“Fuck Zucc. We will not be silent”: *Sex workers’
fight for visibility and against censorship on
Instagram*

by

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Abstract

As governments begin to mandate corporations to regulate online spaces through legislation like the US government's Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), information networks integral to the safety and success of sex workers are being threatened. Sex workers use social media to increase their visibility for the purpose of sharing self-representations that challenge hypocritical and detrimental stereotypes of sex workers as victims and/or criminals. However, sex worker activists on Instagram are being subjected to targeted censorship because of their public sex worker identity and for posting images and content that pushes up against and challenges Instagram's rules about nudity. Through a 30 day ethnographic content analysis, this project sought to understand the tactics and strategies that sex workers are engaging in to resist and respond to Instagram's censorship, while attempting to carve out space for themselves on a platform that has a known history of policing deviant female bodies through censorship. I argue that sex workers take up visibility labour and draw on historical patterns of sex worker activism, such as a politics of care and collectivity, to respond to and interrupt Instagram's one-sided and top-down censorship.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In December 2018, a sex worker activist posted this statement to Instagram captured via screenshot: “First they took my twitter, in June. Then they took [Instagram], just now. I feel invisible. Silenced. Watched. Muzzled...No one cares about my community. I am beyond heartbroken. I am beyond words.” Her Instagram account had been deleted, despite the fact that she did not appear to have explicitly violated any of the company’s rules for participation, also known as its ‘Community Guidelines’. She had posted that statement to a secondary account, one she had originally created with the intention of sharing her amateur photography, unrelated to sex work. As she pointed out, she had lost both her Twitter and her Instagram account in the span of six months, yet she continued to fight for her access to space on Instagram’s platform. Another sex worker activist, referring to the same account deletion, wrote: “Fuck zucc.¹ Fuck the muzzling and silencing of sex workers. We will not be silent.” For those who follow the sex worker community on Instagram, reactions such as these to accounts being deleted have become a regular occurrence, with sex workers’ personal accounts, meme accounts, and activist/education accounts all being targeted by Instagram’s censorship.

The Internet age has seen distinct changes in the “spatial organization of the sex industry,” as many sex workers² have moved online and indoors (Feldman in Showden &

¹ ‘Zucc’d’ is a reference to the last name of Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO and founder of Facebook, (which also owns Instagram). Zuckerberg’s name is often invoked when issues of censorship on Facebook or Instagram come up, with the broader issue of censorship on these platforms being directly attributed to Zuckerberg himself.

² This thesis defines ‘sex worker’ as “people who sell or trade their own sexual labour in exchange for a resource, which is often money but can also be drugs, alcohol or shelter” and refers to “many different kinds of sexual labour” including stripping, porn work and camming, and “activities traditionally understood as prostitution” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 1).

Majic, 2014, p. 245). As the industry has evolved, so have the ways sex workers organize and advocate for their rights. With the Internet's communicative capacities came "a new range of possibilities for sex worker organizing," with social media playing a key role in sex workers' capacity to communicate with each other across space (Feldman, 2014, p. 245). Blogs, for instance, have offered sex worker rights activists a space to "define and debate the boundaries of their experiences" as well as allowing "a safe space for sex workers to come out...and speak *as* sex workers on issues of interest to them" (Feldman in Showden & Majic, 2014, pp. 244, 248). Social media sites including Instagram, Twitter, or Tumblr provide virtual venues where sex worker rights activists and their allies can have discussions amongst themselves and also potentially reach a non-sex worker or 'civilian' audience, as some sex workers count followers on platforms like Instagram into the tens of thousands. Sex workers continue to use such online spaces to support each other, give advice to each other, to connect with viable clients, screen for dangerous ones, and to organize (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 20).

As governments move to regulate online spaces, information networks integral to sex workers' safety and success are being threatened. When, in the face of this, the sex worker referred to above writes, "we will not be silent," my research asks 'how?' My research explores the strategies sex worker activists use on the social media platform Instagram to work around, resist, and respond to the platform's censorship and moderation tactics, while continuing to use the platform for the benefit of their own activism. Within Instagram's short history³, it has developed a reputation for aggressive censorship which explicitly targets female bodies by removing photos featuring female

³ Instagram was founded in 2010, and purchased by Facebook in 2012.

pubic hair, menstruation, photos of plus-sized women in their underwear, and any photo containing a female nipple—even an illustrated one (Buzzfeed, Warren & Warzel, 2015; Mashable, Dupere, 2015). Despite this, sex workers continue to advocate for their right to choose to participate in sex work on mainstream platforms like Instagram, which offer access to a potentially wider audience. Activists use these platforms “to mass-distribute their messages and calls to action,” and to include themselves in the “knowledge production about their work and industry” from which they are often excluded (Feldman, 2014, 245, 243). The presence of sex worker activists online can highlight “counterstories” to the common trope of sex-worker-as-victim, as they are able to depict themselves in their own words and images (Jackson, 2016). Further, some of the sex worker rights activists included in this research consider a main function of their Instagram accounts to be educational. Social media platforms like Instagram offer the possibility of doing so on a broader scale with, in some instances, thousands of followers observing and participating in the conversation.

The driving force behind this research is the fact that in March 2018, the United States Senate passed a legislation package known as the *Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act* (FOSTA) and the *Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act* (SESTA)⁴. This bill enables censorship by a private company over public sex-related content—including sex worker activist’s personal and/or educational accounts—on social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and most recently, Tumblr (Martineau, 2018). This legislation amends the pre-Internet era *Communications Act* of 1934, which provides legal protections to individuals and companies that host “interactive computer

⁴ Future references to this bill simply call it FOSTA for ease and clarity throughout.

services.” Under Section 230 of the *Communications Decency Act* (CDA), user-generated content platforms like Facebook or Craigslist could not be held liable for illegal activity that its users might engage in on its platform, as “no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider”. FOSTA amends this section to include an exception for sex trafficking. According to a White House fact sheet on the legislation, FOSTA enhances penalties “for people who promote or facilitate the prostitution of five or more people or who contribute to sex trafficking through reckless disregard”; allows “victims or damaged individuals of sex trafficking [to] seek justice against websites that assist in the violation of Federal sex trafficking laws”; and enables “State law enforcement officials to take action against individuals or businesses that violate Federal sex trafficking laws” (White House, 2018). The legislation received all-party support in the Senate, with only two senators voting against it (“Vote Summary Bill H.R. 1865,” 2018). The bill was further endorsed by a group of celebrities, including known Democrats Amy Schumer and Seth Meyers, who endorsed the legislation in an emotional PSA, urging the public to call their senators and ask them to pass the law, stressing that because of a “loophole” in the CDA, it was not only legal to purchase a child online for sex, but as easy as ordering a pizza (Friedman, 2018).

FOSTA puts the legal onus on the hosts of user-generated content sites to watch for and remove any content that could be associated with sex trafficking. Internet companies can be “subject to state and civil prosecution for hosting sex workers on their platforms” (Jackson & Heineman, 2018, p. 74). Websites that were known to facilitate the advertisement of sexual services for sale have been taken down (such as the Craigslist

personals page) while the website Backpage.com and affiliated websites (including regional versions of the site, even those outside of the U.S.), which facilitated connections between sex workers and clients, were seized by the United States government in April, 2018. The seizure took place immediately before FOSTA was signed into law, indicating that perhaps FOSTA was not necessary to take such action.

The FOSTA legislation has been criticized by advocacy groups for being purposefully vague (“The Impact of SESTA/FOSTA,” 2018). One such group, known as ‘Survivors Against SESTA’, is an organized campaign that came into being in response to the legislation and is described on its website as “a coalition of current and former sex workers, people who have experienced exploitation and trafficking, dancers, hustlers, allies, partners, family members and community members. We are survivors, and for many of us, the sex trade, and online work in particular, have been central to our survival” (Roux, 2018). Other advocacy groups, such as the US Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) issued a statement on March 2, 2018, indicating its vehement opposition to the legislation, and referencing its conflation of sex work and sex trafficking, its vague language, and its potential to put sex workers “in direct danger” by pushing them offline (SWOP, 2018).

The Internet offers a number of tangible safety nets to sex workers that are threatened under FOSTA, if they have not already been removed (Jackson & Heineman, 2018). Online pages where solicitation occurred, including Backpage.com and Craigslist Personals pages, offered a safer alternative to street work because it gave sex workers the ability to vet their clients online in advance of meeting them. It also gave some workers more autonomy, as they were able to book clients independently of a third-party such as a

procurer or madam. The Internet provided space for sex workers of all types to connect with each other; an online community of sex workers strengthened the safety of individuals who might otherwise be working in isolation. This virtual community offered tangible tools for harm reduction like “electronically mediated ‘bad client lists’ for example, [which] allowed sex workers to share information about violent or non-paying customers with each other” (Jackson & Heineman, 2018, p. 74). An impact survey conducted by COYOTE Rhode Island (Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics) in the wake of FOSTA also showed that sixty-percent of the 156 sex workers surveyed “stated that without online screening capabilities, they now see potentially dangerous clients” (Jackson & Heineman, 2018, p. 74). Jackson and Heineman (2018) acknowledge a report from The St. James Infirmary in San Francisco that “in the first week after the passage of FOSTA” there was already “a fourfold increase in street-based sex work (versus online solicitation)” (Jackson & Heineman, 2018, p. 74). Another sex worker run blog reports that, based on anecdotal evidence discussed amongst sex workers, “13 workers have gone missing and two have been confirmed dead. Two workers have been assaulted at gunpoint, and I can’t even count how many other stories of rape and assault I’ve heard from people returning to or just learning the streets for the first time” (Simon, 2018). The same blog reports that there has been at least one sex worker suicide connected to FOSTA (Simon, 2018). While there is widespread agreement that sex trafficking is a social problem that ought to be addressed, as both advocacy organizations and others point out, many sex workers who used these platforms to find potential, (and importantly, safe) clients, to connect with other sex workers, and to advocate for their rights are left wondering where this legislation leaves them.

The censorship of sex work and the workers who provide it is a longstanding issue, and sex workers themselves have historically been silenced in discussions about their work, lives, and bodies. From the antipornography efforts of the 1980s-1990s, to feminist abolitionism, to the *United States' Global AIDS Act* colloquially known as the 'gag rule'⁵ in the United States, to being made to feel "silenced" at events such as the Women's World Conference of 2011, sex workers have long endured opposition to their own existence (Duggan, 1984, p. 31; Showden & Majic, 2014, pp. xiv, xx). Some of this resistance comes from within feminist activism, theorizing, and legal scholarship. There exists a "longstanding, well-known and over-discussed divide among feminists themselves about the very nature of sex work" and "whether it can and/or should be a woman's right (or a human being's right, for that matter) to choose this type of activity" (Levy and Willman, 2010, 2). This debate, known as the 'sex wars', has been ongoing since the 1970s, with two relatively distinct positions: radical feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin and legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon, saw prostitution, pornography, and other sex work as a social problem. Conversely, sex radicals believed that sex work in itself could be anti-patriarchal by demanding that men pay for experiences they believe they are owed for free (Koken, 2010, p. 28; Tuchovsky, 2006, p.25). While robust debate around the differences exists within both branches of feminism, the aim of this research is not to reopen this debate, though it does acknowledge that the history of such debates remains relevant in understanding the issues at the heart of this research, including FOSTA and Instagram's censorship. This project employs a sex radical approach in line

⁵ The Global AIDS Act of 2003 stipulated that nongovernmental organizations receiving government funding in the United States had to explicitly oppose prostitution and sex trafficking (Showden & Majic, 2014, p. xix).

with the sex worker rights activists this project engages with. This approach acknowledges that the sex industry is often a site of misogyny and violence, but that such harms begin with and are perpetuated by the misconceptions and negative perceptions of sex work and sex workers. Sex workers' relationship to their work varies, and all individual experiences are valid and add to the discussion.

Through this sex radical lens, FOSTA can be seen as an extension of a decades-old conflation between sex work and sex trafficking that has left sex workers with few substantive rights; the “first major federal policy” to do so since US Congress passed the *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA)* of 2000 (Jackson & Heineman, 2018, p. 74). Of the TVPA⁶, Jackson (2016) argues “anti-sex trafficking efforts posit that (1) prostitution is responsible for sex trafficking, (2) prostitution and sex trafficking are synonymous, and (3) prostitution is a form of violence by men against women and girls” (p. 27). Such conflations obfuscate sex workers' agency with the argument that prostitution (among other sex work) is something that only ever happens *to* women, rather than *by* women (Weitzer, 2009, p. 214). As such, sex workers often take up arguments that seek to differentiate between their experience in the sex industry, which they chose for themselves, from the experience of sex trafficking victims who were coerced or otherwise forced to participate in the industry. Ultimately, the strategy of dividing the two experiences “is rooted in the notion of agency—who has it, and who does not—and how the government attempts to determine someone's level of agency” (Jackson, 2016, p. 37).

⁶ The TVPA was signed by President Bill Clinton and then reauthorized by Presidents Bush and Obama.

When advocating for their rights as workers, sex workers stress that their participation in sex work is voluntary, even if it was a choice borne out of a need to survive in a capitalist patriarchal society. Such arguments raise questions in relation to historical and ongoing debates over women's power and autonomy, and a woman's right to choose what she does with her own body, particularly when her choices sit in contrast with prescriptive norms for 'good' feminized behaviour. Koken puts forth a conceptualization of agency as "an individual's power to make choices regarding his or her actions within given circumstances," though this does not mean that agency is equivalent to free will; "an individual may possess free will but lack agency" (2010, p. 29). Radical feminists such as Dworkin have a narrow view of agency, believing sex workers to be the embodiment of women's sexual objectification, and as such, those who partake in it are victims lacking any agency because of their marginalized position (Koken, 2010, p. 29). Sex radicals are deliberate in differentiating between sex trafficking (and other sexual violence) and sex work, which they see as an agentic and even resistive choice, as sex workers are "positioned as gender/sexual outlaws defying taboos of female sexuality" (Koken, 2010, p. 29). A pro-sex worker position does not mean that "sex worker rights activists are all 'happy hookers' who are thrilled with their work and have no suggestions on ways to improve it" (Ditmore, 2010, p. 239). While "sometimes people who support sex workers' rights attempt to show their support by arguing that the sex industry is not actually a site of sexism and misogyny" as sex worker Molly Smith and Juno Mac write, "the sex industry is both sexist and misogynistic" (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 4). This does not mean that those who willingly participate in it are not engaging in work; rather, the sex worker rights movement exists because "the illegal status of sex

work and its consequences do violate the civil and workers' rights and integrity of sex workers" (Vanwesenbeeck in Koken, 2010, p. 30). The conflation of sex trafficking and sex work serves to maintain this harmful status quo.

Governments contribute to this status quo, as they historically —and currently— deny the agency of sex workers who have chosen their profession. Showden and Majic (2014) write that “feminist abolitionism is today colloquially known as the ‘Swedish model’; a legal framework in which the sale of sex is decriminalized, but the purchase of sex is not (p. xx). Such frameworks deny sex work as legitimate labour, as they attempt to eradicate demand in an attempt to shrink an industry to ‘save’ its workers from their patrons (Showden & Majic, 2014, p. xx). Denying sex workers their customers and therefore their income, however, does not help those who partake in sex work out of survival, or those who continue to work in the industry because their time in the industry has left them stigmatized with little to no other employment opportunities. While some countries have adopted the Swedish model, including Canada, prostitution remains illegal in the United States.

Regardless of the legal status of different forms of sex work around the world, American legislation such as FOSTA has a direct impact on sex workers operating outside of the U.S. As I argue in this thesis, and as noted in the forgoing, FOSTA is another iteration of the problematic conflation of sex work and sex trafficking as it draws on similar narratives of moral panic such as those seen in the pornography debates of the 1980s. Instead of targeting brick and mortar sex shops, it is now the virtual spaces that sex workers and their allies are being forced to defend. In addition to the removal of sites like Backpage.com and the Craigslist personals pages where sex workers connected with

clients, their visibility on mainstream platforms like Facebook and Instagram is also under threat.

Following the passage of FOSTA, a small furor erupted on Instagram when it removed photos with the hashtag “#stripper” and “#femalestripper”, but not “#malestripper.” The feminist blog *Jezebel* wrote about this gendered censorship:

Currently, when you search Instagram for #stripper or #strippers, you are given a preview of just a couple “top” posts in the category. But if you click through to view the entire hashtag, the following message appears: “Recent posts from #strippers are currently hidden because the community has reported some content that may not meet Instagram’s community guidelines.” The same thing was reportedly happening until very recently with a handful of related hashtags, including #yesastripper, #stripperstyle, and #stripperlife—but those appear to be back in action, demonstrating how quickly the sex work community has to adapt and change. (Clark-Flory, 2018)

It remains unclear whether or not this censorship was occurring because other Instagram users were reporting a large number of posts tagged with “#stripper” and Instagram was removing them because of their own community guidelines, or whether the removal of the posts was due to FOSTA legislation (as some, including Twitter user @KateDadamo speculated it was). On Instagram, posts and accounts are removed often without justification or explanation. There could be a variety of reasons why a post or an account might be removed, but Instagram’s lack of clarity as to how it is enforcing FOSTA leaves affected users to speculate on the reasons. Regardless of the cause, however, it does appear that female and femme sex workers and sex worker rights activists are subject to a disproportionate amount of censorship on the platform compared to other non-sex worker accounts and users.

Instagram’s visual nature, its history with censoring female bodies generally, and the presence of sex worker rights activists with thousands of followers on the website,

means it offers an interesting platform to explore how sex workers and sex worker rights activists advocate for themselves whilst simultaneously working to evade or combat the threat of removal from the platform entirely. FOSTA is an important, and problematic, part of this equation. It is possible that the law does factor into Instagram's decisions to remove certain content. Sex workers on the site have reported an increase in censorship since the legislation has passed, though Instagram is deliberately unclear about its process.

This project situates FOSTA within the broader history of the sex wars and analyzes the legislation from the perspective that it perpetuates a decades-long moral panic surrounding sex work while also responding to a renewed moral panic about sex and technology. The research question guiding this project is: What strategies do sex worker activists on Instagram employ to work around, resist, or otherwise frustrate and challenge censorship and moderation tactics? This core question also motivates three subsidiary interests. Firstly, how do sex worker activists potentially subvert and lay claim to a corporate platform that denies or rejects their existence upon it? Secondly, how do these activists strategically employ images of their own bodies to push the boundaries of this visual-based platform? And, thirdly, how does the activism they engage in on Instagram relate to other areas of activism, such as offline organizing, intervention and support work? To effectively explore these questions—even though the scope of this project constrains my ability to engage in direct dialogue with sex workers—I adhere to the adage “Nothing about us, without us” (Feldman, 2014, p. 243 citing, a 2007 blog post by Stacy Swimme). This means I cite sex workers directly where possible, have asked for

informed consent from participants in this research, and take up an inductive, non-prescriptive approach to this research.

This thesis takes up a discussion of historical scholarly debates around sex work, the public policy that regulates it, and sex workers' historical and current strategies of resistance from stigma-based perspectives and institutional regulation that intends to eradicate their industry. Chapter 2 situates FOSTA within the broader history of the 'sex wars,' and acknowledges similarities in the narratives constructed around sex work from the 1980s that are represented through the discourse surrounding FOSTA. This includes exploring the longstanding debate amongst feminist scholars about the place of sex work within our society, and examining how this debate has both evolved and persevered into the present. As has been laid out by previous scholars including Gayle Rubin, Philip Jenkins, Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter and Chris Ingraham and Joshua Reeves, public policy discussions around sex work, whether that be pornography or the solicitation of sex online, consistently return to issues of morality, obscenity, and themes of protectionism. This chapter will examine the FOSTA legislation as a moral panic, taking cues from seminal scholars on the subject including Stuart Hall, Stanley Cohen, and Philip Jenkins, but also exploring how their work has been interpreted and extended through such concepts as 'sex panics' (Irvine, 2008, Herdt, 2009). This chapter also considers how the history of sex worker rights activism has evolved to influence the strategies and tactics that sex workers on Instagram are currently undertaking. I have included sex worker voices directly whenever possible by looking to texts written by current and/or former sex workers, whether they be academic in nature or otherwise. These voices inform this research about the impact of the historical and current conflation

of sex work and sex trafficking and how the movement itself, while inherently intersectional given the many different factions that make it up, also struggles when only the most privileged sex workers are able to make themselves visible to speak for sex worker rights.

The third chapter explains the methodological approach I have taken. Over thirty days, I conducted an ethnographic content analysis on Instagram, comprising of 18 accounts, though several of the people who run these accounts went through multiple iterations of their accounts over the course of my ethnography. In this chapter I explain and justify my selection method for my sample, the protocol I followed over the course of this analysis, as well as my own positioning in relation to the community I am studying.

Chapter four offers an analysis and discussion of my findings. I include thick descriptions of the strategies and tactics that I have observed sex worker activists engaging in on Instagram to negotiate with the censorship they are facing. Thematic strategies that emerged throughout my data collection included anticipating censorship by creating back-up accounts to use when deleted; engaging in boundary work, particularly after their account has been deleted, as the sex workers attempt to regain visibility within their community but demonstrate an awareness that there is also a vulnerability to harassment that comes with heightened visibility; and, mobilizing the community of sex workers on their behalf, a tactic which has roots in sex workers' ability to collectively organize as well as engage in a collective politics of care. It concludes with the observation that sex workers on Instagram are concerned with remaining visible in these spaces because it is a way for them to express their own self-representations that run counter to hegemonic narratives about their work and identities.

Finally, chapter five offers a discussion and conclusion that reinforces the intersectionality of the issue at hand, in which the most visible voices on Instagram have a tendency to hold privileged social positions through their whiteness, gender identity, and thinness, among other things. It considers how activists on Instagram co-opt the structure of what Alison Hearn (2008) calls the reputation economy to increase their visibility and lay claim to their own self-representations by engaging in self-promotion and self-branding. It discusses how American regulation of mainstream platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Google, etc. are an extension of American imperialism, as some of the most influential platforms are housed in and contribute capital value to the American economy, and while these companies are available to users worldwide, American law has the ability to regulate how users interact with such companies on a global scale. It looks at changes to Instagram's censorship practices that have emerged in recent months but that indicate a near future in which content will be moderated by machines and algorithms. I interpret the censorship and regulation of the presence of sex workers online as an indication of what is to come, as governments around the world are currently grappling with questions of Internet regulation.

Chapter 2: Literature and theory

Sex workers have a long and complex history of employing their collective agency as a way to challenge dominant meanings and narratives about themselves and their work. The current conversations happening between sex workers and those that attempt to govern them, such as the U.S. government and Facebook, via Instagram, is hardly the first iteration of regulatory interaction. The sex worker rights movement was born out of need, as sex workers experienced and continue to experience real harm as a result of governance structures that do not see them as agentic beings, let alone as having voices that carry valid political weight. While in this chapter I refer to a variety of historical attitudes towards sex workers, it is crucial to recognize that these same tropes continue to play out today in the context of FOSTA. The chapter offers historical context as to how sex workers have organized in the past in order to better inform an analysis of how sex workers are currently organizing on Instagram. This chapter explores how dominant tropes about sex workers are borne out of recurring sex panics, and how FOSTA is a response to an emerging panic over sex and technology in particular. This chapter also engages with the question of how censorship on Instagram functions. Further, I examine how through censorship, the sex worker community solidifies its community boundaries as it attempts to create and control space for itself within a context of targeted censorship. This chapter discusses the link between censorship and a culture of shame and in particular, the shame associated with female sexuality. It ends by laying out certain strategies of anti-shame resistance, such as attempts at stigma reduction through self-representation and memes.

