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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Navigating queer digital sex work: motivations, challenges, and platform practices of gay, bisexual, and transgender sex workers

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the motives, rewards, and risks faced by Filipino gay, bisexual, and transgender (GBT) sex workers engaged in creating, marketing, and transacting online sex content. Guided by Foucault's concepts of power and surveillance, it critically explores how queer sex workers navigate the complex intersection of global digital platforms, local cultural norms in the Philippines, and sexual identity. Through in-depth interviews with 20 Filipino GBT sex workers, the findings reveal a nuanced work ecosystem where workers balance opportunities such as financial independence, self-expression, and activism with risks like economic insecurity, digital harassment, and privacy violations. They also face discrimination from financial institutions and the compounded stigma of being both sex workers and GBT+ individuals. The study highlights the influence of moral judgments on platform regulations, forcing workers to continually negotiate their sexual roles against platform demands, social pressures, and monetization challenges. It concludes that Filipino GBT sex workers exist in a space between exploitation and empowerment, navigating competing forces while establishing digital sex work as a viable income source despite social stigma and digital regulation.

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, sex workers have been using internet platforms to facilitate the sale of sexual services (Frances, 2017; Sanders et al., 2016). In fact, sex work and adult entertainment have been instrumental in the development of communication technologies, particularly the internet (Barss, 2010; Johnson, 1996). These online services span a variety of practices, mirroring the diversity of offline sex work markets. Online-facilitated sex work can be categorized into two broad types: direct online sex work (interacting with clients online to arrange in-person services; e.g., escorting or erotic massage) and

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indirect online sex work (providing sexual services entirely through digital means; e.g., webcamming, content creation, or sexting) (Mathews, 2017; Sanders et al., 2018).

For gay, bisexual, and transgender (GBT) sex workers in particular, digital platforms have provided unprecedented opportunities for community-building, audience development, and financial independence outside traditional adult entertainment structures that have historically centered heterosexual content and experiences. This study focuses specifically on indirect online sex work among Filipino GBT individuals, centering on their digital content creation, online interactions, and platform navigation practices. This study examines how these workers navigate and help shape the evolving digital ecosystem they occupy.

Many online sex workers operate independently, managing content production, marketing, and finances across multiple platforms (Cao, 2023; Pezzutto, 2019; Rand, 2019), from social media platforms, editing tools/software, and sites that host such content (Swords et al., 2023). Online sex work, thus, operates in a dynamic, interconnected ecosystem. However, this is marked by precarity and constant migration. As platform policies shift and market conditions change, creators must constantly rebuild and migrate their audiences (Labor, 2020; Gorissen, 2024). This migratory labor demands platform-specific strategies while maintaining a cohesive brand across different online spaces (Gillett et al., 2022). These adaptive efforts reflect both the volatility of platform-mediated work and the resilience shaping gig economy labor (De Ruyter & Brown, 2019). As Stegeman (2024) notes, digital platforms—not just governments—now regulate sex work, often with discriminatory consequences.

A common sentiment among sex workers is that platform rules are vague and constantly shifting, often leading to unintended violations. Punishments for "obscene" or "inappropriate" content are common, yet platforms rarely define what these terms mean, instead deferring to broad appeals to "local community standards" (Stegeman, 2024). Deplatforming is not a uniform experience; it takes many forms and carries varied consequences for sex workers' livelihoods and digital identities (Gorissen, 2024). Some express confusion over bans, citing a lack of clarity or warning (Sanders et al., 2025), a confusion compounded by ever-changing site policies (Hamilton et al., 2022). Yet much of what is known about these dynamics comes from heterosexual and Western contexts (Powers et al., 2023).

The glaring need for voices from the Global South must be emphasized in the study of sex work. No country in Asia has fully legalized sex work, with all states criminalizing at least one aspect of the practice (Godwin, 2012). Despite legal restrictions, the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (2020) estimates that there are currently 4.5 million sex workers operating on the continent. As is the case in other geographies, sex work in Asia continues to be seen as an immoral activity, leading to the stigmatization of sex workers (Ding, 2020).

## *Research problem and objectives*

I focus my inquiry on the Philippines, where sex work is present but illegal, making it essential to document the nature of sex work online. The Philippine context presents distinct characteristics that shape GBT digital sex workers' experiences, as it exists at the intersection of conservative Catholic values, American colonial influence on both

legal frameworks and digital infrastructure, and emerging LGBTQ+ movements (Embate & Labor, 2025; Labor & San Pascual, 2023; Manalastas & Torre, 2016). Digital penetration in the Philippines is among the highest in Southeast Asia, with Filipinos spending an average of 10 hours daily on social media (Kemp, 2023), creating a unique digital landscape where sex work can flourish despite stringent legal prohibitions. Additionally, the remittance economy and strong familial expectations create economic pressures that directly influence entry into sex work (Parmanand, 2019).

Thus, I ask the question: How do Filipino GBT sex workers maneuver online platforms and rules for their content within the specific socio-legal, cultural, and economic context of the Philippines? Specifically, the study describes the motives, characterizes the forms of rewards, and discusses the risks derived from creating, marketing, and transacting online sex content from the perspectives of Filipino GBT sex workers navigating both global digital platforms and local cultural constraints. Guided by Foucault's articulation of power and surveillance, I argue that Filipino GBT digital sex workers navigate a complex landscape of power relations where global platform governance, local cultural norms, and sexual identity intersect. Through this navigation, they simultaneously resist and reinforce systems of surveillance and control, creating spaces for queer expression while operating within platforms designed to regulate and commodify sexual content. By centering Filipino GBT voices, this research reveals how digital sex work is shaped by specific cultural, legal, and economic forces that differ markedly from the Western contexts that dominate current literature.

## Literature review

### *Gendered digital sex work and the politics of authenticity*

Sex work discourse is often inherently (though not always explicitly) gendered. Scholarly and mainstream discussions of sex work have long centered on the female sex worker and male patron, shaped mainly by Western feminist debates that emerged during the "Porn Wars" or "Sex Wars" of the 1970s and 1980s (Duggan & Hunter, 2006; Gerassi, 2015; Kaur, 2022). Anti-pornography feminists like Dworkin (1981) and MacKinnon (1987) argued that pornography perpetuates patriarchal violence, while sex-positive feminists such as Rubin (1984) and Willis (2012) viewed it as a potential site for women's agency and liberation. These polarized positions continue to shape scholarly and policy discourse on sex work (Smith & Attwood, 2014).

