other sex workers, and all those things make me feel so good, it's so nice. I get a lot of energy from the reunions with the other sex workers, because we laugh about it, we talk about it, and that is a moment that is really important to me. And there need to be more spaces for this solidarity. Cause usually in your normal life, there's no one that understands. Like you can talk about it, but they don't get it, because they don't have experience,

and so having spaces where you can learn and support each other is invaluable. Find groups of people and colleagues. This is life-changing, it helps you with everything.” (Amelia)

For Charlotte, however, the wider sex work community does not serve as an important source of support or empowerment. Instead, she highlighted the competitive nature of sex work:

“I don’t really have a lot of friends who are in the same industry. I have one couple, who have become good friends now, but besides this not really. To be honest, they don’t have to become my best friends. Why? There’s a lot of jealousy and ingenuity. There’s so much competition in sex work. I rather not mingle in that. I’m more of an einzelgänger, you know? Always have been one.” (Charlotte)

As such, the extent to which the participants actively experience stigma and self-stigma differ individually, as do their strategies for coping with these challenges. All individuals, however, have experienced societal stigma to affect them in some way or another.

3.2.2. Sexuality and romantic relationships

Compatibility between sex work and romantic relationships

Another significant aspect of sex workers’ lives that is often impacted is their sexuality and romantic relationships. In line with established theories, the participants indicated the complexities of balancing their professional commitments with maintaining long-term romantic relationships. In some instances, they encountered issues such as a lack of understanding from their partners, along with feelings of jealousy and mistrust. Some participants even mentioned that they had taken a break from escorting due to the incompatibility with their romantic relationships. Lola, for example, took a break from her job during a past relationship – a decision she regrets to this day:

“I gave up my financial independence for a fucking man and I’m still paying for it. In that relationship, I wasted a thousand times more emotional labour and never got any money for it.” (Lola)

An interesting difference in the respondents’ answers was the reasoning behind taking a break from escort work. Some contended that, for them, maintaining a lasting romantic relationship was incongruent with sex work, while others believed that they could seamlessly blend the two, but it was their partners who hesitated. In the analysis of the participants’ viewpoints, a potential indicator of compatibility emerged. Those participants who were currently in monogamous relationships or had been in such relationships previously argued that their job was incompatible with romantic commitments. On the other hand, Lola, Amelia, and Zoe, who identify as polyamorous, found their professional engagements accommodating and even enhancing their sexual orientation.

“I stopped a couple of months ago. It's not compatible if you really date someone. It is more for fun, but not if you want to be honest to someone and you're exclusive, it's hard to combine it emotionally.” (Ingrid)
My boyfriend didn’t want us to see each other the same day I had seen a client. The only thing I would want to do is watch a movie together and cuddle. He for sure had more issues with it than me. I’ve always had partners who were monogamous, and I am polyamorous, since years now, so it’s been a lot of mixed messages because they confused work and private. And even though I was always open to listen to them and listen to their needs, it’s also work for me so I cannot change that or I wouldn’t be able to meet anyone anymore for work. That is really a struggle. But I can also get that they don’t want to because they don’t understand it, because of the stigma.” (Amelia)

“I think in a way, I started going for it after my last long relationship ended, it helped me to not have to think about finding sex and I could just work on my friendships and myself, since I already got the sexual

satisfaction from my job to some extent, so then I didn't have to find casual hookups to fulfil that side. But now, I am doing more of a polyamorous thing, and I don't feel any conflict at all." (Zoe)

Separating private intimacy from commercial intimacy

To maintain healthy private relationships, many of the participants underscored the significance of creating a clear distinction between their commercial and personal sexual experiences. In alignment with established discourse, all participants stressed their commitment to a safe-sex policy, consistently using condoms in their commercial encounters. Furthermore, the interviewees highlighted substantial disparities between the nature of intimacy in these two realms, with Lola characterizing them as "two completely different sides of the same coin." Several participants disclosed that they behaved and expressed themselves in distinct ways when interacting with clients compared to their private sexual partners. These distinctions in sexual experiences encompass various aspects, including communication transparency, personal desires, physical movements, and emotional connections.