Sex worker: A political identity

The term ‘sex worker’ was coined in 1978 by Carol Leigh, a sex worker herself, to describe a range of occupations in which the worker seeks to profit off of their sexuality in some way (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 2). Sex work is an umbrella term that can be used to refer to “escorts, exotic dancers, porn stars, peep-show workers, professional dominants, rent boys, phone-sex operators, strippers, webcam performers, erotic priestesses, prostitutes, and providers of a vast array of niche adult services” (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 2). In economic terms, the profit sex workers reap can be understood broadly as resources. While in most instances sex workers receive money, they can also be compensated with “drugs, alcohol, or shelter” etc. (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 1). Some sex workers may participate in the industry as a survival strategy, “using sex—the one form of labor capital they possess—to obtain food, shelter, clothing, medicine, physical protection, and other necessities” (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 2). Others might engage in sex work “casually or temporarily to supplement low-wage” or precarious work, perhaps while they pursue a career as a writer or artist (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 4). Some sex workers simply find that they are able to be more financially successful in the sex industry than anywhere else, while also having the freedom of managing their own schedules.

Whichever form of sex work an individual partakes in, and for whatever reason, it is important to acknowledge the work as valid labour while also recognizing that a range of experiences within sex work exist. Melissa Ditmore writes that often the public perception of sex worker rights activism makes an assumption that sex workers are all “‘happy hookers’ who are thrilled with their work and have no suggestions on ways to

improve it” (Ditmore, 2010, p. 239). Indeed, some sex worker rights activists and their allies have historically taken a sex-positive approach to advocating for their right to choose to engage in sex work, however, as Juno Mac and Molly Smith⁷ point out, sex positivity:

can be a counterproductive point from which to start a conversation about the actual working conditions of the sex industry” particularly when those who are able to find pleasure or gratification in their work tend to be the most privileged...The sex industry is “both sexist and misogynistic” and there exists real potential for harm, including experiences of “assault, exploitation, arrest, incarceration, eviction, and deportation (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 13 and 4).

While harm in the sex industry is often perceived as being perpetuated by male clients, it is worth emphasizing that many of the potential harms sex workers might experience are perpetuated by the state and police.

“Sex worker is a political identity,” writes Melissa Gira Grant,⁸ “one that has not fully replaced the earlier identifications imposed upon them” (2014, p. 21). By using a blanket term like “sex worker” to describe “all of the people who sell or trade sex or sexual services,” sex workers are better able to advocate for the rights of an industry as a whole, in a society which tends to impose blanket stigma on workers in the industry regardless of whether they engage in full-service sex work or perform on a webcam. Using the term “sex worker” helps to create a sense of unity within an industry that can otherwise be isolating. It also assists in shedding some of the stigma that terms like “whore” and “prostitute” have accumulated over centuries of use, and, it positions the arguments of sex worker rights activists as issues of labour rather than issues of morality or obscenity. This positioning continues to have merit for sex workers who now have to

⁷ Molly Smith discloses in this text that she is a former sex worker.

⁸ Melissa Gira Grant publicly identifies as a former sex worker.

fight for their right to exist as legitimate actors in an online economy as their access to their markets have been cut off with the closure of Backpage.com and Craigslist personals, for instance. Further, sex workers are having to petition for the ability to participate in reputation economies that centre around visibility labour on social media like Instagram.

Sex worker collectivity and the political work of care

Across decades of recurring moral panics over sex work, sex workers have historically been “compelled to band together” as they sought to offset dramatic power imbalances in the industry, including between sex workers and sex industry operators, sex workers and police, and sex workers and the state (Gall, 2014, p. 221). Sex workers’ most valuable social capital has always been each other. Sex worker organizations and collectives run by and for sex workers “reinforce the validity of sex work” (Beer & Tremblay, 2014, p. 291). Sex worker-led organizations such as ‘Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics’ (COYOTE) in the U.S., the Scarlet Alliance of Australia, or the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform are just a few of the established organizations that have “sought to gain legitimacy for sex work and sex workers through legal reform and political discourse” (Gall, 2014, p. 224). While these organizations have been compared to unions, sex workers’ collective representation “cannot solely focus on the site of work, if it is to be effective” (Gall, 2014, p. 222). Sex worker organizations must look at the broader picture of how sex work is regulated by the state and perceived by members of the broader public (Gall, 2014, p. 223). Gall notes that “sex workers generally recognize that, individually, few of them hold positions of strength when it comes to dealing with

the clients, operators, or regulators who help determine and shape their working lives” (Gall, 2014, p. 223). This sort of organized collectivity is typically the venue through which sex workers make themselves most visible to the public in their capacity as sex workers. In such settings, sex workers take great care in mobilizing specific counter-narratives to the stereotypes and hegemonic meaning associated with their work.

However, there is also non-visible political work involved in sex worker collectivity. While sex workers rely on each other to strengthen their capacity to advocate for their rights, the collectivity found in the industry goes deeper than overt political activism. Sex workers also engage in “collective self-help and self-reliance” as they often support each other on an individual level, demonstrating the strength of community ties (Gall, 2014, p. 223; Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 6). As Mac and Smith note, “[c]aring for each other is political work” (2018, p. 6). Sex workers often care for each other “beyond the boundaries of the biological family unit,” engaging in communal resource-sharing that might function as “the only safety net sex workers have if they’re robbed at work or if an assault means they need time off to heal” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 6). This might include collective child care, or the pooling of resources to “pitch in to prevent an eviction or to offer emergency housing” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 6). This communal support and care is a valuable political resource for sex workers because it is a method of valuing each other in the face of political and social systems that consistently tell sex workers they are not valued. In an otherwise isolating profession, having access to a community of peers sits in opposition to a neoliberal political climate which, while celebrating individual rights and being increasingly sexually liberal, still tends towards “a politics of protection,” whereby policies are enacted to protect women and girls” (Jackson, 2016, p. 28).

On Instagram, personal content and activism-related content are regularly blurred, which means at times, instances of this typically non-visible political labour of care is selectively and intentionally made visible. As such, the act of caring and providing support can become demonstrative or performative, serving a goal that extends beyond the political act of mutual support into the public sphere with the aim of making the supportive nature of the community public and visible. As the existence of sex worker collectives signalled the validity of sex work through group advocacy, performing mutual care and support in a space like Instagram reinforces not only the existence but the depth of sex worker networks, signalling sex workers' resiliency and commitment to protecting each other from the harms that protectionist policies perpetuate.

Of course, these same protectionist policies are grounded in questions of harm as it relates to obscenity, violence, and the relationship between the two (Benedet, 2015). The rationale behind FOSTA and similar regulatory measures is one of reducing the harm that befalls sex trafficking victims as a result of online sex trafficking practices. However, such legislation avoids the question of what harm it is imposing upon sex workers. Identifying, articulating, and working to combat these harms becomes necessary work for sex workers and sex worker rights activists to engage in so as to bring the threat of harm against sex workers into the paternalistic conversations of the harms of the sex industry itself, which problematically views attempts to eradicate an entire industry as a method of harm reduction. Such thinking, which suggests that it is in sex workers' best interest to be denied access to an industry that could very well be a means of survival for some of them, is part of the harms that sex workers work to protect themselves from in this way.

As previously noted, the sex industry is indeed one in which workers can and do experience harm including “assault, exploitation, arrest, incarceration, eviction, and deportation” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 4). However, the potential for such harms is increased when sex workers are pushed further underground by regulatory measures intended to stamp out or censor the industry as a whole. In the case of FOSTA, sex workers are losing tactics they have taken up via online tools to reduce the harm they might encounter in their work, such as the production and distribution of bad client lists, and the ability to vet clients in advance of meeting them (Jackson, 2018, p. 74). Doing so only increases a sex workers’ risk for harm like assault, abuse, arrest, and so on.

Debates that invoke or imply the sex industry in some way invoke a broader conversation of harm experienced by women as a result of the sex industry as a whole, therefore identifying the source of the harm as the industry itself rather than the way it is perceived by society (stigma) or how it is regulated and policed. Highlighting the immediate risk for harm that regulatory measures like FOSTA pose for sex workers allows sex workers to challenge preconceived notions of the source of harm as being the sex industry itself. This allows sex workers—particularly those who identify as women—to point out that the harms they experience as a result of anti-sex industry regulation are just as valid as the harms against women that those advocating for such regulation say they are attempting to stamp out (Benedet, 2015).

When ‘unity’ becomes homogenizing

Because of the intersectional nature in which sex workers are treated by those that participate in their criminalization and regulation, it is homogenizing to say that only one

sex worker rights movement exists. Not only is there an array of experiences and perspectives within the sex worker rights movement, but sex workers are also involved in many other movements, as they also advocate for sex workers in queer and trans movements, radical women-of-colour movements, take part in harm-reduction organizing, in the prison abolition movement, not to mention migrants' movements, labor movements, and welfare movements (Grant, 2014, p. 129). "Necessity has bred an intersectional movement," writes Grant (2014, p. 130). This is a good thing for the sex worker rights movement, because as long as sex workers can find new spaces to 'come out' as sex workers, they are adding a sex worker perspective to other movements, while these other movements add to the intersectionality of sex worker rights movement, too (Grant, 2014, p. 130). For sex workers, finding solidarity in other movements creates more safe spaces in which sex workers can disclose their identity without fear of criminalization or stigma; without these spaces, "sex workers will be more occupied fighting for survival alone than in finding solidarity" (Grant, 2014, p. 130).

While this cross-movement solidarity is a benefit born of the diversity of sex workers themselves, the sex worker rights movement is certainly not immune to issues of racial and gendered privilege. Juno and Mac (2018) observe that "[j]ust as in any radical movement, a select few activists often receive unfair credit for doing the same work that more marginalized sex workers, who cannot risk being public in their activism, are doing alongside them" (p. 19). Those sex workers in more precarious social positions, such as immigrants, refugees, single parents, transgender folks, migrant and Indigenous workers, and so on, all face "higher stakes when organizing or speaking up than sex workers who have secure long-term tenancies, hold a passport or citizenship, or have no children"

(Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 20). This might mean that only the most privileged of sex workers are willing or able to voice their opinions and advocate for their rights, as the ability to speak as an ‘out’ sex worker is reserved for those who can afford to mitigate the accompanying social stigma. White, able-bodied, cis-gender and thin sex workers may be the ones presenting themselves as the faces of sex work, and as such, their visible needs can sometimes be equated with the needs of all sex workers, including those less visible segments of the community.

It is beneficial for sex worker rights activists to recognize the similarity in their movement goals with those of others. Sex workers undertake social justice efforts similar to the organizing efforts of undocumented immigrants, for instance. Both groups are “looking for points of entrance into the governance over them and their work” (Jackson, 2016, p. 40). Further, in the same way that trans rights activists and LGBTQ+ activists are, sex worker rights activists are engaged in a fight for their basic rights and to not have their identity reduced to any of these markers. What each of these identities has in common is that society has historically attributed a large degree of stigma to each one, and through stigma, attempted to regulate bodies and sexual activities. The rights movements of these groups were “galvanized and mobilized” by harmful and oppressive regulation that resulted from moral panics associated with each of these identities (Jackson, 2016, p. 40).

Moral panics, sex panics, tech panics

The governance of sex workers has manifested in the form of a rescue industry driven by a historic conflation between sex work and sex trafficking which results in all sex workers being dismissed from conversations about the regulation of their labour

because they are viewed as victims in need of rescue. At the same time, sex workers continue to be criminalized for their deviance, a method that is endorsed by carceral feminism. The “blurred lines between punishment and rescue” perpetuated by the rescue industry, carceral feminism, and enforced by the state, leave sex worker rights activists with an enormous challenge in altering the dominant perspective on their work (Jackson, 2016, p. 28). Because the argument against sex trafficking is so emotionally charged, critiquing it in any way can lead activists to be seen as contesting efforts to rescue women and children from real violence. Sex worker activists must oppose not only entire systems of belief about the nature of sex work, but also the “sociolegal construction of victimization and protection, one that is attuned more toward the interests of the legal system and the nonprofit industrial complex than to worker rights” (Jackson, 2016, p. 41). Carceral feminism, the rescue industry, and harmful regulation of sex work by the state have all materialized and been perpetuated in response to moral panics around sex, sex trafficking, and sex work. In an online context, these longstanding sex panics are converging with moral panics that arise in relation to technology, bringing the same framework of victimization to Internet regulation.

Moral panics and sex panics

Moral panics are often cyclical and self-reinforcing, as similar themes or tropes emerge and re-emerge over time; though that is not to say they are predictable (Jenkins, 1998, p. 232). The “volatility of sexual politics” means sexual activities repeatedly “function as signifiers for a moral panic” as different sexual ‘deviants’ become targets of moralization (Irvine, 2008, p. 1; Rubin, 1984, p. 171). Sexuality in Western societies has

historically been so obscured and mystified by morality and decency politics that “the wars over it are often fought at oblique angles, aimed at phony targets, conducted with misplaced passions, and are highly, intensely symbolic” (Rubin, 1984, p. 171). Moral panics over sex and sexuality are often motivated by a fear of the unknown or unfamiliar. This fear becomes directed at and attached “to some unfortunate sexual activity or population”, though this activity or population may only ever be implied in the panic and never explicitly identified (Rubin, 1984, p. 171).

The concept of a moral panic has been explored in depth as scholars have grappled with “a media world where public salience of the image of crime trumps that of crime itself” (Schinkel, 2013, p. 294). Stanley Cohen first popularized the concept in 1972, describing a moral panic as “a condition, episode, person or group [emerging] to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” as “moral barricades” by gatekeepers in mass media, religious leaders, politicians, and other moral entrepreneurs who contribute to the othering of the targeted subject (Cohen in Schinkel, 2013, p. 293). The term ‘moral panic’ itself “implies not only fear but fear that is wildly exaggerated and wrongly directed” (Jenkins, 1999, p. 7). Indeed, a moral panic represents an “ideological displacement” in which there is a discrepancy between the reality of a threat and the public reaction (Hall et. al. in Jenkins, 1998, p. 458). Once public reaction reaches a certain volume, an onus is put on the state to respond by addressing the problem through regulation. The regulation responds to heightened public panic rather than the perceived threat, leaving the focus of the panic subjected to undue state intervention.

The ‘threats’ at the core of moral panics stimulate disproportionate public response by mobilizing “intense affect” often by producing a scapegoat or “a target of blame” (Irvine, 2008, p. 2, p. 10). These ‘folk devils’, as Cohen termed them, are “cast as a legitimate and deserving target” because they are framed as threatening not only the most ‘vulnerable’ members of society (women and children) but are seen to be threatening the structure and values of society itself (Irvine, 2008, p. 10; Rubin, 1984, p. 141). Folk devils are manifested when “a deviant community whose conduct—some of it illegal...and some of it lawful—violates a society’s dominant behavioral norms” (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 457). When sex workers have been a focus of moral panics, for instance during the ‘sex wars’ of the 1970s-1990s, they have been positioned as a threat to family values by moral conservatives, while the industry itself was framed by radical feminists as posing a real threat of violence to the women and children it victimized.

While the sex industry has been the subject of many moral panics, sex workers are not necessarily always framed as the overt ‘folk devil.’ Panics over sex work are often articulated in terms of threats to the safety and sanctity of women and children, and as such, sex workers are perceived as victims, either directly as victims of sex trafficking, or indirectly, as victims of the patriarchy at large. This line of thinking suggests that if sex workers insist they are choosing the work they engage in, then they are simply complicit in a system that produces such victims, and are therefore participating in their own oppression. Yet even understood as victims, sex workers continue to be signified as immoral. Within moral panics over sex work, some perceive sex workers as obscene figures that threaten to corrupt family values and traditional morals. As moral panics

target and attempt to eradicate its' folk devils, the "target population suffers most, but most everyone is affected by the social and legal changes" (Rubin, 1984, p. 171).

Ultimately,

moral panics rarely alleviate any real problem, because they are aimed at chimeras and signifiers. They draw on the pre-existing discursive structure which invents victims in order to justify treating "vices" as crimes...Even when activity is acknowledged to be harmless, it may be banned because it is alleged to "lead" to something ostensibly worse. (Rubin, 1984, p. 171)

Morality campaigns might explicitly name one threat, while a population associated with that threat through stigma feels the resulting consequences. For instance, historically there has been "morality campaigns directed not against homosexuality but against pedophilia, less against pornography in general than against child pornography" and not against sex workers themselves but against sex traffickers and the social harms of the industry itself (Jenkins, 1998, p. 220). However, sex workers are the implied population in such panics, and are therefore conceived of as either needing to be saved or punished in their own right. Rubin described the moral panic to be "the most important and consequential kind of sex conflict" as moral panics are the "political moment of sex, in which diffuse attitudes are channelled into political action and from there into social change" (Rubin, 1984, p. 171). While stigma and social ostracization are harmful impacts of moral panics, the most consequential result is the state "extending its power into new areas of erotic behaviour" and decimating the group associated with that behaviour (Rubin, 1984, p. 171).

While morality campaigns over the sale of sex are explicitly directed at sex traffickers, it is sex workers who endure the consequences and are ultimately the group that is subjected to the ensuing social and legal changes, and FOSTA is an example of

this effect in action. Social media sites like Tumblr claim that the censorship measures they take are intended to curb the amount of pornography on their platforms after Apple removed the company's app from its app store citing the presence of child porn on the platform (Romano, 2018). Yet, the censorship extends far beyond porn. Sex worker rights activists, photographers who produce and share art featuring the nude body, as well as content featuring '#gay,' '#lesbian' or '#bisexual' tags was also removed, demonstrating a flawed logic which equates the public discussion of sexuality with pornography (Martineau, 2018). There is dissonance in the way such groups are censored under the guise of protecting others from a perceived harm. The threat of harm is conflated with an identity, as the identity has become a signifier for a moral panic. Pornography, specifically child pornography, is the explicit subject of this instance of moral panic, however, all porn becomes conflated with any and all sexuality perceived to be deviant, including those on the LGBTQ+ spectrum and sex workers, and the response to the moral panic, which is the removal of porn, lacks nuance and clarity, opting instead to cast a wide net with which to 'catch' sexual deviance.

Today's sweeping and disproportionate response to the legitimate social problem of sex trafficking have clear roots in the so-called 'Sex Wars' of the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. These heated debates over the symbolism of pornography provide a useful example of sex workers being caught up in a moral panic over obscenity, sex, and sex work as patriarchal violence. Such moral debates over pornography offer a useful example into how this double-bind sex workers were subjected to came to be. These debates cast stereotypes and perceptions about sex work and the workers who engage in it that persist today and can be seen emerging in government legislation like FOSTA.

In the campaign against pornography, a unique coalition formed between radical feminists and the allies they found in right wing moralists. For radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, “pornography is made to stand in for all misogyny, all discrimination, all exploitation of women—in their view, it not only causes but constitutes the subordination of women” (Duggan & Hunter, 1995, p. 40). These views held by radical feminists were not limited to pornography; indeed, Dworkin (1997) wrote: “When men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body” (p. 145). For right wing moralists, pornography was not simply representative of itself, but “as representative of social disorder...because women’s sexuality outside the family is itself seen as cheapened and degraded” (Duggan and Hunter, 1995, p. 39). In this way, the right wing moralists “can agree with feminists that ‘pornography degrades women’” (Duggan and Hunter, 1995, p. 39). With different ends in mind, both parties stoked fears that women and children were the ones at risk if pornography were allowed to continue and took up campaigns to eradicate pornography through the implementation of obscenity laws and censorship—not of “violent and misogynistic images generally, but only of the sexually explicit images that cultural reactionaries have tried to outlaw for more than a century” (Duggan and Hunter, 1995, p. 33).

The sex wars were successful in the development of the ‘rescue industry’, which sees value in reforming sex workers “as well as protecting children and rescuing animals” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 9). Carceral feminism, too, “looms large in sex trade debates” and in the rescue industry, despite the fact that “for sex workers and other marginalized and criminalized groups, the police are not a symbol of protection but a *real*

manifestation of punishment and control” (Mac & Smith, 2018, pp. 16–17). Further, police have their own motives in regulating sex crimes including sex trafficking, as it is politically beneficial for them to demonstrate that they can ‘save’ and protect society’s most ‘vulnerable’ women and children (Jenkins, 1998, p. 218). Carceral feminism, which welcomes police power and “focuses on policing and criminalization as the key ways to deliver justice to women” impacts “the ways in which sex workers and their allies can argue for basic human rights” (Jackson, 2016, p. 40; Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 16). Sex workers and their allies must advocate for their rights as workers and as people with agency while also being careful not to discredit themselves on moral grounds by being seen to promote or support the real harms that do exist in the industry. As such, the U.S. political climate, which most often endorses carceral feminism and perpetuates the rescue industry, poses a distinct challenge to sex worker rights-based frames (Jackson, 2016, p. 40).

The policing of sex workers, driven by morality campaigns supported by radical feminists and social conservatives alike and stoked by fears over crime and imagined predators, resulted, and continues to result, in a “socially acceptable way to discipline women” and their sexualities (Grant, 2014, p. 4). Further, it is a way to discipline women that is bi-partisan, making it an appealing to politicians. Writing of pornography and sex crime, Jenkins writes they became the “perfect political issue,” as “politicians at local and national levels benefited from conspicuous vigilance in this area” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 218). FOSTA, mandated by the U.S. government but arbitrarily enforced by social media giants, was the result of a bi-partisan effort, and embodies such discipline.

Sex and technology panics and FOSTA

The threat of sex predators and sex traffickers online has built up for decades, and now, FOSTA is an attempt to force platforms into taking action. It is a direct extension of two moral panics that have both been brewing and bubbling for decades: a longstanding moral panic over sex trafficking, which encompasses a moral panic over sex work, and a moral panic Smith and Cole refer to as a “cyberpanic”, which focuses on the threats of the unknown on the Internet (2013, p. 210).

Within this panic, online sex predators play a large role as an anonymous but dangerous threat. Male desire is already situated as a source of moral panic in debates over sex trafficking, but in the context of the Internet, “it’s also how men use technology to, as antiprostitution advocates term it, buy and sell women” (Grant, 2014, p. 43). As a newer medium of communication, the Internet in general has been the source of much anxiety over its perceived potential corrupting abilities, though such anxiety presents itself with the emergence of any new technology and is not unique to the Internet. Grant notes that “new [media] have often been said to have a corrupting influence on the weak (women, usually)” (Grant, 2014, p. 43). This panic has ebbed and flowed since the Internet’s early days, when the anonymity offered by chatrooms and MySpace sparked fears over child sex predators (Smith & Cole, 2013).

MySpace, once the Internet’s most popular social media platform, lost its audience in part because of broken trust with its users over its handling of sex offenders’ presence on its site (Smith & Cole, 2013, p. 216). Media reports such as one run in *The New York Times* asserted that MySpace was “full of predators” but failed to take action to remove them (Smith & Cole, 2013, p. 214). Smith and Cole write:

This assertion highlighted the fear not only that social networking sites were full of predators, but also that those running the websites did nothing about it...The size of the portion [of sex offenders] did not matter; what mattered was that sex offenders flocked to social networking sites in droves, while the sites failed to defuse the threat, either because they did not try or because they were unable to do so. (2013, p. 214).

Smith and Cole determine that fears over child sex predators on MySpace were the result of “a social networking moral panic”; which was itself “a phase of an emerging technology child sex crime panic that has evolved in concert with changing technology” (2013, p. 2018). When MySpace lost its audience and credibility as a result of rumours that it was “full of predators,” Facebook was the next social media giant to become the public’s “default” social networking site (Smith & Cole, 2013, p. 217). In its early years, Facebook had cultivated a public image of trust, partially through its “association with physical entities, i.e. universities” which helped to “vouch for the authenticity of its members” (Smith & Cole, 2013, p. 216). We can see that the threat of even a phantom online predator can contribute to the downfall of a social media entity; it is therefore in Facebook’s best interest to respond to moral panics over sex and technology with promises to eradicate the relevant folk devils from its platforms—including Instagram, which it owns.

While the specific moral panic over the threat of sex offenders on MySpace may have faded, certainly the broader moral panics that Smith and Cole identified persist, and can be seen emerging in the discourse surrounding FOSTA.