The debate also extends to digital spaces, with critics of online pornography asserting that it reproduces the male gaze and exploitation (Cawston, 2019; Dines, 2011), while others see it as subversive and empowering (Ashton et al., 2019; Williams, 1989). Bleakley (2014) argues that independent camming gives performers greater control, thereby removing (or at least reducing) the oppressive structures of patriarchal, mainstream porn. Camming can also enhance financial and personal autonomy (Dorsey et al., 2024). However, it is crucial to recognize that this financial independence is unevenly distributed among performers due to unstable income, platform fees, and market saturation (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), with significant earnings disparities often reflecting and reproducing existing inequalities (Berg, 2021; Cao, 2023; Rand, 2019).

However, the dominant exploitation/empowerment debate often obscures the realities of queer and Global South sex workers (Berg, 2021; Vartabedian, 2018). Filipino GBT sex workers, for instance, challenge these dominant frameworks by revealing how digital sex work is shaped by postcolonial histories, Catholic moralities, non-Western family dynamics, and economic pressures—factors that complicate and move beyond the simplistic binary of victimization versus agency (Manalasan, 2003; Parmanand, 2019; Tan, 2001; Yingwana, 2022). Within this context, online sex work platforms can also serve as liberating spaces for expressing counter-cisheteronormative identities, intimacies, and bodies. Transgender performers, for example, use social media to cultivate personas that resist cisheteronormative standards (Pezzutto, 2019), while gay sex workers express queer intimacy and selfhood through digital performances (Wang, 2021; Wang & Ding, 2022). As Laurin (2019) notes, these platforms become "important outlets for performers who wish to perform authenticity in their terms" (p. 68), offering spaces where marginalized identities can be both seen and self-defined.

Authenticity in Filipino GBT digital sex work is less about "being real" and more about strategic, culturally mediated performance. Marwick (2013) frames authenticity as a performative act legitimized through recognizable cultural codes, often requiring emotional labor to build affective ties in transactional settings (Jones, 2015). For my informants, authenticity hinges on "cultural congruence"—aligning self-presentation with local norms of sincerity and emotional truth, especially in a digital culture that values "truthful transactions" (Cao, 2021; Labor, 2021). For instance, Kish frames authenticity as a form of self-affirmation ("owning my sexuality and doing it for myself"), Zeke uses it to stand out in the market ("I showcase gay sexual habits and skills"), while others invoke it to foster emotional intimacy and solidarity within the GBT+ community. These practices reflect "networked authenticity" (Van Dijck, 2013), shaped by performers, audiences, and algorithmic systems. Platform affordances, however, mediate which forms of authenticity are visible and viable.

### *Moral perspectives and regulation in (online) sex work*

Literature shows that anti-sex work judgments are prevalent in many cultures (see Cole, 2024). In their study of sexual issues in South Asia, Malik et al., (2020) write that sex "lies on the border" of "the sacred and profane" (p.150), rendering it a taboo topic. This perspective sheds excellent light on the moral reasonings that underpin the stigmatization of sex work in some Asian cultures. I stress that Asia is not a monolithic region in its valuation of sex (Malik et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, societal views on sex and womanhood influence the way that sex workers are perceived. Filipina sex workers are painted as either deviants with no morals or as victims who require rescuing (Parmanand, 2019). This normative view of sex work as "dirty" can also color the way that Filipina sex workers view each other. For example, cam models were reported to have negative perceptions of direct sex workers, while others viewed webcam models as immoral for presenting their bodies online (Mathews, 2017). Because of the stigma that surrounds the industry, many sex workers hide the true nature of their occupation from their families (Parmanand, 2019). Familial ties hold much bearing in Philippine society, and they can often be a motivation for entry into sex work. Filipina sex workers justify their occupation by stressing that they

engage in sex work to provide for their families (Mathews, 2017). The invocation of familial obligation was also a common theme among Vietnamese girls, allowing parents to rationalize their daughters' engagement in the sex trade (Lainez, 2020).

The moral stigmatization of sex work, particularly for women, has hindered progress in both discourse and legal mechanisms designed to protect them from exploitation. Current platform and state regulatory frameworks disproportionately target the visibility and conduct of sex workers, reinforcing stigma and marginalization. The country's Revised Penal Code penalizes commercial sex, while the Magna Carta for Women defines prostitution as violence against women (Parmanand, 2019). Online sex work is also criminalized under the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, which punishes "cybersex"[1] regardless of coercion. Still, the industry persists (Bonnet, 2017).

Meanwhile, abusive or exploitative behaviors from patrons, such as harassment, doxxing, or non-consensual content sharing, often go unpunished, revealing a regulatory double standard. While regulation can be a powerful tool for improving working conditions (Motterle, 2023), online sex workers have emphasized the need for more effective screening measures to combat crimes like capping, or the illegal distribution of online sexual content (Sanders et al., 2025). The online sex work industry is rife with stories of sex workers getting deplatformed from sex work sites (Barwulor et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2022; Sanders et al., 2025). This fear of deplatformization has pushed some sex workers into constant consultations with other creators to ensure the appropriateness of their services (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). Others have altered the words they use on online platforms to avoid detection by content moderators (Cao, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2022). Deplatformization is directly related to a loss in income (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018).

## *Foucault's power and surveillance in online sex work*

Building on the previous discussions of gender, digital labor, moral perspectives, and regulation in online sex work, I integrate these themes with Michel Foucault's theory of power and surveillance to examine how these dynamics shape the experiences of online sex workers within both digital and social contexts. In particular, I ground this study in his conceptualization of disciplinary power and biopower as articulated in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978).