"For me, it's not even comparable. In my personal life, I try to feel more and don't go directly into classical pleasure. In my personal sex life, I can be selfish and I can ask for my own pleasure, which I also very much do. My body movement is also different. The way I move is different. I am not thinking about how the other person is viewing my body, so I don't have to keep that into account. It's different positions etc." (Amelia)

"It's a whole spectrum I would say. It depends so much on the person. My first escort date this summer was with a super cool person that I would probably have hooked up with if I met them out in normal life. So then, it doesn't feel that different. Still, it's within a structure and there's money involved. So it's not the same, for sure, because it's for a different reason. If it's personal it's about connecting with that person in particular and it's more loose what is going to occur, there's no expectations." (Zoe)

To maintain healthy boundaries, the interviewees emphasized the significance of maintaining distance from clients to prevent them from encroaching into their private affairs. Charlotte, in particular, underscored the importance of this practice in her life. While she wasn't as strict about it initially, she had learned the value of setting clear boundaries with clients over the years.

"One time, years ago, I made the stupid mistake to meet a client in private, who then fell in love with me. But for me, it's the most normal thing to have a coffee after a booking, I don't even think about the sex that we had. But it's not like I ever fall in love with my clients, or that I develop feelings for them. Because I separate that very well. Sometimes, I still have clients who want to book me because they want to get to know the real me, but I will never ever start something with a client. I would never agree to meet them in private. So that boundary is very clear for me." (Charlotte)

Although the participants shared this mindset and advised beginner escorts to pay close attention to these boundaries, some of them had encountered situations where, in practice, this line was blurrier than they would have hoped it to be. Zoe, for example, shared how she experienced it to be harder to maintain this separation in sugar babying than in traditional escorting.

With sugar babying it's so fucking messy and you're dating but you're also pretending to date. With that guy, I actually quite liked him, he was a super nice person and we did have fun together. So it's like occupying this space between personal life and work, which is a greater theme in sex work. But in the hardest way that I've experienced." (Zoe)

As a result of this ambiguity, Charlotte and Zoe felt the influence of commercial sex on their private life, altering their expectations and standards, as well as the level of physical connection to private sexual partners. They have both struggled with excessive comparisons between commercial sex and private

sex, affecting their ability to connect intimately with their personal partners without any financial involvement.

“When I got to my own personal lovers, without meaning to, I drew associations. Because you know, it’s the same positions and the same feeling in some way of desiring affection, and it made me more careful with how much I was giving in my personal life. Doing sex work, I have so much sex, that when I have sex in my personal life, I want it to be like very good and very special and about that person. I don’t need to have casual sex anymore just for the exploration because I get to do that in a work context.” (Zoe)

“I met someone two months ago, and it’s a really nice guy, he accepts what I do for a job, but I find it so much easier to have sex in a work context and that’s just because I have been single for 2 and a half years and have only been having sex for money that entire period. So now, to have sex in private, I find it very difficult. I notice that I am pushing him away. So yeah, I find that really difficult. If I meet someone in private, my standards have become so high, it really needs to be like fireworks because I’m doing it ‘for nothing’, you know? And if there are no fireworks, and it’s more like a campfire, then I think ‘yeah’, I’d better just work and get paid’. So it’s a difficult question that you are asking at this moment.” (Charlotte)

Lola, who has maintained a long-term sugar-baby relationship with the same client, described her connection as somewhat ambiguous. Surprisingly, this ambiguity has proved beneficial for her in many ways. Over the years, as they got to know each other better, she gradually opened up and became more emotionally vulnerable with him. While she doesn't necessarily recommend this approach to other sex workers, Lola felt secure enough in their relationship to ask him to provide a guarantee for a bank loan, a request he fulfilled, enabling her to live in her current residence. However, this also meant that her client gained access to personal information, including her name, last name, address, and birth date.

