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"You're saying I don't belong": queer, non-mainstream religious and spiritual sex workers navigating stigma

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ABSTRACT

Dominant discourses frequently construct sex work and queer identities as fundamentally incompatible with religiosity. Consequently, queer religious and spiritual sex workers occupy an under explored space at the intersection of sex work, spirituality, and LGBTQIA+ identities. This article addresses this gap by presenting two case studies of queer sex workers in the United States, who engage with Norse Paganism and New Age spirituality. Drawing on in-depth interviews, it presents a thematic analysis exploring how religious and spiritual identities shape their experiences of sex work, personal relationships, and self-perception. By challenging assumptions that religiosity and sex work are inherently antithetical, this article contributes to scholarship on queer sex workers by illustrating the diverse strategies they employ to reconcile their intersecting identities, resist dominant moral frameworks, and navigate religious and societal stigma. It further advances understandings of contemporary religiosity, showing how queer sex workers can create affirming religious and spiritual spaces that challenge normative assumptions about sexuality, belief, and sex work.

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Introduction

Sex work, queerness, and religiosity are frequently framed as incompatible, with dominant discourses reinforcing the idea that queerness and sex work exist in opposition to religious and spiritual belonging. While scholarship has examined sex work stigma and its intersection with gender and sexuality (Bensen et al., 2025; Freitas, 2017; Matthen et al., 2018), the experiences of queer religious sex workers remain largely overlooked. This article presents two case studies from my PhD research, which used qualitative methods to examine the relationship between sex workers' religious or spiritual and occupational identities and its influence on their everyday experiences. Focusing on queer sex workers in the US, one practicing Norse Paganism and the other New Age spirituality, this article explores how they reconcile their intersecting identities, resist exclusion, and engage with alternative religious and spiritual frameworks that validate their professional and private lives.

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While all religious and spiritual sex workers in my research faced stigma from both religious communities and society, this article focuses on two participants who experienced multiple layers of stigma linked to other aspects of their identities, such as gender and sexuality. My analysis of the diverse ways sex workers' experience and manage stigma draws on the concepts of harmony and dissonance. I define 'harmony' as a state of consonance, where different identities are aligned and in agreement with one another. Identity conflict, which obstructs harmony, I conceptualize as 'dissonance'. 'Harmonious-dissonance' is where there is the acceptance of dissonance within some elements of their identities to allow for harmony to exist within other identities and experiences. These concepts make a unique contribution to queer theory and sex work research by analysing how religious, spiritual, and sex worker identities exist at the micro-level, while also furthering understanding of how stigmatized identities are lived, which can support sex work campaigns for social and legal justice.

Sex work, religiosity, and queer sexualities

Sex work stigma

Sex workers are people who sell sexual labour for economic or physical resources (Mac & Smith, 2018). Engagements with sexual commerce are diverse, and include, but are not limited to, escorting, online content creation, porn acting, and stripping (Matolcsi et al., 2021). Globally, there are various legal frameworks to regulate sex work, with most countries adopting some form of criminalization. This is because sex work is understood as a social and legal problem which needs to be managed by the law (Armstrong, 2021). In the US, sex work operates under a criminalization framework, meaning it is prohibited nationwide; however, it is permitted within licenced brothels in certain counties in Nevada (Platt et al., 2018). Vocal religious groups have influenced sex work regulations in the US For example, anti-sex work Christian groups lobbied for the implementation of FOSTA (2017) and SESTA (2018) bills, which were passed to reduce sex trafficking (Begum & Seto, 2024). While these bills were intended to curb trafficking, they have instead caused significant harm, undermining sex workers' safety, income, community access, and health outcomes (Blunt & Wolf, 2020). Evangelical Christian groups also shaped the US government's 'anti-prostitution pledge', which prevents federal funding from going to pro-decriminalization sex work services and groups (Winter & Olivia, 2024).