In Foucault's framework, power is not merely repressive but productive, circulating through social relations and institutional practices that shape individual subjectivities. Digital platforms represent a contemporary manifestation of what Foucault termed the "panopticon"—a surveillance apparatus where individuals internalize external observation and modify their behaviors accordingly (Foucault, 1977, pp. 200–209). For Filipino GBT sex workers, this surveillance operates through multiple, overlapping mechanisms: platform algorithms that flag "inappropriate" content, cultural systems that police sexual expression, and state regulations that criminalize digital sexual services under the Cybercrime Prevention Act. This triple surveillance creates what Foucault might call a "polymorphous technique of power" (Foucault, 1978, p. 11) targeted explicitly at non-normative sexual expressions.

In the Philippine context, Foucauldian analysis takes on particular significance given the country's colonial history and its ongoing negotiation between Catholic moral frameworks, American technological influence, and traditional Filipino values (Labiste,

2015). The regulation of sexuality in the Philippines, as seen in the country's Revised Penal Code, the Magna Carta for Women, and the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, reflects what Foucault termed the "repressive hypothesis" (1978, pp. 17-35), or the paradoxical proliferation of sexual discourse through attempts to suppress it. This explicit criminalization of sex work exemplifies how state power produces the very categories it seeks to control, creating what Foucault (1978) called "reverse discourse" where marginalized communities appropriate regulatory categories for self-definition and resistance. Filipino GBT sex workers operate within this complex power landscape, navigating digital tools developed in Western contexts while responding to distinctly Philippine forms of surveillance and regulation that blend colonial legacies with contemporary digital governance (Labor, 2021; Labiste, 2015; Soriano & Cabalquinto, 2022).

In approaching this research, I position myself as a scholar who views sex work as legitimate labor deserving of rights, dignity, and protections. I recognize the agency of those who choose this work, while acknowledging the structural forces that shape their choices. Adopting Sanders and colleagues' (2018) "polymorphous paradigm," I see sexual labor as complex and contextual. For queer sex work in particular, I understand it as both an economic strategy and a site of identity, community, and resistance. Following Jones (2021) and Gorissen (2024), I view GBT sex workers as strategic actors, not passive victims. While critically aware of the risks of digital capitalism, I center on workers' voices and expertise in analyzing their labor conditions.

## Research design

The study employed a qualitative case study design as defined by Yin (2018) and Stake (1995). Case study methodology involves in-depth exploration of a bounded system—in this research, the experiences of Filipino GBT digital sex workers—to develop a detailed understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context. This approach is particularly suitable when research questions aim to understand "how" a social phenomenon works and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018).

The paper draws insights from online interviews with Filipino gay, bisexual, and transgender (GBT) online sex workers (n = 20), recruited through convenience sampling, using the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently working as an online sex worker[2]; (2) self-identified as members of the GBT+ community; and (3) at least 18 years old. The convenience sampling process involved multiple recruitment pathways to access this hidden population through public social media accounts of self-identified GBT content creators. A modified snowball sampling technique supplemented the initial recruitment, where early participants referred other GBT sex workers from their professional networks. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via secure video or audio calls, at the participants' convenience, and lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Participants were asked to discuss their work, including the processes and procedures for digitally curating content, communicating with clients, and facilitating digital transactions. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated when needed. Data was anonymized and kept confidential. The study received ethical approval (Social Science Ethics Review Board-SSERB, Philippine Social Science Council, Reference Code CB-22-06), and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The participants represented a range of gender identities and sexual orientations within the GBT+ spectrum, including 12 cisgender gay men, three cisgender bisexual men, and five transgender women, aged 19 to 38 (median age 26). Educational backgrounds varied, with 8 participants having some college education, 10 having completed high school, and 2 holding graduate degrees. Their experience in digital sex work ranged from 6 months to 5 years (average: 2.3 years). Most participants (14) engaged in digital sex work as supplemental income, while six relied on it as their primary income. The majority (17) were based in urban areas, primarily Metro Manila, with three from provincial regions. Monthly earnings varied from PHP 10,000 to PHP 120,000 (approximately USD 175–2100), with a median of PHP 45,000 (approximately USD 800). This reflects differences in platform usage, content type, audience size, and the time invested. While this sample captures diversity within the Filipino GBT digital sex worker community, it does not represent transgender men and non-binary individuals. It is skewed toward urban-based workers with reliable internet access.

For data analysis, I employed inductive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) within the case study framework. This involved systematic coding of interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and themes across participants' experiences. Methodologically, the Foucauldian framework guided my analysis by focusing attention on how participants described their negotiations with various forms of power, including platform policies, social expectations, financial systems, and legal constraints. By positioning myself as a "teller of tales" (Kearns, 1997, p. 269), I maintained reflexive awareness of how my interpretive framework shaped the collection and analysis of narratives.

## Results

My findings highlights three key aspects of Filipino GBT digital sex workers' experiences: motivations for digital sex work that extend beyond economic need to include personal expression and advocacy; economic benefits such as financial independence and creative autonomy, balanced by precarity; navigation of multilayered risks of economic insecurity, digital violence, and complex digital platform ecosystem and financial infrastructures.

### *Motivations for producing digital sex labor*

The motivations of Filipino GBT digital sex workers revealed complex intersections between economic necessity, personal expression, and social advocacy. While economic factors featured prominently, participants articulated a range of motivations that demonstrated how digital sex work serves multiple purposes simultaneously. Rather than operating in a strict hierarchy of motivations, my analysis reveals that GBT digital sex workers typically describe multiple, simultaneous, and interrelated reasons for their work that cannot be easily separated or ranked.

#### *Financial motivations*

Similar to findings from studies of in-person sex workers and direct online sex workers who arrange in-person services (Hamilton et al., 2022; Mathews, 2017), the Filipino GBT

indirect online sex workers in this study frequently cited economic gain as a motivation for entering the industry. Digital sex work allows GBT individuals to be economically empowered, leading to financial autonomy beyond immediate earnings. This financial agency enables workers to not only meet their immediate needs but also invest in their work by buying professional equipment. For instance, informants who are still in school can send themselves to college. The financial independence that sex work provides liberates them financially. For example, Zeke, a male and gay architecture college student, doing sexual content has been able to alleviate some of the financial problems he faced during the pandemic.