3.3. Opportunities for Empowerment

3.3.1. Sexual liberation and pleasure

While the participants candidly discussed the challenges of integrating their private relationships with their work, they also highlighted the significant sexual empowerment they gained from their jobs. Each of them expressed that escort work had a positive impact on their sexual exploration, boosting their self-confidence and ability to communicate their desires and preferences to romantic partners.

“It’s been a big exploration for me sexually. I’ve gotten to discover entire universes of sexuality that I didn’t know before and made me so much more confident and able to communicate and talk about my boundaries, and all the things that used to be super scary now come naturally in that sense. Which is so fun, I love it. I really feel so comfortable talking to lovers about what we like, our kinks, these convos are comfortable and enjoyable where before it was nerve-racking.” (Zoe)

“I think also my private sex life is way better now because I know more what I really want, my personality.” (Ingrid)

Similarly, Charlotte experienced a positive impact of her job on her hypersexuality, arguing that it had helped her gain back control over this part of her life.

“I regained control over my private sex life and my hypersexuality. I also don’t have the need anymore to have a new boyfriend every 5 seconds, so it really has a positive effect.” (Charlotte)

Finally, Zoe discussed how sex work has empowered her by unveiling the gender dynamics within sexuality in her private life. Her experiences have shifted her perspective on the dynamics of physical and emotional connections in romantic relationships.

“Something that’s so interesting about sex work is that it makes explicit a lot of gender dynamics and makes me very conscious of them in my personal life. Before I started sex work, if someone found me hot, that would be exciting to me. That would be enough ground to get to know them or something. And then through doing sex work and being found hot by many people, it loses its thrill, and then it needs to be something deeper and something else. I kind of like it actually.” (Zoe)

3.3.2. Self-esteem, self-love, and pride

Beyond supporting sexual exploration, the participants shared how their jobs had positively impacted their confidence, body image, and self-esteem. Their experience in escort work often exceeded physical empowerment but also influenced their self-love and pride. This is especially interesting in the context of the dangers of alienation and self-stigma within the field. Whereas some participants acknowledged instances and episodes of guilt and shame, they indicated feeling an overall sense of pride, empowerment, and confidence in their job, both emotionally and physically.

“I think that the confidence that it’s given me is a huge one. Before I started I didn’t know that I was attractive. I didn’t believe it. And then you start getting paid because people think you’re attractive, and then it starts to sink in. It really taught me that sexiness is confidence, and not a set of physical attributes. It’s entirely who you are and how you act and the presence that you bring. And that freed me from a lot of insecurity about my physical body.” (Zoe)

“It’s had a very positive effect overall. For my confidence as well, I have to say, certainly. Like, there’s nothing wrong with me, you know (laughs)” (Charlotte)

“I think my confidence is way better now, overall. Because I got just so much positive feedback. To be more myself in my personal life and to be more confident about myself and about how I look, because I had really big struggles with this.” (Ingrid)

“The work in general has had a good impact on myself because I loved myself a lot more and felt so much empowered. I feel so much reassured with myself and kind of provocative with life, still feeling like I am different. Not I am different, but I know I can shock people and I love it, like all these things.” (Amelia)

“I am a sex worker, I love my job, I am proud of it.” (Charlotte)

3.3.3. Intrinsic motivations for entering the field

Another major theme in the participants’ answers was their reason for entering the field, and their various pathways to empowerment. Naturally, the economic motive of financial independence proved an important indicator for starting escort work. All the participants recognized the positive impact of their jobs on their financial stability and livelihood. An interesting nuance, however, was that often, this goal did not serve as the only reason behind starting sex work. Lola shared how escorting had allowed her to lead a financially stable life where traditional forms of employment do not. Given her struggles with mental health – due to a combination of PTSD, neurodivergence and ASS – she does not feel fit to work a 9 to 5 job and instead opts for a job with more flexibility and lower strain on her mental health. On top, she sees her job as benefiting her mental health, because it grants her the financial power to afford therapy and sustain her mental well-being.