How FOSTA perpetuates moral panics

The historical context of moral panics is relevant when considering how FOSTA itself is simply a reiteration of prior regulatory governmental responses to moral panics

about sex trafficking. This reiteration is the result of the convergence of trafficking panics with cyberpanics. By responding to these panics with such legislation, the American government, led by Trump, has aimed and succeeded at creating policy that is supported across party lines, which contributes to the political capital of all those who supported it. FOSTA and the narratives around it take up strategies that are typical of historical moral panics, as they evoke emotional responses, gain narrative authority through the use of dramatic yet unclear statistics. It is also important to consider the political context in which FOSTA is emerging, as the fear of the ‘other’ FOSTA invokes serves to amplify and complement the fear of the racialized immigrant and refugee that Trump and his government is deliberately attempting to stoke.

Emotional narratives: PSA Videos

Fears that sex traffickers were using social media platforms and sites where sexual services were advertised as tools to make trafficking easier were articulated and emphasized in a viral video featuring celebrities including Amy Schumer and Seth Meyers declaring “I Am Jane Doe” (Friedman, 2018). The video’s message centred around calling for FOSTA to be enacted. It featured multiple celebrities standing in front of a simple dark back-drop, with dramatic lighting, as they held up short punchy phrases written on bristol board and stared into the camera. The PSA echoed prior anti-trafficking media campaigns intended to ‘raise awareness,’ such as the use of “billboards on the side of highways, with black-and-white photos of girls looking fearful and red letters crying NOT FOR SALE” or “clicky little public service announcements for YouTube” in which celebrities like Ashton Kutcher and Sean Penn declare, “Real men don’t buy girls” (Grant, 2014, p. 37). These videos and advertisements work to attract an audience “with

the lure of a crisis—prostitution sweeping the nation!—and a promise of doing good by feeling terrible” (Grant, 2014, p. 35). The message about sex work that emerges from these campaigns and “so-called debates” is:

one of moral contagion and elite panic: Sex work is everywhere, it’s growing, it’s out of control, it makes many billions of dollars a year. It’s coming for your daughter, and it’s in your backyard, and if it hasn’t and it’s not yet, it will be. FROM INSTANT MESSAGE TO INSTANT NIGHTMARE! warn ads out of Florida attorney general’s office; a young girl cowers under the red slash of the headline. (Grant, 2014, p. 42)

The emotional argument against sex trafficking implies and includes sex workers because the awareness-building efforts of the rescue industry, such as the above examples, call for action against the sex industry as it is positioned as a morally corrupt threat against young girls (Grant, 2014, p. 38). It does not matter whether sex worker voices are included in this discussion or not. Rather, the goal of the rescue industry in the development of these campaigns is to encourage and perpetuate discourse on prostitution “regardless of how little sex workers are involved in it” (Grant, 2014, p. 38). As a result, such advertisements perpetuate a lopsided view of the sex industry. The narrative put forth by PSAs like the one in support of FOSTA paint the sex industry as a looming, ever-present threat to vulnerable populations, particularly children. Ordering a child online for sex is “as easy as ordering a pizza,” says Schumer in the video. “Thousands of children are raped everyday,” says Meyers. The situation that FOSTA is said to be addressing is framed as an epidemic of inconceivable evil, however, nearly the entire sex industry is wrapped up in the effects this legislation. Videos and advertisements like these cannot be separated from the legislation they are explicitly calling for and endorsing. The presentation of the regulation of an evil and threatening industry as necessary and urgent makes it difficult for sex workers to advocate for their own rights in this context without seeming to be in

favour of sex trafficking. Additionally, it perpetuates a dominant narrative of the sex industry as corrupt, devoid of morals, and such a prevalent threat that it could conceivably victimize anyone.

Exaggerated statistics

Moral gatekeepers in a moral panic, such as police, media, and politicians, will often attempt to maintain the public's faith or trust in the governing institutions they represent by reacting 'appropriately' to the threat, even if reacting 'appropriately' means engaging in a disproportionate reaction (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, p. 16, in Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 457). These "experts" speak with a unified voice "of rates, diagnoses, prognoses, and solutions...[they] stress 'sudden and dramatic' increases (in numbers involved or events)...above and beyond that which a sober, realistic approach could sustain" (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 457). Statistics can play an important role in the creation of a social problem that warrants a significant response, as the numbers backing up the issue "gain credibility to the extent that they fit public expectations, and they are often simplified or even distorted into some easily remembered format that is repeated until it becomes a truism" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 220). As moral panics gain traction, state officials stress statistics that support the problem, which leads to an increase in statistics as the targeted problem becomes detected with more frequency, and the cycle continues until "statements that in calmer years would mark the speaker as hyperbolic or paranoid suddenly acquire the status of incontestable fact" (Jenkins, p. 219; p. 7).

In the context of messaging around sex trafficking, sex worker activists point out that “the few statistics that exist on trafficking in general and sex trafficking in particular are obtained from a limited number of (often unnamed) sources who rarely reveal their research methods and are then recited and recirculated through the media, academic, and political outlets that are working to proclaim and denounce the sex-trafficking crisis”, giving these sometimes unreliable statistics increased visibility and therefore increased memorability in the public eye (Showden and Majic, 2014, xvii). Take the fact sheet from the White House on FOSTA for instance, which includes a number of vague statistics without sources, such as: “there may be as many as 24.9 million victims of forced labor across the world. Of these, 4.8 million were in forced sexual exploitation” (White House, 2018). The White House fact sheet does not cite any sources and does not break down these statistics within a given timeframe. While there is a qualifier for these statistics suggesting they are estimates, they are convenient statistics for other moral authorities and news media to round off to an even 25 million and 5 million respectively, both inconceivably staggering and memorable numbers. Notably, these figures are worldwide totals, and are presented as one of the first bullet points on the fact page. The figures for human trafficking in the United States, conversely, are presented lower, as the fact page reports that in 2017, its Department of Homeland Security identified 518 victims of human trafficking (White House, 2018). The fact page goes on to state that in more than ten years, (since 2007), “the National Human Trafficking Hotline has received reports of 22,191 sex trafficking cases in the United States” but does not state what percentage of such reports were confirmed, pursued by law enforcement, etc. (White House, 2018).

Such dramatic yet vague statistics organized with the largest numbers near the top of the page, reinforce the righteousness of decisions by police and state to address the constructed panic, and could even provide justification for further action (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 457). These statistics, particularly when accompanied by the emotional storytelling done in the aforementioned PSA for instance, offer real potential “to enhance state power by triggering repressive changes in law or social policy” because such changes are framed as justified to an understandably outraged public given the dire circumstances (Irvine, 2008, p. 6). As far as public perception goes, statistics come off as “reassuring, seemingly apolitical, and knowable” despite the fact that the numbers presented by this fact sheet, for instance, seem to be estimations of the problem of sex trafficking (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 5). Conversely, sex workers’ commentary in opposition to the stance such statistics support is seen as illegitimate, “alien and mysterious” and perhaps “too political” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 5). It is difficult for sex workers to challenge such statistics, even if they are being used to ultimately regulate their own working lives, because sex trafficking itself is such an emotional and frightening public problem. Statistics like the ones above also gain authority in such debates when the numbers are so high they are “memorable” and carry emotional weight on their own (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 5). Advocating for sex worker’s rights may require speaking against legislation such as FOSTA, which becomes a complicated manner when such regulatory measures are widely said to be combatting such an emotionally compelling and memorable problem. In contrast, sex workers’ arguments are hardly visible to begin with, let alone memorable to a broad public (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 5).

Stoking racist and protectionist fears of immigration

FOSTA-SESTA, emerging in a political environment in which one of the cornerstones of Trump's presidency has been anti-immigration policies, claims to protect women and children from an exaggerated threat of online sex trafficking. Trump's anti-immigration stance is clearly connected with his racist attitudes towards immigrants, as evidenced by his infamous candidacy announcement in 2015 that Mexican immigrants were "bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Silva, 2018). In April 2018, a month after signing FOSTA, Trump doubled down on the incorrect assertion that immigrants are rapists. Speaking of a caravan of migrants coming into the United States, the majority from Honduras, Trump said in a speech that "women are being raped at levels nobody's ever seen before" (Silva, 2018). Trump has also exaggerated both the rates and the nature of human trafficking at the U.S. and Mexico border as justification to build a wall. He said in a speech that women were being trafficked across the border, "tied up, with duct tape on their faces, put in the backs of vans" (Krajeski, 2019).

The positioning of women and children as the population-at-risk is a trope that has also been connected with waves of immigration-related anxiety (Jackson, 2016; Jenkins, 1998; Showden & Majic, 2014). It is white women and white children, then, who are considered first and foremost as an imagined victim (Showden & Majic, 2014, p. xvi). Interestingly, Jackson points out that "the social justice efforts of undocumented immigrant organizing and contingent worker organizing are fighting for basic rights just as sex workers are, and these are not mutually exclusive categories...Here, punishment of 'the other' is a neoliberal exercise in gender policing, under the illusion of protecting women and girls" (2016, p. 40). It is this same anxiety over crime infiltrating 'good'

communities, much in the same way that Trump positions crime-driven immigrants as infiltrating America, that results in police targeting of street-based sex workers.

Chateauvert writes, “When public pressure to do something about crime mounts, police sweep up street-based workers. Neighborhood residents take false comfort in the belief that empty sidewalks discourage crime” (2013, p. 3). Sex worker visibility is connected to the prevalence of crime, meaning the mere existence of sex workers in any given space symbolizes crime itself. Therefore, while sex workers have made themselves more visible in online spaces, their presence is also criminalized; this symbolism is made official through FOSTA. Instead of police ‘cleaning up’ sidewalks, platform content moderators are ‘cleaning up’ social media.

Resisting demonization through recognizing a plurality of publics

Literature on moral panics has been criticized for not taking into account the plurality of publics, public feeling, and audiences, and for instead depicting a vague public in angry mob-like terms. The publics described in some moral panic literature are not often engaged with very deeply, as they are “represented as anarchic...and hysterical, [with] descriptions that recall late-nineteenth-century critiques of the irrational crowd” (Irvine, 2008, p. 2). There is often “fierce contestation in moral politics,” but “one finds scant mention in sex panic literature of internal conflict and resistance, thus making a fractured public appear unified” (Irvine, 2008, p. 8). However, a dominant narrative does not necessarily mean a representative narrative. Irvine points to the success of conservative religious activists’ in dominating “public conversation on sex education

through discursive strategies that triggered the fierce emotions of local political debates” (2008, p. 9). While small but emotional publics can push a dominant narrative, sometimes a variety of publics might support a dominant narrative, but with very different motivations.

The plurality of publics involved in moral panics becomes all the more clear when considering the fact that media does not consist of one ‘mass’ and that, through social media, micro-disputes, some certainly based in morality, play out constantly (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016). As Mary deYoung writes, it is “the pluralism of late modern society...that may open up avenues for folk devils, indeed even already socially marginalized folk devils, to find allies and advocates, build constituencies, and exercise agency” (2013, p. 151). It is important to consider the agency of folk devils because “the ‘otherness’ of folk devils is reified by their treatment as objects rather than subjects, as powerless rather than agentic” (deYoung, 2013, p. 142). Even if folk devils are rendered “morally defenceless” (Rubin, 1984, p. 171), they can employ what social capital they have “to resist their demonization” and to potentially have an impact “on the course and outcome of a moral panic” (deYoung, 2013, p. 142). Ultimately, this is what this thesis is about: how marginalized groups positioned as folk devils, like sex workers, exercise their agency to talk back to a moral positioning that has been imposed upon them. As long as there have been moral panics that impact the livelihood of sex workers, sex workers have been organizing, resisting, and attempting to gain some control over a narrative driven by fear, stigma, and a multitude of political agendas, none of which consider the agency of sex workers in their morally-driven decision making, yet consider themselves experts when it comes to the governance of sex work.

Reframing and representing: Sex workers challenging dominant narratives

Sex worker rights activists attempting to gain some credibility and recognition of their agency employ strategies to reframe sex work from something women need to be protected from, to a rights-based perspective, which argues that sex workers can and do choose to enter into sex work of their own volition, but have yet to acquire basic worker rights, including “the right to work, and to work safely” (Jackson, 2016, p. 28). As evidenced by a study done by Jackson, there are several rhetorical strategies that activists might attempt to employ in order to reframe sex work as legitimate work, including “contesting the conflation of sex trafficking and sex work, critiquing antiprostitution efforts including end demand, contesting the emotionality of shocking trafficking statistics and stories, and finding voice and presenting sex workers as rational and knowledgeable” and as experts in their own right (Jackson, 2016, p. 33).

Sex worker activists are, at a basic level, working to prove that they are agentic beings with decision-making power over their own bodies, sexuality, and choice to profit off of each. In order to do just that, there is a need to address “whore stigma,” which “posits that any woman attempting economic initiative, and especially women who do so through sexual labour, will experience strong social disapproval” (Jackson, 2016, p. 36). By telling their own stories, sharing their own experiences, and in doing so, emphasizing their own agency, sex workers seek to mitigate this stigma and remove its governing power.

Through critical engagement with anti-trafficking advocacy, sex workers are able to point out that the victim-driven governance structures that deprive them of workers’

rights comes down to “proscriptive norms around women’s economic behaviour” and “this prescription of how we should behave as women, sexually” (Jackson, 2016, p. 36). By poking holes in the protectionist mindset towards sex work through the sharing of “counterstories” that sit in opposition to this mindset, sex worker rights activists seek out “points of entrance into the governance over them and their work” (Jackson, 2016, p. 40). Counterstories can “challenge the hegemony of policy and media constructions of marginalized and oppressed groups as deviants, criminals, and victims” by centralizing the experiences of stigmatization and oppression of the under-represented group (Jackson, 2016, p. 28). Sex worker activists present counterstories through traditional political organizing such as protests, but the Internet has presented a new tool for nuanced representations of and discussions about sex work, as “socially and legally marginalized groups” adapted online spaces “to engage in public political discourse about the issues facing their communities” (Feldman, 2014, p. 244).

The affordances of the Internet made it easier for sex workers to advertise their services from the safety of their own home, allowed them to conduct more thorough investigations into the clients they were seeing, and expanded on pre-existing sex worker collectivity through the creation and circulation of resources like bad client lists. It also altered how they were policed⁹, as cops began to pose as clients online, and arrests of sex workers took place more and more in hotel rooms rather than on street corners (Grant, 2014). This shift in the spatial organization of the sex industry also influenced “the kinds of tools and strategies [sex workers] use for mobilizing, framing, and addressing the

⁹ Certain sex workers were able to move indoors and off the streets as a result of being able to conduct their business online. Because the sex industry moved at least in part online, so did policing practices, as police departments began to use the Internet to run covert prostitution stings (Grant, 2014).

public with their messages” (Feldman, 2014, p. 245). The participatory nature of the Internet’s structure provided further opportunities for sex workers to engage in the “knowledge production about their work and industry” (Feldman, 2014, p. 244). The networking capabilities offered by the Internet provided “lower cost alternatives for social movements to mass-distribute their messages and calls to action” as well as provided greater access to sex worker networks (Feldman, 2014, p. 246). Such alternatives were only available for those who could afford Internet access, however, which meant that the most marginalized of sex workers continued to be left out of these conversations. Those sex workers who did have access to such networks were able to participate in the circulation of crucial information (pertaining to safety or the distribution of mutually beneficial resources, for instance) across space and time. An example of this information sharing is the existence of “electronically mediated ‘bad client lists’, [which] allowed sex workers to share information about violent or non-paying customers with each other” (Jackson & Heineman, 2018, p. 74). Access to such information is “essential for supporting all sex workers in negotiating their work, and in turning down work that is unsafe, underpaid, or undesirable” (Grant, 2014, p. 29). But, perhaps more important, is the “access to conversation” that sex workers found in online spaces (Shirky, 2011, p. 5 in Feldman, 2014, p. 245).

One of the ways in which many marginalized communities employed the Internet’s capacity for their benefit was in “offering safe spaces for anonymous status disclosure” (Feldman, 2014, p. 244). The anonymity offered, particularly by the Internet’s early days, allowed sex workers to interact with each other on blogs, where they would “speak *as* sex workers on issues of interest to them in rational deliberation

with political and moral opponents, the general non-sex worker public, and each other” (Feldman, 2014, p. 248). There is political and personal value in simply being able to exist in a space where sex workers can embrace, or at least disclose, their sex worker identity amongst a community of other sex workers. Such literal representations of members of this community can contribute to an environment of mutual care and support in which communities can attempt to suspend the stigma they otherwise encounter on a regular basis (Tiidenberg, 2014, n.p.). Sex worker related blogs provided such a space, for instance, particularly before social media became as pervasive as it is today (Feldman, 2014).

On social media, particularly within mainstream spaces, sex workers engage in political work by presenting “unfiltered and often complex experiences and perspectives on sex work as *valid*”, disrupting and challenging stereotypes imposed by decades of moral posturing by governing institutions (Feldman, 2014, p. 255). The practice of sex workers engaging in the production of their own self-representations allows sex workers to challenge their perceived status as ‘victims’, a label which “effectively silences their voices” as it makes it difficult for sex workers to “articulate experiences of violence and exploitation” while still advocating for sex work as a legitimate profession (Jackson, 2016, p. 33). Sex workers owning their identity and challenging the dominant narratives surrounding it in online spaces works to counter the many stigmas surrounding this identity, and is “a foundational step for further collective action” (Feldman, 2014, p. 248).

However, the political need for increased representation, particularly complex and ‘real’ representation, speaks to a postfeminist trend in digital culture wherein a need to

put the private self on public display for the purpose of ‘relatability’ situates “visibility and sharing...as conduits to female empowerment” (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017, p. 853). For marginalized communities, visibility and the ability to tell one’s own story that can accompany it are not frivolous goals; however, it is important to note that attaining visibility—particularly when that visibility tends to be reserved for white, cis, thin and able-bodied sex workers—does not solve structural inequalities and systemic oppression. For communities who are often made invisible by their oppressors, however, making a taboo or shunned identity such as ‘sex worker’ visible is a political act.

Anti-Shame Work

Shame is a prevalent phenomenon on the Internet in general, as individuals are publicly shamed on a regular basis for any number of reasons, warranted or not. Participatory platforms can give all who participate “an unprecedented capacity to independently investigate, judge, and punish their peers for moral infractions” (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 456). Sex workers are often shamed for their work through the regular use of derogatory slurs like “slut” or “whore”, to name just one way. To combat the shame associated with such words, sex workers have made efforts to reclaim them. Another way in which sex workers combat shame associated with their work is through publicly owning their job title. Even when sex workers do this on social media, they continue to experience harassment in the form of trolling or doxxing¹⁰, for example. Ingraham and Reeves argue that a culture of shame exists online, in which moral panic is

¹⁰ Doxxing is when someone’s personal information such as their real name, address, or place of work is released online with the malicious intention of subjecting them to further harassment and feelings of fear.

deployed through “digitized moral entrepreneurship” in which any individual user can participate in casting moral judgement on an issue or another user (2016, p. 455). The authors point out that online, shaming is ubiquitous, as individuals and groups are subject to phenomena such as “bigot-shaming” to “fedora-shaming” to breast-feeding advocates “formula-shaming” moms (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 456). This “shaming culture”, they argue, “is symptomatic of a deep-seated political disenfranchisement that leaves subjects grasping to “do something. Contributing to a social media-driven panic culture that punishes and ostracizes deviants thus stands in for meaningful political participation” (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 456). Therefore, a culture exists within new media contexts “whereby citizens often prosecute their own discrete moral panics amid the more sustained sense of political crisis that characterizes contemporary life” (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 456).

These micro-instances of shame occur not only between users, but also between users and moderators. Instagram’s moderators are “uniquely positioned as gatekeepers”, and while Instagram itself may purport that its moderation tactics revolve around questions of morality or obscenity, what it really comes down to is being able to strike a balance between “the site’s desire to attract users and participants to its platform—the company’s profit motive—with demands for brand protection, the limits of user tolerance for disturbing material, and the site rules and guidelines” (Roberts, 2016, p. 2). However, the task before a content moderator involves “complicated matters of judgement” which “require a moderator be steeped in the social norms and mores of the places in the world for which this content is destined, frequently a place and an audience different from the worker himself or herself” (Roberts, 2016, p. 1). What a moderator considers obscene or

immoral may directly conflict with the user's conception of obscenity. On Instagram, many of these differences of opinion revolve around women's bodies. As such, when a moderator decides to censor an image of a female body, whether it belongs to a sex worker or not, he or she is deeming that body 'inappropriate' or obscene, and perpetuating the idea that the recipient of the censorship ought to be ashamed of her body.

Olszanowski writes that "it's no accident that images of women's bodies work to discipline society to naturalize these arbitrary appropriate-versus-inappropriate distinctions" (2014, p. 84). Social media platforms including Instagram seem to be preoccupied with determining firstly which parts of the female body are to be considered "inappropriate" or obscene, and second, determining which female bodies can acceptably push these boundaries. Instagram's censorship tactics transport shame and stigma around female sexuality and female and gender-non-conforming sexuality that already exists in our public spheres, as they reinforce hegemonic processes that legitimate the social order (Chunn & Lacombe, 2000, p. 10 in Olszanowski, 2014, p. 84).

Self-representations on Instagram become all the more political when they sit in opposition to normative prescriptions of bodies, gender, and sexuality, and are therefore at risk of becoming a target of shame (Tiidenberg, 2014, n.p.). Such 'deviant' self-representations challenge a culture or "regime of shame" that encourages internal self-control "based on the idea that there are things and practices that cannot [or should not] be shown" (Tiidenberg, 2014, n.p.). Caldeira & De Ridder acknowledge that "there is a certain 'political' character underlying all self-representation on Instagram...Even when self-representations on Instagram are not created with a deliberate political goal in mind,

they nonetheless become political by declaring who gets to occupy the public's visual field" (2017, p. 325). Sexuality, and particularly sexuality-for-sale, is one such practice. Tiidenberg examines how "taking an active role in one's sexual storytelling through both images and text can serve as empowering exhibitionism" (2014, n.p.). The act of sharing images of self-representation on Instagram can be a tool "for identity formation" and self-reflexivity (Tiidenberg, 2014). This "empowering exhibitionism" is not simply about sharing that which is meant to be private (nudity, sexuality, etc.); it is about sharing aspects of oneself that are considered deviant and that ought to be hidden in shame. Through inserting such content into a public space like Instagram, such "self-storying" can be seen as a form of activism in itself (Tiidenberg, 2014, n.p.).

For sex workers, shame and stigma are two major barriers to their ability to access workers' rights. While sex workers are shamed for capitalizing on their sexuality, they are simultaneously essentialized as sexual beings. Sex workers' political work, too, "is still understood as sex, as if we cannot speak without producing pornography" (Grant, 2014, p. 125). Sex workers have a need to be able to "embrace sex worker identity without finding ourselves expected, again and again, to perform someone else's sexual fantasy" (Grant, 2014, p. 125). On the same note, sex workers' are still expected to be ashamed of their sexuality and their ability to profit off it. Indeed, sex worker politics "cannot deny the body just because someone else has a complex about it" (Grant, 2014, p. 126). Part of pushing for sex workers to be able to exist in online spaces without being deemed inappropriate by platform moderators or individuals keen to report that which they view as 'immoral' is refusing to hide their sexuality for the comfort of others.