Unlike findings from studies of Western cam performers (Jones, 2021) who primarily cite individual economic advancement as motivation, Filipino GBT workers frequently framed their financial motivations within collective family responsibilities. Dakzilog69, male and gay, who works in a business process outsourcing (BPO) company, shared that being a part-time adult content creator increases his monthly earnings: "*To be honest, earning from my BPO job is just enough for someone living alone. It's just enough for a single person. It's not enough to support a family or be the main breadwinner.*" This reflects the Filipino cultural concept of "utang na loob" (debt of gratitude), where family financial support is seen not just as generosity but also as a moral obligation and a way to reciprocate for parental sacrifice.

For Filipino GBT sex workers, financial motivations must be understood within the country's economic structure, where low wages in formal employment contrast sharply with potential earnings in digital sex work. Many of the workers I interviewed come from lower-middle-class communities in the Philippines, with financial considerations forming an important but not necessarily primary motivation for their engagement in digital sex work. The financial motivations of GBT sex workers reflect what Foucault termed "productive power"—even as economic systems constrain choices, they produce new forms of agency and resistance through digital entrepreneurship.

### *Personal expression and empowerment*

Beyond financial motives, sex workers shared that their decision to post content online was driven by a desire for sexual expression, a wish to use their existing skills and resources, and a sense that society was becoming more accepting (Hamilton et al., 2022). Some of the informants mentioned that doing digital sex work as queer individuals has allowed them to express their sexuality in the hopes of inspiring other people, particularly those part of the GBT+ community, to be comfortable in their skin. Zel, a male and bisexual corporate employee, and Wildtatts, a warehouse worker, remarked that such work allowed them to build their confidence and made them happy. For Kish, transgender and queer, a master's student and a transgender woman, there is an empowerment in producing sexual content:

> *We, as women, are oppressed in a way that we can't fully express ourselves without being judged. That's what I'm trying to address, and being an inspiration to other women has become inevitable for me—it's one of my motivations. Of course, another motivation is owning my sexuality and doing it for myself. I'm also discovering how this power can impact many people around me.*

Further, online sex workers find enjoyment and pleasure in their practice, and it can also be derived from affective, intimate experiences with patrons (Jones, 2016; Motterle, 2023). As Zel puts it, "*My generation of queer sex workers know that we can do a lot of things with our content. We gain money from it, and we also take pleasure in our content. We love doing what we do.*" The digital space offers a platform for self-discovery and exploration of one's sexuality. By creating content that aligns with their desires, queer digital sex workers can experience pleasure and satisfaction on their terms (Jones, 2016; Motterle, 2023).

These narratives reflect both global experiences of oppression and the specific stigmatization of gender-nonconforming individuals in Philippine society, where colonial-era concepts of gender and sexuality continue to influence social attitudes (Manalasan, 2003). The significance of sexual self-expression for Filipino GBT sex workers must be contextualized within a society where Catholic moral teachings dominate public discourse and SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression) anti-discrimination legislation has repeatedly failed to pass Congress. When Kish describes "owning my sexuality," she articulates what Foucault would recognize as a "technology of the self"—practices through which individuals transform themselves within power relations rather than simply being subjugated by them.

### *Socio-political motivations*

Informants shared that performing solo or partnered sex online lets them showcase their GBT sexual practices and skills. Sharing this with clients and followers offers a sense of freedom from the judgment of cisheterosexual society in the Philippines. Online sex work platforms thus become spaces of liberation for counter-cisheteronormative identities and intimacies. Gay sex workers mentioned the value of showing their content as a way to mainstream queer bodies and their form of intimacies.

Zel, 24, pointed out that aside from the financial gains and the sexual pleasures, engaging in digital sex work allows them to resist cisheteronormative norms. He shared:

> *We showcase gay sexual habits and our skills as a way to liberate the GBT in the Philippines. We tell the viewers, "Hey, there is sex outside the cis way. We enjoy doing it with one or two people, regardless of gender. That's all right."*

These sentiments highlight the process of queering sexual scripts by showcasing non-cisgender sexual habits and skills, often suggesting that they are consciously reshaping the way bodies, desires, expressions, and practices are dominantly portrayed in the sex work world. By showcasing their unique desires and skills, queer digital sex workers disrupt these narratives and offer alternative representations of sexuality (Gregorio, 2023; Pezzutto, 2019).

For them, producing content is a way to express and affirm counter-hegemonic identities and intimacies, allowing them to cultivate a persona beyond cisheteronormativity. I found that this involves a conscious effort to resist cisheteronormative pressures and challenge dominant ideals of identity and intimacy (Labor, Samonte, & Bana, 2023; Gorissen, 2024). By exploring queer identities and desires using digital sex workspace, workers like Kish and Zel feel a sense of freedom to express their evolving desires away from the constraints of traditional Philippine society. The use of the platform to show

their sensual persona is also a way for them to subvert traditional power dynamics in sex work, where GBT workers can empower themselves. Online sex workers find enjoyment in their practice, highlighting the reality that sex work can be a pleasure (Gorissen, 2024; Jones, 2016; Motterle, 2023).

The relationship between financial and non-financial motivations emerged as more nuanced and fluid than a simple hierarchy would suggest. Workers often described how economic, personal, and political motivations reinforced and transformed each other over time. For some participants, financial needs may have initiated their entry into digital sex work, but personal and political motivations sustained their continued engagement. For others, the desire for sexual expression came first, with the discovery that this expression could be monetized emerging later. This complexity challenges frameworks that position economic necessity as inherently primary or that create artificial separations between financial survival and identity expression, particularly for GBT individuals whose economic opportunities may be constrained by discrimination in conventional workplaces.

## *Advantages and rewards of online sex*

Filipino GBT digital sex workers experienced several significant advantages that challenge simplistic narratives about sex work. These benefits include economic control, work autonomy, and personal agency—all of which allowed participants to exercise meaningful choices in their professional activities while navigating the constraints of both digital platforms and Philippine societal expectations.

