

MRP MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

IDENTITIES DO NOT BELONG IN A BOX:  
UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, NEGOTIATION &  
COMMUNICATION FOR  
ESCORTS AND ESCORT AGENCY OWNERS

CLEPYKE

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The Major Research Paper is submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Professional Communication

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**ABSTRACT**

This Master's Research Paper (MRP) seeks to better understand how both escorts and escort agency owners construct, negotiate and communicate their identities in the context of their lives. Using Erving Goffman's theories on stigmatization, identity formation, and performance theory, combined with in-depth qualitative interviews, I aim to better understand of the dynamic nature of the participants' identities. The qualitative nature of the research will explore how both human agency and social constructs impact and inform their lived experiences communicating and constructing each of their respective identities. The findings reveal that there are significant gaps in the existing literature on communication and sex work; the current literature focuses heavily on a victim-based narrative of sex work, with particular emphasis on the outdoor population of sex workers. This ignores the experiences of those who work in the peripheries of the sex industry (e.g. agency owners), as well as the escorts themselves, who have willingly chosen to engage in this line of work without coercion.

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## Introduction

Prostitution is one of the oldest professions in history and has consequently been studied extensively by academics. The vast majority of research seeks to understand why people turn to prostitution, with particular emphasis on street prostitution, which comprises roughly 10-20% of all sex workers (Alexander 1998; Cooper 1989; Hampton 1988; Rhode 1989 as cited in Lucas, p.514, 2005); the other 80% of sex-workers have, in turn, are a largely under-studied group. That 80% is comprised of different types of indoor sex workers; outdoor sex work presents an entirely different set of circumstances and experiences than their outdoor counterparts. This MRP focuses on indoor sex workers, who have been to some extent neglected in existing scholarly literature on prostitution.

Upon conducting further research, it has become evident that there is even less information about identity formation and communication in relation to those who work in escort agencies (Weitzer, 2007). Consequently, an entire group of people who may have insight into understanding identity formation and communication for sex workers (or those who work in that business) have been under-studied. Thus, there is an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the experiences of this group of people, which may help provide more insight into those who engage in indoor sex work and those who exist in the peripheries of this industry.

The current academic discourse on the subject focuses mainly on the interaction between escort and client alone, with particular emphasis on the fictional characters that escorts create with clients as a protective mechanism (Koken, 2012; Weitzer, 2007). Little attention is paid to the multiple identities that must be managed by escorts in relation to other groups, including their families, friends, and the public. In response to this lack of insight into how identity formation occurs and changes within escort agencies, the purpose of my research is to further analyze and

understand this dynamic.

### **Research Questions**

As a consequence of a thorough review of the current academic literature and the identification of gaps therein relating to escorts and those who work in the business, three research questions have emerged to guide my Master's Research Project (MRP):

1. How are the identities of those who work in escort agencies both constructed and negotiated through communication with friends, family and people external to escort agencies?
2. How do the identities they construct as a consequence of working in an escort agency, and the larger social perceptions of people who work in the sex industry, impact how they communicate with different groups of people?
3. To what extent does sex work enable aspects of identity development and what kinds of opportunities for growth and development emerge out of working in that industry?

In order to fully answer these questions, there are two interwoven components of this literature review. The first theoretical framework that informs my analysis of identity formation, and provides insight into the impact different types of interactions on said identity, will help to guide the analysis according to my particular research questions. The second component of the review focuses on what the literature says about how workers in escort agencies negotiate and manage their multiple identities. In other words, I seek to further understand how identities are negotiated in the context of the various interpersonal scenarios that people deal with on a day-to-day basis.

### Literature Review

#### **Prostitution in Current Literature**



An overwhelming amount of research has been conducted on prostitution, which itself is a stratified concept. An important distinction needs to be made between street prostitution and indoor prostitution (Weitzer, 2005, p.214). According to Monto (2004), there is a range of diversity in terms of the experiences that prostitutes have through their work, depending on what kind of prostitute they are; for instance street workers, masseuses, escorts and call girls are stratified into an occupational hierarchy, street prostitutes being at the lowest rung and call girls at the highest (Weitzer, 2005, p.214).<sup>1</sup> Where the literature fails however, is in acknowledging a deeper understanding of identity negotiation and formation for those who work in the escort industry, including those who work in the peripheries (i.e., escort agency owners). Communication is also not a focus in the current academic literature on this subject. The closest that the literature comes to discussing communication is through the legal narrative and understanding how street based sex workers solicit clients. The discussion about the interpersonal aspects of communication in the personal lives of sex workers, and those who work in the peripheries, is largely unexplored.

### **Sex-Negative Culture of North America**

#### *Coercion and Marginalization*

The majority of literature on sex-work focuses on those who work on the streets and are generally considered to be involved in a high-risk, exploitative lifestyle (Weitzer, 2007). This ignores other groups of people who engage in sex work in the peripheries of the sex industry, and those whose experiences are not necessarily a result of an exploitative relationship or coercion. There seems to exist a stark dichotomy in academic literature where either the sex worker is being forced to engage in prostitution or the sex worker willingly engages in sex

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<sup>1</sup> Further stratification exists within each level of prostitution, though exploration into these concepts is beyond the scope of this MRP.

work, but are characterized as sexual deviants; the current narratives focus on either victimization or liberation (Koken, 2012). Part of the reason for this dichotomy is the sex-negative culture that exists in North America, which has evolved over centuries of religious belief that has ingrained the notion that "...sex is inherently sinful" (Rubin, 1984, p. 199) and that one's sexual behaviour determines one's level of virtue (p.199). According to Rubin (1984) however, these beliefs have evolved to such a point that they no longer require religion to sustain them because they have become ingrained into the collective moral minds of North American people.

Sex negativity, feminist critiques of prostitution, and male domination have all contributed to gaps in the literature when it comes to understanding identity formation as it relates to those who work in escort agencies or as escorts. Currently, radical feminists frame sex work as an exclusively violent and exploitative relationship where women are being labeled as "prostituted women" or "survivors", and according to Weitzer (2005), these terms "clearly indicate that prostitution is something done to women, not something that can be chosen, and 'survivor' implies someone who has escaped a harrowing ordeal, which in turn denies the worker's agency (p.213). In other words, using the term "prostituted" as a verb removes the component of free will or choice from the act, therefore insisting that under no circumstances can entering prostitution be of one's own volition; this serves as a mechanism for these narratives to continue to permeate the boundaries into pop culture and feed into the already skewed perceptions that exist about sex work. Indoor sex workers, along with those in the peripheries, are so often bunched in with the existing exploitative narratives about prostitution in the common culture, and they face "stigma and condemnation from the wider society" (Weitzer, 2007, p.147).

It seems that any discussions about sexual practices that are outside of the normative, heterosexual standards are generally avoided in most arenas (public or academic) unless they relate to narratives about those who are being exploited or marginalized, as evidenced by the overwhelming amount of literature on the least common form of prostitution (Weitzer, 2005). This is problematic because it perpetuates a negative societal value judgment, i.e., those who work in the sex-industry (in any capacity) are less virtuous because they have *elected* to engage in such deviant sexual behaviour (Katz, 1979). These notions about deviance can be critically interrogated through literature on Goffman's ideas about social identity and stigma.

#### *Contemporary Society and Sex-Work Stigmatization*

Since there is such a narrow focus in both academic literature and the popular discourse about street prostitution, as well as the exploitative nature of sex work, society has adopted much of the same radical feminist and conservative perspectives regarding sex work. Much of the existing literature and public opinions have delegitimized sex work by suggesting that it does not qualify as labour because inherently, it is nefarious (Weitzer & Ditmore, 2009, pp. 332-336). Prostitution is viewed as "...sexual deviance, as a cause of moral decay, and as a threat to marriage because it breaks the link between sex, love, and reproduction" (2009, p. 332). These beliefs in turn feed into the idea that those involved in the peripheries of sex work (i.e., escort agency owners/managers, brothel owners, etc.) are the oppressors who seek to exercise power over individuals in vulnerable positions, when this is in fact not always the case.

According to Weitzer & Ditmore (2009), these narratives are known as "moral crusades" and are often successful insofar as they have the ability to influence public opinion, governmental policies, and other forms of social cohesion (p.339); and "if the social problem identified by activists is accepted by the authorities as a bona fide problem,

the crusade may gradually become institutionalized in state policy” (p. 339). It is difficult to counteract this depiction of peripheral sex-industry workers because there is virtually no literature on escort agency owners, pimps, brothel owners and so on (Albert, 2001; Brents and Hausbeck, 2001; Decker, 1979; Hausbeck and Brents, 2000; Heyl, 1977; Milner and Milner, 1972; as cited in Weitzer, 2005). Without further research and advocacy, it stands to reason that society will continue to maintain many of its existing beliefs about sex industry workers as a whole.

It is interesting to note that a gap in the literature with respect to the social stigma of working in an escort agency exists insofar as none of the current literature acknowledges people who work in the sex industry but not necessarily as a sex worker. In a typical escort agency there are escorts, owners, managers, drivers, and receptionists who work in the sex industry, all of whom do not necessarily engage in sex work. Nowhere in the research I have conducted has there been any mention of those people and their experiences with identity negotiation and formation, which may be a valuable resource in the already limited discussion on the subject.

### **Erving Goffman**

Goffman’s legacy is rooted in the sociological implications of human interaction and behaviour. His body of work is broad and nuanced with respect to his musings regarding human interaction; his concepts of stigma and the spoiled identity, are in my opinion, the most relevant lens through which the current literature on sex work and identity construction can be understood. One might feel that the more appropriate choice to understand how power dynamics influence identity negotiation in this context would be through the works of Foucault, who defines power not as the presence of a specific thing or mechanism, but rather the absence of that thing. He posits that in order to even recognize that power exists, one must

“...use resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used” (Foucault, 1982, p. 780).

Resistance is the mechanism through which power relations can be teased out since such relations are not visible in common interactions. The main drawback of Foucault's framework is that it focuses on the effects of power on the individual and neglects the agency of the individual. Foucault's position focuses heavily on macro-level agency and dynamic.

Goffman's approach highlights the agency of the individual and how to use communication strategically to negotiate identity; Foucault's argument ignores the important aspect of human agency in the larger context of society.

Goffman examines social stigma in his work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963b; as cited in Smith 2006). He argues that three concepts of identity exist: Social identity, which refers to “the everyday ways persons are identified and categorized”; personal identity, which “...marks out the person as distinct from all others”; and felt identity, which refers to “...the feelings that a person has about their identity” (Smith, 2006, p. 85), all of which are closely tied to how stigmas are developed. Stigmas come to exist when there is a disjunction between the “...assumptions we make on the basis of first appearances” (social identity), and the “...category and attributes that experience proves a person to possess” (actual/felt identity)(p.85).