Censorship Constructing Community

There are multiple formulations of ‘community’ or imagined community at play in this research project. The first and most obvious is the community of sex workers that are the focus of this research. This community, which we can understand as a “network community” or “virtual community,” can provide much of the same help and support that its members might expect from a community grounded in geographic proximity (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 105). Gaining access to virtual spaces that “transcend the confines of neighbourhood and kinship” means that “people can be brought together by their shared interests and values” (Wellman, 1996, p. 348 in Blackshaw, 2010, pp. 106- 107). For marginalized groups such as sex workers, having access to those outside their physical and geographical reach means connecting with others over a shared political identity. These connections can and do “extend into face-to-face contact”, where other forms of traditional political resistance are taken up, but they also present “the potential empowerment” of an otherwise disenfranchised group, by connecting over shared experiences and discussing shared challenges (Blackshaw, 2010, pp. 107–106). The formation of a virtual community based in collective identity involves “a process of boundary work, which consists of the ongoing production, performance, and validation of values, codes, and norms through discourse...the inclusion/exclusion of individuals in a community not only defines their social positioning, but also constructs the collective itself” (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016, p. 1699). Sex workers’ political identity is a collective identity, as any marginalized group that has experienced a process of ‘othering’ can attest (Milner, 2016, p. 118). However, the formation of a sex worker activist

community in the face of such othering has been sex worker rights activists' biggest asset in working to advocate for their own agency.

For the virtual community of sex workers at the focus of this research, the very existence of this community is often at odds with the 'Community Guidelines' Instagram attempts to impose on its users, and therefore, is at odds with what Instagram imagines its broad virtual community to be. Instagram's 'Community Guidelines' ask its users to "[p]ost photos and videos that are appropriate for a diverse audience" going on to say, "[w]e know that there are times when people might want to share nude images that are artistic or creative in nature, but for a variety of reasons, we don't allow nudity on Instagram" ("Instagram: Community Guidelines," 2019). At another point in the 'Community Guidelines,' it is stipulated that users must "[f]ollow the law...Offering sexual services...(even if it's legal in your region) is...not allowed" ("Instagram: Community Guidelines," 2019). The enforcement of these guidelines, which is evidently resulting in the deletion of sex worker accounts for the vague reason of them having posted "sexually suggestive content." It implies that the community of sex workers does not belong in the Instagram community-at-large seeing as members of the community are deleted for posting images that are revealing, but not fully nude, and for disclosing their identity and discussing their experience(s) as sex workers, as if the discussion of one's labour rights as a sex worker acts as an advertisement for the sale of sexual services.

There is evidently a desire to make this community less visible, therefore denying its ability to exist as a virtual community, as the community is urged to leave online social spaces. It could be that the discussion of sex work in all of its possible forms is perceived by Instagram as crossing an imagined line of what the public discourse on its

platform should include. Indeed, historically, all matters pertaining to sexual life have been considered to be inappropriate for public forums, but deviant sexual activity, including sex work and its products (pornography, for instance) have been considered legally obscene, and the industry has been criminalized and policed on such grounds (Benedet, 2015; Fraser, 1990, p. 71). However, sex workers, having been demarcated as a class of people with distinct boundaries formed around a shared taboo identity, work to solidify their community boundaries, affording the larger sex worker community collective visibility and working to bring the concerns of sex workers into public view as a political issue in need of awareness and discussion.

The space this sex worker rights community has created for itself can be characterized as a counterpublic due to its position of being at odds with Instagram's community boundaries and with the broader public itself. Counterpublics emerge when they are excluded from participation in the mainstream public, contesting such exclusions and "elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). In response, mainstream publics "excorciate...these alternatives" and "deliberately [seek] to block broader participation" (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). Within idealized public spheres, such as the one Habermas conceived of, and arguably, the ones that exist on Internet platforms, the idealization stems from the misconception that the public sphere itself is some form of equalizer, wherein participants can check their privileges at the door and have equal access to democratic conversation (Fraser, 1990, p. 62). As Nancy Fraser correctly points out in her feminist analysis of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, the result of "bracketing" one's social inequalities in this way results in "the development of powerful informal pressures that

marginalize the contributions of subordinated groups” (Fraser, 1990, p. 64).

Counterpublics, insofar as they provide an alternative to a mainstream public that typically privileges its dominant groups, can function as “safe spaces” where its members can withdraw and regroup “from hegemonic pressures and antagonisms” (Fraser, 1990, p. 64; Milner, 2016, p. 119). Counterpublics “succeed” when marginalized groups can use these spaces to “contest dominant discourses that frame hegemonic practice and meaning” (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 861 in Milner, 2016, p. 118).

Instagram’s targeted censorship effectively strengthens the borders of the sex worker community it attempts to disband through censorship. In fact, its censorship “has a consequential role in the way that particular subaltern communities are built and maintained on Instagram,” writes Olszanowski, in her study of a community of feminist photographers challenging Instagram’s censorship of ‘deviant’ female bodies (2014, p. 85). By dictating that Instagram is for certain communities and not others through its censorship practices, Instagram signals distinct community boundaries of its own, despite the overarching impression that social media platforms are for everyone. Still, for all of Instagram’s moderation tactics, it has yet to annihilate this clearly unwanted community from its platform, as “despite [its] draconian content policies, users are finding creative ways of maintaining their practices and ultimately circumventing censorship” (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 85).

When bodily censorship is “preassumed” by a group on Instagram, its members might engage “in a kind of self-discipline” in order to circumvent the censorship (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 91). Olszanowski writes about how this self-discipline might include creative photo-editing to maintain their practices but also avoid censorship (2014,

p. 85). One such tactic involved “covering the nude body with limbs, objects, or layering the body with other images...demonstrating nudity without showing it” (2014, p. 89). In so doing, “[t]hese women are *creating their bodies* anew and thereby *creating space*; more specifically, they are *creating communities*” (italics in original, Olszanowski, 2014, p. 91). By acknowledging the censorship as threatening their existence on the platform, “this specific intimate public participates in the creation of networked spaces where there isn’t space for them” (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 91). In so doing, these communities might find “unexpected power in repression”; as “having the ability to create space means having the ability to control parts of it” (Olszanowski, 2014, pp. 91-92). On Instagram and other social media platforms like it, counterpublics, including sex workers, have worked to take up their own spaces. While these spaces are not necessarily always in view of the mainstream, the fact that they still occupy space on mainstream platforms like Instagram or Facebook is meaningful in terms of the counterpublics’ potential ability to heighten the visibility of its political participation so that it can challenge dominant antagonisms.

Negotiations of gendered censorship

Instagram’s ‘community guidelines’ and its Terms of Use¹¹ function to regulate its users’ behaviour on its platform, stipulating what is “acceptable discourse” and

¹¹ Instagram’s Terms of Use were most recently updated on April 18, 2018, just over a month after FOSTA was signed into law. The Terms of Use include a section that stipulates that it “can refuse to provide or stop providing all or part of the Service to you (including terminating or disabling your account) immediately to protect our community or services, or if you create risk or legal exposure for us, violate these Terms of Use or our policies (including our Instagram Community Guidelines)” (Instagram, 2019).

“directly impos[ing] restrains and obligations” on users (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017, p. 330). This regulation “shapes and constrains the relationships of users with the platform, revealing its norms and values” (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017, p. 330). Unsurprisingly, these norms and values function as extensions of the norms and values entrenched in Western society. These norms and values present themselves in a “content management policy” that relies on an arbitrary dichotomy of “appropriate-versus-inappropriate” (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 84). This dichotomy is most often concerned with ‘mature content’, as the platform concerns itself most with regulating content featuring nudity, sexual or pornographic content, and illegal activity. However, the “inconsistency of enforcement has users struggling to wade their way through ill-defined concepts relating to the morality around photo sharing”, as celebrities and popular Instagram personalities, including Kim Kardashian West for example, are seemingly exempt from such regulation (Faust, 2017, p. 161). Further, the line of acceptable content “is always in flux, with constant revisions and what Instagram often refers to as mistakes” (Faust, 2017, p. 161). Often, though, these ‘mistakes’ are not addressed until they are circulated and picked up on by media.

Instagram’s ‘community guidelines’ state that the company’s goal is to “create a safe and open environment for everyone” and stresses that nudity is not welcome in such an environment (“Instagram: Community Guidelines,” 2019). Its guidelines on nudity have evolved over the years, as it has navigated backlashes and the aforementioned ‘mistakes.’ In its current state, the guidelines specify that “photos, videos, and some digitally-created content that show sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully nude buttocks” are prohibited, as are “some photos of female nipples”. However, “post-

mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed” (“Instagram: Community Guidelines,” 2019). Previously, Instagram’s nudity guideline was articulated as one part of five short rules: “Keep your clothes on”; a phrase that Olszanowski pointed out was “embedded with moral superiority” as it “serve[d] to homogenize the practices that involve ‘taking your clothes off’ and subsequently denounces them” (2014, p. 87). While Instagram’s articulation of its guidelines have evidently changed, the approach to the censorship of deviant sexualized bodies has not. What these guidelines stipulate, regardless of phrasing and however vaguely, is “what can be shared on the platform and what is liable to be deleted”, imposing what Caldeira and De Ridder note are “direct constraints over the self-representations shared on Instagram” (Instagram, 2019; Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017, p. 330).

However, this is not an entirely top-down process. Individual and groups of Instagram users “can exercise a sort of ‘editorial power’ that can constrain the kinds of representations shared on the platform” (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017, p. 332). Of course, such mechanisms are largely in place because it is cheaper and simpler to have users police its content rather than the company itself proactively regulating all of the content that populates its platform. Therefore, “users can trigger the banning of certain images and accounts by ‘flagging’ and ‘reporting’ inappropriate content, according to their own subjective understanding of appropriateness” (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017, p. 332). ‘Flagging’ an account or a post “can be used as a tactic” by groups or individuals to suppress those who sit in moral opposition to themselves (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016, p. 420). This method of collective regulation and dispersed editorial power is certainly not exempt from influence by real-world prejudices, as it is “differently directed according to

gender” as well as race and class (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017, p. 332). As such, those creating posts that deviate from accepted standards of beauty, sexuality, or gender, “are more likely to be met with hostility and even vilification” from certain fragments of the Instagram community (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017, p. 332).

Despite the apparent omnipresence of its ‘community guidelines,’ as well as the performance of procedural collective regulation through flagging and reporting practices, Instagram’s censorship process remains highly obscured (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016, p. 424). When a post or account is deleted, it is gone without “any public record or space for contestation”, leaving those who have been censored “little chance to defend” their deleted content, or, on the flip side, leaving no space for those making the reports “to rally against something so egregious it warrants more than a quiet deletion” (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016, p. 424). When a specific group or community is being subjected to censorship, whether it is the result of targeted and collective efforts by an opposing group, or coming directly from Instagram’s moderators, their ability to *respond* is weakened, if not entirely removed.

The censored party’s inability to respond is not just about responding to the censorship itself. Carrie Rentschler’s concept of “response-ability” posits that “response-ability signifies the capacity to collectively respond to sexual violence and its cultures of racial, gendered and sexuality harassment. It is an activist engagement of subjectivity based in networks of media production and distribution” (Rentschler, 2014, p. 68). Rentschler puts forth response-ability as “young women’s deployment of social media responses to street harassment and sexualized violence” via the “network-enabled tactical subjectivities of current feminism” (Rentschler, 2014, p. 69). Response-ability is

ultimately a method of interruption; a method to challenge oppressive forces such as rape culture “while also building community among young women, and among girls and older generations of women” (Rentschler, 2014, p. 71). Social media has transformed the experience of ‘witnessing’ from a passive experience in which an individual might see or hear something troubling and may or may not intervene, to an experience in which a troubling event is widely distributed and “the act of ‘speaking’ through social media-enabled forms of documentation signals an act of taking responsibility” (Rentschler, 2014, p. 69). Censorship of an activist community therefore poses a threat to that community’s capacity to collectively respond to moments in which it is being oppressed, including but not limited to its ability to respond to the censorship itself. When sex workers lose the ability to respond to the dominant narratives and stereotypes that are attributed to their identity, it allows for harmful stigma and governing practices to persevere unquestioned.

Memes as tools for community building, boundary setting, and challenging dominant antagonisms

Memes have become a pervasive part of Internet culture as images are pulled from all corners of pop and historical culture and are adapted and re-adapted into joke after joke after joke. In the sex worker community, as in other politicized communities online (the LGBTQ+ community, for instance), memes can be adapted into political tools. The term ‘meme’ itself originates from biologist Richard Dawkins, who used the word to label “units of cultural transmission”, though the applicability of that definition to what are currently widely known as memes is contested (Milner, 2016, p. 15). Memes are “premised on participation by reappropriation”; they are “aggregate texts, collectively

created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants” (Milner, 2016, p. 2). Memes depend on the use of bricolage, often using images or references that have pre-existing cultural resonance and reappropriating their original meaning to suit a new or altered meaning imbued by the ‘bricoleur’ (Milner, 2016, p. 61).

In the context of today’s Internet, participatory media such as ‘memes’ can facilitate boundary work, as they are appreciated by those in the community, and can also serve as mechanisms to “challenge dominant antagonisms” (Milner, 2016, p. 118). Often, memes trade in humour, and much of the time they are premised on “identification humour” or “in-jokes”; a comedic mechanism that can be used to “erect and maintain symbolic boundaries...through the assumption of exclusively shared knowledge” (Miltner, 2014, para 15). Memes can facilitate boundary work in online communities by circulating an image or image/text combination that one must have prior cultural knowledge or certain lived experiences to firstly understand the meme but also to find it relatable or humorous (Miltner, 2014). Whether they are based in humour or not, memes can be seen as “performative acts, applied both for persuasive purposes...and for the construction of collective identity and norms” (Gal et al., 2016, p. 1710).

Memes have shown themselves to be a key element of participatory media, and while they originated in message boards and forums such as Reddit and 4Chan, they have worked their way into the mainstream, and are now “ubiquitous in networked environments” (Miltner, 2014, para 2). As Miltner points out, the “cultural history of the Internet has roots in communities where participants were assumed to be white and male” and the same goes for the origins of memes (2014, para 62). In general, public participation on the Internet, including on a platform such as Instagram, “certainly isn’t

evenly distributed, and this inequality manifests around age-old identity categories like class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability” (Milner, 2016, p. 117). But, memes can be employed by counterpublics “who use participatory media to find internal support and to challenge dominant antagonisms” (Milner, 2016, p. 118).

Memes have effectively become a new way of identifying with and relating to a specific audience. In the sex worker community, memes serve to demarcate community boundaries while contributing to the construction of a communal identity by identifying common challenges, adversaries, and laughing about it together.

Conclusion

Moral panics over sex work, sex trafficking, sex predators, and sex workers persist, as evidenced by FOSTA and the institutional communications surrounding the release of FOSTA. While sex worker rights activists have a variety of useful tools at their disposal through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, and the Internet has given sex workers new ways to express their identity and speak as sex workers, these spaces are being slowly chipped away at by government and social media institutions alike. In the case of Instagram, neither is explicitly taking the blame for the censorship of sex workers, however, it is not a phenomenon that has required blame. Moral panics over sex work have created a socially acceptable way for women and their sexualities to be managed, governed, and controlled. It is important to remember that while the Internet does offer a vast array of affordances, it is not a wholly accessible resource either. The most marginalized community members who do not have access can be automatically excluded from conversations and information that spread online.

FOSTA demonstrates that carceral feminism and the rescue industry are alive and well in the United States, and that sex workers' voices continue to be invisible to those in power. However, sex workers continue, as they have for decades, to draw on their collective agency to make themselves and their demands for safety and harm reduction visible. While the concept of 'visibility' takes on new meaning in an age of Instagram influencers, visibility to each other and to the broader public remains a crucial part of formulating collective resistance.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This project has employed a rights-based feminist research methodology, which recognizes the structural and systemic marginalization of the community I am researching. Sex workers' voices are often ignored and have been actively silenced in many different contexts, including when they are labeled as victims in political, policy-based discussions and some academic research, and on a broader level, through the stigma associated with their work (Jackson, 2016; Showden & Majic, 2014). Research on sex workers can be prescriptive, and often stems from frameworks that inherently deny the subjects of study their agency—such as approaching a project from the perspective that “prostitution itself is violence against women” (Farley et. al. 1998, quoted in Agustín, 2010, p. 26). Regardless of the field of research, “we do not need more research imposed by people who believe they know best how other people ought to live and who have already taken a moralistic position before research is begun” (Agustín, 2010, p. 26). Campbell and Wasco (2000) write, “the overarching goal of feminist research is to capture women’s lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women’s voices as sources of knowledge” (p. 783); a goal I have attempted to embody with this project.¹² Further, Campbell and Wasco point out that the “process of research is of as much importance as the outcome” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 783). This project has aimed to situate the participants as the experts by recognizing their voices as valid. For this reason, the literature consulted for this research includes academic work that

¹² This project’s definition of woman is inclusive of trans-women and non-binary femmes. While the scope of this project is limited and cannot overtly address the specific inequalities and challenges that come with being a transgender or non-binary sex worker, these groups have not been excluded from this research.

forefronts the voices and experiences of sex workers, and also turns to argumentative and testimonial texts by sex workers themselves.¹³

The ethics of researching a marginalized community

Basic ethical principles indicate that to engage in ethical research, researchers should obtain informed consent from participants and maintain their anonymity and confidentiality (Beninger, 2017, p. 58). While many ethical guidelines stipulate that research conducted in a public space “where people would reasonably expect to be observed by strangers” does not require “consent, confidentiality and anonymity”, social media users often have different expectations (Burnap, Sloan, & Williams, 2017, p. 1159). Social media platforms like Instagram blur the public and private; while users are often aware of the fact that their accounts are public and can in theory be viewed by anyone, “online information is often intended only for a specific (imagined) public made up of peers, a support network or specific community, not necessarily the Internet public at large, and certainly not for publics beyond the Internet” (Burnap et al., 2017, p. 1160). Social media users also have differing perspectives on the issue of data ownership, and some users who believe consent should be gained from all social media users included in academic research pointed to “intellectual property rights” as one reason (Beninger, 2017, p. 65).

Beyond the expectations of an average social media user, it is important to take into account that this research is engaging with a marginalized community, whose

¹³ This is not to say that sex workers and academics cannot be one and the same, but that texts by sex workers who may not hold academic status are seen as equally important in informing this research.

contributions to broader activist movements such as feminism can sometimes go uncredited. It was therefore important that as a researcher, I acknowledge this community's ownership over the content they produce, and ask for their consent before using their content for purposes other than the original intent. This is particularly important when considering that much of this content is originally intended for a fairly explicit imagined audience: other sex workers. While some of the content gathered in this study is intended for dissemination beyond this demographic, for instance, content that aims to promote education of non-sex workers on the topic of sex work, much of the content is aimed at an implied imagined audience of other sex workers, particularly regarding posts aimed at informing sex workers about their rights, risks, etc. When information "is presented to unintended audiences it has the potential to cause harm, as the information is flowing out of the context it was intended for" (Burnap et al., 2017, p. 1160). Asking for consent from participants and outlining exactly how any data collected from their accounts was to be used allowed for participants to exercise a degree of agency and control over their content. This was particularly relevant for this study, given that participants' lack of control over their content being censored by Instagram is at the heart of this project.

I was given consent by 18 accounts to observe and collect information from their accounts over a 30-day period. Eighteen accounts gave their consent for their information and content to be used, while the rest of the accounts simply did not respond to my request. In my request for their consent I promised a default condition of anonymity, in which usernames, faces, and other identifying details would be removed or concealed from anything that would be published. However, one individual requested that her

working name be attached to anything published about her or her account, because maintaining ownership of the content she produced was important to her. Australian-based sex worker Scarlett Amore wrote:

While any identifying factors like my face need to be omitted, I do request that you include my working name – Scarlett – and username on any quotes or content, and give me credit for any content taken from this account...I am clearly an “out” sex worker and therefore any content I create or anything I write needs to have my working name beside it. (Personal communication, 2018).

This request demonstrates that anonymity is not always the best or only way of preventing harm for the researched community, and that in some instances, maintaining ownership over their work is paramount.

In all other cases, I proceeded with the condition of anonymity that was laid out in my request for consent. For accounts that are referred to often in this research, and for which having an identity marker is relevant for the organization of findings and the benefit of the reader, I assigned pseudonyms. I also omitted any usernames or account ‘handles’ aside from Scarlett’s, and replacing mentions of individual account handles with some version of “@account”.

While I originally exclusively sought out accounts that had ‘public’ settings, meaning anyone could view their page unless they were blocked, I discovered after the first account deletion in my sample that a common tactic after deletion is to make a secondary or back-up account ‘private’, so that the user has the ability to approve or deny anyone who wants to follow them. In order to continue to observe how the deleted individual was grappling with the deletion, I had to change course and include private accounts in my sample. However, I recognized an individual ‘going private’ to be a potential revocation of consent. Therefore in these instances, I messaged the individual to

confirm I still had their ongoing consent to be included in the project. In the two cases where this was relevant, I received affirmation of ongoing consent.

Sample

The sample for this project was selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. To find the 18 accounts that made up my final sample, I began with the public sex worker accounts I already followed on my personal Instagram. I created a new Instagram account where I disclosed my identity as a Master's student engaged in "researching the impacts of FOSTA/SESTA on sex workers' presence on Instagram". This way any account I followed could see my intentions in following them just by looking at my profile. I initially followed a total of 35 accounts; 19 of which were already familiar to me as I already followed them on my personal account. I then found an additional 16 accounts through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I searched for participants purposively by using hashtags such as '#sexworkiswork,' '#FOSTA,' and '#sexworkerrights'. The snowball sampling I also employed was assisted by a function Instagram offers under the heading "Suggestions for You". This function shows up after you follow a new account, and offers "suggestions of similar profiles" you might be interested in following, "such as mutual friends or other people they might know" (Instagram Help Center, n.d.). Using this algorithmically-prompted function was beneficial in creating this sample, as it increased the likelihood that the accounts I was following were already networked with each other in some capacity. While this type of snowball sampling limits the generalizability of any findings arising from this project, it still provided sufficient data to inform a deeper and contextualized description of the

meanings and processes associated with being subjected to censorship by Instagram, which was the intention of this ethnographic investigation (D. Altheide, 2012). I initially collected a sample of 35 accounts, though this differs from my final sample of 18 accounts. This difference was due to a self-imposed requirement to gain the consent of those involved, as previously explained.

The purposive sampling also factored into curating a sample that met certain requirements and parameters. I sought out a sample in which participants' number of followers varied, as the number of followers an activist has attributes a quantifiable level of visibility. I hypothesized that an activists' level visibility could affect their ability to evade censorship/moderation and/or respond to it when it occurs because of their ability to appeal to a greater number of people for assistance. Additionally, I sought out a variety of different forms of activism for my sample. Of the 18 accounts included in this sample, four accounts were described in their account profiles as community organizations/sex worker collectives, engaging in either activism on behalf of the community or working to empower the sex worker community by providing "needs-based information and resources," as one organization was described in its bio. One account was the Instagram page for a weekly podcast show put on by sex workers, and was characterized as a "News & Media Website". The rest of the accounts were run by individual sex workers, and often featured documentation of their personal lives, 'meme' pages, or a combination of both. Only one account included in this ethnography, a porn actress with 280k followers, used their Instagram page for paid advertising of products such as sex toys.

The racial and gender demographics of this sample are not entirely known, as not all accounts disclose their personal identity or post photos of themselves. Accounts

dedicated to creating and sharing memes, for instance, might keep their personal identity private and may never post a photo of themselves to the account. However, in instances where the person behind the account did not disclose their identity, it was implied that they were women or presenting female while engaging in sex work. The word “woman” was present in the handle/username of one such account; in another instance, the avatar image was one of a woman on a stripper’s pole; in another, an account which featured primarily hand-drawn illustrations, often represented themselves in their artwork as the female character. Most of the accounts with visible identities—as in they frequently posted photos of themselves to their pages—were white-appearing women. However, this only constituted five of the 18 accounts included in this ethnography. Many other accounts, while they could be safely presumed to be women, kept anonymous identities. In the latter part of this ethnography, after a few accounts run by visibly white women were deleted, but then restored by Instagram, there was a discussion about how the accounts that were restored, and restored quite quickly, were run by visibly white women, while other accounts run by sex workers of colour had never been restored.