### *Economic control*

Online sex workers can choose how to price their services, how often they produce content, and how frequently they wish to interact with clients. As my interviewees generally advertise themselves through X, they mentioned two types of services their patrons can avail of: (1) subscription-based and (2) exclusive content. For the subscription-based model, creators redirect patrons to a different platform to access their content. This comes in time-bound access (i.e., weekly, monthly, lifetime access). Meanwhile, for exclusive content, interested patrons can message them directly with a specific request, making the content available only to that patron. According to my informants, subscription-based content can range from PHP 500 to PHP 2500, while client-based, exclusive content can range from PHP 5000 to PHP 20,000 per video. Coco noted having a "menu" that listed the prices for each specific content.

The informants named Telegram and Just for Fans as two leading platforms where they post content for clients to access. These platform choices reflect significant distinctions in ownership structures and their implications for worker autonomy and revenue. Just for Fans represents a sex worker-owned platform, founded by adult performer Dominic Ford, which distinguishes it from mainstream corporate-owned platforms like OnlyFans. Several participants explicitly noted this distinction as meaningful in their platform selection. Zeke explained: "*I prefer Just for Fans because it's made by someone from the industry who understands our needs. They're less likely to change policies against us suddenly.*" This perception of greater stability in sex worker-owned

platforms emerged across multiple interviews, reflecting workers' awareness of how ownership structures influence platform governance.

Participants reported several advantages of sex worker-owned platforms, including more transparent content policies, better communication during policy changes, and favorable revenue splits. Dakzilog69 noted that "*Just for Fans consults with creators before making major changes*," contrasting this with experiences on mainstream platforms where policy shifts often occurred without warning. Additionally, several participants mentioned that sex worker-owned platforms better understood the technical needs of adult content creators, offering features specifically designed for their work rather than generalized content tools.

However, participants also acknowledged tradeoffs between different platform types. While sex worker-owned platforms offered greater security and understanding, mainstream platforms like X provided wider audience reach and discovery opportunities. This led most participants to adopt hybrid strategies, using mainstream marketing and audience-building platforms while directing followers to more specialized platforms for monetization. Lexi explained: "*I need Twitter to find new subscribers, but I'd never trust them with my actual content or depend on them for income*." This strategic navigation between platform types demonstrates how workers balance competing considerations of audience reach, revenue security, and content control.

Through a Foucauldian lens, sex worker-owned platforms can be understood as creating "alternative governance regimes" that modify, though do not eliminate, surveillance and control mechanisms. While all platforms exercise disciplinary power through terms of service and content moderation, participants perceive sex worker-owned platforms as implementing more consistent, transparent, and industry-appropriate forms of governance. This illustrates how resistance to mainstream platform control has evolved beyond individual tactics to include the creation of alternative infrastructure. However, these alternatives remain constrained by broader financial systems and legal frameworks.

### *Work autonomy and personal agency*

Just as sex workers can control their hours, they are also able to manage how they are presented and branded online. Kitty and Lexi, both transgender and queer, said they must prepare outfits and backgrounds when making videos. Wildtatts, meanwhile, wants to be perceived as "*someone who moans loudly and is wild*." For Zeke, maintaining his physique is vital, as *it keeps him in the market*. He added, "*I have also spoken with other content creators who say they find inspiration in what I've done*." The democratization of online spaces empowers sex workers to challenge conventional standards of beauty, enabling greater self-expression and representation (Hamilton et al., 2022). As such, queer and transgender digital sex workers also cultivate spaces away from cisheteronormativity (Pezzutto, 2019; Vartabedian, 2018; Wang, 2021).

Further, increased physical safety is part of the work-related advantages of working online (Hamilton et al., 2022). Contrary to previous findings (see Jones, 2021), the non-binary and transwomen sex workers I interviewed do not face transphobic and racist discrimination from audiences anymore. They stated that their patrons and subscribers know their content before choosing their channels. This narrative may be due to the absence of physical interaction with patrons (Cunningham et al., 2018). Lexi, for

instance, chooses to create content that only features herself. However, in doing such content, she also accommodates the fantasies and requests of her patrons.

More than the freedom to choose the esthetics of their appearance, sex workers also feel that they have a better choice in the *kind* of sex work they want to do. For instance, as part of his advocacy, Dakzilog69 shared that he wants to normalize being "uncut" through the hashtag "*#EmbracingMyForeskin*." Some informants prefer only doing solo videos or with specific people they are acquainted with. On the other hand, others delve into BDSM (bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism), public sex, or orgies. Online sex workers feel a sense of agency because they decide the services they want to offer, the platforms they wish to utilize, and the boundaries they want to set (Sanders et al., 2016). For example, Zeke prefers collaborators who are already experienced, while Dakzilog69 favors partners who are the opposite of what he looks like.

These workers also take pride in being tech-savvy. They mentioned using their smartphone's camera, designing lighting, and editing recorded content. Most, if not all, of my informants were proficient in using social media, specifically X, to advertise themselves and attract subscribers to their channels outside of X (Cao, 2023). To do this, their content must be marketable and appealing to consumers. As such, they find the need to invest in better equipment to improve the quality of their content. Coco, transgender and queer, a camera model, explained: "*I had to create an oasis where clients would feel very comfortable seeing me, like in a studio, so I had to install lights. I think overall I spent around Php 20,000 or less on my camera.*"

Some informants, like Lexi and Dakzilog69, invested in new smartphones with better camera quality and tripods for stable video equipment. My informants' spending on new equipment ranged from as low as Php 20,000 to as much as Php 200,000. These investments, although they take a considerable chunk of their earnings, are essential for improving the production and marketability of their content on the platforms they use. As Dakzilog69 explained: "*If I were the subscriber, why would I subscribe to low-quality videos that I wouldn't enjoy, compared to high-quality videos that would give me pleasure?"* Thus, heavy investment in new technologies is an essential aspect of their digital sex work.

From these narratives, online sex work can be seen as a viable, enjoyable occupation, directly countering the neo-abolitionist narrative that sex work is inherently and singularly oppressive (for a summary of neo-abolitionist theorizations, see Gerassi, 2015). However, this is not to say that online sex work is without danger of exploitation or abuse. In the following section, I unpack some of the risks associated with selling indirect sexual services online.

## *Disadvantages and risks*

Despite the advantages, Filipino GBT digital sex workers face substantial challenges that create ongoing precarity. These risks operate across multiple dimensions, from economic instability to digital violence and identity-based harassment. Significantly, these challenges reflect both global patterns of platform governance and Philippines-specific contexts of legal prohibition and cultural stigma.