For people who work as escorts or in the sex industry, it is difficult to manage the different identities one has as a part of everyday life. The identity escorts have at work differs from the one at home, or the one they have when interacting with people who are not in the industry. It seems likely that given the multiple arenas in which these people must manage their identities, there exists an opportunity for variations between their social and felt

identities.

Inconsistency between the social, felt and personal identities' alone is not enough to cause stigma, however. In order for stigma to truly exist, the inconsistency must have a negative influence on one's social standing instead of elevating it (Goffman; as cited in Smith, 2006, p.86). In the context of a sex-negative North American society, it is reasonable to assume that, should a person find out that someone is engaging in voluntary, un-coerced sex work, or meet someone working in an industry that supports this, they would very likely think less of that person, given the reality of the current societal views about sex. The social stigmas attached to voluntary forms of prostitution are particularly salient and damaging for those labeled as prostitutes or sexual deviants (Koken, 2012).

While a woman who has a casual one night stand may be judged harshly by some, women who exchange sex for money are viewed by most as having violated one of the most powerful taboos in western culture. The label 'prostitute' carries with it a powerful stigma, although the bearer may be viewed as deserving of 'help' and kindness if the woman has been forced into prostitution (Rubin 1992; as cited in Koken 2012).

Goffman acknowledges that there are ways for stigmas to be managed; in the context of those who work in escort agencies it is very common to engage in stigma management, which,

...often takes the form of 'information management' techniques such as 'passing', (hiding one's stigma in order to 'pass' as a non-stigmatized person); or 'covering', a strategy characterized by selective disclosure to trusted confidantes or family members (Koken, p.211, 2012).

In order to protect themselves and cope with issues of identity, techniques like information management and passing are used to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of

being labeled a prostitute or sexual deviant. I take issue, however, with the semantics of the terms “covering” and “passing” as those terms carry a negative connotation, as if using such techniques implies that something nefarious is being hidden and that perhaps using these techniques creates an inauthentic relationship between the performer and the audience; this may not always be the case. Using these tools is simply a mechanism through which the participants mitigate the potentially negative or hurtful aspects of revealing their line of work to the people they love.

Much of the qualitative research conducted in this area has shown that information management is essential to the both the emotional and financial survival of these people. Information management may be understood as an ordinary element of identity formation and is not indicative of a disingenuous or unstable identity. In her dissertation on escorts transitioning out of sex work, Law (2011) showed that many of her participants spoke about needing to fill in the gaps of their employment history, hiding their work from their loved ones, hiding their real life from clients, and multiple other instances of information management. In Koken’s (2012) study, one of her participants spoke about not wanting to buy a fur coat because, as a young African American woman, it would be too obvious and people would know she was a working girl (p.216); similar to Law’s study, participants in Koken’s study also expressed concerns with hiding their employment history when trying to get a “straight” job (p.217). Some of the literature shows that sex workers create an entirely new identity as a coping mechanism to protect themselves from the consequences of the emotional labour that is sex work (Abel, 2011; Vanwesenbeeck, 2005). This identity can be used to shield them from the stigmatized role of “whores”.

In several studies, patterns emerged where many of the participants were emphatic about distancing their “whore” identity from who they are in everyday life (Koken 2012; Law 2011; Sanders 2005; Scambler 2007), and one study in particular framed this as a business strategy (Sanders, 2005, p. 323). Many of the women in this study explained that they create a fictitious persona for work through a life story that is entirely fabricated (p.328). According to Sanders (2005), a major reason that sex workers adopt this alternate identity is to protect themselves from client stalkers, as well as to sell the fantasy and keep their clients coming back. However, the other important reason is to protect their cover, meaning that many of their family and friends are not aware of their employment circumstances and these aliases prevent clients from being able to potentially expose them to their families (p.329).

### **Fluid Identities**

The existing literature on identity implies that identity is a static construct, when it is in fact dynamic. Identities are not only dynamic, they are also fluid, meaning that for people there are many parts of the self. Identities are not one-dimensional and people adapt them depending on their circumstance and with whom they are interacting (Stimmel 1955; as cited in Sanders, 2005). The concept of altering identities is not exclusive to people who engage in sex work, everyone does it depending on the situation. Research also shows that other forms of identity are often fleshed out as a result of engaging in sex work. Law (2011) found that many sex workers have experienced benefits as a result of engaging in this type of work (i.e., voluntary), particularly with respect to their self-esteem, confidence, body image, and sexuality (p.100). Another participant in the same study described how her job as an escort helped her to negotiate her body image and feel more comfortable “in her own skin”; she found her clients preferred her “unconventional” look as she was a size 12 and her clients kept coming back



(p.98). Other participants described how their work helped them to expand their sexual identities in the sense that became more open to trying certain sexual practices or labeling themselves in a less exclusive manner (e.g., bi-curious instead of bisexual or strictly lesbian) (p.98). These labels are important because they all tie into one's larger identity; sexual identity is as relevant as any other form of identity and for many people who engage in sex work this is particularly evident.

Another important issue that arose in the literature is that many of the people who are involved in this industry never truly escape their identity as a sex worker because it often follows them even if they retire or transition out of the industry. This is arguably what occurs when Goffman's ideas of self and social identity become blurred (social identity being how others perceive someone and self-identity being how one perceives one's self). For instance, when escorts transition out of sex work into more conventional lines of work and people are aware of their former employment, their social identity, despite the fact that they may no longer be a sex worker may be misaligned with their self-identity as a non-sex worker (Law, 2011, p. 100). This may not be the case in every situation however; since identity is a fluid concept, the "sex- worker" or peripheral sex-industry worker identity may not be at the forefront of how one chooses to identify, or rather, it does not outweigh the other more central components of one's multi-faceted identity.

### **Goffman: Frame Analysis, Rhetoric and Normalization**

Though Goffman's work is useful in understanding stigma and identities, it is not sufficient to effectively analyze or understand the negotiation piece of this research. For this it is necessary to turn to Goffman's discussions regarding frame analysis and rhetoric. Ordinary conversation, Goffman believes, is closely tied to identity formation in that regular talk is

performative, meaning that it "...conveys commitment to action, or promises, or assent, dissent, caution and much else" (Burns, 1991, p. 303). All forms of talk have a purpose, each of which are meant to incite engagement and participation from the listener (p.304). By engaging in talk, the audience (i.e., the listener) is obliged to use empathy and to experience the story with the speaker because the audience is assumed to be ignorant of the experience of the narrator (p.304). For Goffman, this is a part of the "performances" that human beings play in their everyday lives, which are also an integral part of our identities. This ties in directly with the very nature of qualitative research and more specifically with trying to better understand how identities are both constructed and negotiated by people who work either as sex workers or in the peripheries of the sex industry.

These performances also serve another purpose in the day-to-day lives of human beings, which is to help normalize social relationships and cohesion. Goffman posits that social and personal identities should have some sort of harmony in the interactions those people have and the way that they behave (Burns, 1991, p. 90); in other words "acting out social relationships in public has to be done in conformity with the rules of public order" (p.90). This suggests that social interaction must have some impact on one's identity because everyone must still be able to function in contemporary society to some degree or another. He also argues that people use rhetoric to mitigate "possible damage to the fabric of society" (p.92). For Goffman,

The very fact that apologies, accounts, and pleas may be directed to chance acquaintances or strangers, or even broadcast to any one within sight or hearing, must mean that we are conscious of their ultimate function. In other words, we feel compelled to express regrets, excuses, requests so as to 'keep station' in society, rescue our social identity or self-

respect from possible danger, or preserve the regard of other people (p.92-93).

When contextualized within the realm of sex-work, it stands to reason that those who work in this industry recognize that their position in society, based on their social identity, is in danger as a direct result of the larger negative societal views on the industry. This puts sex workers and those in the peripheries in a unique position where they are required to fight harder to hold on to their position in society through the normalization of sex work. This normalization can only truly occur from the bottom up, meaning that each individual interaction a sex worker has with a non-sex worker serves as an opportunity to educate them about the industry and take back some of the power that they lose by virtue of being a sex worker.

### Methods

This MRP uses mainly a phenomenological approach in that the goal is to understand how the experiences of each participant have impacted their identity formation throughout their lives; phenomenology is mainly concerned with “...understanding the past from the participant’s perspective” (Harper, 2011, p. 87). This approach complements the qualitative nature of this project in that the purpose of qualitative research is to “...explore meaning and perceptions to gain a better understanding and/or generate hypotheses” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p.314). The goal of conducting this research is to tease out the experiences and thoughts of the participants and analyze them against the current backdrop of the existing literature on communication and identity negotiation.

#### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews (SSI’s) are the most commonly used form of qualitative research (Harper, 2011); for the purposes of this MRP, individual SSI’s offered the best opportunity to ensure that a rich and descriptive account of experiences emerged from the

dialogue. Using this method, the participants were able to provide their own interpretation of their experiences in their own voices (Bryman et.al, p.166, 2012). The focus of the interviews was to speak with them about the identities they construct as a consequence of working in an escort agency or as an escort. The main goal of this research is to draw on existing theory (Goffman et. al) to explain how identities are constructed and negotiated in this particular context (Bryman et.al, 2012).

In several similar studies on identity formation and prostitution, in-depth, SSIs were employed because they provided an opportunity for those in the sex-work industry to give a meaningful account of their experiences in a confidential setting (Rice & Ezzy, 2001; as cited in Abel, 2011, p.179). These studies yielded highly detailed and candid discussions from the participants about the experiences they had as sex workers, and this is the key to being able to analyze and draw conclusions from the data. Many of these studies conducted interviews with upwards of 30 participants, which gave them the opportunity to collect a vast amount of data to analyze. Given the time and scope limitations of this project, I chose to conduct only three interviews for several reasons, the first of which is the labour-intensive piece of qualitative interviews, i.e., transcription. Each interview lasted anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes in duration, and generally speaking for each hour of interview data, it takes approximately 4-6 hours of transcription time (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), making this task time consuming and resource heavy. The concern here was that conducting too many interviews would yield an incredible amount of data that was beyond the narrow scope of this project, making it difficult to remain concise and clear in the analysis section. Similar qualitative MRPs conducted in the past have used between three and six interviews in order to better understand the experiences of particular groups of people (Kohistani, 2012; Rahman, 2004). This style of analysis does not

require a large sample because this MRP is not seeking to make broad claims about how all sex workers feel, but rather, it seeks to understand the nuanced experiences of a small cross-section of people that may serve as a pilot study for a broader project in the future. Also, the style of analysis, quality of interviews and in-depth discussion and critique of the interviews is conducted through a theoretical framework rather than attempting to pool quantitative data and search for key words.