Ethnographic Content Analysis

This project undertook an Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) of 18 sex worker activist accounts. The ethnographic investigation took place over the course of 30 days and included at minimum twice-daily observation of these accounts, with the intention of generating rich and informed descriptions of the sociocultural dimensions of what is likely one of many sex worker communities on Instagram. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2019), the goal of an ethnographic investigation is “describing and

interpreting the observable relationships between social practices and systems of meaning, based on firsthand experience and exploration of a particular cultural setting” (p. 174). The cultural setting in this case is one part of an assumed broader sex worker activist community on Instagram; the social practices include navigating censorship and resisting undue regulation; the systems of meaning include the dominant discourse surrounding sex work and the discursive practices that sex worker activists engage in to reframe that meaning.

A central tenet of ECA as a method is that all research inherently involves participant observation, from “the selection of a topic, method of study, data collections, analysis, and interpretation” (D. L. Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 27). Ethnography traditionally embraces researcher reflexivity as inherent to a sustained inquiry, and in the context of researching a marginalized community, self-reflexivity is crucial to this project (D. L. Altheide & Schneider, 2013). My external positioning in relation to this community, as someone sex workers might refer to as a ‘civilian’, meant there were limits to my ability to engage as a participant observer. That said, my prior experience as a follower of some of the members of my sample meant that I was an informed observer, and could, to a degree, “draw on my experience and knowledge to imagine the motives of those members in performing particular actions”, particularly as I had previously seen specific motives and actions laid out (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 176). Further, I did participate in my sample’s collective efforts to assist individuals in the wake of having their accounts deleted. To conduct this ethnography, I created a new Instagram account on which I disclosed my identity as a master’s student “researching the impacts of FOSTA/SESTA on sex workers’ presence on Instagram”. To my surprise, this account

gained nearly 100 followers over the course of the 30-day ethnography, only seven of which were accounts that I had followed while seeking out my sample. Most of the accounts appeared to be sex work-related in some way, and I received questions about my research from one such account. The small following this account gained and the nature of some of the accounts that followed it suggests that perhaps my account was somehow included in the network of this community, whether through algorithms that suggest “accounts to follow” to individuals or otherwise. Additionally, in my role as researcher of and ally to this community, I participated in actions such as petitioning Instagram to return accounts that had been terminated by submitting ‘feedback reports’. I also assisted in publicizing an account deletion when it happened, by sharing who was deleted and posting their new ‘location’ on Instagram (typically a back-up account). I later identified both actions as communal strategies that were part of an emerging pattern of steps for resisting censorship after it occurs. Through regular viewing of their posts and interactions with each other, I came to ‘know’ individual members of my sample and gained deeper understanding of the factors at play in the cultural setting of Instagram.

A key element of ethnography is the researcher’s intent to understand experiences and how meaning is constructed, to reveal “common elements of a culture” and ultimately engage in “cultural description and interpretation” (García-Rapp, 2018, p. 7). Approaching this research from an ethnographic perspective means understanding document analysis as fieldwork (D. L. Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 23). Conceiving of content analysis as fieldwork makes logical sense in a space like the one occupied by this particular community on Instagram, which is constantly changing, with multiple new ‘documents’ uploaded every hour. This is not a content analysis of static data, but an

ethnographic investigation of a dynamic space that can be best understood through the researcher's immersion "in the contexts, environment, situations, and lifeworlds of the subjects" (D. L. Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 26). Engaging in regular interaction and observation with the content at the heart of this research proves even more critical when a significant part of this research is understanding what happens when data *disappears* from the Internet. Aside from the risk that some of the data of interest would be censored by Instagram moderators, Instagram's 'stories' feature allows individuals to make temporary posts that automatically disappear after 24 hours. Therefore, the documents that make up the object of study are temporally fluid. Content is added and also removed on a daily basis as Instagram users and moderators act and react to events as they occur. If the documents were examined historically as opposed to currently, much of the important context that arose (often from posts to 'stories') would be missed.

Data Analysis

The qualitative content analysis this project took up fit well with researching this community because content analysis offers "an unobtrusive and nonreactive method" that can be "applied to all types of media content" (Reichert Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 347). This project engaged in a 'small data' approach that allowed for a more rich, detailed, "qualitative insight into social media practices" (Hillman & Weilenmann, 2015, p. 4057). A small data approach served my interest in identifying and understanding the context surrounding individual posts, the narrative construction that occurred across media forms, and in the community organization that was responding to censorship/moderation (Stephansen & Couldry, 2014, p. 1216; Utekhin, 2017).

The ECA took place over the course of thirty days, from November 23, 2018 through December 23, 2018. A time period of thirty days was chosen because though my sample size was relatively small, I wanted to ensure there was enough breadth to witness and record a wide variety of interactions, reactions to censorship, and community activity. Further, this ethnography encompassed the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, which falls annually on December 17. Including this day in my sample meant I was able to witness how Instagram activism interacted with a day that is marked by protests, vigils, and other in-person meetings around the world. It also increased the likelihood that there would be overt discussions about what perpetuates violence against sex workers, as well as potential strategies for ending violence against sex workers.

Because of the nature of Instagram as a multi-media space, I was inherently concerned with multi-media content. I collected a combination of images, videos, written captions that might accompany a 'timeline' post on Instagram, as well as posts to an account's 'story'. Because I created a separate account for this project, all of the data was easily accessible in one place, and nothing was lost amidst other content that would have been present had I conducted this study using my personal account. I checked Instagram at least twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon or evening. This ensured I did not miss any posts, particularly the temporary posts to 'stories'. Checking Instagram frequently also increased my chance of viewing any posts before they could potentially be deleted.

My primary method of data collection was taking screenshots of relevant posts. For the storage and analysis of video posts, I used an app that allowed me to record any

activity on my own iPhone screen, so I was able to save videos that might have otherwise disappeared. Taking screenshots and saving the photos and videos on a regular basis was critical for an ethnographic investigation concerned with analyzing data that is at risk of being taken down by Instagram moderators. Criteria for when posts were collected and stored for analysis included: if the post related directly to FOSTA/SESTA; if it related to the censorship of sex workers; if it related to the removal of a post and/or account; and, if it related to Instagram's community guidelines. I was also interested in understanding the nature of the community I was studying, therefore I collected any posts relating to community-building. This included posts that addressed the community either directly or indirectly, related to organizing for activist or community-building purposes offline, shared resources that would be beneficial for the community, or otherwise provided support for the community or expressed appreciation for the community. These criteria were developed a priori, and set the foundation for my thematic analysis, directly informing the broader thematic codes that were the base of my inductive coding strategy.

This study employed a hybrid method of analysis, incorporating a deductive approach so as to ground the analysis within the scope of the research question, as well as an inductive approach, allowing for codes and themes to emerge from the data. This combined approach allowed for the research question and intent to remain integral to the data analysis while also allowing themes to emerge directly from the data itself (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83).

Collecting data for 30 days using screenshots and a video recording app resulted in 1,600 images and videos for analysis, though videos made up a small percentage of this data set. I typed up image descriptions and transcribed all captions and other text

from all relevant screenshots and videos. This allowed me to better know my data set, to confirm my initial criteria as thematic codes, in addition to producing a set of emergent codes based on themes and categories of behaviour. The broader categories that resulted from a combination of my initial criteria and some areas that emerged as relevant to understanding the community included ‘community building,’ ‘boundary work,’ ‘(re-)framing sex work,’ ‘activist rhetoric outside of sex work,’ posts or discussions ‘relating directly to FOSTA/SESTA,’ and ‘pertaining to content deletion’. These higher level codes helped to identify the nature of much of the activity that occurred throughout my ethnography. These themes were then broken down further through inductive coding, with ‘pertaining to content deletion’ and ‘relating directly to FOSTA/SESTA’ being of particular interest. Within ‘posting about content deletion’, I was able to identify and categorize specific strategies, such as ‘sharing info about prevention, resistance’ to censorship or content deletion, or ‘rebuilding strategies’ after an account as deleted, which was further broken down to ‘asking the community for help’, for instance. I was also able to identify and categorize themes in rhetoric surrounding content deletion, such as posts that display ‘impacts of, reactions to censorship’, or posts based in ‘criticism of Zuckerberg, Instagram, Facebook for censorship’.

Overall, this coding strategy allowed for the data to guide the process while also keeping sight of the research question and the intent of the study. Coding was a process that occurred throughout the data collection and evolved into the final codebook in the analysis stage, ensuring that “the developing themes were grounded in the original data” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). Allowing the data to guide the analysis is important for this project when considering the theoretical positioning this chapter began

with describing. By taking an emergent approach to coding and analysis, this project endeavoured to allow the subjects of the research guide its outcomes.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Sex workers on Instagram are having their existence as a virtual community—and therefore a visible community—threatened by governmental legislation such as FOSTA and Instagram’s moderation tactics. As a result, sex workers are engaging in efforts to increase their community’s collective visibility as a tactic of resisting and responding to instances of individual censorship. Over the course of this ethnography, three accounts were deleted, two of which were restored. However, those that had their accounts restored did not credit Instagram with their return, but rather the sex worker community that rallied around them, amplifying and reiterating objections to the censorship. This chapter discusses the common strategies that emerged as the owners of the deleted accounts attempted to challenge their deletion and the tools this community employed in order to challenge dominant antagonisms. I identify a process of response to individual instances of censorship, in addition to more continual strategies of response to what the community recognizes as targeted censorship. Overall, the tactics of resistance fall under three categories: 1. taking pre-emptive steps in anticipation of censorship; 2. engaging in boundary work to gain some control over their online space; and 3. appealing to and mobilizing the sex worker community on their behalf.¹⁴

Participants attempt to pre-empt censorship by creating back-up accounts that they could turn to in the event their account was deleted. They also demonstrate an expectation or familiarity with censorship as they engage in strategic self-censorship in

¹⁴ While these categories emerge throughout my data and analysis, this chapter is structured to follow the narrative process of the censorship and the ensuing response and strategies. Laying out the response as it occurred allows for a more straightforward and detailed description of the context.

an effort to toe the company's 'community guidelines,' attempting to negotiate with Instagram's binary approach of deeming content "appropriate-versus-inappropriate" (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 84).

Participants engaged in boundary work for the purpose of retaining some control over their online space when control was exactly what they were losing when being subjected to censorship. When a sex worker account was deleted, participants turned to a secondary account (either a new account created in the wake of deletion or a pre-existing back-up account). Often immediately in the wake of their deletion, they would make this secondary account 'private', meaning they then had the ability to approve or reject requests from people who wanted to follow them. This was an attempt to control who had access to their space, and therefore who would have the ability to report the content they produced to Instagram and its moderators.

Finally, participants who had their accounts deleted appealed to the community for support and for direct action. They asked the community to spread the news of their deletion, thereby publicizing censorship which might otherwise have occurred silently without opportunity for recourse. Those with deleted accounts also asked their followers to submit reports to Instagram on their behalf to advocate for their return, making the outrage associated with the deletion directly visible to Instagram's moderation decision-makers.

This chapter further explores the responses and tactics that sex worker activists take up in response to instances of censorship that threaten the existence of their virtual community. It also examines how ultimately these sex workers employ the agency of their collective community to make both the censorship itself as well as their responses

and reactions to it more visible, and the tools they employ in order to do so. I argue that the sex worker accounts being subjected to censorship are engaged in a negotiation with Instagram over which bodies, identities, and communities are entitled to occupy Instagram's virtual space. By signalling that sex workers are not wanted in its virtual community, the company is quite explicit about the fact that it does not believe sex workers have a right to visibility on its platform based on their sex worker identity. The difficulty that sex workers are currently encountering within virtual social spaces like Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, etc., is a result of being one of the first groups subjected to state regulation of the Internet, and having that regulation endorsed because of the stigma they face. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, which owns Instagram, was quoted in January of 2010 as saying: "We view it as our role...to constantly be innovating and be updating what our system is to reflect what the current social norms are" (Smith & Cole, 2013, p. 217). The censorship of sex workers on Instagram is in some ways an extension of long-standing attitudes towards sex workers, however, what Zuckerberg failed to consider in 2010 is how Facebook, and now Instagram, work to construct and uphold social norms in their own right given their pervasiveness and status as two of the "default" social networking sites (Smith & Cole, 2013, p. 217).

The uneven impact of stigma

While the issue of access to a social media account may seem frivolous or inconsequential, the censorship that is at hand is a symptom of a broader social attitude towards sex workers; one which would prefer they remained out of sight. The stigma associated with sex work and the sex worker identity was one of the most frequent topics

of discussion within my ethnography. The same stigma that contributes to sex workers being censored on sites like Instagram has the ability to escalate quickly into real harm and violence. As one post from a participant read, “#STIGMAKILLS Sex Workers.” This particular post depicted a pyramid¹⁵ explaining how stigma starts small yet can end in violence and death. The bottom of the pyramid was labeled “**Stigmatization**: Safe Spaces & outsource removed, Safe/regular clientele afraid/arrested, SESTA/FOSTA type laws, Victimization (“all trafficked”), SWERFs, Dead provider jokes, Whorephobia.” The next levels of the pyramid included, “**Victimization**: Clientele pushing providers’ boundaries, Providers forced to work dangerous clients/spaces, “Bad John” lists & screening sites taken down; **Dehumanization**: Severe abuse, Serial predators target providers, Coercion by pimps, arrest.” The top of the pyramid read: “**Isolation, Death**: Murder, Death, Rape.” This post, by including laws and regulation associated with sex work as both resulting from and perpetuating stigma in and of themselves, contests the victimization framework by drawing a direct path from such measures to “Murder, Death, Rape.”

The chain reaction this pyramid lays out is important to remember in the context of this study. For many, particularly those sex workers in the most precarious positions, the effects of FOSTA and the stigma it perpetuates go far beyond losing an Instagram account. Instagram signalling that sex workers do not have the right to visibility on its platform normalizes the removal of and ostracization of sex workers from communal spaces. The company’s censorship actively participates in the silencing of sex workers by perpetuating a victimizing framework that does not take into account what sex workers say, and instead imposes top-down governance based on the assumption that ‘sex worker’

¹⁵ Figure 1

is an undesirable identity (Jackson, 2016, p. 35). Further, it is important to note that the lines demarcated in this graphic between stigmatization and victimization, for instance, are even thinner for sex workers of colour, trans sex workers, and sex workers in more precarious economic situations.

The sex workers in this study that were successful in having their accounts returned to them represent some of the most privileged in this community. Their visible whiteness, thinness, and cisgender femininity made it more safe for them to be visible on Instagram in the first place, and also to seek out intensified visibility through the acquisition of an audience. As Mac and Smith write, “Just as in any radical movement, a select few activists often receive unfair credit for doing the same work that more marginalized sex workers, who cannot risk being public in their activism, are doing alongside them” (2018, p. 19). Those activists who are vocal and visible on Instagram are likely the ones who “already have the most control over their working conditions,” therefore, certain sex worker perspectives have more access to visibility and more time to even think about what visibility means for them and their work (Mac & Smith, p. 13).

This social positioning contributes to the social capital certain activists are able to expend in order to advocate against the censorship of their accounts. It takes time, energy, and a willingness to make oneself more visible in order to mobilize a community to combat Instagram’s censorship. Those in more precarious social positions may not have the resources to combat censorship let alone the ability to risk making themselves more visible, as for some, increased visibility comes with an increased risk of violence. When censorship on platforms like Instagram occurs, the most marginalized are the most

easily silenced without recourse, meaning it is these populations that are the first to endure the lasting and more serious ramifications.

The community: An established network

The 18 accounts included in this ethnography constituted part of a larger virtual community of sex workers on Instagram; one which actively and publicly interacted with each other, and in some instances engaged in patrolling its own borders. I label it a community because of the visible network of relationships between participants (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 105), a characteristic which proved important in this group's efforts to evade, subvert, or respond to censorship, particularly when entire accounts disappeared. It was the network that spread the news of their deletion and advertised their new 'location' to followers in the form of a back-up or secondary account, allowing the deleted individuals to regain some visibility and audience.

Sex workers have historically drawn upon and relied on their networks when organizing, but having access to online space facilitates connections that extend beyond geographical boundaries and are based in shared identity (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 106). Indeed, one challenge of sex worker organizing continues to be that "sex worker groups remain fragmented among themselves and confined to the city level" (Gall, 2014, p. 233). Community and activism-based relationships between sex workers are not new, though access to social media has supplemented and expanded these "traditional networks" (Williamson & Ruming, 2016, p. 71). Some of the participants in this study were geographically distant, for instance, with some located in Canada, others in different cities in the United States, and others from Australia. However, the nature of their

accounts and the content they disseminated was often quite similar, grounded in sex worker rights-based advocacy articulated over generations. The network became visible when participants would cross-post each other's material, sometimes stating their agreement or adding in a caveat by imposing their own text on top of the original post. Instagram itself facilitates this kind of bricolage-style discourse, with a built-in function to allow users to repost others' posts to their 'stories.'

This cross-posting would often serve as a quick way to circulate information that the participant deemed important for their audience, such as when one participant, Tara, posted a spreadsheet and several other text-based images to her account and credited a sex-worker led advocacy group (also a participant in this sample). The spreadsheet and text shared information about changes to how much dancers were capable of earning due to recent changes in state labour laws in California. The laws changed the status of dancers from independent contractors to employees, which had a negative impact on dancers' bottom line. Cross-posting also served as a way to support each other's content creation by sharing each other's original memes, for instance. The practice of cross-posting demonstrated the community's interactions with each other. Individual participants in this community were not speaking and sharing in silos, but had an established network; they knew of each other, engaged with each other, and often publicly proclaimed their appreciation for each other.

The segment of the broader sex worker rights movement on Instagram that made up my sample engaged in advocacy for sex worker rights, shared certain aspects of their personal lives, and produced content such as memes that would be relatable to a community of sex workers. The specific community in this ethnography was not a space

where sexual services were advertised or solicited, though sex workers would often ask for payment for their emotional/intellectual labour and time. It was common to include links to platforms where they could receive payment in their bios. For instance, Katie, a participant, posted to her stories, “I’m about to disable the ability to respond to my stories. Fucking pay me or shut the hell up...Pay trans/GNC [gender non-conforming] POC [people of colour] first and foremost. But if you’ve learned from me, or gotten aroused by me, fucking pay me.” Demanding payment for the time and energy that went into their Instagram page was not uncommon, particularly when interacting with individuals one-on-one, or when others might be benefitting from the work they produced on their page. While payment was requested in some instances on the app, it is important to note that this was not a space where sex workers advertised their services or engaged in sex work.¹⁶ Occasionally, participants would screenshot messages they had received requesting services or even requesting knowledge about services, and would definitively reject the request, explicitly defining the space as not one where clients could solicit them. Katie once posted a screenshot of such a conversation, wherein someone had messaged her:

I see you post all the time about respecting sex workers. I am totally new to hiring someone like yourself, but I am interested in doing so. Where do I go to find services offered, rates, and all that? And where can I find other women in your field? Is there a website to search for this?

Katie’s response was: “Google it, cop.” She wrote on the screenshot she posted, “Have a nice day” with a kissing face emoji. Sharing such an interaction demonstrates to her

¹⁶ This is not to imply that sex workers who do engage in advertising sexual services or use Instagram, or any other social media, as a method to interact and attract clients, deserve to be censored as well. This is just to stress the fact that in this instance, the community at hand performs a different function, and yet is still being subjected to undue censorship because of their sex worker identity.

followers the nature of her presence on Instagram. She is not there to be solicited for sexual labour or for information on soliciting sex, but as a “feminist” voice, as she self-describes, sharing her experience and advocating for her community.

The existence of this virtual community has its roots in sex worker collective organizing, which itself “coalesced around a form and modus operandi of extra-workplace pressure-group activity” (Gall, 2014, p. 224). There exists both an individual and a collective element to this community, as individuals are working to promote the interests of the community at large, and other members of this community on Instagram work to spread, reiterate, and engage with such messages beyond its initial iteration. Such a virtual community is a result of a longstanding sex worker rights movement practice of adopting the affordances of online spaces as a way of extending conversations and debates relating to movement goals (Feldman, 2014, p. 244).

Taking up issues of communal importance

The space this community exists within is an important place for interaction and discussion. Issues and messages that are of importance to the community are circulated widely as they are shared and re-shared, with each ‘share’ reiterating or underscoring the importance, relevancy, or resonance with the community. One such issue was the fact of targeted censorship on Instagram itself as the community grappled with the restrictions this censorship places on their autonomous behaviour on the platform. Another point of discussion was Tumblr’s December 2018 announcement, which occurred during this study, that it would remove all ‘adult content’ from its platform. The ban seemed to be primarily directed at porn that lived on the platform, though in addition to “depictions of

sex acts” and “human genitalia,” “female-presenting nipples” were also banned with the new rules (Martineau, 2018). This decision was lamented by several accounts included in this study, as it would directly affect the content they shared on the platform and how they would interact with other users. The fact that the ban was to go into effect on Dec. 17, 2018—the annual International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers—did not go unnoticed. “RIP to this platform [Tumblr] as being a place where [sex workers] could monetize in an artful way. Weird they are doing it on International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers” wrote one account, posting to her stories. Scarlett posted a screenshot of a tweet that read, “tumblr is taking away porn, Craigslist taking away personals section, backpage being taken down, I don’t think people understand that this is a direct attack on sex workers & make[s] working even more unsafe & difficult in a system that already gives sex workers no rights protections.” The Tumblr news was discussed by this community as the latest effort to censor and control their presence online, and was often seen as more of the same, being discussed in conjunction with censorship on other social media like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter when conversations of censorship arose. Instances of censorship across platforms such as this decision by Tumblr were consistently associated with FOSTA by the community.

The accounts did not limit the topics they engaged in to sex work advocacy, but, just like the broader sex worker rights movement has done historically, engaged with different intersections of the sex worker rights movement (Grant, 2014, p. 129). This included trans rights, immigration, critiques of capitalism, body positivity, and anti-racism rhetoric. While these issues were often discussed in terms of how they intersected

with sex worker identity, sex worker rights advocacy was the most prevalent topic during my observation.

All of the accounts in this ethnography used their presence to (re-)frame sex work, grounding their depictions in their experience and their politics. Participants often made posts that worked to distinguish between sex trafficking and sex work—an important issue for sex workers who are often either assumed to be victims, or, if they purport to be agentic beings, are presumed ‘happy hookers’ (Ditmore, 2010, p. 239). While participants used their platforms to advocate for their rights and to speak against violence, they did not engage in portraying themselves as experiencing ‘total job satisfaction.’ In sharing their experience as sex workers, they portrayed a complex representation of sex work, taking up discussions of the good and the bad. For instance, Scarlett turned to the community for advice when she had a bad experience while working, posting to her stories:

How do u guys deal with the emotional vulnerability/fear of violation after a condom breakage? I ran out of meds a couple days ago and it’s usually something I can cope with no worries, but at the moment I feel disgusting & worthless. Also emergency contraception is already taken care of, this is more mental type stuff.

Scarlett included a question and response box on the post, so followers could respond to her question. As she got responses, she shared the suggestions anonymously, therefore enabling others who might have had similar experiences or feelings to also hear the suggestions and assistance provided by the community. This is an example of the kind of emotional and mental support that such a community can provide to a group that is engaged in work that can otherwise be isolating, and an example of when “caring for each other is political work” (Mac & Smith, 2018). As access to virtual social spaces has supplemented and extended the networks of sex worker rights activists, it has made the informal aspects of mutual support and care more visible

as they might occur in a public space. Different forms of informal care have also emerged from this specific environment.

Resources were also commonly disseminated, from instructions for what to do when stopped by police, strategies for self-defence, and information about how changes to laws or new laws could impact the community (including FOSTA/SESTA). Additionally, information for in-person events, meetings, or demonstrations was often shared on the platform. Flyers for in-person rallies and vigils for International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers events were distributed, for instance. Also, one Portland-based stripper organized a sex worker meet-up prior to the holidays which she termed “Strip-mas 2018,” and invited all sex workers to attend. Out of this meeting, which was at least organized in part on Instagram, a new local sex worker collective was formed.