Sex workers face persistent social and legal stigma across their personal and professional lives (Bowen & Bungay, 2015). Although there has been a noted quasi-normalization of certain aspects of sexual commerce in America, such as pornography, this apparent liberalization has occurred alongside increased stigmatization and criminalization of individuals and businesses involved in other forms of sex work (Weitzer, 2020). Sex work stigma is often rooted in the belief that it is inherently exploitative and an act of violence against women, thereby contributing to broader violence against women and girls who do not engage in sex work (Miren & Watson, 2020). Alternatively, it is framed as 'dirty work', a socially or morally tainted occupation (Tzeng & Ohl, 2021). To manage stigma, sex workers may attempt to conceal or distance themselves from their sex worker identities, meaning that they do not share their occupation with friends, family, or religious

communities (Abel, 2011). While this may be a successful identity tactic to manage stigma, sex workers can experience internal stigma due to negative perceptions of their careers (Benoit et al., 2020). Conversely, some sex workers resist stigma, often linked to narratives of victimhood, imposed by society and the law. They do so by asserting their agency, reclaiming their experiences of the sex industry, and actively challenging stigma through education and activism (Grant, 2014).

The identity concepts of harmony and dissonance aim to capture the nuances of religious and spiritual sex workers' identity management and the motivations behind their identity performances, illustrating how they 'weigh up' potential outcomes. In the context of stigma, harmony occurs when, for example, a person's sex work career is known and supported within their family, while dissonance arises from religious or social stigma. Harmonious-dissonance may involve enduring sex work discrimination in exchange for the economic benefits that sex work can provide. Thus, these concepts offer a useful framework for understanding sex workers' decisions, stigma management, and lived experiences.

Queer sex work

Sex workers' experiences cannot be explained without intersectionality as they do not 'occur in a vacuum'; they are shaped by their sexuality, gender, race, culture, class, religious and spiritual backgrounds, and other roles they have within their lives (Smith, 2015, p. 247). Crenshaw's seminal work in 1989 on intersectionality demonstrates how these overlapping identities interact to create complex experiences of social and political oppression. In this article, queer is used as an umbrella term to encompass all non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. Due to arguments that sex work is inherently violence against women, other gender and non-heterosexual identities of sex workers are commonly excluded from research and debates (Matthen et al., 2018). Yet, the sex work community is diverse, and it is essential to include the experiences of queer sex workers, as they challenge dominant heteronormative framings of sex work (Yingwana, 2022).

Queer sex workers can face compounded legal stigma due to the criminalization of homosexuality in some countries alongside the criminalization of sex work (Platt et al., 2018). As a result of queer stigma and criminalization, they are at heightened risk of 'violence, human rights abuses, and decreased access to services and justice' (NSWP, 2018, p. 1). Despite these challenges, sex work can provide a means of overcoming economic hardship for some LGBTQIA+ individuals, as discrimination may create barriers to obtaining non-sex work employment (Coston et al., 2022). Additionally, sex work can serve as a way to affirm and explore stigmatized aspects of their identities, such as sexuality (Matthen et al., 2018). However, if sex workers produce sexual content to fulfil the male gaze (Johnson & Grove, 2017), or if clients hold binary assumptions about gender and sexuality, heteronormative norms can impact queer sex workers' experiences of sex work and identity affirmation. Intersectional analysis, therefore, gives attention to these perceived invisible identities in sex work experiences. Yet, there are gaps in the literature which consider the intersections of queer, sex work, and religious and spiritual identities, which this article sets out to address.

Being queer and religious

I use the term religion to refer to a system of beliefs, rituals, rules, and practices associated with a higher power, which centres within an organized group and community (Hood & Spilka, 2003). I define spirituality as the belief that life exists beyond scientific rationale. Spirituality encompasses the idea that there is a reality beyond the physical world, including the belief in a higher power, universal consciousness, cosmic energy, or that nature is sacred. Although there are overlaps between definitions of religion and spirituality, spirituality often exists outside of formal institutional contexts, and spiritual practices (such as mindfulness and meditation) help search for meaning in life and assist personal development (Love et al., 2005).