### *Economic insecurity*

While economic gain was seen as both an entry motivation (Hamilton et al., 2022) and an advantage of working online (Sanders et al., 2016), some GBT sex workers interviewed in this study have found that their actual income falls short of their previous expectations (Hamilton et al., 2022). Coco and Kitty, online trans sex workers, mentioned that while pay is good, they also shoulder enormous costs of clothing, makeup, production equipment, and decor, all while dealing with an irregular market. The flexibility afforded by online platforms can also be tied to economic precarity (Vlase & Preoteasa, 2022).

Online sex workers must also contend with pay cuts from platforms and managers. The business model of webcam and content delivery platforms varies, but many take a portion of a creator's income (Sanders et al., 2018), reducing their take-home pay. Zeke, a gay worker, and Zel, a bisexual worker, stated that while they understand that Just for Fans may take a portion of their monthly subscription fee, they often prefer utilizing Telegram. As Zeke explained,

> *Since it's in dollars, it comes to me as crypto, and then I convert it into pesos. It's a hassle because there's a deduction. A percentage goes to Just for Fans, and there's also a service charge when you cash out. Unlike with Telegram, it's all mine—what you get is what you keep.*

Other GBT workers like Coco, who produced content under a piece-rate system, must work longer hours to meet financial quotas (Mathews 2017). Coco explained that while exclusive content for a client pays a lot, this also entails a lot of effort and resources from her since she has to buy the sex toys and curate the video to fit the client's fantasy. She also experienced client interactions where they received no payment at all (Campbell et al., 2019), mainly if the client wanted an on-site sexual engagement.

Earnings disparities emerged among my Filipino GBT informants, who described varying levels of financial success. While some, like Zeke, reported significant income that enabled them to pursue education, others indicated that despite considerable time investment and expenses for equipment, their earnings remained supplementary rather than transformative. These disparities often reflected existing advantages in terms of physical appearance, social capital, English language proficiency, and technological resources, illustrating how digital platforms can reproduce rather than disrupt structural inequalities (Cao, 2021, 2023).

### *Digital violence and harassment*

Aside from economic issues, GBT sex workers must also deal with harassment from social media followers and online clients. Although many of my informants shared that they are respected and cared for by their patrons, some experienced harassment and scamming in their online work. Zel lamented being scammed by a client who sent a fake receipt. Dakzilog, meanwhile, experienced bullying when he revealed his face in one of his videos. Kitty shared that she has experienced transphobia by some cis-heterosexual people, "*by saying that I can't be a biological woman since I was born a boy*." While it may be true that indirect online sex workers experience less physical violence, the violence they face has turned digital. Online sex workers can become targets of verbal abuse and unwanted attention (Campbell et al., 2019).

Some sex workers have come to fear posting content that makes them identifiable online, as this can lead to cases of stalking or doxing (Hamilton et al., 2022). Having been educated in a conservative Catholic school, Coco expressed that one of her fears is to be found online and to be identified on a porn site. She elaborated:

> *One of my fears is if they would ever see some of my videos, and they wouldn't be on Twitter but on a porn site like they just pop up magically, and they see me. They are gonna be disappointed. Compared to if my video goes viral, it's usually on Telegram and Twitter, and they don't use that.*

The phenomenon is so widespread that sex workers have come to regard doxing as an expected occupational risk (Jones, 2016). Aside from the stigma surrounding sex work, GBT individuals are accused of being immoral on two levels: as sex workers and as members of the GBT+ community. Kitty, for instance, has been accused of being immoral for doing such work, while Coco and Lexi shared instances of being misgendered. The binary gender categorizations implemented by online platforms exacerbate these cisheteronormative structures.

Another constant fear for GBT sex workers is deplatforming, which ranges from content removal and shadowbanning to permanent account deletion and cross-platform exclusion. Online platforms vary in their policies on sexual content, with some enforcing unclear standards of moderation that lead to shadow banning (Pezzutto 2019) or even deplatformization (Are & Briggs, 2023; Hamilton et al., 2022; Sanders et al., 2025; van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). It is difficult to ascertain the exact mechanisms behind shadow banning, but the process limits the visibility of a particular post or creator (Pezzutto 2019). Account removals and shadow bans directly affect online sex workers' income, and so the potential for deplatformization becomes a source of fear (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). Zel mentioned that he "needs to be nice to people" to avoid having his content removed, while Zeke availed of X's blue check verification to avoid being flagged by the platform.

As Berg (2021) notes, these forms of digital displacement require varied adaptation. Several informants described experiencing "graduated deplatforming" (Gorissen, 2024), where platforms reduce visibility before harsher action. Dakzilog69 shared: "*You'll only know when your engagements suddenly drop. You think no one is interested anymore, but your posts are being hidden*." This creates psychological uncertainty in addition to financial loss. Severe deplatforming disrupts digital ecosystems. Kitty recounted: "*When my Instagram was gone, my Telegram subscribers dropped by half. It's not just losing one account—it's losing the whole network I built through it.*" As Berg (2021) argues, the loss of one platform can dismantle entire networks.

For GBT sex workers, deplatforming often intersects with identity performance and authenticity (Berg, 2021). Several transgender informants noted stricter moderation compared to cisgender creators. Lexi shared: "*When I post the same kind of content as cis women, I get flagged more often. It feels like they're policing my trans body more strictly*." In line with Berg's (2021) view that content moderation reinforces hierarchies of bodies and sexualities, my informants' experiences suggest that digital moderation amplifies inequalities within sex work communities, disproportionately burdening those with intersecting marginalized identities.

### *Platform ecosystem and marketing of content*

My interviews revealed that GBT sex workers in the Philippines use multiple platforms for marketing and uploading their content. The constant threat of deplatformization not only generates economic insecurity but also forces GBT digital sex workers into exhausting cycles of audience rebuilding and platform migration. Unlike traditional gig workers, online sex workers navigate a fragmented digital landscape, redirecting followers, crafting cross-platform strategies, and staying visible across platforms (Gorissen, 2024). This often-overlooked migratory labor requires digital savvy, strategic foresight, and adaptability to shifting platform rules.