Deleted but not erased: ‘I’m like a motherfucking cockroach bitch’

Three accounts were deleted over the course of this study. All three belonged to cisgender white women, and two of the three were eventually restored. All of the accounts took up certain strategies to respond to the censorship, but the tactics evolved through a process of trial and error, as community members observed how others dealt with their deletions and attempted to replicate strategies they saw taken up by others, especially those who were successful in having their accounts restored. The details around the deletions and how individuals who experienced a deletion navigated the aftermath can be complex and difficult to follow at times, as some users went through multiple iterations of accounts as they were repeatedly deleted. My decision to convey

the intricacies of these process is in order to first demonstrate that such occurrences are messy. As yet, there are no straightforward and widespread strategies for resisting censorship imposed by a social media giant, but instead what can seem like scrambling attempts to find anything that might work or have an impact. Further, by laying out some of the non-linear paths the participants embarked upon after deletion, I aim to illuminate the relationship between Instagram and the users it censors as much as possible, as this relationship dynamic is central to the experience—and therefore the response—of the community that is being subjected to top-down censorship measures. For the sake of clarity I refer to individuals who have had their accounts deleted or censored as the ‘censee(s)’.

The deleted accounts

Scarlett Amore

@slutscarlett, a meme page directed at an audience of sex workers, was the first account to be deleted during this study. Scarlett Amore, the Australian-based sex worker behind the account, asked that her working name and Instagram handles be used in any reference to her work, as receiving credit for her labour was important to her. When her account was deleted, Scarlett had 7,000 followers. She had identified herself as a “sex worker, author, and queer woman” and provided a link to purchase her book, *The Whore’s Handbook*.

Katie (a pseudonym)

Katie's account, with 5,500 followers as of the end of November 2018, was deleted while she was on vacation visiting her mother, a trip she had been documenting on her Instagram. Katie's account featured a combination of memes and documentation of her personal/work life. Before her account was deleted, her bio read: "A force. The Divine Feminine in 7" heels. Amateur astrologer. Abolish police and prisons. Next up + backup account: @[backup]. Pay Me: [with a link to her Venmo account]". Her account was categorized, using a feature of Instagram's 'business profiles' as being a "Landmark & Historical Place", which may have been a pre-emptive strategy in and of itself to avoid detection by Instagram moderators.

Tara (a pseudonym)

Tara's account was deleted for the second time since I had been a follower of hers, the first occurrence happening three months before this ethnography began. When her account was deleted during this study, she had more than 82,100 followers. Tara did not explicitly refer to herself as a sex worker in her bio, though the word "stripper" was in her username. In her bio, Tara referenced the parts of her identity that situate her as an educator and a media producer, writing: "Published writer + sex educator. Podcast Host."

Networks catching on: Learning of the deletions

I learned that Scarlett's account was deleted when three other accounts in this study posted to their stories, writing that "slutscarlett was 'zucc'd." I learned of Katie's account deletion in the same manner, and throughout my study, I learned of many

accounts that had been deleted in this way, though these other accounts were outside my sample. Such instances revealed how my small sample of 18 accounts, while likely part of a broader networked community, was also intricately linked in and of itself. Those who posted about Scarlett's deletion also informed their followers of where she could be found now, with requests that their followers follow her at her new account(s). This practice indicated an assumption that several of the members in the community shared at least part of a follower base, as the deleted individual using these channels is implicitly trying to make contact with their lost followers to make them aware of the situation and to urge them to re-follow her in her new location. Through the process of deletion and then working to publicize the deletion, the 'censee' is also presumably exposed to new followers who had not yet come across their account. While the censee lost the visibility that their deleted account and all of its followers had afforded them, they were being made visible to new groups as a result of the news of their deletion being circulated throughout the community. Having the community rally around the deleted individual to essentially advertise their deletion proved crucial in mitigating the consequences of being deleted. For instance, when Scarlett's original account was deleted, she had approximately 7,000 followers. Four months later, Scarlett's secondary account had almost nearly the same number, with a follower count of 6,986.

Visibility is important to sex workers because social media sites like Instagram function largely on what Alison Hearn calls the "reputation economy" (Hearn, 2010). Such an economy trades in likes, views, and shares. While the reputation economy is primarily geared towards the consumer marketplace and is largely predisposed to normative expressions of feminine discourses and practices, for marginalized identities,

visibility amplified by likes, shares, and views can be legitimating. Further, this affirming visibility can be translated into the very social capital such communities need to survive in spaces where they are actively silenced by governing institutions.

Without the existence of the networked sex worker community on Instagram, it would be much more difficult to detect when an account was deleted, particularly if they did not have a back-up account that they had previously advertised. If these individuals were operating in silos, they would have been deleted without anyone immediately realizing what had happened, and any attempts to regain the presence they had built up over the years would have been all the more challenging. Overall, they would be much easier to silence through censorship. However, social media itself, Instagram included, is premised on the creation and expansion of networked communities, and the networked nature of sex worker activist communities is no exception. This allows for the network itself to ‘catch’ the news of a deletion, and to quickly and effectively disseminate the information across “a network of advertorial capillaries by duplicating, amplifying and multiplying the...content to their own circle of followers and personal friends” (Abidin, 2016, p. 89). This kind of information flow mimics networks embodied by other social media communities seeking increased visibility, such as social media marketers or lifestyle ‘influencers’ whose goal is to operate within normative, (often feminine) discourses and practices for the purpose of translating increased visibility into capital gain. However, the networked sex worker communities at hand are co-opting a basic function of social media and a broader reputation economy that functions on the trading of visibility in order to resist and speak back to the social media entity itself. In this context, the visibility does serve the individual who is seeking it, as they attempt to

regain and rebuild an audience, something that could certainly be transformed into profit here as well (Abidin, 2016). However, all of the people using their platform to share the deleted individual's new location and information are not gaining much aside from assisting to amplify the community's voices as a whole.

Anticipating censorship: Back-up accounts

I was notified of Tara's deletion not through other sex worker accounts, (though other sex worker accounts did also advertise Tara's deletion), but through her own well-established back-up account. After her account was deleted and then restored the first time, (several months prior to this study), Tara was able to tell her followers where they could find her in case it ever happened again. When her account was deleted for the second time, her back-up account was already equipped with 9,100 followers—more followers than either Katie and Scarlett's accounts had to begin with. As of the end of this study, that number had grown to 11,300 followers. Additionally, Tara has access to yet another account that represents the podcast she co-hosts, which, at the time of writing,¹⁷ also had 9,400 followers. Because of the heightened level of visibility her back-up account already had, Tara's deletion became something of a spectacle itself. While still only a small portion of the 85,000¹⁸ followers on her main account, having more than 9,100 people watch her account be deleted, listen to her experience, and potentially mobilize and advocate on her behalf was likely an advantage for Tara. When her account was deleted again during this study, it was reinstated by Instagram in less than 12 hours.

¹⁷ April, 2019.

¹⁸ As of January 2019.

In contrast, it has taken others—including a racialized trans sex worker not included in this study—more than six months of lobbying to have their account returned.¹⁹

Katie, too, turned to a pre-existing back-up account after her account was deleted. The bio on her back-up account read, “I started this to begin posting photos professionally and also used it as a backup. As of right now, [her old account] is gone. Idk what to do...” Having a back-up account at all demonstrates that both Tara and Katie were aware they were perhaps prone to censorship, either because they had been censored before as is the case with Tara²⁰, or because they were aware of other sex worker accounts being subjected to censorship.

In contrast, Scarlett did not have a back-up account ready and waiting, though she was evidently aware of the strategy. After her account was deleted, Scarlett created two new accounts: one, under the handle @_scarlettamore, was created to replace her deleted account and provide a space to rebuild her content and audience. She also created a second new account, under the handle @scarlett.pdf, which she advertised as a back-up account in case her new account was also deleted; that way, her followers could follow both accounts, and be able to find her with ease if she was deleted again. Scarlett’s bio on her replacement account was updated to read, “I got zucc’d. WAS @SLUTSCARLETT. Sex worker, author, and queer woman. She/her. Living on Wurundjeri land. Backup account @scarlett.pdf” and featured a link to buy her book, *The Whore’s Handbook*. The second back-up, @scarlett.pdf, was also private. The bio for this account read: “just in

¹⁹ The account belonging to this individual was not included in this study because at the time this study began, the account was private. Additionally, the instance of the deletion and recovery of this account occurred outside of the timeline of my ethnography.

²⁰ I do not know if Katie had experienced account deletion prior to the beginning of this study because I had not previously interacted with her account.

case. Backup account because Instagram hates sex workers.” Back-up accounts such as Scarlett’s were often explicit about the fact that they only existed because their main accounts were under threat of censorship. If a follower went to follow Scarlett’s back-up account before she needed to use it, the description she uses in her bio signals to the follower that she is anticipating censorship based on her identity, and that they should participate in pre-emptive action, too, by following her back-up account.

Scarlett’s second account, @_scarlettmore, appeared to disappear from Instagram for a few hours on the same day her main account had been deleted. Eventually, it reappeared, though the circumstances of this brief disappearance are unclear. Scarlett continued to use this second account, though she posted a slew of memes to @scarlett.pdf, the new back-up, captioning one post: “Some classic slutscarlett memes for storage.” On this post, a follower picked up on a potential strategy for evading further censorship that Scarlett was not yet employing, writing: “would changing ur name help protect u? Whenever accounts get repeatedly taken down, I’ve seen them change the name to [something] totally different and they seem to get left alone.” To this, Scarlett replied, “probably, but it’s my author name and brand so I prob won’t.” Scarlett’s name was clearly of importance to her. When I first reached out to Scarlett for consent, she stressed wanting to maintain ownership over the content she produced, and her working name was a key part of this.

However, the day after her original account was deleted, her second account @_scarlettmore was deleted, this time for good. After this, Scarlett appeared to take the advice of the commenter, and changed the handle of her third account, @scarlett.pdf, to @_swmemes, removing her name from the handle. Scarlett likely wanted to be as visible

as possible to any followers who might want to find her again after her deletion, and keeping her name in the username was one way to do this. However, she ended up having to make her Instagram identity slightly more ambiguous to attempt to evade Instagram's moderators, demonstrating that while visibility in the community can be a strength for these accounts, when in the midst of experiencing censorship, the censees need to take measures to limit their visibility with Instagram's moderators. While we can only speculate, this instance demonstrates that Instagram might take steps to make it more difficult for a censee to return to its platform under a similar username as a way of increasing barriers for returning.

In this instance, creating a second account and a third as a back-up helped Scarlett when she was deleted for the second time, as she had already been recruiting followers to her back-up account. The bio for @_swmemes was changed as well. With the @_scarlettamore account, Scarlett had explicitly identified herself as a "sex worker, author, queer woman." This line was removed from her @_swmemes account, and was replaced with the line, "subpar memes for sex work queens." This is the account she has managed to keep and is still using at the time of writing, though she has also created another account. She actively uses both accounts, one for memes, and the other for illustrations. If Scarlett is deleted again, having two active accounts will likely be an advantage for her, because she will already have a second platform she can turn to.²¹

Once Katie, Tara, and Scarlett gained access to a backup or secondary account, they were able to reach out to their community of peers on Instagram, letting them know that their account had been deleted and asking for assistance in spreading the word. Each

²¹ Instagram allows its users to have up to five accounts at one time.

person made posts that could easily be copied and shared by others who wished to help publicize their deletion and their new location. This gives the deleted parties a broader platform made up of all the followers of the accounts that repost their information combined. This wider audience they gain access to might be made up of followers already familiar with their account, but there are undoubtedly followers that encounter them for the first time in this way. Having the community mobilize to spread the knowledge of the deletion serves to not only mark the deletion as an event, but to give it an audience. As this audience started to accrue in the form of followers on their secondary or back-up accounts, the deleted person shares their reaction to the deletion.

Documenting, publicizing, responding

Instagram's moderation structure is not designed to be negotiable; its moderators offer primarily top-down, final decisions. Once something is deleted by Instagram's moderators, it is gone without "any public record or space for contestation" (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016, p. 424). By deleting users' posts and accounts, Instagram works to deprive this community of its "response-ability", a term Rentschler uses to describe "the capacity to collectively respond" (Rentschler, 2014, p. 68). While Rentschler examines "response-ability" in terms of how young feminists on social media respond to street harassment and sexualized violence, the concept can be applied to all manners of identity-driven harassment and violence. The community at hand is a feminist response to the online moral panic of sex work, as opposed to a feminist response to rape culture. "Response-ability" requires established networks of distribution wherein a community can "respond and see and hear others responding" as well as "affectively represent their

experiences in online spaces that enable broad distribution and response-ability” (Rentschler, 2014, p. 79). Instagram’s censorship disrupts the ability of this community to respond to its own marginalization in general and to interrupt the intersecting practices that continue to oppress sex workers in addition to depriving those it censors of a method of responding.

Through the creation of back-up accounts and efforts to regain some of the visibility they lost when their accounts were shuttered, the deleted sex workers are attempting to carve out a space to respond to and resist this one-sided moderation process. Once they have access to a back-up account and their follower count begins to grow, the censees publicly react to the censorship using humour and/or demonstrating the emotionality of the situation. It is possible that doing so draws in more followers, as the deletion itself becomes an event that has newsworthy value for the community, and any information that the censee shares about it could be beneficial should others be put in a similar situation in the future.

Scarlett’s first post to the third iteration of her account (@_swmemes) was a meme featuring two photos of actress Emma Roberts’ character Madison Montgomery from the television series *American Horror Story*²². The image is captioned, indicating dialogue: “Surprise, bitch. I bet you thought you’d seen the last of me.” Scarlett added text above the images that read: “sex workers and feminists pulling out their backup accounts after being zucc’d.” She captioned the meme: “I’m like a motherfucking cockroach bitch.” She posted to her stories, asking that people share her new profile location once again, writing, “another shameful beg for a promo because

²² Figure 2

@_scarlettmore [the replacement account] was deleted. You wanna go back to actually doing something productive @instagram ???”

The first post Katie made to her back-up account included three screenshots of the messages from Instagram as she had attempted to log in to her account and learned that it had been deleted. One of the screenshots gave a description of why her account was deleted:

Your account has been disabled for not following our Community Guidelines. You won't be able to log into this account and no one else will be able to see it. Sexually suggestive content isn't allowed on Instagram. This includes: - Posting sexually suggestive photos or other content. - Soliciting sexual services, - Using sexually explicit language. If you think this was a mistake, please let us know.

By posting these screenshots, Katie works to un-black-box what is a highly ambiguous process. While she cannot offer much more insight into Instagram's specific decision-making process, sharing these screenshots at least demonstrates that Instagram's ambiguity extends even to the person who is being censored. Instagram's explanation to her comes from a template and does not specifically tell her what she has done or which post violated the 'community guidelines.' The last image in the set of four was a selfie of Katie while she cried with her head in her hand, her face red and wet with tears. Katie captioned this set of images:

First they took my twitter, in June. Then they took my IG, just now. I feel invisible. Silenced. Watched. Muzzled. We all told you what would happen if FOSTA/SESTA passed and no one listened. No one cares about my community. I am beyond heartbroken. I am beyond words.

Next, Katie posted a selfie of herself and her mother lying on a beach, smiling. She captioned the image:

This was my last personal post. I eventually do want this account to be for me to post professional photos I take but for [right now] I'm using it to process what's

happening to me. I'm just in fucking shock and hurting so much. The mission to exterminate and silence sex workers is clear. I didn't even use hashtags [because] I was scared of this. A trip to see my mom who I'd been estranged from... ending like this. That account was REAL. It was ME. I don't even wanna make a new one. I don't even know what to do or if I even fucking care. No one listened when we said this would happen. The law hasn't even gone into effect yet. I am...I have no words. (broken heart emojis)

The law Katie refers to, in the context of her previous caption, is presumably FOSTA/SESTA.²³ Scarlett, too, made an implicit connection to FOSTA after her second account was deleted. She posted a series of factsheets about FOSTA/SESTA to her stories that detailed the impacts of the law and included quotes from anonymous sex workers describing how FOSTA had forced them to take up street work, for instance.

After her account was deleted, Tara posted to two other accounts she runs; one was the page for her podcast, and the other an account she had established specifically as a back-up account in case of deletion. She posted a photo of herself to her back-up account in which her unsmiling face was blurred by sunlight behind her, as she sat in front of a pride flag hanging in her window, with the caption, "If you're seeing this it means you now know that my original account was deleted again. It was deleted without warning sometime at about 4:45 PM PST today. I'm a sex educator and the censorship is real." Tara later uploaded a video to her stories to address the situation, in which she expressed a deadpan frustration over the ordeal. The comments on both of these posts were filled with followers decrying Instagram for having deleted her.

²³ There appeared to be a myth circulating on social media that the law would not go into effect until January, 2019. Throughout the study, I saw several posts trying to debunk this information, though there were also a few instances when I saw this misinformation being spread. The law went into "effect" when it was signed into law by Donald Trump on April 11, 2018.

While their emotional responses to having been deleted varied in both nature and intensity, by sharing their emotional reactions, each signalled that being deleted had a real and frustrating impact. While Scarlett expressed an air of defiance and perseverance in the face of having been deleted, Katie expressed her feelings of defeat, erasure, and fear. These emotional responses sit in contrast to the emotional stories and statistics employed by anti-sex trafficking campaigns that worked to bring legislation like FOSTA/SESTA into law in the first place (Jackson, 2016, p. 33). Scarlett's defiant post about being a "motherfucking cockroach" stands in opposition to the belief by some that sex work, and by extension, sex workers, can be eliminated if there were just sufficient government legislation to do so. Also, Katie's inclusion of a picture of herself crying and upset at the news of having been deleted indicates that rights-based frameworks have emotional stories to tell, too; it's not just trafficked victims of sex work that endure harm as a result of how sex work is legislated. Having access to back-up accounts, and then using these back-up accounts to publicly express the emotional impact of being censored resists the erasure that victimizing frameworks such as the one perpetuated by FOSTA/SESTA perpetuate (Jackson, 2016, p. 33).

Instagram's moderation is influenced by hegemonic moral positionings and real-world prejudices. The need to respond to such decisions becomes even more apparent given Instagram's preoccupation with determining inappropriate versus appropriate female bodies, and the many instances in which it has censored the former (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 84). Sex worker activists are well versed in responding to instances of their own erasure, however, so the subjects of the censorship respond anyway, developing creative and collaborative means of interrupting and challenging the censorship via its networked

community (Rentschler, 2014, p. 71). The public displays of emotion, whether that be anger, defiance, annoyance, fear, or sadness, serve to effectively respond to an event that, if Instagram had its way, would have little to no witnesses. By way of a back-up account and by mobilizing the broader community on their behalf, the deleted individuals are creating space for themselves to respond to Instagram's presumption that its censorship is a one-sided conversation.

Mobilizing the community

While Scarlett focused primarily on rebuilding her audience on her new account(s), Katie and Tara took steps to try and convince Instagram to restore their accounts. When Tara's account was deleted for the first time in August, prior to this study, she had asked her followers at the time to submit reports to Instagram asking where her account had gone and requesting that it be reinstated. Tara credited this strategy with helping her account be reinstated the first time, so she took up the campaign once more, posting to the Instagram page for her podcast asking for the followers there to contact Instagram and ask where her account went, "because I didn't violate terms of service, that increases my chances of having it reinstated." To her back-up account, she posted a selfie to her story, writing on the image, "If you want to help – Report a problem to IG + Ask why an education/self-help account following terms of service was deleted." She also posted a video of herself to her stories, showing appreciation for the support and expressing her frustration at being deleted:

Hey everybody. Thank you for being so supportive and for contacting Instagram to report a problem and to ask where [my] profile went, because, I don't need the likes, but I'm pretty sure I shared safe, educational posts. This shit is really

frustrating, and it's just one more 'fuck the man' thing, but if anything, if nothing else, I feel incredibly supported and loved by a ton of strangers, so, thank you.

Katie took up this strategy as well. After sharing how she felt after being deleted, and demonstrating that the last thing she had posted would have been well within community-guidelines, Katie started asking those following her back-up account to take steps to help her. The next post she made was a screenshot of someone submitting a report to Instagram, providing the steps her followers could take to submit a report, as it was not an intuitive process and required knowledge of the settings options. The steps included: "Account > Settings > Help > Report a Problem > Something isn't working." A second image on this post was a screenshot of someone writing such a report to Instagram, and acted as an example of what her followers might write: "@[Katie's account] is not appearing anymore and many other accounts who followed that account seem to have the same issue. That account provided rich and very informative posts that I greatly enjoyed. It would be an absolute devastation to have lost such a blessing of an account." Katie wrote a caption under the instructions that read: "Apparently people can do this on my behalf? I know it seems stupid to be doing all this for my real account w 7 years of memories. It's also silencing and erasure. Help if you'd like?" The comments section on this post quickly filled up with people writing "Done."

In giving these examples of what their followers could write to Instagram, Katie and Tara worked to frame their accounts in a certain way, distancing themselves from the sex worker parts of their account, and instead stressing the aspects of their accounts that serve to normalize and moralize their Instagram personas. Each of them suggested that the educational value of their account be recognized. Katie reposted someone writing a

report on her behalf, who indicated that her account had provided “rich and very informative posts”; Tara had asked her followers to submit reports to Instagram asking “why an education/self-help account following the terms of service was deleted.” After watching Katie’s account be reinstated, Scarlett took up the same tactic of asking her followers to submit reports on her behalf, suggesting they write that her was “a comedy and educational account.” Each individual also included the fact that they were adhering to Instagram’s ‘community guidelines’ and, as Scarlett wrote, were “wrongfully deleted.”

In framing their accounts and personas in this way, the deleted individuals are attempting to gain moral credibility with and actively resisting against an entity that has deemed their identity to be immoral through its decision to remove their accounts. The deleted individuals attempt to reason with the governing structure by stressing their agency as educators and comedians—both respected professions—but doing so via as many other people as possible, giving this deliberate re-framing of their identity more credibility by demonstrating and amplifying the fact that others perceive them in this way, too. It is not that the sex workers are misleading Instagram in this reframing of their identity—many are comedians and educators, some of them even certified sex educators, for instance—but there is a deliberate downplaying of their sex worker identity in this public appeal to Instagram. The individual’s credibility is displayed for Instagram through the mobilization of allies and advocates on their behalf, as being able to call groups of followers to action is a demonstration of one’s social capital (deYoung, 2013, p. 151). Through these tactics, the censees and their advocates demonstrate their agency as a collective. In the face of accusations of moral impropriety, particularly ones that restrict one’s ability to respond, debate, or negotiate, ‘folk devils’ or scapegoats as sex

workers have been viewed as objects without recourse. But even by stressing that they have been “wrongfully” accused of immorality or obscenity, the deleted individuals align themselves with other “chimeras and signifiers” and false targets that might have been in similar situations previously; ie., LGBTQ+ people being subjected to moral panics over pedophilia (Jenkins, 1998; Rubin, 1984, p. 171). The community affords them social capital, which affords them recourse, which ultimately affords them agency.

In their stories, Katie and Tara often reposted those who had shared their new location at the back-up accounts or had posted screenshots submitting reports for them. Many of these posts were adaptations of posts by Katie and Tara, featuring the reposter’s own added text decrying Instagram censorship and asking their followers to follow her. This was perhaps a tactic of publicly acknowledging/thanking those who were helping her by sharing, and returning some of the visibility labour their followers afforded them in kind. It also demonstrated to her followers how many others were supporting her in her requests, therefore encouraging others to do the same. Katie, Tara, and Scarlett all often made posts thanking their followers for submitting reports and/or sharing the word, and asking them to continue doing so.