Earlier scholarship rarely explored gender, sexuality, and religion together, but more recent studies have addressed this gap. For queer people, faith can serve as a site for oppression and empowerment. Some religious interpretations champion heterosexual norms and values, which in turn, stigmatizes the queer community (Wilcox, 2003). This can lead to religious individuals leaving their religious institution to keep their faith (Packard & Ferguson, 2018) or engaging in 'believing without belonging', which involves believing in a God but disengaging with the organized element of their religion (Davie, 1990). Although traditional religious subscription can be seen as regulatory, particularly concerning sexual identity and expression, empowerment and religious negotiation are important discourses when understanding the everyday lives of religious and spiritual individuals (Beekers & Schrijvers, 2020). Queer theory emphasizes the fluidity of religious identities as some queer individuals opt for personal faith external to traditional religious spaces (Goss & West, 2000). Alternatively, individuals may seek out traditional, but queer-affirming, religious and spiritual communities, which reinterpret religious texts, traditions, and theological narratives that condemn queer people (Wilcox, 2003).

Research on LGBTQIA+ religious individuals must account for the diverse intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality that shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Cheng, 2011; McQueeney, 2009). For instance, some LGBT Muslim women conceal their sexuality due to cultural pressures and to avoid violence and marginalization (Khan & Mulé, 2021), while others actively seek to create more inclusive interpretations of their faith (Yip, 2002). Research in Canada found that some LGBTQIA+ Muslim organizations create inclusive spaces, help members reconcile perceived identity conflicts, and engage in activism against Islamophobia and religious marginalization (Golriz, 2025). These examples demonstrate the heterogeneity of queer religious experiences across faiths, which this article reflects by approaching the realities of religious and spiritual sex workers with cultural sensitivity (Yip, 2017).

Religion and sex work

Research on queer religious and spiritual sex workers is scarce. Drawing on my PhD research, this article examines how religious and spiritual sex workers manage discrimination related to gender, sexuality, and sex work from both religious communities and broader society. Here, religious and spiritual sex workers are defined as those who consensually work in the sex industry and identify with a religion or spirituality. Mainstream religions commonly see sex work as unethical or sinful (Winter & Olivia,

2024). For example, early Christian theology regards sex outside of heteronormative procreation as immoral and views sex workers as sinners, whereas Buddhism in Thailand does not classify sex work as a 'sin' in the same way Christianity does, but considers it to accumulate bad karma (Peach, 2005). However, religious texts can be interpreted in multiple ways, and progressive religious leaders may hold alternative perspectives (see Hope, 2024).

Discrimination against sex workers can lead to shame, condemnation, and isolation from religious communities or spaces. To navigate this, some sex workers disengage with organized religion and opt for non-mainstream religions and spiritualities, such as New Age spiritualities, which encourage an individualized engagement with sexual identity and fulfilment (Dinnie & Browne, 2011) or Paganism, a non-mainstream religion which is said to support stigmatized groups, including sex workers (Moreno, 2019). Others wish to remain a part of their religious community, so they attempt to conceal their occupation or seek out spaces within their religion which are accepting of their careers (Matthews, 2024). All religious and spiritual sex workers in this research engaged in nuanced identity negotiations due to their varying religious, spiritual, and sex worker identities. This article illustrates how these intersecting identities can be further complicated for those who are queer, religious or spiritual, and a sex worker.

Methodology

Case selection

This article focuses on the intersections of religiosity, queer, and sex work identities. The selection criteria involved individuals who identified as LGBTQIA+. Other religious and spiritual sex workers involved in this research had non-heterosexual sexual experiences or were bicurious in the case of one UK-based participant. Still, they identified as heterosexual and were cis gender. Subsequently, two case studies are profiled: Khan, a 41-year-old, white American, demisexual/asexual transgender woman working as a full-service escort, and Amy, a 23-year-old, white American, bisexual cisgender woman who works as a porn actor and online content creator. Both Amy and Khan live in the western region of the United States, in counties where all forms of sex work are illegal.