“I don’t think a lot of people experience financial peace in this society. And I think that a lot of people would like to look down on me, but I think I’m better off than a lot of people in this capitalist system. This job gives me the financial freedom to keep on working towards that goal of empowerment. Without this money, I wouldn’t be able to pay for therapy. The work itself does not make me feel empowered. The

work enables me to empower myself. And it's the only way I see where I can sustainably empower myself. I don't see another method in this society". (Lola)

Similarly, three interviewees started escorting to finance their higher education. In this sense, sex work has empowered them to finish their degrees and has allowed them to gain cultural capital. As such, the decision to enter the field is often a very rational and conscious choice, backed by extensive benefit-risk calculation.

"The time that it gives me. I never have been able to work so little and have so much time and be comfortable. It's just this last year that it's the case, and I am fucking grateful for it every single day because I can do my studies and live a very fun and exciting life and not worry about expenses." (Zoe)

"Other people also sell their bodies. If I look at my mom and how her back is, working in healthcare, and she gets paid way less per hour than me." (Lola).

"That's the thing as well I have to admit - I hate working. I really don't like working. So I'm not gonna lie, it's really good pay for not much time invested. So yeah, that's for me the best." (Amelia)

Beyond these economic motives, it may be argued that several of the participants viewed their jobs as a form of social service, where the exchange benefits both parties. The participants who emphasized this aspect of the job explained how a successful booking, leading to a satisfied client, in turn, energized and motivated them: "This person has an emotional and physical need, and they are actually doing the right thing by hiring a sex worker and supporting someone who wants to give it to them, and this is a great exchange" (Zoe). Charlotte is especially empowered by and grateful for the service she can provide to clients with disabilities.

"I often work with people who have a disability, or are in wheelchairs, or with certain illnesses, and those are the most fulfilling. One client is in a wheelchair, and he always wants to roleplay, and to then see him so proud, that makes me happy. That gives me fulfilment, absolutely. Those are the most grateful clients you can have. And afterwards, it always hits me, like 'wow, we are so lucky to be healthy'." (Charlotte)

Ultimately, all the participants revealed an innate curiosity about people, perspectives, and opinions – an emotional need that found fulfilment in their work. They cherished the chance to connect with diverse individuals in such an intimate context, an experience that empowered them through access to a range of personalities and worldviews.

"My main drive was meeting different kinds of people. And the side part was the money. It was interesting to meet so many different people and it's not that they're disgusting, ugly people. It's really educated people. You learn so much about different personalities and how they think about life and about what's important in their life and about their fears as well. You would never meet people like this, in this intimate and open setting. So you could have really nice, interesting conversations with them." (Ingrid)

"I enjoy it because I find it interesting to get into people's head like this and to learn how they experience the world. It's quite fascinating. I meet people that are very different from me and we are connecting in the ways that we are, whatever that might be, and the rest doesn't really matter." (Zoe)

An important aspect to consider when exploring these avenues of empowerment is the dynamic and non-linear progression of the participants' internal motivations over the course of their careers. As time has passed, their priorities and objectives have transformed, reshaping the way they derive significance from their work. In essence, the initial reasons for entering the field may not be the same as the reasons for staying. For instance, Ingrid embarked on her escorting journey out of guilt and self-punishment, but she gradually found empowerment in her role after a few months. Similarly, Zoe's entry into escorting was more serendipitous than intentional. However, her perspective on it has undergone a profound

transformation. Amelia recently took a break from escorting, and she's eager to see how her job will fit into her life now, given the shifts in her views on certain aspects during her time away. These journeys of transformation highlight the dynamic nature of personal growth and empowerment.