‘Maddening, but grateful’: Accounts returned

Roughly twelve hours after Tara’s account was deleted, and four days after Katie’s was deleted, both Tara’s account and Katie’s account were reinstated around the same time. Tara posted to her backup account to let the followers there know that her main account had been returned. She updated the captions on the posts she had made about being deleted, writing on her podcast’s page, “Thanks to those who contacted them

and asked where it went, that increased my chances of having it reinstated.” Later that day, Tara posted a link to an article from *Engadget* titled “The internet war on sex is here. No sex, please, we’re beholden to our advertisers.” Tara indicated that the article was a “good summary of the new war on sexuality.”

One of the first posts Katie shared on her restored account was a meme that expressed that the “legions of people” who filed reports with Instagram requesting her account be restored were at least in part responsible for its return. The meme was a scene with two mannequins, as one mannequin pointed an outstretched index finger and thumb, resembling a gun at the other mannequin’s head. Katie added text on top of the mannequins; the one doing the ‘shooting’ was labeled “me”; the ‘gun’ was labelled “legions of people, unrelentingly, on my behalf” and the mannequin being ‘shot’ at was labeled “[Instagram] restoring my account.” Katie later posted that “they didn’t say why they reinstated or when, they just did it...Maddening. But grateful.”

Katie, being successful in having her own account restored, began to ask her followers to do the same for other accounts that had been deleted, including Scarlett, posting a screenshot of the report that she herself had written for Scarlett, writing: “@slutscarlett was deleted erroneously. Her account is educational and a bright spot in my days! She deserves her account back! Please restore @slutscarlett!!!!”

Katie became more vocal and active about the censorship of sex workers after her account was deleted and then restored. While she expressed gratitude, it was directed at the community for rallying around her, not at Instagram for returning it to her. She made an effort to return the favour to other sex workers that had been deleted, putting out a call for sex workers in this situation to contact her for an article she planned to write “about

online erasure of [sex workers] with QTPOC (Queer, Trans People of Colour) being hit the hardest. If you'd like to be interviewed, email me." She also asked her followers to "send me accounts that have been shut down and not recovered (POC to the front)."

Katie's immediate spring to action after her account was reinstated was likely bolstered by the fact that she had regained her audience of thousands and wanted to be able to mobilize her own followers to help others in the same situation she had just experienced.

While I am unfamiliar with the rate of growth Katie's account was experiencing before this study began, at the end of it, she had gained more than 2,000 followers, growing her initial audience of 5,500 followers by 36 per cent. The fact that her deletion was

publicized so well by other accounts, some of them with hundreds of thousands of followers of their own, might have had something to do with this. Katie also explicitly noted that white privilege could have influenced why her account was reinstated in the first place. Again, on the same day her account was restored, she posted to her stories:

"FOSTA and SESTA are aimed at sex work. But as with anything else, the most marginalized workers will and are being hit the hardest. Please rally around my sisters the way you all did for me."

Katie's appeal to the community to assist workers of colour was performative in and of itself, and she acknowledged that it was prompted by a sex worker of colour reaching out to point this fact out to her. Even if racialized or gender non-conforming sex workers are employing the same visibility tactics that the white sex workers in this sample are, they do not receive the same return for their efforts that white voices do. Gaining visibility in an ecosystem like Instagram is not a matter of sheer effort, as racialized or gender non-conforming sex workers who have had their accounts deleted for

months on end without gaining much traction can attest. Visibility is not awarded equally, therefore visibility does not equal validity for any one voice over another. Even if visibility was returned equally based on investment of labour and time, there would still be an array of sex worker voices who firstly could not afford such investments, and secondly, experience a higher cost of political speech than others. Factors such as “immigration status, fear of eviction/police violence, or the potential loss of child custody mean that certain sex workers face higher stakes when organizing or speaking up” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 20). Therefore, the demographic of sex workers with the most visibility accrued will never be fully representative of the wider community.

Talking back: How the community challenges Instagram

Memes: A performative response to dominant antagonisms

Seven of the accounts produced their own memes regularly, and these memes made up the majority of content on their pages. Like much of the activity that occurred within the context of this ethnography, memes depend on the use of bricolage, as previously used images or references are recycled and re-appropriated; with each new iteration, the meme takes on a different meaning (Milner, 2016, p. 61). In the case of this community, most memes were directly related to sex work in some capacity, making them relatable for a specific group of people, therefore demarcating a boundary between those who are ‘in’ on the joke (sex workers) and everyone else, solidifying commonalities and community boundaries with those within the industry.

One such meme was created by Scarlett, posted to her @_swmemes page. In it, she posted a computer-generated image of a book. The ‘template’ of the meme, meaning the image of the book and its malleable title, had already been widely circulated online according to a website that documents memes and other viral content, *Know Your Meme*²⁴ (“Know Your Meme,” n.d.). The book title was edited to read, “*bargaining with sex workers will get you a discount* And Other Hilarious Jokes You Can Tell Yourself.” The italicized text was the text added by Scarlett, relaying a common problem shared by sex workers with a sarcastic response to the imagined customer. There were comments on the post that indicated that this naming and shaming of a common problem was appreciated by her followers because it was a shared experience that many could identify with. While a non-sex worker would be able to understand the premise of the meme, its meaning is in its relatability, and its impact would not be the same as it would be to someone who has experienced something like that.

Most of the memes posted by Scarlett and other meme pages included in this study were of a similar nature; pointing out shared problems unique to the sex industry and framing them in humorous terms. The accounts that posted memes often posted ones that referenced sex work directly, whether to commiserate about a shared problem specific to sex work, or to challenge power structures that sex workers must operate within, including Instagram’s censorship problem.

While memes may have originated in white, male dominated online spaces, they are now often used by marginalized communities or counterpublics to “challenge dominant antagonisms” (Milner, 2016, para 68; Miltner, 2014, p. 118). Memes “tend to

²⁴ “Know Your Meme” is a wiki that allows submissions from the general public about the origins of popular memes and other viral content on the Internet.

reflect the socio-demographic background of meme creators” and are “performative acts” as each one “contributes to [an] ongoing negotiation over norms” (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016, p. 1701, 1700). When a community’s identity and mere existence is as politicized as the sex worker community is, simply talking about their experiences in an open and forthcoming way is political. As such, much of the speech that occurs within this community, while simultaneously solidifying a collective identity within, also situates this identity in reference to its adversaries (Milner, 2016, p. 118). Of course, “when dealing with political identities, which are always collective identities, we are dealing with the creation of an ‘us’ that can only exist by its demarcation from a ‘them’” (Milner citing Mouffe, 2016, p. 118). In the context of Instagram’s deletion of sex worker accounts, this occurs very literally, as memes are often used as a vehicle not only to criticize censorship, but to name and shame specific adversaries, including Mark Zuckerberg, or, ‘Zucc’.

After she had two accounts deleted in quick succession, Scarlett made a meme criticizing the censorship by appropriating a photo of four policemen standing behind a round table displaying the results of a drug bust. The photo was edited and mocked in various different contexts online as an example of overzealous drug policing (Barrón, 2018). Both Scarlett and Tara shared memes that repurposed the original photo to instead comment on the overzealous policing of sex workers online by social media companies²⁵. In Scarlett’s meme, she photo-shopped different social media logos onto each of the policemen’s chests, so that instead of reading ‘POLICE’, there were logos for Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Facebook. On the table, instead of the collection of drugs, money,

²⁵ Figure 3, Figure 4

and paraphernalia, she just wrote “sex workers.” Tara shared a meme of a similar nature to her podcast’s page, photo-shopping a picture of Mark Zuckerberg’s face on top of one of the policeman’s, and instead of the drugs and paraphernalia on the table, she had photo-shopped a variety of disembodied nipples.

Another account in this ethnography created another meme that directly called out Zuckerberg, using an image of a person rock-climbing while being attacked by four seagulls²⁶. The creator of the meme labelled the rock-climber “IG feminists,” (IG meaning Instagram) and the four seagulls attacking were labelled, “Mark Zuckerberg; Incels²⁷; Whorephobia; Underage trolls.” The same account posted another meme before the holidays. That image depicted a man sitting on a sinking boat while sharks circle²⁸. The meme is given a title: “Drowning: A Christmas Special.” The man in the sinking boat is labelled “sex workers”; the boat is “isolation/censorship”; each of the shark fins is labelled “SW burnout; seasonal depression; seeing toxic family.” The water itself is labelled “poor mental health.”

Each of these memes directly references the censorship occurring on Instagram as a shared stressor for the community, and the latter demonstrates that it is just one factor in an array of affective challenges sex workers have to navigate as part of their labour. The first two memes featuring the four overzealous policemen offers a commentary on the censorship of 1) the sex worker community specifically and 2) Instagram’s oft-criticized censorship of “female-presenting nipples.” The latter two memes reference

²⁶ Figure 5

²⁷ ‘Incels’ refers to a group of misogynists that refer to themselves as ‘involuntarily celibate’ and have perpetuated violence against women because they feel entitled to sex. This group has a particularly adversarial relationship with sex workers online, and sex workers believe the group regularly targets sex worker accounts on Instagram and on other social media by reporting them in order to get them shut down.

²⁸ Figure 6

multiple challenges associated with existing on Instagram as a sex worker, or more broadly, a feminist. In the last meme featuring the boat, “isolation” and “censorship” are lumped together, indicating an association between the two; censorship leads to further isolation, and isolation can lead to more permanent censorship if there is a lack of access to a networked community. Ultimately, these memes and other posts that directly challenge Instagram’s censorship give the community a method of responding to a system that is working to silence them, and as such, a method of responding to the threat of further vulnerability to violence as a result of increased isolation.

The body is political: negotiating community guidelines

After their accounts were deleted and then restored, Katie and Tara showed gratitude to the community for rallying around them, not to Instagram for reinstating their accounts. The first post Katie made to her timeline upon her return appeared to be a challenge of some sort to Instagram’s ‘community guidelines’. The post was a photo of Katie’s chest, with her breasts bare, and her nipples covered by the heart symbol for Instagram ‘likes’. In the picture, she is wearing a necklace that reads “trust no man.” She captioned the post “smd,” an abbreviation that means “suck my dick” and is meant to be abrasive. The photo, the necklace, the use of Instagram’s own symbols to cover her nipples, and the caption combine to create a post that is deliberately provocative, but she has also strategically self-censored to account for Instagram’s well-known ban on female-presenting nipples. This self-censorship is strategic not only because it employs electronically-imposed pasties, but because those pasties are created out of Instagram’s well-known ‘like’ symbols, thereby attributing her self-censorship to the censor. This post walks the ambiguous line that Instagram’s Terms of Service has created based on a

slippery definition of what constitutes “appropriate and inappropriate body representations” (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 84).

The exact location of this line appears to be in a constant state of flux, as seemingly arbitrary moderation decisions are made by workers who are often geographically and culturally distant from the content they are moderating (Roberts, 2016, p. 1). Facebook, for instance, has its moderators in 10 offices in six different countries, though it does not specify which countries (Zuckerberg, 2018). In fact, content moderation workers have admitted that the line is deliberately obscured, because if the ‘rules’ were made public, it would become “very easy to skirt them to essentially the point of breaking them” (Roberts, 2016, p. 5). This line seemingly becomes even more blurred in the context of the sex worker community. As demonstrated by some of the data presented here, many in this community exist as out sex workers, engage in discourse around sex work, but do not engage *in* sex work on the platform. And yet, if the removal of their accounts is a result of FOSTA, as it is perceived to be, then they are being deleted simply for describing themselves as sex workers. As Grant writes, “there has to be a way to embrace sex worker identity” without that identity being inherently sexualized or coming with expectations of sexual performance (Grant, 2014, p. 126). At the same time, sex workers’ bodies are inherently political. It is their bodies that are classified as obscene; it is their bodies that are viewed by Instagram’s Community Guidelines to be ones that “should keep [their] clothes on” (Olszanowski, 2014, p. 87) while other groups on the platform such as fitness accounts or modeling accounts posting images with comparable levels of nudity are left untouched by Instagram’s moderators. So it is, then, that sex worker politics “cannot deny the body just because someone else has a complex

about it” (Grant, 2014, p. 126). In fact, self-representations of their sexuality, bodies, and sexualized bodies are political when posted to their Instagram, insofar as they are “declaring who gets to occupy the public’s visual field” (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017, p. 325).

Conclusion

What Instagram is attempting to take away from the sex workers it censors is their visibility, not necessarily their access to its platform. Instagram is undoubtedly aware that once an account is deleted, the user returns to the platform with a new account. But what they lose in this process is the following and audience they had built up—they lose the visibility they had put so much work into acquiring in the first place. This visibility is important to sex worker communities because it allows them to articulate public responses to cultures of violence and victimization which are continually reproduced by sex and technology panics. Such responses are crucial for a sex worker community because such cultures actively work to silence sex workers, refusing to award them credibility or take them seriously as experts on issues pertaining to their field—including trafficking.

On social media like Instagram, sex workers had carved out a space for themselves by co-opting tactics and efforts associated with a “reputation economy”, using the visibility and networking affordances of social media to cultivate social capital, validate marginalized identities in public spheres, and amplify their responses to harmful instances of regulation such as FOSTA. Instagram’s targeted censorship of sex workers

threatens these capabilities, which sex workers have been practicing, perfecting, and expanding upon since before the Internet.

To mitigate this loss, individual sex workers who are censored turn to back-up accounts, refusing to allow Instagram to block their access to its platform entirely. They work to spread the news of their deletion through the networks their old account had been a part of, and through these networks, regain some followers and attract new ones. As their audience and access to their community's network is slowly rebuilt, the deleted person articulates a response to the censorship, demonstrating the effect of the censorship through affective displays of humour and/or emotion such as anger or sadness. Such displays of affect contribute to the mobilization of the community as followers are then asked to advocate for the deleted individual to Instagram by using one of the only methods Instagram gives its users to directly and expressly contact the company: its feedback reports, which are buried in Instagram's 'settings' options. The ability of this sex worker community to mobilize on behalf of censored individuals is evidence of "the capacity of affectively laden feminist mobilizations" and the far-reaching capabilities of "otherwise...largely invisible networks of feminist affinity" and collectivity (Rentschler, 2014, p. 79).

Sex workers on Instagram recognize that they are being targeted as a group by moderators. They undertake the above tactics in instances of individual censorship, but employ tools of expression and self-representation such as memes and deliberate yet pointed self-censorship to continually respond, react, and negotiate the censorship. Through these processes and tools, sex workers attempt to push up against an obscured line demarcating inappropriate content from appropriate content. The policing of sex

workers with morality politics is not unique to the context of Instagram; the policing of sex workers—by state entities and otherwise—has long been seen as valid because their bodies, sexuality, and capitalization on both is viewed as ‘inappropriate’ and obscene, and therefore, their validity as workers and as people is called into question. The tactics that sex workers engage in on Instagram is simply another iteration of sex workers’ attempts to reclaim the prescriptive politicization of their bodies and identities.

The visibility tactics that sex workers employ on Instagram, whether they are responding to censorship or not, serve a broader purpose of informing how the sex worker identity is viewed. Through its censorship, Instagram demonstrates that it employs a “policeman’s eye...[which] can’t see a sex worker as anything but his or her work, as an object to control. It’s not just carceral; it’s a sexual eye. If a sex worker is always working, always available, she (with this eye, almost always a she) is essentially sexual” (Grant, 2014, p. 11). Therefore, for sex workers on Instagram, it is not just about increasing visibility—it is about having some control over the ways sex workers are viewed; it is about challenging the carceral eye, the essentializing eye, and the victimizing eye. Sex workers are locating power in the ability to articulate their own self-representations, which is why resisting and responding to the targeted censorship of this community on Instagram is likely worth the time and affective labour it takes to find a strategy that works.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Sex worker voices and experiences on Instagram are being silenced through censorship because of their public identity as sex workers and their deviant sexuality. FOSTA's vague conception of sex trafficking combined with Instagram's vague 'Community Guidelines' and lack of definition of what constitutes "sexually suggestive" content has allowed for Instagram to have a great degree of latitude in the censorship it engages in. This silencing continues to be a result of both a victimizing framework as well as a flawed understanding of sex work which defines sex workers as fundamentally immoral and 'inappropriate.' I argue that sex workers on Instagram are taking up patterns and strategies of resistance to the company's censorship that are grounded in historical iterations of sex worker resistance; namely, sex workers are employing a politics of care that locates agency and social capital amongst the collective community in order to increase their community's visibility as a whole and resist Instagram's one-sided, top-down censorship. Through deploying this social capital, sex workers are demonstrating their agency, making it visible to Instagram and anyone else in the community who might be witnessing the censorship and response. This display works to interrupt Instagram's implicit conception of this community as obscene and silenceable. Instagram's moderation structure, in which it removes content without giving the user specific reasons and has left virtually no avenue for contestation, implies that it has the total authority to make such moral judgements.²⁹ Sex workers' strategies of response to

²⁹ In May of 2019, Instagram announced that it will begin implementing a new internal appeal process for posts that have been taken down over the course of several months. As yet, there is no such mechanism in development for accounts that have been deleted, but *Engadget* reports that such a feature will be coming "down the road" (Alvarez, 2019).

Instagram's censorship challenge its position as a moral gatekeeper, as evidenced by sex workers' successful attempts to challenge and reverse some of its censorship decisions. This demonstration of sex worker agency is a strategy that sex workers have historically employed through the formulation of sex worker collective organizations, for instance, which have served as vehicles to advocate for sex worker rights and to challenge victimizing tropes that work to silence and dismiss sex worker experiences and voices.

Sex workers have established a virtual community on Instagram in which they are able to share resources and information, articulate movement goals, provide realistic portrayals of their experiences with sex work, and contribute to an environment of mutual care and support. Sex workers' visibility in mainstream social media spaces, especially when this visibility is articulated and amplified by sex workers, is crucial to challenging stereotypes perpetuated by stigma through presenting their own experiences with sex work, which often sit in opposition to the victimizing and moralistic dominant narratives about sex work. Instagram's targeted censorship of this community, motivated at least in part by the U.S. government legislation known as FOSTA, threatens to remove this space from sex workers. This censorship takes the form of removing individual posts as well as deleting entire accounts without giving advance notice or detailed reasoning to the account owner. FOSTA and the resulting censorship—which is not limited to Instagram—is a response to an ongoing moral panic over sex and technology. This moral panic is both a reiteration and convergence of two longstanding moral panics; one over sex trafficking, in which sex workers are implied, and one over new technologies and fear over the element of the unknown they embody, in which online sex predators tend to be a factor (Smith & Cole, 2013, p. 209). Historically—most notably during the sex wars—

these moral panics have perpetuated dominant narratives about sex work that narrowly position sex workers as being simultaneously and inextricably both victims and criminals (Grant, 2014, p. 9; Showden & Majic, 2014, p. xv).

Before censorship even occurs, sex workers demonstrate an awareness of the threat of censorship by taking steps in anticipation of censorship, such as creating a back-up account. They also engage in strategic self-censorship, indicating a familiarity with the kinds of posts Instagram tends to remove. By posting photos that might feature themselves topless but with strategically placed emojis covering their nipples as superimposed pasties, for instance, sex workers attempt to push up against the company's ever-moving line between appropriate and inappropriate, while still adhering to Instagram's well-known rules surrounding the banning of female-presenting nipples (Olszanowski, 2014). Ultimately, such posts attempt to locate this line; to make known what it will and will not tolerate, and which bodies and which sexualities it considers to be obscene.

The strategies and tactics that sex workers take up to resist, respond, and negotiate Instagram's censorship evolve through trial and error as the sex worker community watches in real time how those who are censored grapple with it. The most integral and overarching strategy deleted sex workers take up is engaging in visibility labour. When a sex worker account is deleted, they can often return to the platform through a back-up account or by creating a new account, meaning that the censorship does not necessarily remove their access to the platform, though it does take away their audience. Without an audience, the affected individual is limited in their capacity to reconnect with their network and to publicize their deletion. They aim to re-build this audience by reaching

out to other established accounts in the sex worker community and asking them to share their new account information. As they begin to accrue a following, the deleted individual shares and demonstrates the experience of being deleted. This might include sharing screenshots of the messages from Instagram itself, demonstrating how vague the language Instagram uses is, while also offering the community a glimpse into how the company conducts its censorship. The deleted individual might also engage in displays of emotion, sharing that the censorship has made them scared, angry, etc. In so doing, sex workers make the deletion of their account an event with witnesses and affective consequences (Rentschler, 2014, p. 69). Conversely, Instagram intends for its censorship to be both private through its use of one-to-one messaging and impersonal and vague through its use of template messages that do not address the specific reasons for an account or post deletion. Once the community is aware of the deletion, the deleted individual might try to further mobilize the community on their behalf by requesting they collectively submit feedback reports to Instagram requesting that the account be reinstated. This process adapts a pre-existing tool within Instagram's platform that was not designed for this express purpose, giving the broader community—in addition to the deleted individual—the ability to respond directly to Instagram. The two sex workers in this study that had their deleted accounts reinstated attributed the reversal to these collective lobbying efforts.

The conversation of censorship is also taken up by those in the community who have not directly experienced it but have witnessed others in their networks lose their accounts. Through memes, for instance, sex workers invoke the censorship by identifying and antagonizing a shared common enemy, namely, Instagram and other social media

companies and their owners. They demarcate the boundaries of their own community as they situate themselves in opposition to these institutions and the people responsible for running them, namely, Mark Zuckerberg.

Impacts and intersections of censorship

FOSTA is actively changing the landscape of the Internet for sex workers in dramatic ways. During my ethnography, one account posted an illustration that visualized the impact of FOSTA on sex workers' relationship with Internet spaces.³⁰ The illustration depicted two 'Internets,' one as a dark and narrow alleyway that was labelled "Internet for sex workers." The alley was beside a café, with the sign above it reading "Internet for Everyone Else." The post was captioned with a quotation from an article on FOSTA on *engadget*: "The law legalized sex censorship online, and now we've got a body count for it. Literally" (Blue, 2018). The article references a sex worker who committed suicide as a result of the bill, as reported by a sex worker rights blog (Simon, 2018). For sex workers, losing access to online spaces through censorship can lead to further isolation in an already isolating and dangerous industry. This image illustrates the harm that is resulting from the implementation of FOSTA by Internet companies, as sex workers are forced out of mainstream online spaces and end up migrating to other, potentially less safe online and physical spaces.

FOSTA's conception of sex workers as victims first and people second is what ultimately imposes harm on the community. With platforms most commonly used for

³⁰ Figure 7

solicitation already gone (including Backpage.com and Craigslist's Personals), and safety nets such as "electronically mediated 'bad client lists'" having disappeared as a result of FOSTA, some sex workers—particularly those in more precarious financial situations—are left with no other choice but to turn to the streets to seek out clients or meet with potentially dangerous clients, both of which puts them at further risk for violence (Jackson, 2016, p. 74). Removing sex workers' access to online communal spaces, including on Instagram, where connections to community both online and offline are facilitated, presents a dangerous reality to sex workers in which they can be forced to engage in risky behaviour they would not have normally had to do when they had access to online infrastructure from solicitation sites to sites of community. When engaging in advocacy against FOSTA, sex workers aim to demonstrate and articulate the harm that such regulation imposes on the community. The representations of this harm sit in contrast to the harm that advocates for FOSTA say it is addressing. Drawing attention to the harm that FOSTA imposes on those engaging in the industry of their own volition complicates the thinking around FOSTA that views it as a helpful bill and nothing else.