Khan follows Modern Norse Paganism, a polytheistic religion. Norse Paganism is a pre-Christian European religion, originally practiced by Germanic people (Strmiska, 2007). It is centred on the Yggdrasil, a sacred cosmic tree connecting multiple realms (Vickers, 2024). Contemporary Norse Pagan practices vary but may include honouring deities through offerings, participating in outdoor rituals, and connecting with the Norse Pagan community through online forums or in-person gatherings (Fatica, 2024). Amy follows a New Age vibrational spirituality, which is a mental state of being, believing in vibrational energy. There is no single founder of this spirituality; rather, it is the product of syncretic spiritual traditions, including New Age spirituality, Eastern philosophies, and digital wellness culture. This spirituality sees everything in the universe, including thoughts, feelings, people, and experiences, as having a vibration (vibes), or in other words, an energetic state which interacts with the broader energetic field of the universe (Yogkulam, 2024). This spiritual practice seeks to be someone who receives and gives high vibrations (positive energy) and avoids or rejects low vibrations (negative energy) to ensure they

are living in a high vibrational state. Practices include chakra alignment, aura work, meditation, and sound therapy (Naragatti, 2025).

Recruitment

The study was part of a transnational exploration of sex workers in the US and UK, with all the complexities shaping their religious or spiritual and professional experiences. This article draws on data from research with 11 religious and spiritual sex workers. Participant criteria included being over the age of 18, identified as religious or spiritual, having been a sex worker, and living in any country; however, only US and UK-based sex workers responded to the research advertisements. The two participants who form the case studies reported on in this article responded to posts on international social media. Pseudonyms are used to protect identities. While the limited sample size precludes generalizability, this qualitative study was designed to provide rich, in-depth insights into an under-researched area rather than to be representative.

Data collection methods

This article is based on research conducted through participant-driven photograph elicitation, diaries, and semi-structured interviews. Creative methods are a research approach which offers participants the opportunity to express themselves in non-verbal ways (Brooks et al., 2019). Employing creative methods can provide a unique space for participants to reflect on their lived experiences and identities (Copes et al., 2018). Employing photograph elicitation and diaries provided a space for participants to express their thoughts, experiences, and reflections as they saw and felt them. Photograph methods have been noted to enable sex workers the opportunity to generate intersectional explorations of their lives (Smith, 2015). Diary methods facilitate access to rich knowledge as participants can explore their prominent, sensitive, and mundane experiences in their own way (Cucu-Oancea, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were an essential element of this research. For participants who took photographs and kept diaries, it was imperative to provide a space for them to talk through their data and voice their experiences. A sex work study that explored sexual pleasure through participant-driven photograph elicitation found that participants' images were highly metaphoric, and semi-structured interviews captured why participants took the photograph and how they saw the photographs represented their identities (Smith, 2017). Interviews also offered religious and spiritual sex workers the opportunity to share their stories if they did not want to engage with creative methods but wanted to participate in the research. By structuring the interview schedule around flexible areas of interest instead of fixed questions, the research promoted an open-conversational approach that encouraged participants to freely discuss their everyday experiences as religious and spiritual sex workers. Interviews took place on Microsoft Teams or in person at a sex work organization in the East Midlands, UK. Khan and Amy opted to contribute to this research through interview, which took place on Microsoft Teams due to them living in the US.

Data analysis

All data was de-identified, and thematic analysis was employed to analyse the creative data and interview transcripts. One strength of thematic analysis is its flexibility and variability, which was crucial as the research engaged with multiple methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The visual data (photographs) was integrated into the written data (diaries and interview transcripts) analysis as participants discussed their photographs in depth during interviews. I completed thematic analysis manually, following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-stage approach for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data. This process involved getting familiar with the creative and interview data (stage one) and finding initial narratives and concepts (stage two). After this, I generated initial themes because of the narratives and concepts discovered within the previous stage (stage three). I then spent time further analysing the themes and subthemes (stage four), reviewing these themes (stage five), and then finalizing the key themes (stage six). Final themes were organized into four overarching discussions: sex workers' engagement with religion and spirituality, experiences in sex work spaces, sex workers' experiences of love and intimacy, and realities and misrepresentations of sex work.