### *Participants*

Finding participants was fairly simple as I have a personal connection with the escort industry and I used my existing relationships to recruit; fortunately, I had the contact information for all of the participants I used in this study. I received ethics approval on April 20, 2015 after one round of heavy revisions. One of the major concerns with qualitative interview research is that rapport and trust must be built quickly between the researcher and interviewee to provide a safe space for disclosure (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 316). Since I had a pre-existing relationship with each of my participants (some more intimate than others), developing trust and rapport presented less of a concern during my interviews. In addition to these techniques, my participants were informed that every precaution would be taken to keep their identities and confidentiality protected. Some of these precautions included: keeping data on an external thumb drive that was locked in a safe place when not in use; all interviews would be destroyed (voice recordings and transcriptions) upon completed submission of this MRP in late August 2015, and providing each of them with a comprehensive list of community resource contacts in the event they were required.

It is interesting to note that all three of the participants actually expressed that they did not wish for their identities to be concealed, as they are neither ashamed nor embarrassed about who they are as people or about their current/previous work in the industry. Upon further

consultation with the Research Ethics Board (REB), my MRP supervisor and personal reflection, I have chosen to keep the identities of my participants confidential with considerable regret<sup>2</sup>.

Since my REB submission to conduct this research is protected by law, should anything happen legally in the future, I am not obliged to disclose the names of any of my participants, and their safety both now and in the future is tantamount. After receiving ethics approval, each participant was either phoned, emailed, or visited in person to discuss the project and they received a copy of the informed consent guide if they were interested in proceeding (Appendix A). Each interview was conducted either in person or via Skype and was approximately one hour in length. The process of transcribing occurred in a private space using headphones, which helped to mitigate any risk of someone hearing the interviews. For interviews conducted on Skype, the data was collected using a recording app called “Skype Call Recorder” and loose notes were taken during each interview to assist during the writing process. The Skype interviews took place in my home and the face-to-face interviews took place in a private room selected by the participants in order avoid any possibility of someone overhearing the content of our interviews. Bryman et al. (2012) cautions researchers about conducting interviews in very public places because of the potential for background distractions; fortunately all of my participants opted to conduct the interviews in private places making the process easier to manage.

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<sup>22</sup> Currently in Canada there is little information or precedence set regarding the protections of academic research; however in the case of the Vancouver Regional Coroner’s inquest, a provincial precedence was set in a case addressing researcher-participant confidentiality. Russel Ogden of Simon Fraser University was protected from being compelled to disclose the confidential details of his research because it violated the guarantee of confidentiality he provided to his participants (Ogden v Simon Fraser University, 1998). Case law shows that people cannot waive their legal rights prior to a crime happening (R v. Parent, 2013); should anything happen in the future where one of my participants is charged with some type of crime relating to their work in this industry and because this MRP is of public record, anything they say can be used against them in a court of law, opening them up to further scrutiny and in turn myself.

*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation in this MRP are as follows:

1. Inclusion: Participants can be male, female, or transgender and must have worked in an escort agency for a minimum of one year at any point in their lives, OR may be (or have been) either an escort or escort agency owner.
2. Exclusion: Participants who have worked less than one year in an escort agency or who have worked for less than one year as an independent escort and participants under 18 years of age.

*Interviews*

The actual interviews began in late May 2015 and continued into late June. Each participant was fully willing to be interviewed for this project, however securing a time and date to have the actual interview was an issue with two of the three participants. In terms of conducting the actual interviews, an interview guide (Appendix B) was created to help guide the conversation with the participants. Each of the interview questions was purposely designed to be open ended, to allow the participant to expand in as much or as little detail as possible to avoid leading the participant into answering in a specific way. Since qualitative research is iterative, it is also important for each question to be probing, but flexible enough to adapt since the experiences of each participant will vary depending on their circumstance (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p.316). Each question was structured to help build rapport with the participant first and slowly bridge into the more exploratory and personal questions regarding identity. All of the questions relate to concepts of identity formation and negotiation and the aim was to ensure that they were specific enough to glean information from, but not so specific that the participants have difficulty answering them. The questions were only meant to be a guide and

were open to revision depending on what the participants said during their interviews.

### *Code Book*

Please see Appendix C for a detailed codebook used to identify themes between participants.

### *Participant Profiles*

#### Jade

Jade is a transsexual woman of European descent in her fifties. She identifies sexually as someone who “loves people”, although did not identify using a specific marker (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, pansexual etc.). She worked as an independent escort starting in the early 90’s and, although she is currently retired, she will occasional take clients if she so chooses. She has several entrepreneurial endeavors on the go, works in the nightclub industry and has no children.

#### Lyon

Lyon is a black male of West-Indian descent in his mid-fifties. He identifies as heterosexual, is in a long-term relationship with a woman with whom he shares two children. He entered into the escort business in the very early 80s by way of a female friend he knew who worked as an escort at the time. He opened up his own escort agency around this time and was highly successful for the larger part of his 25 year tenure as an owner. He has worked in every position outside of being an escort and has been responsible for marketing, management, hiring, website development, business development, and a host of other positions. He left the business in the latter part of the 2000s for a variety of reasons and has since been working on a number of different ventures.

#### Oliver

Oliver is a Caucasian male in his late 30s who is not a fan of labels when it comes to his



sexual preferences. For the purposes of this interview he agreed to be identified as a bisexual man, with a stronger preference for men. He began working as an independent Professional Dominant (ProDom) male independent escort in the 90's and eventually worked his way up to Master ProDom throughout the years. Oliver is currently retired from his work as an escort, although he also will occasionally take a client if he has the time. He is single and has no children.

### Analysis

#### **Identities**

##### *Social*

One of the most prevalent themes in the interview data was that people who work in the sex industry are villainized in society. All of the participants were aware of the existing perceptions and stigmas about those who work in this industry and the narratives that continue to be told from the perspective of “all sex workers”, when in reality those narratives are the lived experience of a smaller number of sex workers. What is interesting with respect to my participants is that their social identities seem to have little to no impact on their personal or felt identities. Since most sex-workers do not work outdoors, it is more difficult for a layperson to tease out who is or is not a part of the sex-industry. This is considered a concealable-stigmatized identity, meaning that it “can be kept hidden from others but carries with it social devaluation” (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; as cited in Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). In the context of Goffman, a stigmatized identity is that which carries “a mark of failure or shame, tainting the self in the eyes of others” (Goffman, 1963; as cited in Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Lyon speaks about concealable stigmatized identity as someone who has worked in this industry and how that has impacted him throughout his life.

It's [working in the business] prevented me from being as proud of my

accomplishments as I could have been. It's also prevented me from getting the praise from people I would have loved to have been praised by for the things that were accomplished and that does affect you. It lessens your outward perception of your accomplishments and minimizes your inward. I feel I've always been confident enough to negate any of those negative things because at the end of the experience certain things happened that has affected my attitude socially or towards society and my role within society. It's changed me there...(para. 46, 2015).

Lyon alludes to the idea that living with this concealable stigmatized identity has come with a certain level of social devaluation. This is known as "associative stigmatized identity" because Lyon is so closely connected to the stigmatized group, i.e., sex-workers (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). He feels that his work in this business has prevented him from being as outwardly successful and praised, as he perhaps would have been if he were in a different profession.

Oliver also discussed his social identity in terms of his ability to conceal his sex work, perhaps not intentionally but rather serendipitously; he has been fortunate enough to never work in a place that required him to truly hide any real part of who he was. He also felt that living and working in a large and diverse city and consistently working with other people in similar professions has insulated him from some of the potential negative effects of stigmatization (Oliver, 2015, para. 40). This plays into Goffman's theory on passing in that Oliver was able to appear to society as a non-stigmatized person because of his ability to work in traditional places while still engaging in sex work. Oliver also spoke very candidly about his sexual identity on several occasions during his interview. This is very relevant to the social aspect of identity because he acknowledged that the outside world identifies him as a "gay male", but he dislikes

labels and does not personally identify in that way.

I don't like the [gay] label, but as I got older... when I first came out I was adamant that I didn't like labels, including bi-sexual, but then for practicality purposes, it takes too long to try and explain to people. Its not authentic for me to say I'm bisexual, because that suggests that you're right in the middle and it doesn't have to be. You can be totally bisexual or only a little bit, so I probably be bisexual if I was pushed against a wall and forced; but because I have so little sex with women and I have so much sex with men, cause I've always been fairly promiscuous, the gay-male label gets put on me (Oliver, para. 45, 2015).

Oliver recognizes society's need for cohesion and order insofar as needing to understand what his sexual label is. This speaks to Goffman's idea that the social and personal identities must have harmony and Oliver is willing to maintain the status quo with respect to his sexual identity to maintain that order. He recognizes that it is easier to yield to the given social label than it is to take the time to explain his feelings about his personal identity to someone, even if yielding means simply not correcting the person. This discussion about sexuality under the code of social identity is important because it provides a basis for an exploration of the personal and felt identities of each participant in this study, demonstrating that identity is fluid, and that each type of identity is somehow tied in with the other in a complex web.

### *Personal*

Personal identity is what makes one person unique from another, which sometimes includes distinct life experiences (Smith, 2006, p. 86). What is unique about the concept of personal identity is that one can manage parts of it in the sense that they can determine what information they choose to disclose. Goffman argues that "to disclose information about a

stigma is to disclose a potentially damaging aspect of one's personal identity. There will be many circumstances, therefore, where the discreditable will guard their personal identity by strategic management of information about self" (p.86). People are able to use selective disclosure and risk management techniques to protect their personal identity in different scenarios. In the cases of my participants, it is evident that there are certain aspects of their personal identity that are visible and therefore much harder to conceal. However, each of them appears to have found a way to mitigate any potential stigma that may have arisen at one point or another by leveraging their own control over situational factors and their own personal feelings about who they are as people.

For instance, all of the participants expressed on multiple occasions that they are in no way ashamed of who they are as people, nor are they ashamed of the work they have done in the business. This is important because it may help them to offset any potential stigma they may have or have yet to face as a result of their involvement in the escort world. They could use information management techniques provide them to gain an opportunity to resist potential stigmatizers that take issue with their line of work or with who they are. An important thing to note is that none of the participants seemed to place "sex worker" or "peripheral sex worker" at the forefront of their personal identities. This is not to say that it played no role, but it seemed that there were more prevalent personal identifiers that they chose to address during our interviews.