“I did a pause, and I’m scared of starting again because I also know that my values have changed since I stopped. So I don’t know if I could do it so easily now. I changed my point of view on a lot of political things and about my body, and about myself, and everything. So I think now it’s gonna be more like questions and this is gonna be interesting. But before, it was really easy, it wasn’t complicated.” (Amelia)

In conclusion, the participants had overlapping yet individual approaches to finding fulfilment and empowerment in their jobs. They all shared a peculiar sense of rationality on the motives behind entering the industry in the first place, but also for deciding to continue escorting since. However, their testimonies should not be interpreted as definitive or determining the course of their future careers. Analysing the embodied labour experience of sex workers is understanding it within their ever evolving and dynamic individual context.

Conclusion

In a discourse where sex workers are often placed within the rigid confines of a victimization narrative, this master's thesis has sought to illuminate the profound complexity and resilience inherent in the lives of female-identifying escorts. The guiding research question, "How do female-identifying escorts navigate between their clients, self, and stigma using strategies of emotional and aesthetic labour", aimed to uncover the multifaceted labour experience of escorts. The approach to this study has been rooted in a pluralist perspective, which emphasizes an open and comprehensive exploration of the challenges, strategies of resilience, and opportunities for empowerment within the industry. This allowed a more nuanced picture of the experiences and labour involved in escort work. The literature review served as the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis, revealing the prevailing, often one-dimensional portrayal of sex workers as victims in the oppressive paradigm. The remnants of the agency-coercion binary from the sex wars era continue to influence contemporary discourse, casting sex work as either an industry of service or a subject of rescue. The interviews, however, have illuminated a reality far more nuanced and ambiguous than initially anticipated.

Central to the findings is the prominence of emotional labour, as defined by Hochschild. The participants unanimously acknowledged the vital role of emotion management strategies in their interactions with clients and the success of their professional endeavours. The interviews shed light on the practical implications of the theoretical concept of 'bounded authenticity' and the perpetual balancing act between individual emotions and the emotional demands of the job. Instances of surface acting and deep acting revealed the complexity of emotional labour, as well as the difficulties of separating work-related emotions from private ones. The consequent risks of losing sense of self were a theme that resonated throughout the interviews, with a few participants resorting to the adoption of a manufactured working identity. However, an overarching pattern that emerged was the principal importance of authenticity and realness in their work, underscoring the enduring significance of revealing their true selves. The concept of authenticity becomes even more intriguing when juxtaposed against the economic pressures of the industry – where aesthetic labour comes into play. A fascinating paradox arises within the industry, where escorts are expected to conform to a particular aesthetic, brand, or niche, while simultaneously striving to maintain authenticity and provide a genuine 'girlfriend experience'. In other words, the industry often expects escorts to present themselves flawlessly, but simultaneously values natural beauty highly. In navigating these complex demands, alongside those of clients and their own values, the participants demonstrated exceptional degrees of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, adaptability, and flexibility, often involving both explicit and implicit cost-benefit calculations in interacting with their clients.

The exploration of this thesis extended beyond the professional realm to examine the impact of societal stigma on the participants' personal lives, particularly in their relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners. The pervasive stigma surrounding sex work – which many of the participants

described to be the most challenging aspect of their job - often led to feelings of self-shame and guilt, significantly affecting the lives of the participants. Coping with these pressures required diverse strategies, ranging from activism, to secrecy, to community building. Regardless of the individual strategies employed, all the participants experienced the impact of stigma on their self-esteem at some point in their careers. A parallel aspect of their lives heavily influenced by their work was their romantic relationships and sexuality. Incompatibility and secrecy were recurring themes in their relationships, highlighting the intricate interplay between professional endeavours and personal life. The participants often concealed their work when starting new relationships and spoke of their partners' mistrust and jealousy. An interesting pattern emerged, where the general separation between professional and personal identity was rather blurry, but the participants carefully delineated private sex from commercial sex to prevent overcomparing these experiences and to safeguard the fulfillment of their romantic relationships. Beyond strictly separating commercial sex from private sex, the nature of the participants' relationships also proved significant. Where participants in polyamorous relationships often did view their jobs to be compatible with their relationships, participants in monogamous relationships disagreed.