Ethics

This research received ethical approval from Nottingham Trent University in 2022. While visual methods are becoming increasingly common in research, their use can still encounter resistance due to the risk of identifying participants or capturing non-consenting individuals in the data (for example, clients or non-participating sex workers) (Smith, 2017). To address this concern, all participants were given creative guidelines explaining how to engage with photographs and diaries, including what to capture and what to avoid (e.g. any identifiable features of themselves or others). The author also screened all data, excluding photographs unsuitable for publication due to anonymity concerns. Participants signed a consent form after reviewing a detailed participant information sheet outlining the research aims, participation options, and how their data would be stored and used.

This research aligned with interpretivist and feminist methodologies, which place lived experiences at the centre of discussion and view everyday life as subjective, multiple, and unique to each individual (Frechette et al., 2020). To ensure that the identities of religious and spiritual sex workers were accurately represented, I engaged in an ongoing process of reflexivity, considering my role in producing knowledge and the ways my perspectives influenced the research. While I support the labour approach and the decriminalization of the sex industry, I recognize that not all participants may share this view. Therefore, I was guided by participants' understandings of their sex work, religiosity, and other identities, ensuring that diverse perspectives were expressed and accurately represented.

Findings

The best choice: access to the labour market

The first collection of experiences explores how sex work was the best occupational choice for Khan and Amy's life circumstances. Mayhew and Mossman (2007) suggest there are four main groups of sex workers: i) sex work as a preferred career, ii) sex work as the best occupational option (sex work may not be their preferred career but it offers flexibility and a good income), iii) sex work as a result of limited choice (may be 'locked into' sex work to finance their substance dependency or are homeless), and iv) sex work is a result of no choice (trafficking and exploitation). This categorization can help to understand the diversity of decisions to sex work and the experiences of sex workers. However, it must be used with caution as categorizing sex workers' decisions to enter the industry based on choice and agency fails to encapsulate the complexities of experiences, which can reinforce hierarchies between different forms of sex work or decisions to sex work, also called the whorearchy (Sandy, 2014). This article also differentiates "sex work as no choice" from consensual sex work, categorizing the former as trafficking and asserting that it should be regarded as distinct from sex workers' lived experiences.

For Khan, her work can be seen as the best occupational option available to her as she discusses her challenges of obtaining 'square work' (non-sex working jobs) (Bowen, 2021), which opportunities in the sex industry assisted:

> . . . I have some horrible depression and a little bit of anxiety, and trying to get a real job was difficult for me, I had just come out as transgender . . . I ended up having a breakdown at work one night and since then, I have only worked a total of 30 days between various [non-sex work] jobs . . . I ended up having to relocate and that's when I started researching sex work . . .. (Khan)

Khan experienced mental health challenges as she was understanding and sharing her gender identity with family and friends, which impacted her ability to find a job. Her decision to enter the sex industry was a constrained choice because of queer stigma and her mental health challenges, which made it difficult for her to access mainstream employment. Research on the US job market found that 70% of transgender employees reported experiencing at least one form of employment discrimination (being fired, not hired, or not promoted) (Sears et al., 2024). So, while Khan earns an income from escorting and navigates gender discrimination within the US job market, stigma complicates her relationship to her work as she struggles to reconcile her feelings about engaging in work she does not view as a *'real job'*.

Amy discussed that sex work was the best occupational option because it offered her better opportunities for a work-life balance and economic income compared to other careers:

> . . . Other jobs are just not as interesting or exciting. They're just your run-of-the-mill job where you do the 9:00 to 5:00, you're just physically exhausted . . . And you cannot even afford your own apartment. . . . I would say that sex work for me overall has been a very positive experience. If it [sex work] is a low vibe, then maybe low vibes are where it's at . . .. (Amy)

It has been suggested that poverty rates in the US have remained stagnant for decades due to uneven job distribution and the prevalence of low-quality employment (Siddique,