Oliver spoke candidly about how when he is in heteronormative social situations and communicating with people outside of the sex-industry, he feels like a deviant, and that people will perceive him in a very particular light because he was a sex worker for so long (Oliver, 2015). Oliver feels as though his perceived social identity is misaligned with his personal

identity. This is an example of the salience of stigmatized identities, and in the case of Oliver, Goffman would argue "...the identity may be chronically accessible and occupy their thoughts quite often. To the extent that people are frequently thinking about the concealed identity, the stigma is a more important and salient part of their lives" (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

Interestingly, Oliver points out that he feels very positive about what he does and who he is, but when he is thrust into more traditional interactions and social situations, he is uncomfortable. He recognizes that his identity as a sex-worker has the potential to impact his perceived (social) identity in certain situations, so he manages his interactions and disclosure of his previous work on a case-by case basis.

For Lyon and Jade however, their experiences with their personal identity are closely tied in with their visible traits. Lyon speaks about his experience as a man of West Indian descent and the impact it had on leading him to be comfortable with who he was during a time when there were few people of colour in the city that he lived in.

I was more confident in who we were [West Indian men] in our race and in our pride, and because of that it allowed good and bad things to happen to me. The good things were that people recognized my confidence and they encouraged me because I was confident. The bad thing was that some people resented the fact that I was proud of who I was and my colour, and it was not my place to be so. As time went on during the 70s the black identity began to arise and we became more aware that being black wasn't a bad thing; as a matter of fact it became quite a good thing socially because a number of the Caucasian people began to identify with us and began to feel important because of that (Lyon,2015).

He goes on to describe the impact that being a person of colour had on his ability to work in this business successfully and how his early experiences acted as an insulator insofar as they helped

him to maintain a sense of self pride throughout his life; this sense of pride helped to offset some of the negative aspects of working in the escort industry.

For Jade, her experience was similar in the sense that she is a trans woman and that is an integral part of her personal identity, although she does not allow people to use that against her in a negative way.

I don't hide that I'm trans- I don't wear a label that I'm trans but if anybody ever said 'hey you're trans, or hey look at that person' or yell out something like 'that's a guy' and people are like that because they feel they have the power and you have to take that power away from them. And the way you do that when you're a trans woman and somebody says that is you say 'No I'm sorry, I'm a trans woman not a man, but thank you for noticing me' and I would just walk on. That way you've taken away their power because you're not afraid of them and you're owning up to who you are and what you are (Jade, 2015).

Jade makes it clear that being trans is simply a part of who she is, which is the same for any cis-gendered person. However, because she is trans, it is more likely that she will encounter people who perceive her personal identity as an issue or threat. These disjunctions between her personal identity as a trans woman and her social identity as a trans woman and a sex worker are both opportunities for stigma to develop because of the assumptions lay-persons might make on first appearance (Smith, 2006, p. 85).

She offsets these experiences by making sure to not allow anyone to define her personal identity on her behalf; instead she defines it for them. She prevents the opportunity for stigma to develop by taking control when people voice their own assumptions about her based on appearance and in turn, insulates her against those negative interactions. This technique still

allows for inconsistency between her personal and social identities, but prevents that inconsistency from having a negative influence on her; negative influence for Goffman is the key to stigma development (Smith, 2006, p.85), and in Jade's case, she tries to prevent the negative influence from every happening, in turn preventing (or at the very least offsetting) the impact of the stigma. It is important to note the difference between the personal and felt identities of Oliver in contrast with Jade and Lyon, the latter being a West Indian man and the former being a trans woman; their personal identities also happen to be visible, which is important because neither of them can divorce themselves from these visible markers, they are part of who they are. Felt identities refer specifically to how one *feels* about their identity (Smith, 2006, p. 85), and personal identities include what marks out a person distinct from all others, which can be both explicit or implicit.

In the case of Lyon and Jade, their respective physical identities are those distinct markers, which play a role in how they manage the many components of their personal identities. This is not to suggest however that their personal and felt identities have no overlap; generally speaking, people prefer clearly defined categories, and the case of identities is no different. For both Jade and Lyon both their felt and personal identities exist together on a continuum.

### *Felt*

The felt identity piece is more difficult to tease out because it refers specifically to how one feels about one's own identity, which is not always laid out in clear terms. In the case of Lyon, Jade and Oliver, each of them at some point discussed how they feel or felt about their identities during different parts of their lives. However, trying to articulate this is challenging because again, identities exist on a continuum. Identities bleed into one another because they are fluid; imagine identities as a horizontal Venn diagram and each of the circles (identities)

intersect with one another in a meaningful way throughout every interaction in one's life. Since the process of identity development is fluid, it is important to keep in mind that depending on the circumstance, different parts of one's identity are more salient than others depending on the time, circumstance, and people with whom one is interacting. When asked about how they felt about their personal identities during the interviews, each participant chose to discuss a part of their identities that was different than the other, but no less important.

For Oliver, he chose to discuss how working in the industry has helped to inform his sexual identity both within the context of his work and more generally as a person. He explained that he discovered that he is good at S & M (Sadism and Masochism) through sex work and that he is both comfortable with it and does it well. His work as a ProDom male escort helped him to both realize, and be comfortable with this aspect of his sexual identity, which arguably lives under the category of "felt identity". This is consistent with the experiences of participants in Law (2011) who found that sex-work helped them to expand their sexual horizons and become more receptive to new sexual experiences (p.98). In Oliver's experience, this is precisely what happened; learning that he is comfortable with S & M also allowed him to develop a niche business as an escort, which ended up being very lucrative for him.

For Lyon, his felt identity is intertwined with his personal identity very closely. He identifies as a black man and his experiences as that black man have influenced how he felt, and still feels, about himself to this day. Often throughout his interview he spoke about his self-confidence and how it was informed by his experiences as a black man, as an entrepreneur in the escort industry, through his own constructed social identity within the escort industry, and to some degree by the social identity placed on him by other people. Lyon also explained



that he felt that his experiences working in the escort industry have prevented him socially from being able to receive praise in the same way that someone who worked in a more conventional line of work may experience. In Law (2011) one of the participants had a similar experience with her social identity as an African-American woman, and she felt that spending her money on elaborate purchases (e.g., fur coats) would be a tell that she was a working girl (p.216). Her ethnicity impacted her ability to information manage and also show off her social status with nice purchases and receive praise because she was concerned her sex-work identity would be revealed and in turn stigmatize her, which is similar to Lyon's struggles with working in the industry.

There is some regularity that can be observed with respect to the dynamics of identity negotiation; other aspects of social identity inform the experience of working in the sex-industry. Although identities are fluid, their development is not a consequence of chance; for instance, race and sexuality play into the structure of fluid identity in the context of these participants. Some people work through the existing structures that are in place that influence identity, while others work against said structures to achieve the same goal. The interview data suggests that separating one type of identity from another is near impossible because each of them matters in their own way. Jade speaks frequently about her lifelong struggle with identity before she decided to transition to female and how uncomfortable she felt from childhood into her adult life when she was living as male. Understanding the misalignment between her felt identity and her socially obligatory identity that insists that males behave in a specific way and females in another is important in understanding the larger picture of her story and how working as an escort helped her accept who she would eventually become.

I always had this attachment to thinking and feeling like a little girl even since I was very

young and then I had to adapt and start living and feeling comfortable as a male. It was never comfortable, it was always uncomfortable so any chance I got to get into drag, even though it was uncomfortable being in drag because drag is just over the top - you know the wigs, the false eyelashes and that (2015, para. 32).

In order to give some context to this excerpt it is important to note that Jade began working on the streets. Her entry into street prostitution was, according to her, in no way exploitative or coercive. She was working as a male stripper and doing drag on the weekends and she lived in an area of the city that was “tranny-hooker central” (Jade, 2015). She came home one night in full drag when she was still living as male and was approached by a man who was looking to “have fun” after getting out of her cab. She saw an opportunity to make some money and took it, and thereafter began working when she felt like it. In the above excerpt she is explaining that when she was living as male, dressing in drag helped her to reconnect with that “little girl” she had learned to suppress as a child despite the discomfort that came with dressing as a woman. Eventually, she began toning down the full drag into a more realistic version of what women wore and eventually she began to realize that dressing in drag was not what she wanted either. She explains that,

I felt at the time that I was a gay man dressed in drag and then it went from there to a gay man dressed as a girl and it went from there remember the little girl years ago where I felt really comfortable in my skin. At that point I’m kind of going I’m comfortable like this- I’m really happy- I mean you can see even when I’m talking about my past experience the excitement- like oh my god this is me and it wasn’t just the sex work, it was being the woman that I always felt I should be and I never thought that woman would be a prostitute, but whatever, it felt real to me (Jade, 2015, para. 30).

She then goes on to explain that at the time, her social identity as a “gay man” was misaligned with her felt identity, which for her was not a gay man and her work as an escort helped her to understand and accept this as she progressed in her life. Jade was forced as a young girl, and later as a young man, to ascribe to the social roles, which are “...performances constrained by situational proprieties and ‘rules’ of the interaction order (Smith, 2006, p. 366). In other words, Jade was obliged to adhere to the social gender norms constructed for “boys” and “girls”, despite her inherent desire to behave “like a girl”. Here it is clear that identity negotiation is further compounded by the social confines of gender-based identities, which creates the opportunity for inconsistency between specific identities and an opportunity for stigma to develop as a result. It is evident that teasing out the felt identity for Jade was a challenging process and the obligatory social identities, and to some degree her personal and previous felt identities, all played an important role in helping her to fully develop her current felt identity.

### **Benefits of Sex-Work**

Much of the existing literature on indoor sex work points to the conclusion that people enter this industry because of the benefits (Law, 2011). Some of these benefits include financial, self-esteem, psychological and emotional development, and business development. This stands in direct opposition to the existing narratives of sex work, particularly the radical feminist viewpoints that there are no benefits to sex work because anyone willfully engaging in it is being coerced or “prostituted” and those in peripheral roles are exploiters (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The narrative of exploitation suggests that there are no benefits to sex work; my interview data suggests that otherwise in the case of my participants, and the participants of countless other studies (Law, 2011; Weitzer, 2005; Weitzer, 2007; Koken, 2012). The research

of this MRP is consistent with the literature that suggests that there are countless benefits that come with engaging in the sex industry; this is not to suggest, however, that this is a reflection of the experiences of all sex workers.