On the one hand, they create various selling points, namely Just for Fans, Telegram, and through direct email transfers, to sell their content. Coco directly uploads sexual products through clients' emails, where patrons can access explicit content. As previously noted, social media can also be used as a marketing tool, a space where sex workers can build a personal brand that invites even more patrons (Pajnik, 2017; Pezzutto, 2019). Among my informants, X is the central platform in their marketing strategy to advertise their content. Some, like Kish, prefer to promote their content using Facebook and Instagram stories by posting "photo teasers" and embedding links within the stories. However, Wildtatts observed that Facebook is more sensitive to revealing and sexual posts, making it easier to restrict them.

It is also through social media that online sex workers can communicate with clients (Sanders et al., 2018), forming a bounded intimacy where audiences get a glimpse of the worker beyond curated content (Wang, 2021). Dakzilog69 remarked that you can also communicate with other adult content creators through X, Grindr (a gay dating app), and other social media platforms for potential collaborations. Thus, social media becomes a site for transactions and collaborations between adult content creators (Pajnik, 2017).

Filipino GBT sex workers face unique platform navigation challenges. While they use globally accessible platforms, they must also navigate Philippines-specific digital regulations, including the provisions of the Cybercrime Prevention Act against "cybersex." This creates a dual regulatory burden where workers must satisfy both international platform standards and avoid domestic legal scrutiny. Additionally, payment processing becomes particularly complex in a country where international financial services are less integrated, forcing many workers to develop creative workarounds specific to the Philippine banking system.

### *Financial infrastructure and challenges*

The monetization of work done on sex-work-specific sites and non-sex work-specific channels is finally realized through electronic financial platforms, such as digital banking and electronic wallets. Patrons need to send proof of payment before being allowed access to the creators' channels. Lexi noted that it is now easy to "download the fees" because their Just for Fans site is connected to her bank account. Meanwhile, patrons who prefer anonymity can use their GCash payment portal to send money. However, the Just for Fans payout system uses cryptocurrency as a payment mode, allowing them to understand how to monetize the system financially. Zeke expounded on this:

> *The payout is made every Wednesday in the US, but it technically arrives on Thursday here in the Philippines. It goes directly into crypto; my Bitcoin address is linked to CoinsPH. Sometimes, the exchange rate from dollars to pesos is low, which frustrates me, especially since there's a service charge when I transfer it to my bank account or GCash.*

Though they utilize different platforms according to their overarching purpose, Swords et al. (2023) find that the online sex work industry has undergone a deep level of interpenetration; online sex workers draw links between accounts on different platforms to reach more audiences, cultivate a stronger personal brand, and ultimately diversify their streams of income. For instance, Dakzilog69, Wildtatts, and Zeke shared that they manage channels in Telegram, JustForFans, and Pornhub to diversify their revenue streams. Interpenetration does serve to strengthen a sex worker's portfolio, but issues arise when platforms differ in their management of sexual content. Echoing once more the observation of Stegeman (2024), platforms regulate online sex work in their ways. Dakzilog69 described how he creates and regulates his content on the three platforms:

> *Pornhub only wants exclusive contents, or they will remove them. With JustforFans, there might be similar videos, but the advantage is that we earn through subscriptions. They don't mind similar videos as long as people subscribe because JustforFans also takes a cut. With Telegram, we upload specific videos to an exclusive channel for exclusive clients.*

Online sex workers often feel that online platforms have unclear terms of service, which results in accidental violations. Several platforms punish sex workers for seemingly obscene or inappropriate content. Still, these platforms do not clearly define what they count as inappropriate, relying instead on blanket statements that uphold "local community standards" of obscenity (Stegeman, 2024). For example, Kish has been flagged by Instagram for posting "*something sexy or revealing*." She has also experienced being reported by "some harassers" for the same reasons. According to Kish, multiple violations can "*ban you from using and posting content*." Informants like Kish and Lexi must constantly check X to see if their accounts are still active and available.

Some sex workers who have been blocked from particular sites express surprise, stating that they do not know the exact reason for their ban (Sanders et al., 2025). A lack of knowledge of platform standards can be attributed to the frequent changes in site policies (Hamilton et al., 2022). Here, deplatformization also impacts the emotional well-being of online GBT sex workers as it reflects more extraordinary discourses around sex work. Bans and account loss occur not only on sex work sites and social media but also on digital finance platforms. Numerous sex workers have shared that they experienced discrimination from financial service providers such as Visa, Mastercard, PayPal, and JP Morgan (Stardust et al., 2023; Tusikov, 2021). Sex workers have faced abrupt closures of their bank accounts (Beebe, 2022) and outright denial of financial services (Tusikov, 2021) based on their occupation. These instances, coupled with occurrences of nonpayment by patrons, as mentioned earlier, lead to the financial exclusion of sex workers (Stardust et al., 2023). In the face of these difficulties, some sex workers resort to accepting cash or electronic gift cards (Barwulor et al., 2021).

It is necessary to question why deplatformization, discrimination, and disenfranchisement occur. The legal argument is that these platforms are based in or cater to

locations where sex work has not been legalized or at least decriminalized, and so they seek to prevent its proliferation (Stardust et al., 2023). Meanwhile, a finance perspective would reveal that "adult entertainment"—and, by extension, sexual services—has been tagged as high-risk transactions owing to the alleged frequent cashbacks and fraudulent charges associated with it (Tusikov, 2021). These legal and financial explanations clarify the regulatory mechanisms of online platforms, but a deeper analysis shows that current policies also have their roots in moral perspectives on sex work (Stardust et al., 2023). Platforms have been demonstrated to conflate sex work with exploitation; whether this reflects the beliefs of corporate owners or political actors is unclear, but a blanket ban on sex-related transactions allows platforms to shield themselves against accusations of enabling abuse (Beebe, 2022).