2023). Sex work should therefore be understood within the broader context of the job market and structural inequalities. Amy reflects on the financial opportunities offered by the sex industry; however, these opportunities often carry social and spiritual disapproval. Within Amy's spiritual framework, individuals who believe in vibrations seek out people and experiences that enhance or maintain a high-vibrational (high vibes) state of being, whereas low-vibrational (low vibes) experiences are associated with negative feelings and realities (Maxwell & Katyal, 2022). Sex work may be viewed as a low vibration because it is often framed as morally wrong or dirty work. Amy, however, feels positively about her work and reconciles these feelings through reframing her spiritual practice (Beekers & Schrijvers, 2020). Yet, accepting the belief that sex work is low vibration conflicts with her goal of living in a high-vibrational state. This tension complicates her identities, creating harmonious-dissonance, as she must balance her positive feelings about her work with negative social and spiritual views.

Negotiating their queer identities: non-monogamy and sexual pleasure

Another way these participants negotiated their identities for harmony is by being in consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. They reflected on how CNM helped them navigate the demands of sex work, private intimacy, and in Khan's case, her sexuality:

> All my partners have known since I started … I'm demisexual, borderline asexual … Not having a local partner; not having that sexual ability to fulfil that sexual need isn't a big deal because I don't really have that sexual need. That's how long-distance relationships work well for me and being polyamorous allows my partners to have other partners to get those needs met …. (Khan)

While some religious communities promote heterosexual monogamous relationships (McQueeney, 2009), for Khan, engaging with CNM was not noted to cause dissonance with her religious identity. Her experience highlights how religious and spiritual choice can enable diverse experiences of sexual intimacy and expression to co-exist within religion and spirituality (Wilcox, 2003). Although non-monogamy is a way for Khan to have successful private intimate relationships because of her low desire for sex, her sexuality conflicts with the demands of full-service (typically penetrative sex) out-call escorting (meeting clients at a chosen location). However, she was sofa surfing at the time of the interview, *'I'm on the couch, I don't have a room. I don't have a bed'*, so it is difficult for her to engage in sex work which does not involve full-service sex such as online content creating. While this form of sex work is potentially challenging for her sexuality, this is the best occupational option within her current life circumstances.

In comparison, Amy discusses how being in a non-monogamous relationship with her cis male partner enables her to have sexual experiences with people she has met in the sex industry:

> … I've been with him for a long time, we're technically non-monogamous. That's what's giving me the freedom to hook-up with other people in the industry off camera. (Amy)

Amy separates her occupational and 'off camera' sexual experiences. This separation is important when understanding the management of intimate partner relationships; sex within work is labour, whereas sex with colleagues external to their work setting is not, it is for pleasure and intimate connection. However, Amy's mention that her and her partner are *'technically non-monogamous'* suggests their relationship boundaries are unclear. CNM involves an explicit agreement and boundary setting for extra romantic or sexual relationships with each partner (Jansson et al., 2022). Therefore, it can be suggested that her sexual experiences external to her work are an ongoing negotiation for her relationship.

Khan and Amy have different experiences of sexual pleasure when sex working. Khan discusses how she compartmentalizes her job to manage conflict with her other identities:

> . . . It's just for money and it's not like I enjoy it completely . . . I don't dislike it either, there are no romantic feelings, I clock in and do the job, and [then] I clock out . . . And that's how I can compartmentalise it and not have it affect me the way that I know it has affected other people. (Khan)

Her mention of 'no romantic feelings' challenges monogamous understandings that love and sex are interconnected. *'Clocking in and out'* suggests the disconnection of intimacy with her clients; sex work only offers Khan economic income (Sanders, 2005a). Her reflections suggest that she engages in surface acting to perform the behaviours and social cues of feeling sexual pleasure, as she cannot engage in deep acting because she seldom desires sexual experiences (Hochschild, 1979). While this enables her to gain income, she can experience emotional dissonance because her work challenges her sexuality.