### *The A-ha Moments*

What is most interesting about this study is that two of the three participants actually used the term “a-ha” to explain how they came to understand that there was some value in working in the sex-industry. Jade, Oliver and Lyon all describe the specific incidents that led them to realize that the traditional hierarchy of everyday jobs was not for them, and how they realized that working in the industry would be far more lucrative than continuing to work for someone else. This is consistent with the research of Weitzer (2007), which found that indoor sex-workers drift into the business less out of a need to survive, but rather, they recognize the opportunity for “financial-independence and upward mobility” (p. 144). All three of the participants in this study, one of whom did not actually engage in escorting, recognized that the opportunity for financial gain was ripe in the sex industry, and used it to their advantage. This is important because each participant focused on different aspects of the industry that helped him or her to both enter the business, and opportunistically advance depending on their circumstance. Lyon disclosed that in his early 20s he realized he was no longer interested in working in a controlled work environment, and he decided he did not want to work for anyone anymore, so he started a number of different companies before he was introduced into the sex industry, which will be discussed in further detail in other sections. Once Lyon began the business, which was in the pre-internet era, he began to consider how he could further his financial gain and in doing so, had his “a-ha” moment.

I had an a-ha moment that happened when I was - well I was in the washroom and I

picked up the newspaper and the only thing available was the [redacted] Examiner and in the back was a huge section with all these 1-800 numbers where you could get dates and all these women were available and they were... so I phoned the number and the guy is saying “you got to pay by the minute and then you can talk to these people” and I’m saying well this is crazy! Why can’t you just give me the girl’s number and I’ll talk to her in person. Then I thought to myself my god, there’s so many people using this stuff and nobody has a phone number in these things so what happens if I put a phone number in an ad in the Sun or in the newspaper and I bet you a thousand guys would phone that number, and a thousand guys may be convinced that instead of a date they would prefer someone come over immediately for some instant gratification (Lyon, 2015, para. 18).

It is in this experience that Lyon comes to recognize the opportunity to make strategic financial moves within the structure of the escort industry, the timing of which was convenient. This example ties into the larger idea that working in the sex industry has benefits and in the case of Lyon, he saw the potential for exponential benefit for not only himself as an entrepreneur, but for the women working for him at the time. This is interesting in that currently, according to Weitzer (2007), very little is known about the motives or experiences of managers in the sex industry (aside from the widely known “pimp” roles) and how they came to be involved in the industry; people like Lyon are largely overlooked in the existing academic literature on this subject (p.151-152).

Oliver had a very similar narrative in terms of coming to realize that working a traditional job would not afford him the lifestyle he wished to have. Before becoming a sex worker at 21, he aspired to be a writer, although according to him, he had already toyed with the idea of sex work from a young age as he was fascinated by it. He explained that “I did one

summer at a borderline minimum wage and I was like I'm not going to ever be successful as a writer if I work 40 hours. That was my sort of vision there and it [sex work] naturally interested me" (para.8, 2015). According to Oliver, his decision to transition into sex work was seamless, despite the fact that he was fairly unfamiliar with the industry, i.e., he did not have friends in the business until after he had already decided to pursue this route. His "a-ha" moment appears to be a culmination of both his experience working as an underling for an unsubstantial wage, and his already existing interest in sex work.

Jade's narrative was no different than the other participants, for her "[being an escort] means that I have a job ha-ha. Being an escort was exactly that. It was a business for me; as an entrepreneur I look at things that I would enjoy doing for a living and making money and not having to answer to other people" (2015, para. 8). Similarly to Lyon, Jade had several previous business ventures before transitioning into sex work and for her it was not about the money, but rather, for the fun. At the time she began working she was already the owner of a stripping agency that booked male entertainment all over the province she lived in, so she was not in need of the financial gain that sex work offered her, although it was not something she was averse to. She explains, "I approached this industry a little different than others. It was fun and I wanted to do it, so I was making money with the [strip] agency already so it's not as if I needed the money, but for kicks, it was a fantasy. So I'm getting everything all rolled in one and I'm meeting men that are just men I would never normally meet" (2015, para. 26); for her the trade off was sexual gratification, fun and financial independence. The experiences of these participants speak to a possible change in the social and academic narratives that suggest working in the sex industry is either inherently exploitative or coerced, and the notion that there is no benefit to engaging in this type of work (Weitzer, 2005).

*No Exploitation Here*

In order to further illustrate that not all sex work is exploitative in nature, it is necessary to then examine how the narratives of participants serve to help the larger community understand that sex-work is not always exploitative. Bear in mind that each of the experiences of these participants is markedly different from the other because they each held different positions during their time in the business; what is important to consider is how closely related their respective stories are and the striking similarities in terms of understanding why they were not victims of exploitation. This aligns with the narratives of many sex workers, and the idea that the overwhelming amount of literature that suggests that exploitation is the predominant discourse with regard to sex work, is inaccurate for many people in the business (Weitzer, 2005, p.219).

Lyon in fact decided to participate in the business because he knew women who were being exploited.

She [my friend] told me the insight about the business and how horribly they were being treated as far as my perception was. It was a horrible way...things they had to subject themselves to become employed and stay employed wasn't right in my mind...when they went and applied for the job the company owners would interview them and take them out to dinner and would expect them to have sex with them. They said they had to 'try out the merchandise'. Often times when they went for the original interview they would make the girls go in another room, strip, come in naked, spin around for them, show them their stuff and then give em a t-shirt and they would have to sit down naked for the interview! And the reason they said was because they wanted to make sure they weren't cops and they'd like to see what was happening. So these girls on a regular basis,

sometimes once a month, would have to go with these bosses for dinner and fellate them or have intercourse with them to keep their jobs. They were also required, from the time they booked on from 6pm-6am, be in the office and answer the telephones and book all the calls and make sure that everything else happened while the bosses did nothing but collect money. So those were the two big issues – the sexual exploitation and also the fact that they couldn't even stay home (Lyon, 2015, para. 17 & 22).

During this part of the interview, Lyon was very vocal about his disgust with how these women were being treated at the time, and for him, this was one of the main reasons he got involved in the industry. It was his personal moral identity that was a guiding feature of his progression into the business, and it was the guiding principle of his business until he moved on more than 20 years later. What is interesting here is that his understanding of the escort industry at the time was somewhat misaligned with the traditional social understanding of the industry; it seems reasonable to believe that the narrative around prostitution in the early 80s was very similar, and likely more negative than it is today. Interestingly, Lyon's perceptions of the business, which were clearly a result of his personal connection, were not aligned with the societal perceptions despite his working traditional jobs up until this point.

Jade's experience shows the other side of the coin in terms of her own conscious and deliberate choice to become an escort. She actually speaks about "those people" that Lyon speaks about who are in fact exploiting women and coercing them into sex work.

I chose myself to be an escort; it wasn't something I needed to do to support any habits...I wasn't forced into it by any means. Under those circumstances I have a really hard time respecting people in the industry relating to people who aren't choosing to be that way or people who are encouraging people to be in sex work or they're not in it



because of choice (2015, para. 9).

Jade acknowledges that exploitation is certainly a reality for people in the sex industry and morally she takes issue with anyone who thinks that it is okay to encourage someone to participate in this line of work if it is not of their own volition. Interestingly, Jade also felt the need to discuss the existing stigmas of sex work in the context of larger society and how that narrative stands in opposition to not only her story, but many others as well.

We [sex workers] seem to be villainized, looked down upon, and in a lot of cases we're looked at as victims and a lot of us are actually survivors not victims - the ones that choose to make it a legitimate business; and it is a legitimate business because it is your body, it is your choice, and in my case I choose who I see, who I don't see, I decide what I'm going to let them do to my body and what I decide to do to their body (2015, para.11).

In her case, Jade refuses to allow larger society to define her personal identity as that of a victim, although she recognizes that socially, that is the identity that has been given to her. Personal identity plays a major role insofar as understanding why neither Jade nor Lyon experienced exploitation. They both had an underlying moral code that existed, which both distanced and prevented them from engaging in or being victim to exploitative behaviours. Because both participants had a very clear and specific understanding of why they initially wanted to be a part of the industry, it seems that this helped to insulate them from participating (actively or passively) in events that might either perpetuate the narrative of exploitation or make them more vulnerable to it.

### **Impression Management and Normalization**

In listening to the participants in this study, it became evident that Goffman's views on frame analysis were very relevant when considering the ways in which each person communicated the nature of their job to me, to their families, and to people outside of the business. When it came to managing their experiences with these groups of people, every participant used a specific frame to communicate a number of different aspects of their work depending on the circumstance, which is not unlike the experiences of participants in other qualitative studies (Koken, 2012; Vanweesenbeeck, 2005; Law, 2011). These instances are prime examples of Goffman's theories of performative talk, which argues that every experience people have communicating with one another is purposeful (Smith, 2006). These instances of communication between people are meant to engage the person telling the story with the person listening to the story. This engagement is facilitated through the communication of both empathy and experience, which serve to create a shared understanding between the speaker and listener; these interactions help to normalize the subject matter of the conversation. For people who work in the sex-industry, this form of communication, i.e., performative talk, helps the narrator create discursive frames through which the listener can challenge and reject the contemporary negative frames that already exist around sex-work, i.e., immorality, and instead place emphasis on its ordinariness. Many of the frames that the participants used are from business and business communication perspectives, which help to normalize the understanding of the type of work they do and in turn make it easier for the listener to digest. These instances of purposeful communication may exist in the context of sex work to maintain existing relationships. By emphasizing normalcy, or ordinariness, people who work in this industry are able to manage their relationships.

*Within the Business*

Lyon spoke about how during his time as an agency owner, he strived to change the internal perceptions of the escorts themselves, meaning that in his experience, many of the people who worked for him had negative view of themselves as an escort, which he did not want for anyone who worked in his company.

[My views on the business] changed the attitude of the escort towards the business and what the business should be doing. We felt that we were there working for them and we named our company [removed company name] and we had a motto - 'when you succeed, we succeed' and there's no sexual innuendo in that. We tried to change the escorts' views of themselves and what it is that they were doing. A lot of times, almost always actually, were interviewed by me, so I had an opportunity to find out their motivation and maybe offer them some other points that they may want to consider. I realized that outside of what they did for a living or proposing to do for a living - they were normal people, absolutely normal. Most of them didn't seem to have much of a problem with what they were doing and I thought I can get this and when I look at sexuality and everything else this is no different than anything else than another other woman does with the exception of money changing hands (Lyon, 2015, para.25)

In a business context, Lyon used very specific frames to normalize the nature of his work and the work that the women did. Using performative talk with his employees, Lyon reminds them that their profession was no different than anyone else's, which helped to place emphasis on the being ordinary or "normal."

Lyon goes on to explain the other tactics used in terms of how the normality of his business was communicated; they wore suits and ties to work, carried briefcases, had a nice office in the downtown core where receptionists handled the phones and everything was just

the same as any other place of business that one may walk into (para. 29). In keeping with the traditional workplace theme, he was able to provide a space that was professional in nature, despite the atypical nature of the business; he continued to normalize the professional business aspects of his agency. This information management tactic is considered “passing” since it involved hiding stigma to pass as non-stigmatized. The issue here is in the semantics of the definition of passing. The definition suggests that one is “hiding” something in order to avoid stigmatization, but this implies that deception is a tactic being used in these situations. It would be more accurate to suggest that instead of “hiding” something, one may be instead “normalizing” that something to avoid stigmatization.