## Discussion: Power, surveillance, and resistance in Filipino GBT digital sex work

The experiences of Filipino GBT digital sex workers illuminate how Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and resistance operate in contemporary digital contexts. Digital platforms function as what Foucault (1977) termed "disciplinary mechanisms" that regulate behavior through surveillance and normalization. For Filipino GBT sex workers, this surveillance operates across multiple dimensions: algorithmic content moderation that flags "inappropriate" content, community standards that encode cisheteronormative assumptions, and payment systems that monitor and restrict transactions. When Dakzilog69 describes experiencing shadowbanning—where his content visibility was reduced without notification—it illustrates Foucault's concept of "hierarchical observation," where visibility itself becomes a form of control. Platforms create a digital panopticon where workers internalize the gaze of content moderators, self-censoring and modifying their presentation to avoid detection.

Moreover, Foucault's concept of biopower—the regulation of populations through control over bodies and sexualities—takes specific form in the Philippine context, where colonial legacies, Catholic moral frameworks, and global platform capitalism intersect. The Cybercrime Prevention Act's criminalization of "cybersex" represents state biopower attempting to regulate digital sexual expression, while platform terms of service implement transnational regimes of sexual normalization. Filipino GBT sex workers find themselves subject to what Foucault might call "polymorphous techniques of power" (1978) that target their bodies from multiple directions simultaneously: as sex workers, as queer individuals, and as Filipinos operating in a global digital economy.

Despite these constraints, however, Filipino GBT sex workers develop "tactics"—opportunistic maneuvers within strategic power systems (de Certeau, 1984). When workers develop coded language to describe their services, build cross-platform networks to survive deplatforming, or create alternative payment channels, they engage in "practices of freedom" (Foucault et al. 1988)—not a complete escape from power relations, but rather creative navigation within them. Beyond merely economic tactics, workers like Kish who frame their work as "inspiration to other women" engage in "technologies of the self"—practices through which individuals transform themselves within power relations (Foucault, 1988). These practices of resistance demonstrate that power is never total; it always generates new forms of agency, even as it constrains.

The experiences of Filipino GBT digital sex workers in this study both support and complicate existing research on online sex work platforms as spaces for counter-cisheteronormative expression. Previous studies have found that transgender performers use social media to cultivate personas outside cisheteronormative standards (Pezzutto, 2019) and that gay sex workers perform queer intimacy online (Wang, 2021; Wang & Ding, 2022). The accounts of participants in this study affirm these findings but extend them by highlighting how Filipino cultural contexts shape these expressions in distinctive ways. Unlike Western contexts where individual self-expression is often the primary frame (Laurin, 2019), Filipino GBT workers frequently positioned their counter-cisheteronormative expression within collective frameworks of community responsibility and liberation.

As such, these findings underscore that queer digital sex work exists in a space between exploitation and empowerment, shaped by moral judgments, regulatory frameworks, and platform dynamics. While moral views—rooted in social norms or personal convictions—continue to influence how sex work is performed and policed (Beebe, 2022; Cole, 2024; Mathews, 2017; Powers et al., 2023), it would be shortsighted to view regulation as *solely* a moral project. The risks associated with online sex work add necessary nuance, especially in the context of GBT workers who navigate both dangers and pleasures in their labor. As Jones (2016) argues, sex work is fluid, and naming it solely exploitative or empowering erases its heterogeneity. The experiences of Filipino GBT digital sex workers highlight how marginalized communities cultivate technological literacies and strategic workarounds within systems not designed for their success—insights that broaden our understanding of digital labor, platform governance, and sexual citizenship.

## Conclusion

The study highlights how Filipino GBT sex workers operate at the intersection of multiple overlapping systems of global platform governance, local cultural norms, transnational financial infrastructures, and identity-based discrimination. This research shows the multifaceted nature of GBT digital sex work, shaped by intersecting motivations of financial mobility and independence, personal expression and empowerment, and resisting socio-political norms. Rather than focusing solely on economic need, workers cite overlapping reasons, revealing digital sex work as a complex space of negotiation between necessity, identity, and resistance.

Engaging in online sex work offers them benefits of economic control, work autonomy, and personal development in content creation and platform management. However, these workers face significant challenges such as financial insecurity, digital harassment, identity-related attacks, and privacy concerns. The platform ecosystem presents challenges due to unclear content and platform standards, forcing workers to adapt their content for income security constantly. Furthermore, workers face systematic discrimination from financial institutions and payment processors, which often leads to account closures. These challenges are compounded by the workers' intersecting identities as both GBT+ individuals and sex workers, requiring them to navigate occupational stigma and gender-based discrimination in their work.

I have shown how Foucault's ideas on discipline and resistance play out online, as experienced by Filipino GBT digital sex workers. Digital platforms function as disciplinary tools, regulating behavior through algorithmic moderation, cisheteronormative community standards, and restrictive payment systems. While these platforms offer access to national and global audiences, allowing workers to monetize content, they also impose challenges related to morality, censorship, regulation, and platform governance. Queer sex workers must strategically navigate personal sexual scripts alongside service demands and social pressures, all while facing anti-sex work and anti-GBT+ discrimination. The platforms' opaque rules and inconsistent enforcement can result in deplatforming and income loss. High-risk transactions and unfamiliar payment schemes further complicate the monetization process. With each platform policing content differently, workers feel caught in a constant, uncertain process of adaptation.

This study makes three primary contributions to understanding digital sex work. First, it documents the unique experiences of GBT digital sex workers in the Philippines, providing a necessary perspective from the Global South that challenges Western-centric understandings of platform-based sex work. Second, it demonstrates how queer sex workers negotiate their sexual role scripts against multiple, sometimes contradictory forces: platform requirements, service demands, and sociocultural pressures. Third, it highlights the complex navigation strategies employed by workers who occupy multiple marginalized positions as they establish adult content creation as a viable income source, amid both global digital regulation and local social stigma. By centering their voices, the study deepens our understanding of digital labor, queer economic strategies, and transnational desire, underscoring the urgency for more context-sensitive platform governance that accounts for the diverse realities of non-Western users.

## Notes

1. The Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 defines cybersex as "the willful engagement, maintenance, control, or operation, directly or indirectly, of any lascivious exhibition of sexual organs or sexual activity, with the aid of a computer system, for favor or consideration."
2. Although some participants disclosed occasional engagement with direct services, all participants included in the study derived the majority of their sex work income from indirect online sex work.

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