Unlike Khan, Amy expresses a desire for sexual experiences and reflects on her own sexual pleasure when creating pornography:

> I am basically doing it to cater for the male gaze. I think I'm lucky that I'm a woman who can have an orgasm just from internal stimulation. . . . With a woman, usually those will be more performance, less pleasure. Unless there's a toy involved. I do like women, but when it's on camera, it is a lot more about the performance aspect . . . I do fake some orgasms, but they are definitely not all fake. (Amy)

Although porn is not always made with the purpose to bring sexual satisfaction to sex workers, this does not mean it is always absent. Depending on the connection and experience of the shoot, Amy, like other porn actors, can experience sexual pleasure (Smith, 2017). When she is creating porn for the male gaze, it focuses on internal penetration (Reiss & Dahlman, 2024); however, she feels lucky she can experience sexual pleasure from this type of pornography while also capitalizing on dominant heterosexual male desires. With women, her sexual pleasure is more performative; mainstream lesbian and female bisexual pornography is often made to fulfil heterosexual men's sexual fantasies as opposed to empowering queer women's sexual agency (Johnson & Grove, 2017). Her pornography performances with women connects to Sanders (2005a) work on manufactured identities, which is a combination of both sexual labour and deep emotion work as she performs the cues of pleasure. The hyper-sexualization of lesbian and bisexual women in mainstream heterosexual porn may, therefore, influence Amy's experiences of sexual pleasure when creating pornography with women, illustrating the entangled

nature of heteronormative ideologies and queer sex workers' experiences of the sex industry.

Non-mainstream religious and spiritual identities

The next collection of quotes explores participants' religious and spiritual identities and how these are influenced by their sexuality, gender, and sex work. To begin, Khan reflects upon her religious journey of leaving Christianity and becoming a Norse Pagan:

> . . . I am Norse Pagan. I was raised Christian, however . . . if I were still a Christian, the first hurdle I had to overcome, and that's what led me down a completely different path was trying to reconcile me being trans with being Christian. It's bad enough to be gay but being trans . . . There just really wasn't a feasible way to overcome it . . . I don't think there is a way to reconcile sex work with Christianity. . . . I don't belong and you're saying I don't belong, so why would I want to belong. (Khan)

Khan discusses how some engagements with Christianity exclude sex workers, non-heterosexual, and transgender individuals. Her experience supports Johnston's (2022) work, which describes how the negotiation of belief for sex workers consists of embarking on an exploration of the self, questioning belief systems, and subsequently rejecting their previously held beliefs. Because she is transgender and demisexual/asexual, these doctrines had a significant impact on her identity, so she leaves the church to find acceptance in other religions and connects with the more flexible framework Norse Paganism offers. She continues:

> That's what is nice about the Norse Pagan community, they are very vocal about their inclusivity. You can be trans, you can be gay . . . you can be whoever you are . . .. (Khan)

Some orthodox religious communities and practices condemn non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, creating identity-related stress for queer individuals (Goss & West, 2000). In contrast, Khan's Norse Pagan community affirms her identities and fosters a sense of belonging she did not experience in her former Christian community.

Amy has had the same spiritual identity since childhood and like Khan, she reflects on how the diversification of religiosity can enable acceptance and alignment with an individual's life and identities:

> This generation of spirituality has become more relaxed and personalised. It's less about, 'you've got to follow these rules, and this is the way it is'. It's more 'this is what it is for me', and that's what it should be, it's about you individually. (Amy)

Amy and Khan's religion and spirituality have emerged within the United States' pluralistic and individualized religious environment, which enables individuals to adapt beliefs and practices to their life circumstances (Ammerman, 2014). The nation's long history of a free religious marketplace has produced a competitive and diverse landscape in which multiple faiths coexist and adapt to social, cultural, and political forces (Koenig, 2016). In this context, religiosity is fluid and continually diversifying, with some Americans combining or reinterpreting elements from various traditions to form personalized systems of belief and practice, a process McGuire (2008) terms 'bricolage'. This individualized approach to religiosity enables individuals such as Amy and Khan to reconcile and integrate different

aspects of their identities, including their sex work. The relationship between religiosity and sex work is explored further below.