### *Outside the Business*

When dealing with people outside of the business, the frames do not seem to change much from the perspectives of the participants. Goffman argues that people use rhetorical devices within the context of social interactions in order to function in contemporary society (Burns, 1991, p. 90); for people who work in the sex industry, these interactions combined with the use of framing and rhetoric are used because they recognize that their position as a sex worker is one that holds a lower status because of the negative societal views on the industry and of sex more broadly. Oliver and Jade both take encounters with laypersons as opportunities to teach people about what they do and, through conversation, help people to understand that the existing negative stereotypes are false or inaccurate. Oliver explained that many of his encounters with people were situations where they had never come across a sex worker before and through his discussions he was able to change some of their perspectives,

[I met] a lot of people who I don't think had ever encountered a sex worker who was being open about it. And I think it's about when people are confronted with identities

that are different than their own- it's like they always say, one person coming out [of the closet] can affect... if someone you know really close comes out, you can be from a totally bigoted small town, but as soon as you meet one real homosexual you think 'oh I never thought of that' (Oliver, 2015, para. 23).

He suggests that it is easier for a person to dislike someone who comes from an unusual background when they are at arm's length; however, when faced directly with said person in an intimate or personal relationship, it is harder to continue to accept the existing stereotypes about them.

For Jade, her experience is intimately tied with her trans identity, and it is through her everyday behaviour that she attempts to recreate the boundaries and understanding of what it means to be a sex worker.

Sex workers in particular, we can be ladies - we are ladies and you can do a little naughtiness, you can still be a slut and be a lady, it's the way you do it and the way you handle yourself. I handle myself in the way I have... I've always had manners, I was brought up that way and so none of what I did changed me (2015, para.47).

By always conducting herself as a lady, she emulates to the larger society that not being a slut or a sex worker is not synonymous with having no self-respect. Jade is, in her own way, quietly protesting the existing stereotypes by taking back her power insofar as making sure to stay true to her own identity and upbringing and roots. Again, here it is clear how she manages the disjunction in her identities, but removes the opportunity for a negative influence on said identities, thus insulating her to some degree from stigmatization as Goffman defines it (Smith, 2006, p.85).

### **Covering and Passing**

Examining the experiences of participants and how they communicated their work to their personal social networks is perhaps the most complex part of their identity negotiation. Adding the elements of love and close intimate connections with respect to their identities as sex-workers or peripheral sex workers creates a very unique circumstance through which each of the participants must deal with these unavoidable interactions. Employing the techniques of both covering and passing occurred frequently in the discussions about how participants dealt with family, extended family, and friends/acquaintances. As previously mentioned, the semantics of the terms “covering” and “passing” are problematic when trying to make sense of why either technique is used. The terms carry an inherently negative connotation and suggest that the use of either technique is synonymous with creating a disingenuous or inauthentic relationship between the person using the technique and whomever it is being used on, which is not the case.

### *Mothers*

For every participant there was a similarity in that one of the most difficult people to communicate with about their line of work was their mothers'. Each participant spoke at length about their experience telling, or rather, selectively disclosing the nature of their work to their mother; they all used the techniques of both covering and passing to some degree whether they were just giving a surface level explanation or divulging specifics about their work. Interestingly, all three of the participants agreed that their mothers knew what was going on, though not all would admit it and would prefer not to discuss it. In the context of the participants in this study, with the exception of Lyon, both the depth and breadth of discussion on the topic of their work with their mothers was fairly limited.

Jade explained, “The only thing I ever told my mother was that I did massage. Yeah

that's all she needed to know, she needed to know that I saw men and I gave them massages and that's all you need to know mother and she said 'that's all I want to know'. Oh yeah she knew. She *knew* what was going on but she didn't *want* to know and that's fine" (2015, para. 64). It is important to note that although Jade never went into detail about what kinds of things she did with her clients, inherently she knew that her mother was aware enough of her work so there seemed to be no real need to discuss it any further. It is difficult to tease out exactly why she chose not to go into great detail with her mother about her work, but it is reasonable enough to assume that most parent-child relationships do not involve discussing the intimate sexual aspects of their lives, whether it is paid or not. Jade did, however, explain that she took the route of honesty, to whatever degree that may be, with her family because she did not want them to ever be blindsided by anyone who saw her ads in the back-pages or elsewhere. She explained that her main motivation behind disclosure was to protect her loved ones from ever being embarrassed or surprised by anyone attempting to hurt them with information about her line of work (2015, para. 60, 61, & 72). This technique was used by several of the participants in Koken (2012), who were considered to be somewhat "closeted" as sex-workers but did disclose enough information to their loved ones to keep them protected in the event anyone "outed" them fully.

Oliver hid his sex-work identity from his mother much longer than the other participants because although he was not raised in a religious home, he also was not raised in a sex-positive home per se (2015, para.29). He explains how he was somewhat forced to reveal his work to his mother.

I was in a reality show and at that point it was called [name removed] and it was mainstream. So I knew at that point my mom didn't watch TV, but I knew that some girl

guide somewhere would be like ‘I saw your son on TV whipping some fat old man and talking about getting paid for it’ so before the show aired I called my mom and had the talk and I framed it in the S&M context cuz of the sex-phobia. Even from my mum I was worried if I just said, ‘I’m an escort’ so I framed it as ‘hey mom I get paid to beat people’ and that was my thing- mom I beat people...she was like ‘oh...that’s interesting’ and she was you know like a typical mother questions like is it safe and I told her it was quite safe because its in a very controlled setting and it’s probably safer than other forms of sex work and as times go on I let her know things (Oliver, 2015, para. 25 & 27).

His experience was dictated by his public exposure and to some degree is similar to Jade’s in that he did not wish for his mother to be surprised or uninformed by a “girl guide” or someone outside of the business who was looking to cause trouble. Oliver points out that as time went on however, both the breadth and depth of what he chose to disclose increased. This could be a result of him getting to know his mother better and understanding that she is a safe person to disclose to without fear of stigmatization or judgment. Lyon’s situation was slightly different insofar as his mother is a deeply religious woman and he knew that her perception of the nature of his work might stand in opposition to her fundamental beliefs. But like Jade's mother, Lyon's mother knew about his role in the sex industry.

My mother didn’t need to know all of those things because I knew that she has a religious and personal belief that is contrary to all of that so I chose not to share that with her out of respect for her belief and a desire not to make her worry or be concerned that something bad is going to happen. Because you know with most religions there’s always this belief that something bad is about to happen and she didn’t need to go through all of that just because she loved her son. I did that not because I was afraid, but because I felt it would



have been too distressful for her emotionally... Here's the thing, I never ever told her I *never* did it. She asked a number of times, and I told her that I answer telephones for a lot of people and if one of those people acted in an inappropriate way that's their business and none of mine. She *knew*, she had a suspicion, she's probably heard about it, but she couldn't get a straight answer...she couldn't get a confirmation from me. But the thing about it is, and I think this is where the difference is, even if she knew it for sure, the behaviour within my own lifestyle and the way in which I was operating with my family and friends and everything else, she could see no harm. So therefore it would have been difficult to damn or condemn what I was doing if there's no harm (Lyon, 2015, para. 40).

Here it is evident that Lyon's motivation behind his selective disclosure about his business was also to protect his mother, much like Jade's, yet his rationale was instead to describe what his job duties were as opposed to the nature of the work. He chose to keep the breadth narrow but the depth detailed so as to demonstrate to her that, despite what she may believe this line of work to be based on her own assumptions and those of larger society, what he is showing her stand in direct opposition to said assumptions.

#### *Immediate/Extended Family*

Lyon opted to use the same strategy when dealing with his children; when they asked, instead of describing the type of business he ran, he chose to describe what he did in that business.

When they asked I would tell them that I run a company, I manage people, I create ads and I would describe all of the job description and left out the part where it was for escorts or entertainers or massage or adult services; I left that part out because I don't think the kids needed to know or would have understood that. It shouldn't have made a

difference anyhow. I felt confident that if they knew and saw and experienced all of the other aspects of the business that they would see that even though the business may not be to everybody's liking that their parents weren't immoral people or doing immoral things. But eventually they would see we were just running a business (2015, para. 39).

Here we see elements of both covering and passing, the latter is shown in his concern for showing his children through experience that they are just running a typical business as opposed to something morally questionable. The former is shown through his selective disclosure about his work to his children. He never lied about his work; he simply chose to reveal particular points and frame them in a very specific way.

Jade's experience with her immediate and extended family was different in that her trans identity was a part of the conversation along with her sex-work and advocate identities. Jade has been an advocate in the LGBTTTQ and sex-work communities for many years and has had extensive public exposure. So, although she was honest with her siblings from the beginning about her work, the element of her nieces and nephews played a role in how she chose to disclose her line of work.

With the generation of my nieces and nephews before, they saw a transition and I had to deal with that. So what's happened is my first niece had to be told because of the TV interviews I was doing and all of a sudden she's old enough to watch the news and my niece knew she couldn't hide that forever and she said you need to talk to your auntie. So I talked to her on the phone and she had questions and everything she asked I gave her a direct honest answer about and everything is cool and fine. Like I said kids are amazing that way- you're honest with kids cause you can't hide things from kids no matter how hard you try. They can see through things and they can just pound those questions (2015,

para.82).

For Jade, her experience disclosing to her family was intimately tied in with her experiencing the transition from male to female. Not only was she working as a sex worker at the time, but also she was transitioning and was an active LGBTQ advocate in the community. She chose to wait until her family asked the questions and then answered them honestly. It seems that she felt that both the breadth and depth of the discussion with her extended family was candid and honest, perhaps because instead of feeling pressure to cover her identity, she waited until they asked on their own accord. She never had to cover or pass with them because there was no real need; the evolution in terms of understanding was instead a natural progression rather than a forced disclosure.