One part of the harm FOSTA imposes on the sex worker community is its contribution to feelings of unease and fear amongst the sex worker community as they feel they are being constantly surveilled by social media companies who might be afraid of the legal liability sex workers' presence on their platforms now presents. Further, the companies themselves are not the only ones watching: a faction of the general public that views sex worker's bodies and their identities as obscene has the ability to cast moral judgement through the targeted use of the app's flagging mechanism. When Scarlett's account was deleted, Katie wrote that she was "scared of this daily," particularly because

she already had her Twitter account deleted earlier in the year. When the news of changes to Tumblr's Terms of Service broke, Katie wrote:

Oh you can't jerk it to tumblr porn anymore? Nick Kristoff got censored?
Ummmm sex workers are living in fear, victims are harder to find, and queer
people are being censored. Fuck. You. WE SAID THIS WOULD HAVE
MASSIVE, far-reaching consequences. But you don't listen to the people you jerk
off to.

She captioned the post, “#FOSTA #SESTA we told you this would happen.

#listensexworkers #censorship.” Katie's expression of fear and anger towards the changes that were happening on social media as a result of FOSTA attempts to situate the impacts of FOSTA for sex workers against the more trivial impacts of FOSTA for those outside the industry—ie., Tumblr users losing access to free, sexually explicit content on Tumblr as opposed to the producers of such content, who may very well be losing at least one stream of income. She references how sex workers' opinions and expertise are often ignored and undervalued, because, as Juno and Mac write, “it is a struggle to be heard if your detractors can easily dismiss you as ‘sluts’” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 14).

While Katie's fear of having her account deleted because of her sex worker identity is valid, for sex workers sitting at more marginalized intersections, the threat FOSTA poses to their livelihood, safety, and access to community is even more severe. Ultimately, white sex workers having their accounts deleted on Instagram is a more visible symptom of the impacts of FOSTA. The white sex workers in this study who were able to have their accounts returned to them were successful in exercising a degree of control over the situation FOSTA has imposed on sex workers because they were able to make their plight known and visible to the community and those watching from outside the community. However, a much less visible consequence of FOSTA is the phenomenon

of sex workers in precarious positions needing to engage in dangerous behaviours since their main method of coming into contact with clients in the safest way possible—through sites like Backpage.com and Craigslist personals—has been removed (Simon, 2018). Therefore, it is important to remember that the perspectives of the most visible activist voices are shaped and informed by their privileges (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 19). These perspectives, meaning the majority of the ones portrayed in this thesis, are not representative of the community as a whole. This does not mean that their perspectives are not valid and ought to be dismissed; it is just to say that it is impossible to have “one ‘representative’ token woman who can stand in every time ‘women’s issues’ are on the table” (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 18).

The perspectives in this ethnography, particularly those of Katie and Scarlett, do attempt to recognize that their privilege affords them greater visibility and more safety from the impacts of FOSTA. When Katie has her account reinstated, she expressed an awareness of the fact that her privilege contributed to her account being reinstated, writing: “Despite being happy I got this back somehow, I’m now scared it can go again at any moment. Also my heart is heavy for those more marginalized whose accounts have yet to be restored.” Katie then undertook an effort to use her regained visibility and audience to crowdsource and publicize the names of QTPOC (Queer, Trans, People of Colour) sex workers who had also been deleted and remained that way, though it is important to know that she did so after the disparity was pointed out to her by a trans person of colour sex worker; something Katie was open about. Katie’s appeal to the community in this way is a performance of allyship, one that, while it may benefit the folks she is advocating for in the short term, ultimately adds value to Katie’s self-image

and credibility in an activist space. This is not to say that her intentions were not good, nor that she should not be deploying her privilege in this way; only that Instagram functions largely on a reputation economy, and in this particular environment, performing allyship typically contributes positively to the reputation of the ally.

What an 'activist' looks like: Activism and self-branding

When sex worker rights activists engage in visibility labour on Instagram, they are adopting and co-opting practices associated with the reputation economy for their own collective benefit. The reputation economy is prevalent on social media platforms, where 'likes', 'reposts', and interactions all add to visibility capital. Alison Hearn conceives of the reputation economy as functioning "through forms of market discipline and affective conditioning, which, much like the practices of branding, work to direct human meaning-making and self-identity in highly motivated and profitable ways" (2010, p. 423). Such a reputation economy rewards those who can effectively present a self-disciplined and curated image of themselves in exchange for likes, shares, and increased visibility, with many hoping to make themselves and their image ultimately sell-able to marketers and brands. In a reputation economy, those sitting at sites of social privilege tend to find more success. As such, white, able-bodied, thin and cisgender sex workers are better able to co-opt this economy for their own purposes, given that it rewards certain bodies over others with heightened visibility. Despite being disruptive to social norms in some ways (ie. existing as a sex worker in the public eye), their white, cis, thin bodies make their disruptiveness more palatable. There is a privilege here that allows them to take up visibility tactics that are in theory available to all, but that white

cisgender sex workers might access with more ease than more marginalized workers. One example of this is that while I was searching for my sample, most of the public accounts I found that also disclosed the account owners' identity were operated by white-appearing sex workers. The Black and POC (people of colour) accounts I was either previously aware of or found during my sample search were almost all private, suggesting that perhaps these sex workers of colour felt the need to have the ability to screen who would be 'seeing' them and their account, while most of the white sex worker accounts might have felt more comfortable with an entirely public platform. While there are disparities within the community, the fact remains that as a whole, sex workers are discriminated against and experience societal marginalization at the hands of a moralizing public, including those moral gatekeepers who create and implement Instagram's moderation policies which result in the censorship of sex workers on its platform.

Sex workers and self-branding

Sex workers co-opt the reputation economy for the purpose of influencing and lobbying Instagram itself, but also for influencing the community of sex workers and allies to listen and then act on behalf of those who have been deleted. These strategies raise questions as to how the neoliberal practice of self-branding and the commodification of the self factor into the visibility labour that sex worker rights activists undertake.

Like all representations of the self online, sex worker rights activists are selective and curative in what they share. Visibility labour itself is heavily affective, as it requires performing an "interactive intimacy" and engaging in "relation-building practices"

(Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017, p. 845). Visibility labour in general is borne out of the neoliberal endeavour of engaging in self-branding and commodification of the self so as to advance one's social and/or career status. It is a pervasive and practically necessary form of public engagement, as there is a "need to build a self-brand in order to be competitive" in the majority of contexts, including in feminist circles, academic circles, and sex worker circles (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011, p. 1771). While "posting one's opinions, thoughts, status updates, and so on are part of media production and thus can be empowering self-work...because of the commercial and branded context of online spaces, this kind of media interactivity can also transform into self-branding" (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011, p. 1771). While sex workers may be engaging in visibility labour for the benefit of the group as a collective—as opposed to employing visibility labour for personal capital gain—the curative and performative nature of keeping up active virtual self-representations can be considered self-branding. However, in using visibility labour and self-branding tactics (such as when sex workers brand themselves as sex educators or comedians, for instance), the sex worker activists endeavour to promote their cause "while simultaneously challenging the institutional and commercial structures" that house it (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011, p. 1772). In this way, their visibility labour differs from its dominant use.

Further, while certain groups may be after any and all visibility capital, sex workers have the added burden of developing an awareness of how much visibility is too much, and what kind of visibility opens them up "to more insidious forms of public scrutiny, including hate speech, trolling, and other acts of online misogyny" including targeted reporting on Instagram (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017, p. 855). In a neoliberal

context, visibility can be seen as inherently empowering for women who can gain it, however, women, and especially sex workers online, must “carefully toe the line between visibility and vulnerability” (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017, p. 855). When too much visibility leads to targeted reporting, for instance, sex workers are at risk for censorship and losing the entirety of their visibility, further marginalizing their experiences to the fringes of mainstream social media. Navigating this line with the added risk of these harms, including harassment, violence, and censorship, adds to the emotional labour involved in sex workers’ attempts to validate their work through visibility.

Further, in the environment of Instagram’s reputation economy, where engaging in visibility labour is a common and expected method of advancing one’s professional and/or personal brand, it is conceivable that Instagram and its moderators understand sex workers as taking up these same visibility tactics and adhering to the purpose and form of this reputation economy rather than attempting to adapt its tools for a different purpose. That is, Instagram may perceive sex workers’ visibility tactics as efforts to advance their personal/professional brands as *sex workers* looking to increase sales rather than as *sex worker activists* looking to participate in discussions and engagement with their community over their rights, for instance. Of course, these sex worker activists are also sex workers, and political discussions about one’s experiences with sex work becomes very limited if they cannot disclose their identity as such. Here, again, is another possible way in which Instagram’s moderation policies lack nuance, instead choosing to assume that sex workers have a similar approach to the platform’s capabilities as Instagram ‘influencers,’ for instance. While sex workers can and do co-opt certain practices involved in the reputation economy of social media, there are limits and constraints on

how far they are able to take these tactics, as moral gatekeepers from trolls to Instagram’s moderators attempt to limit, challenge, or frustrate their access to visibility.

Centralized control: Social media regulation an extension of US Imperialism

A majority of the largest and most influential technology companies responsible for hosting and controlling content and conduct online, including Facebook, which owns Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Google, and Apple,³¹ are based in the United States and subject to U.S. law. When FOSTA was signed into law, there did not seem to be consideration as to how this American legislation would impact the use of the Internet far beyond U.S. borders. In my sample, for instance, participants were located in multiple different Western countries including Canada, the U.S., and Australia, with the Australian-based Scarlett being censored to the same degree as her American counterparts (if not more—she never did recover her account). When the American government seized Backpage.com, its local pages that had been specific to different cities fell under this seizure and were also shuttered, leaving sex workers in cities like Toronto scrambling for a solution (Gibson, 2018).

While other economic superpowers like China, India, Japan, the UK and Russia all have their own platform-based economies, American-based platform companies are

³¹ While Apple does not have its own platform, it does have some level of influence over platform companies moderation policies, as in 2018 it removed Tumblr from its ubiquitous App Store over child pornography, and the 2014 version of Instagram’s Community Guidelines directly named Apple’s App Store’s “rating for nudity and mature content” as a reason it did not allow nudity on its platform (Hamilton, 2018; Olszanowski, 2014, p. 87)

some of the most powerful, because of their ability to aggregate several services under their brand (Jin, 2013, p. 145). While the U.S. has previously imposed its power onto non-Western countries through military power, capital, and its cultural market, it “now seems to dominate the world with platforms, benefitting from these platforms, mainly in terms of capital accumulation” (Jin, 2013, p. 145). Before Internet regulation even occurs, American values and communicative preferences are already perpetuating American cultural imperialism, as platforms like Facebook and Instagram have values, cultural bias, and the “communicative preferences of their designers” built into their design (Jin, 2013, p. 154). Arguably, American imperialism is advancing via the influence and capital of American-based platform companies. The capital value of the companies themselves is bolstered by the capital value of the world-wide labour that occurs within these platforms by data-generating users (Jun, 2013). Once the U.S. government begins regulating these spaces, as it has with FOSTA, the impact of these regulations will impact the way global users interact with the Internet, further imposing an American perspective on issues like morality and workers’ rights, as it does within the context at hand.

The values embedded in platforms like Facebook and Instagram originate from their creators and designers (Jin, 2013, p. 154). Both platforms were founded and continue to be run by white men, with Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook and Adam Mosseri at Instagram.³² The “cultural history of the Internet [itself] has roots in communities where participants were assumed to be white and male” (Miltner, 2014, para 62). This is not to say that white men are solely responsible for building or conceiving of the Internet

³² Adam Mosseri is the CEO of Instagram as of October, 2018. Prior to this, the CEO was the platform’s co-founder, Kevin Systrom—also a white man.

as we know it, but that they have played and continue to play a role in guiding the Internet into the capitalist mechanism it is today. As is the case for so many cultural institutions, when white men have both a foundational and an ongoing role in its construction and permutation, it impacts the way those with marginalized identities move through the resulting systems because there is an inherent bias against them built into the core. Public participation on these platforms is skewed in favour of white men, a skew made visible when certain types of harassment—namely, those against women and people of colour—are seemingly permitted by platform companies and others are not (Giese, 2017). The ‘permission’ for content to exist or not exist ultimately comes from content moderation policies grounded in flawed dichotomies of appropriateness, the enforcement of which is outsourced to moderators who may not have a complex understanding of the nuances of the cultural norms present in the content they are regulating (Olszanowski, 2014; Roberts, 2016). These moderators follow specific rules laid out in internal company documents that are not made public to users. As such, while their own subjectivities certainly plays a role in some instances, moderators are often simply implementing the specific rules that are formulated by social media companies concerned primarily with the question of profit over questions of moral gatekeeping (Roberts, 2016, p. 5). And, as users around the world participate on these platforms, the American, capitalist and patriarchal social norms and values they embody are dispersed and culturally exported.

Censorship dictated by profit

Ultimately, “the decision for what stays up and what comes down must...be a monetary one” (Roberts, 2016, p. 8). While regulating such platforms, the American

government, in wanting to maintain the power and economic benefits that come with being home to the world's most influential platforms, likely takes a similar approach when it moves to regulate these platforms. Companies like Instagram use their moderation strategies as a method of "brand protection," making "active decisions about what kinds of racist, sexist and hateful imagery and content they will host and to what extent they will host it" (Roberts, 2016, p. 5). The maintenance of their brand is of course directly tied to their long-term profit.

The line that platforms must walk can be largely dictated by the responses of its users to both the content found on the platform and the restriction of content on the platform. While Instagram largely relies on its user base to flag 'inappropriate' content for it to review, it also relies on its user base to dictate the level of content restriction in a way. Platforms' global user bases are their commodities, and as such, when Instagram apologizes for making a censorship "mistake," it is almost always as a result of a certain level of outrage on behalf of its user base, as opposed to Instagram coming to the conclusion that it made a "mistake" on its own. Responses of outrage to certain content can also cause platform companies to censor certain content that the community feels should have no place on the platform. Facebook's decision to ban certain white supremacists and inflammatory conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones and Milo Yiannopolous from its platform is one such instance (Martineau, 2019). The fact remains that Instagram appears to operate from a baseline which has been criticized for silencing those who engage in regular criticism of oppressors like white people and men and use phrases like 'men are scum' for apparently being 'hate speech,' whereas violent language directed towards marginalized groups has a tendency to stay up (Giese, 2017). A part of

the problem is that Facebook, “it has been observed, is able to judge content—but not intent” (Zuylen-Wood, 2019). Language intended to be inflammatory and incite calls to action or resistance against an oppressor are viewed in the same way as language that is inflammatory for the sake of inciting hate and violence. This lack of nuance is often only corrected when the affected individual group or person is able to generate outrage that becomes visible enough to Instagram and its public so as to threaten its brand image, and by extension, its profitability.

Where censorship is heading

The year following the passing of FOSTA into law has been filled with changes from social media platforms as they navigate this government-mandated content regulation, and presently, it seems there are many changes yet to come. In less than six months, Facebook and Instagram have both announced new content moderation policies which are unsurprisingly similar in nature, given Facebook’s ownership of Instagram. In November 2018, Facebook announced that it was changing its News Feed algorithm to recognize and demote “borderline content,” meaning “content that comes close to violating its policies prohibiting misinformation, hate speech, violence, bullying, clickbait” will be seen by fewer people, even if it is “highly engaging” (Constine, 2018). The technology blog *TechCrunch* says the change “allows the company to hide what it doesn’t want on the network without taking a hard stance it must defend about the content breaking the rules” (Constine, 2018).

Instagram announced a similar change to its moderation tactics in April, 2018, stating in a press conference that it has “begun reducing the spread of posts that are

inappropriate but do not go against Instagram’s Community Guidelines” (“Remove, Reduce, Inform,” 2019). Specifically, they would be doing so by restricting this “borderline” content from “the broader community in Explore or hashtag pages” (“Remove, Reduce, Inform,” 2019). Instagram gave examples of the kinds of content that would be considered “borderline” under this change, showing images under three categories: ‘violence,’ ‘graphic/shocking,’ and ‘sexually suggestive.’ The example images Instagram used for “sexually suggestive” content included an image of a woman with very large breasts kneeling on a bed in underwear, and a close-up image of a man grabbing his fully-clothed crotch. These changes appear to be fairly obscured within the app itself. Instagram’s Help Center has one page outlining the change, though it lacks a description of what posts will be subject to these limits. The only example it gives is that “a sexually suggestive post will still appear in Feed if you follow the account that posts it, but this type of content may not appear for the broader community in Explore and hashtag pages” (Instagram Help Centre, 2019). Instagram does not specify what qualifies as “sexually suggestive” and therefore what content may be subjected to this reduced visibility. Of course, Instagram has used the same vague term when notifying sex workers to justify its removal of their post or their account.

This lack of specificity means the line of ‘acceptable’ content remains obscured. Now, with the new policy of hiding posts that were at one time ‘borderline’ but permitted, Instagram not only continues to obscure the line, but has now moved it. As a whole, this new moderation tactic means that there is less opportunity for engagement for certain groups like sex workers. If sex workers want to participate on Instagram while disclosing their identity as sex workers and posting “sexually suggestive” photos of

themselves, Instagram automatically reduces their ability to expand their reach and increase their visibility. Instagram's new censorship strategy to limit the visibility of 'inappropriate' posts while not deleting them fully allows Instagram to engage in censorship without also dealing with the individual sites of resistance that can occur when it deletes an account or a post.

A shift from reactive to proactive censorship

In announcing the initial changes to Facebook's News Feed algorithm in November 2018, Zuckerberg released a 5,000 word "Blueprint for Content Governance and Enforcement," which outlined how the company will begin "proactively enforcing our policies to remove more harmful content [and] preventing borderline content from spreading" (Zuckerberg, 2018). Notably, while addressing content moderation changes at Facebook, Zuckerberg framed the issue in terms of reducing the impact of "harmful content"—Zuckerberg uses the word harm 24 times in his 'Blueprint' announcement (Zuckerberg, 2018). Such language calls back to the framing of prior measures that attempt to regulate the sex industry, including FOSTA's initial intent, which was created as a method of reducing the harm that the sex industry imposes on sex trafficking victims.

It seems that platform companies are seeking to shift their censorship strategies in order to solve a fundamental moderation challenge. Until the end of 2018, social media companies have approached their moderation and censorship duties from a reactive position, responding to content they considered inappropriate as they became aware of its existence. They were able to effectively outsource the regulation of their content to their own users, relying on their free labour "in the form of filing a report or flagging content

for the review process to even begin” (Roberts, 2016, p. 2). Instagram and Facebook have been able to rely on this method of moderation because it meets their obligations under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which “immunizes most online platforms from state tort liability” so long as they “remove content ‘in good faith to restrict access to or availability of material that the provider or user considers to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally protected’” once they become aware of such content’s existence (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016, p. 419). Therefore, until FOSTA, there was “little incentive for sites to review content before users flag it” since as long as the company could claim ignorance of the content on its site, it was not legally responsible for it. However, FOSTA is the first regulatory legislation to amend this section of the CDA, pushing platforms to engage in proactive censorship for the first time. Facebook and Instagram’s response has been to turn to censorship via machine-learning. Training algorithms to censor its content would allow the company to be much more efficient in its moderation, and would likely give the company a cheaper and faster way to moderate content.

Putting censorship in the hands of Artificial Intelligence

Zuckerberg says that Facebook is moving towards incorporating more Artificial Intelligence into its moderation strategies in order to do the most “repetitive work” (Zuckerberg, 2019). When Instagram announced its latest moderation strategy, it too said it has “started to use machine learning to determine if the actual media posted is eligible to be recommended to our community” (Constine, 2019). To do this, Instagram is

“training its content moderators to label borderline content when they’re hunting down policy violations,” using the labels the moderators generate to train an algorithm on what constitutes ‘inappropriate’ content (Constine, 2019).

Zuckerberg, in his ‘Blueprint,’ said that Facebook is turning to training Artificial Intelligence to increase the accuracy and consistency in its moderation decisions.

Notably, in his ‘blueprint,’ Zuckerberg acknowledges that moderation decisions “require nuance and exceptions” but says that because human moderators make decisions that are influenced by their own subjectivities, their judgements can be inconsistent. Conversely, Zuckerberg says “computers are consistent at highly repetitive tasks” (Zuckerberg, 2019). He goes on to say that “visual problems, like identifying nudity, are often easier than nuanced linguistic challenges, like hate speech,” adding that “our systems already proactively identify 96% of the nudity we take down” (Zuckerberg, 2019). Here, Zuckerberg assumes that nudity is a relatively black and white issue, that someone is either nude, or not, and their content should be treated as such. However, as outlined in this thesis, in the context of sex workers, the body is political, and the sex workers who are posting so-called “sexually suggestive” content to their accounts work hard to inject nuance into such images. Further, Zuckerberg’s assertion that algorithms can be more “accurate” and “consistent” in their censorship assumes that these algorithms can and will be value-neutral in their assessments, while ignoring that the content moderators who are informing the algorithms work with their own individual biases and values in mind.

Where this leaves sex workers

Reducing its users visibility without outright deleting their content is a convenient way for Instagram to censor sex workers without needing to defend their decisions when challenged. This change further frustrates the sex worker community's attempts to blur the boundaries of Instagram's inappropriate/appropriate dichotomy by taking the grey area they have established and hiding it from sight. Putting censorship into the hands of AI further black-boxes the moderation process while enforcing public-facing guidelines that are extremely vague. These vague public-facing policies deliberately leave enough room for the company to make 'mistakes' in its censorship; as evidenced by the total lack of transparency as to what "sexually suggestive" actually means. As part of its moderation changes, Instagram has implemented an appeals form, giving its users a formal channel to challenge its censorship decisions for the first time (Alvarez, 2019). However, this one-sided appeal form, in conjunction with its deliberately vague determination of "borderline" content gives Instagram the ability to be overreaching in its censorship and apologize for overstepping at a later date—putting the onus on the user to put in the time and labour of submitting an appeal form if they disagree with Instagram's decision.³³

At its heart, the issue of censorship of sex workers on Instagram is a conflict of "control and legitimacy" (Miltner, 2014). As participatory spaces like Instagram are used to challenge "entrenched disparities of power and voice," conflicts of this nature are not limited to Instagram or the sex worker community (Miltner, 2014). Marginalized

³³ It is unclear if users will be able to appeal Instagram's decision to limit the visibility of their 'borderline' content. However, it appears that Instagram will not notify the users if their content has been flagged as 'borderline', so it would likely be difficult for them to tell in the first place, aside from noticing a decrease in levels of engagement on their posts.

communities including but not limited to sex workers have put a lot of time and affective labour into amplifying their presence as counterpublics within systems that are entrenched with patriarchal and capitalistic values. With each potentially stifling algorithm that members of marginalized communities must consider before posting, the more the content they post might change or alter as a result of these considerations. One sex worker/illustrator acknowledged this in a May 2019 caption, wondering “what kind of influence [do the algorithms] have on the content we create? How much of our work is purely us vs how much of it is shaped by what we think our audience would engage with to favour the algorithms?” When considering how Instagram functions as a reputation economy built on visibility, the punishment of reduced visibility for those who push up against Instagram’s rules without crossing them can have a direct influence on the kind of content they put out. These shifts in Instagram’s approach to content moderation works to deprive counterpublics like sex workers of the ability to exist within its space while simultaneously subverting it and challenging its very structure and norms. Instead, it rewards posts and accounts that adhere to Instagram’s definition of normative behaviour.

As Facebook and Instagram double down on reducing the visibility of what it deems ‘inappropriate’ content, the question the sex worker community is asking itself is at what point does the fight for visibility on a platform that is clearly opposed to their presence become no longer worth the time and labour. When this happens, FOSTA will have been successful in not only depriving sex workers of the online platforms where they conduct business—such as Backpage.com or Craigslist personals—it will also have been successful in pushing sex workers out of mainstream online social spaces, taking away their ability to exist on mainstream platforms *as* sex workers, to develop a

subversive counterpublic and a networked community, and to participate in political discussions and negotiations pertaining to their rights and identities. However, as Scarlett said after returning to Instagram after being deleted: “I’m like a motherfucking cockroach, bitch.” The sex worker community is nothing if not resilient, and will continue to draw on its historical practices of activism and collectivity to care for each other in the face of a society and a government that continues to view sex workers as deviant and immoral.

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