Despite the numerous challenges the participants face, they equally emphasized the positive influence of their work on various aspects of their lives. Sexual liberation and empowerment were prominent themes, as their job had facilitated them to gain insights into their sexual preferences and fostered transparent communication in their private lives. This newfound confidence extended beyond physical attributes, bolstering their self-esteem and confidence in their entire personalities. The sources of empowerment were diverse, ranging from financial independence and flexibility to mental health and overall emotional well-being. In assessing the participants' journeys to self-actualization, it is crucial to recognize their dynamic and non-linear pathways, each unique to the individual. The definition of empowerment varied among participants, encompassing a range of personal and professional goals. The motivations for entering the field often differed from the reasons for staying, and the challenges they perceived changed over time.

This thesis started by investigating the meanings of emotional and aesthetic labour on the interpersonal level – in the client interaction – and on the structural level – in societal stigma and self-stigma. It analyzed how sex workers navigate and actively redefine the pejorative societal understanding of their employment. After investigating these types of labour on a more substantial level, however, it becomes apparent that these services do more than serve the purpose of resilience and coping. Offering a labour experience rooted in emotional and aesthetic management, sex workers construct a business strategy, define their brand identity, and make conscious decisions regarding the attraction and retention of clientele. Hence, whereas it is impossible to reject the patriarchal structure of society and hence the sex work industry, it is equally important to recognize how escorts actively build and reinvent, often non-linearly, their role within this structure.

In conclusion, the qualitative analysis has dismantled the notion of escorts as mere victims of internalized misogyny or past trauma. Instead, it has unveiled the remarkable resilience and adaptability exhibited by the participants as they navigate the ever-evolving balancing act between their clients' needs, economic goals, and personal values. As such, their experiences are diverse, not to be generalized, and defy the simplistic reduction to narratives of victimization or liberation. Instead, they should be analyzed with great attention to detail and respect for the intricate labour that is escort work.

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Annexes

Annex A: Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT

The present study arises in the context of a master's dissertation underway at **ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa**. This study concerns emotional labour in sex work and aims to deconstruct the embodied labour experience of sex workers beyond the traditional focus on physical labour, focusing on emotion management and the importance of appearance, as well as the challenges and opportunities found in these types of service labour. The study is carried out by Flora Van den Bergh who can be contacted (vandenberghflora@gmail.com / +32491204391) in case of any questions or should you wish to share comments.

Your participation, which is highly valued, consists of one interview and could take around 1 hour. There are no expected significant risks associated to participation in the study, since it will be completely anonymized. Although you may not benefit directly from your participation in the study, your answers will contribute to the existing academic discourse on emotional labour in sex work, uncovering the embodied professional demands of sex work that exceed the outdated definition of sex work as exclusively physical work.

Participation in this study is strictly **voluntary**: you can choose to participate or not to participate. If you choose to participate, you can stop your participation at any time without having to provide any justification. In addition to being voluntary, your participation is also **anonymous** and **confidential** through the measure of pseudonymization and coding. The data are intended merely for processing and no answer will be reported individually. You will never be asked to identify yourself at any time during the study. To make sure that your perspective is accurately represented throughout the data analysis, the interview will, upon your approval, be **voice-recorded**. This audio only serves as a way to accurately interpret your answers by avoiding a biased misrepresentation. The recording will only be available to Flora Van den Bergh and will be deleted immediately after the termination of data analysis.

In view of this information, please indicate if you accept participating in the study:

I ACCEPT I DO NOT ACCEPT

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