Conversely, Oliver did not have these kinds of discussions with his extended family, and only certain people in his immediate family, e.g., siblings, were aware that he was ever a sex worker. He has chosen to even address his work with his nieces and nephews particularly because he is no longer a sex worker, I was actively an escort to this day - I mean some of them (nieces and nephews) are 14, it would probably be a discussion if that was my only job, I would probably be like okay... they know the word sex-worker activist and stuff, they would know that I'm involved in that stuff (2015, para. 33). Oliver employs the tool of passing because by choosing not to disclose anything about his sex work identity, he is passing as a non-stigmatized person; again, this is not to suggest that his relationship with his extended family is inauthentic, but rather his identity as a ProDom sex worker is inconsequential insofar as maintaining a healthy relationship with the people he loves. He did state also that at some point if his nieces and nephews ever see his Wikipedia page or find out that he is actively involved in sex-work advocacy, he would of course have a conversation with them, but would only focus

the advocacy aspect as opposed to the prostitution (para.27). All of the participants used very similar information management techniques to deal with the varying social groups mentioned, which is precisely how the women in Koken (2011) managed their experiences, “These women were neither ‘completely out’ nor ‘completely closeted’ regarding their involvement with sex work, but instead made selective judgments about with whom they would share information, when to disclose this information, and how to ‘spin’ their involvement with sex work.

### *Friends*

In terms of dealing with friends it appears that each of the participants had an easier time fully disclosing the nature of their work without fear of judgment or stigmatization and most of them knew from the beginning. When asked about whether his identity as a sex-worker has ever impacted other relationships outside of family Oliver responded that,

As for other relationships it didn’t really affect them. I think I hung around with enough odd people that being a sex worker... I mean hanging around an electronic musician is just as weird as being a sex worker as being a bodybuilder you know. All those things... yeah like bodybuilders are their own subculture and they’re looked down upon to by society cause they’re weird and inject themselves with steroids, so I had friends like that so it’s all normal kind of (2015, para. 43).

He felt that his friends were just as “odd” as he was and because each of them lived within some kind of stigmatized subculture of their own, he did not need to worry about them passing judgment on him. Oliver did mention that having an intimate relationship with someone, i.e., dating, was very challenging. It was difficult for him to explain how paid sex and selling an experience to a client is very different than an intimate and loving relationship. In his experience, his partners were not able to understand this distinction and because of this he has

chosen to stay single and is very content with this decision (para. 43). Being in an intimate relationship with someone makes it challenging to use covering or passing techniques because employing either one of these techniques in a situation like that could be interpreted as deception and may invalidate the relationship. Full disclosure on the other hand comes with the very real risk that someone may not be comfortable with sharing their partner in an intimate way with another person, despite the fact that there is a distinction between paid sex work and intimacy.

Jade took issue with the definition of “friends” during our discussion and was clear in explaining that she only has a handful of genuine close friends,

I didn't really have a lot of friends. There's only a couple of dear friends I had from high school and I told them everything that I was doing, there was nothing I hid from them, step by step including the sex work. Again you have to tell people so you can protect them (2015, para. 72).

Her motivation for disclosure was consistent with why she told her family and that is to protect them. The distinction here is that she was comfortable enough with her close friends to fully reveal her sex-work identity in its full breadth and depth without fear of stigmatization or judgment; part of this is because many of her close friends also work in the industry, so there is arguably a sense of camaraderie and shared experience that informs their relationship and also acts as an insulator to protect from internal criticism. Similarly, participants in Koken (2012) and Law (2011) mentioned that many of the people they were true friends with were completely aware of their sex-work identities, and in fact being able to speak candidly with those people helped them to be able to decompress and avoid burnout at work (p.222-223).

Similarly, Lyon stated that his close friends have known what he has done from the

beginning and have never had an issue with it as they have progressed through life (2015, para. 41). Where his experience differs is in how he dealt with new friends who were perhaps at one time acquaintances that grew into friendships. He explains the approach he took in those situations was a case-by-case basis but generally, he used the same methodology.

There were people I met outside of personal friendship at business and maybe grew into a friendship. Those people were a bit different in that they needed an education and usually the education was hands on. Often times because of the amount of work we were doing, which was around the clock really, we would go for dinner with them and they would *inquire*. “How does this thing work?” So we would invite them up to the office. Those stories are the ones where people have seen things, discovered things, changed their attitudes, and found it to be more interesting and less narrow-minded. They saw the people and not the business and that was really special and that’s the second group of friends (2015, para.41).

Again, it is clear that his approach employs both covering and passing (Koken, 2012, p.211). He covers by making sure to not disclose too much to the individual until the timing is right. He passes by showing the individual what his business is like through experience; by taking these people and introducing them to his place of work, employees, and showing them exactly what is happening, he is able to mitigate any potential stigmatization that may exist in the person’s mind. By normalizing the business practices of escort agency owners through experience and rhetoric, he in turn changes perceptions one person at a time. All of the participants in this study seem to utilize a combination of tools in order to manage their relationships with every group of people in their lives, and using these tools allows them the opportunity to control both the breadth and depth of their disclosure while still maintaining a healthy relationship with their

loved ones.

### Conclusion

As with any theoretical perspectives, there are some points of contention in terms of the literature on Goffman and identity. The vast majority of what both Goffman and other authors examining sex work and identity have written focuses on the stigmatized individuals as victims and does not address the issues of larger societal structures that create this victimization or stigmatization (Perez, 2014, para. 4). Goffman's concept of stigma is grounded in a micro-level analysis; he argues on one hand that stigma is normative in that what is considered "deviant" for some cultures may be well received in others (Perez, 2014, para.6). Yet he also suggests that certain personal tendencies are so socially unacceptable that they will always be considered "deviant". Goffman seems to contradict himself by suggesting that deviance is a social construct, yet argues that universal examples of deviance exist across all cultures.

In terms of this study, the most clear limitation is the sample size; conducting a study with a larger sample size would be more beneficial as it would allow for a deeper analysis and comparison of the topics discussed. However, having a smaller sample size was advantageous because it allowed for a very focused study of the data. Another issue with the study was that it limited the kinds of questions I was able to ask participants; since the focus was specifically on identity negotiation and communication, there was little opportunity to explore other aspects of communication such as interpersonal, organizational, gender identity, and a myriad of other issues.

Much of this research shows how complex and intersectional identities are. For Jade, Lyon and Oliver, their experiences show how dynamic the process of identity negotiation is on both social and personal levels. Goffman's framework makes understanding these dynamics

easier in that it provides a context for how information management techniques are used to mitigate the potential social stigma that people who work as either sex workers or in the peripheries are at risk of facing. Though some of the language used in Goffman's framework is problematic, the overarching theory serves as a strong lens through which researchers might be better able to understand the nuanced and dynamic experiences of these people. One of the most important findings of this research is that employing these information management techniques is not an indicator of the authenticity of a relationship. Every participant used some combination of these techniques for similar reasons, which were usually to protect their loved ones from being hurt. Interestingly, they also believe that they were protecting them by disclosing *some* information. More importantly, they also used information management to protect themselves while attempting to change the wider perspective on sex-work through self-disclosure using very specific frames. Lyon, Oliver and Jade are all very different participants in terms of their experiences, sexual orientations, genders, and even in the roles they have played in the sex industry, and even though those differences inform their own experiences in a nuanced way, there certainly appears to be some significant and relevant similarities. Each of them are intimately tied to their social, personal and felt identities through their experiences in sex work, which has impacted how they feel about themselves, and how they have come to understand their many identities. Every participant placed heavy emphasis on how working in the industry has benefitted him or her long term, whether that is in his or her personal development, self-image, or elsewhere. This stands in direct opposition to the traditional radical feminist beliefs that there are no benefits to sex work and that it is inherently exploitative.

Throughout the course of conducting this research, I have learned that unpacking the



notion of “identity” is incredibly complex and multi-layered. There is no one piece of identity that stands separate from the other, each of which is further complicated by various intersections (e.g., sexuality, gender, ethnicity, etc.). It appears that nobody is able to divorce themselves from their lived experiences, and those experiences in turn impact the trajectory of their identity development as they move forward in their lives. This is important to understand outside of the context of escorts; more broadly, this speaks to the idea that in some way or another, our identities are fluid and ever changing. For the participants in this study, it seems that their experiences managing their identities with their friends, families, and acquaintances are a consequence of the desire to protect both themselves and their loved ones. The identities they construct seem to be loosely linked to their experiences in sex work, but “sex worker” is not the main aspect of what they feel is their identity, nor is it the first thing they think of when considering who they are or how they came to be this way as people. It seems that their experiences in sex work have provided my participants with an opportunity to grow intellectually, morally, and personally throughout their lives. Each of the participants expressed on multiple occasions that they feel their work has impacted them in a meaningful way and made them less judgmental, more open minded, and able to see things from a different perspective on many levels.

In future research it is important to consider human agency when trying to understand concepts of identity negotiation and communication because agency is a subjective variable. Research is not able to assume what any one person truly feels about the work that they do, which is also true of the existing assumptions made about sex work. In order to explore this further, it would be valuable to study. The existing narrative serves to reinforce the idea that people are unable to understand the damage that this line of work has on them long term and

silences the voices of the actual people working in this industry who may have a different lived experience.

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## Appendix A

**Ryerson University  
Consent Agreement**

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this consent form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

**TITLE:**

Identities Do Not Belong in a Box: Understanding Identity Construction, Negotiation and Communication for Escorts and Escort Agency Owners

**INVESTIGATORS:**

This research study is being conducted by Cleo Pyke, Master of Professional Communication Candidate, supervised by Dr. John Shiga from the Professional Communication Department at Ryerson University.

This research project is being completed in partial fulfillment of my degree. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Cleo Pyke [cleo.pyke@ryerson.ca](mailto:cleo.pyke@ryerson.ca) or Dr. John Shiga [jshiga@ryerson.ca](mailto:jshiga@ryerson.ca).

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:**

The purpose of this study is to understand how identities are formed as part of working in an escort agency or as an escort. I aim to understand how professional identities are both created and communicated through interaction with clients, co-workers and those outside of the escort business. There will be 5 participants recruited for this research.

The inclusion/exclusion criteria are as follows:

**Inclusion:** Participants can be male, female, or transgender and must have worked in an escort agency OR as an escort for a minimum of 1 year at any point in their lives. Participants must either be (or have been) an escort or escort agency owner. Participants may also be those who are currently working in an agency or those who have worked in an agency previously in their lives.

**Exclusion:** Participants who have worked less than 1 year in an escort agency or as an escort; participants under 18 years of age.

**WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO [OR] WHAT PARTICIPATION MEANS:**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- Participate in a short semi-structured interview with Cleo Pyke that will last approximately one hour
- This interview will be conducted either in person or via Skype and will be

recorded to accurately capture what each participant says. **Note:** Please be advised that I cannot guarantee confidentiality given the nature of electronic/internet based activities as well as I will not be aware of where you are connecting via Skype. At the time of the interview, please be sure that you are in a location that provides aural and visual privacy

- You will be asked a series of questions regarding your experiences with identity construction and communication during your time working in an escort agency, your age, number of years worked and other similar questions.
- **No payment or incentives** will be provided for participation in this study
- Below is a list of sample questions you will be asked during this interview.

### **Sample Questions**

1. Can you tell me about your interpretation of the position(s) you held during your time in an agency/as an escort?
2. Can you tell me about the kinds of identities that exist within the realm of escort agencies/as an independent escort?
3. How do those identities differ when interacting with people in different positions within the agencies? (For example, with drivers, other escorts, supervisors etc.)
4. Can you describe some of the experiences you had trying to navigate your interactions with groups of people outside of the escort business (e.g., children's friends parents, other people who inquire about your work, family members, children themselves)
5. Could you explain to me if/how your work identity (-ies) have affected your relationships with friends/peers?

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS:**

This research will be beneficial (in a very limited capacity) researchers in particular because it will help to contribute to the already existing literature on the subject. My research will be documented in my Major Research Project (MRP), which will contribute to a growing library of student research in Professional Communication and at Ryerson University more generally, which explores identity construction in marginalized groups in Canada. This MRP will be held in the Ryerson Library repository of MRPs, theses and dissertations and will be available to students and faculty conducting research in related areas.

I cannot guarantee, however, that you will personally receive any benefits from participating in this study.

### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS TO YOU AS A PARTICIPANT:**

#### **Psychological Risk:**

The psychological risk of participating is low, however, participating in this interview may potentially be psychologically distressing for some subjects because it is possible that some of your previous experiences with clients may have been negative. However, because the



nature of this particular Major Research Paper involves identities as opposed to high-risk experiences, those topics will be unlikely to arise during the interview process.

I will manage this risk first by informing you (the participant) that you are free to go into as much or as little detail as you wish with respect to the questions being asked. I will also check in with you every few questions to see how you are feeling emotionally.

Below is a list of resources in both the Edmonton and Greater Toronto Areas for you to access in the event that you are feeling triggered as a result of our interview:

**Edmonton**

- Capital Health (24 Hour line 1877-303-2642
- The Support Network Distress Line 780-482-4357
- Adult Mental Health Crisis Response Team 780-482-0222
- Centre For Addiction and Mental Health -Mood and Anxiety Disorders Program 416-535-8501 x 4747
- CEASE 780-471-6137

**Toronto**

- Gerstein Crisis Centre (Downtown) 416-929-5200
- Assaulted Women's Helpline 416-863-0511
- Distress Line 416-408-4357
- Counselling 519 Church Street Community Centre 416-392-6874
- Maggies – Toronto Sex Workers Action Project 416-964-0150

**Social Risk:**

There is a small possibility of social risk if anyone finds out your identity. For instance if people find out about your profession you may be socially ostracized. I will manage this risk by using stringent measures to protect your confidentiality. As a part of maintaining confidentiality I will use pseudonyms' instead of your real names and remove any identifying information.

I will keep every interview recording on a single USB stick until I can transcribe them all; once they are all transcribed, I will delete the recordings and save the transcriptions on that same USB stick. Once the project is complete, I intend to keep the USB for 6 months, after this time I will delete all information from the USB and physically destroy it afterwards. All interview recordings and transcriptions containing personal information (e.g., name, age, etc.) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my supervisor's office and will be destroyed upon submission of my completed MRP.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

There is a small possibility that others could find out your identity and previous/current work experience due to a confidentiality breach, either directly or inadvertently. In order to mitigate this risk, extreme caution will be taken by removing any and all indicators or

revealing details about the participants. I will choose a pseudonym for each participant to ensure that his or her confidentiality is maintained.

I will keep every interview recording on a single USB stick until I can transcribe them all; once they are all transcribed, I will delete the recordings and save the transcriptions on that same USB stick. Once the project is complete, I intend to keep the USB for 6 months, after this time I will delete all information from the USB and physically destroy it afterwards. All interview recordings and transcriptions containing personal information (e.g., name, age, etc.) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my supervisor's office and will be destroyed upon submission of my completed MRP.

You will be audio-recorded during our interview and this interview will be subsequently transcribed. You will have the opportunity to listen to the recording and/or read the interview transcript, and to edit, clarify or add information to your responses. Please be aware that in exceptional circumstances, I am both compelled and ethically responsible to report criminal activity to legal authorities. Some of those circumstances include the following: Instances of self harm, reports of sexual assault, or a third party being at risk of being harmed and other such extreme scenarios. Researchers shall maintain their promise of confidentiality to participants within the extent permitted by ethical principles and/or law. This may involve resisting requests for access, such as opposing court applications seeking disclosure.

**Note:** Please be advised that I cannot guarantee confidentiality given the nature of electronic/internet based activities as well as I will not be aware of where you are connecting via Skype. At the time of the interview, please be sure that you are in a location that provides aural and visual privacy

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You should not feel obligated to participate because we know each other. If you decide not to participate it will not impact my future relationship with you and you can choose whether to be in this study or not. If any question makes you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. You may stop participating at any time. If you choose to stop participating, you may also choose to not have your data included in the study. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University or the investigator Cleo Pyke involved in the research.

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY:**

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

- Cleo Pyke  
**Email:** cleo.pyke@ryerson.ca
- Dr. John Shiga (Supervisor)  
Acting Graduate Program Director, Assistant Professor

**Email:** jshiga@ryerson.ca  
**Office:** RCC 382G  
**Phone:**(416) 979-5000  
x6385

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study please contact:

Research Ethics Board  
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation  
Ryerson University  
350 Victoria Street  
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3  
416-979-5042  
[rebchair@ryerson.ca](mailto:rebchair@ryerson.ca)

**TITLE:** Identities Do Not Belong in a Box: Understanding Identity Construction, Negotiation and Communication for Escorts and Escort Agency Owners

**CONFIRMATION OF AGREEMENT:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to participate in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I agree to be audio recorded for the purposes of this study. I understand how these recordings will be stored and destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B

**MRP Interview Guide****Introductory/Background Information**

1. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Can you tell me about your interpretation of the position(s) you held during your time in an agency?
3. Would you please describe what led you to working as (insert position)?

**Experience During Career**

1. Can you tell me about the kinds of identities that exist within the realm of escort agencies? (Maybe ask them if they feel like they have a certain kind of persona or professional identity that is different in any way than the face that you use with people, personal acquaintances or friends etc?) There is room to discuss more than one identity i.e., professional identity, and work identity, social identity etc.
2. How do those identities differ when interacting with people in different positions within the escort world? (For example, with drivers, other escorts, supervisors etc.)
3. Can you describe some of the experiences you had trying to navigate your interactions with groups of people outside of the escort business (e.g., children's friends parents, other people who inquire about your work, family members, children themselves)

**Perceptions-Family, Social, Personal**

1. Has your working as (insert position here) affected your perceived identity? If so, can you describe how?
2. Can you tell me about your experiences regarding people's perceptions (those who know the truth about your job) about your working as (insert position)?
3. Could you explain to me if/how your work identity (-ies) have affected your relationships with friends/peers?

**Experiences Post-Agency (If Applicable)**

1. Can you explain to me how you leaving the business has changed your perception of your own identity (or if it hasn't then explain)
2. Could you describe your experience transitioning back into the workforce and having a new identity there?

**Other Thoughts**

1. What are the differences in communication between the identities... e.g., they may talk less about sex work with their friends and maybe "shop talk" with their work peers and other such people within that context
2. In which identity do you feel the most comfortable within your own skin or your own world and what kinds of communication make you feel comfortable in that role

## Appendix C

*Code Book*

Master Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Inclusion
<b>Identities</b>	Social	Social identity refers to “the everyday ways persons are identified and categorized” (Smith, 2006, p. 85).	When participants mention how they feel society perceives or labels them or how that perception has impacted them
	Personal	Personal identity “...marks out the person as distinct from all others” (Smith, 2006, p. 85).	Any instance where participants describe what separates them from other groups in society or what makes them distinct or “different”
	Felt	Felt identity refers to “...the feelings that a person has about their identity” (Smith, 2006, p. 85).	Any instance where participants make reference to how they feel about their own identities
<b>Benefits of Sex Work</b>	Financial Gain	Law (2011) found that many sex workers have experienced benefits as a result of engaging in this type of work (i.e., voluntary), particularly with respect to their self-esteem, confidence, body image and sexuality (p.100).	When participants discuss any of the things that have benefitted them as a result of working in the sex-industry. This could be financially, emotionally, or in terms of their self-esteem
	Self-Esteem		
	Psychological & Emotional Development		
	a-ha Moments	Interviewees highlight the structures within the sex industry and the way they make moves within those structures at opportune times to	Any mention of an “a-ha” moment that describes why they chose to get involved with this industry or what brought them to realize that this was the right choice for

		gain something (e.g., money, prestige etc.). These moves also speak to the larger shifts and trends that exist in the current communication of sex and intimacy	them
	No Exploitation Here	This code refers to instances wherein the interviewee makes a point of explaining that they have not experienced these the business this way. This is important to their personal identity insofar as it differentiates each of them from the exploitative social relations that are <i>presumed</i> to exist in other areas of the sex-industry.	When participants discuss the perception that many have about the exploitative nature of sex work and their personal resistance to being labeled as someone who was coerced into this business. Also when participants reference seeing exploitation occurring in various circumstances (this usually is not in reference to them directly, but is something they may have witnessed)
<b>Impression Management and Normalization</b>	Friends	Interviewees use discursive frames to challenge the association of sex work with immorality; particular emphasis is placed on the ordinariness or “normalcy” of the business	Any instance where participants discuss how they dealt with having to disclose their employment to the general population; or, any discussion about what is “normal” or how working in this business is “normal”
	Everyone else		
<b>Covering and Passing</b>	Family	Stigma management: ...often takes the form of ‘information management’ techniques such as ‘passing’, (hiding one’s stigma in order to ‘pass’ as a non-stigmatized person); or ‘covering’, a strategy	When participants discuss how they dealt with the disclosure of their sex-work identities with family, friends, acquaintances and other such groups. Any mention about how they mitigated the potential issues

	<p>characterized by selective disclosure to trusted confidantes or family members (Koken, p.211, 2012).</p> <p>In order to protect themselves and cope with issues of identity, techniques like information management and passing are used to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of being labeled a prostitute or sexual deviant.</p>	<p>with disclosure was also included</p>
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## Friends

<b>Changes in Identity</b>	<p>Identity is dynamic, not static; this concept emphasizes the idea of the fluidity of identity and the notion that there are many parts of the 'self'.</p> <p>Identities are not one-dimensional; people adapt their identities depending on their circumstance and with whom they are interacting (Stimmel 1955; as cited in Sanders, 2005).</p>	<p>Any mention of their current or past feelings about their identity; or how they feel their time in the industry has (or hasn't) impacted who they are as a person</p>
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