Non-mainstream religiosity and sex work

Both participants discussed how their non-mainstream religious and spiritual identities co-existed with sex work. Khan spoke of how Norse Paganism can be interpreted to include sex workers in a positive way:

> The path of Norse Paganism I'm on, it's not as all-encompassing of your life as say Christianity or Islam is. It's live your life with honour, to yourself and your Gods . . . There is one that isn't specifically the Goddess of sex workers, but the realm of things that a God discovers could be interpreted to include sex work. (Khan)

Her belief that a Norse Pagan God can be interpreted as inclusive of sex workers offers an alternative perspective that challenges the assumption that sex work and religiosity are inherently incompatible (Peach, 2005). Non-mainstream religions that embrace diverse engagements with sexual expression can be a way for sex workers to be religious or spiritual without having to engage in complex stigma management. Khan's experience illustrates the diversification of religious identities and communities in contemporary landscapes, where individuals have an active role in shaping their beliefs and practices (Nyhagen, 2017).

Amy's discussion of how her spirituality can intersect with her sexual experiences offers another example of how non-mainstream religiosity can be a space for co-existing sex work identities:

> . . . I feel they're like two separate things [spiritual and sex work identity], in my mind, they're not really at odds with each other. They're two different parts of my life to an extent. Sex can still be spiritual for me. Not every time you have sex is gonna be a spiritual experience, but it has the potential to be. And even if you don't have a connection with the person . . . you can still enjoy the moment, and sex for me, it kind of turns my brain off and just lets me be, and I feel like that's kind of a spiritual experience . . .. (Amy)

Lived religion examines how individuals experience, practice, and find meaning in religion in their everyday lives (Ammerman, 2014). Although lived religion is often discussed in contemporary contexts, historical religious life in America also included home-based rituals and other non-institutional sacred spaces (Hall, 1997). Amy exemplifies how spiritual and sex work identities can co-exist and create unique sex work experiences. However, mentioning that they are *'two separate things'* implies that her sex work identity is not integrated into her other identities. Separating her sex work identity may be a way to disassociate from sex work stigma (Abel, 2011). Therefore, although there is the possibility for non-mainstream religiosity to co-exist in sex workers' lives, societal and religious stigma can influence how these identities are performed and experienced together.

Although the individualized nature of religiosity can allow for identity harmony, all sex workers within this research faced challenges because of other people's religious and spiritual beliefs on sex work. Amy discussed tensions with her father, who has the same spiritual identity as her:

> . . . He thinks that sex work is something that is very out of sync with normal society and the way that humans should be, it's a very low vibration . . . I asked, what is it about it that you do not like, what is it about adding currency into the interaction, how does that make it automatically out of sync and a low vibe? And he used the example 'if you were to ask a cannibal that question a cannibal would be like . . . Taking the killing out of the equation, just the eating of the human flesh part, what part makes it wrong? Is it when I think the thought, is it when I chew, is it when I swallow, how is eating human flesh wrong?'. The answer is you can't really think of a specific part . . . we just know that it is. (Amy)

Amy thinks her occupation is positive, so doesn't experience internal conflict between these identities, yet harmonious-dissonance emerges because of her father's opposing beliefs on sex work. Although her father does not explicitly equate sex work with the low vibe level of cannibalism, he uses the example to illustrate his belief that sex in exchange for payment is objectively wrong. While this moral framing is grounded in their shared spiritual beliefs about vibrations, secular attitudes may also be influential. In the US, the criminalization of sex work reinforces perceptions of immorality and deviance, legitimizing its legal regulation (Weitzer, 2020). Vocal religious groups, often Evangelical Christians, echo this view, framing sex work as inherently tied to sex trafficking and positioning sex workers as victims in need of rescue or as sinful people (Daniel-Hughes, 2018). These religious positions frequently align with abolitionist and carceral feminist arguments that portray the sex industry as a site of women's objectification, calling for its eradication. Such alliances fuel sensationalized generalizations about sex workers, intensifying stigma in mainstream discourse while silencing counter-narratives (Weitzer, 2020). Thus, while Amy interprets her father's stigmatizing views through the lens of spirituality, these views may also be shaped by broader socio-legal frameworks and public attitudes, where religious condemnation and secular moralism intersect.

Discussion

Religious and spiritual rejection

Both participants have non-mainstream religious and spiritual identities, and they value the fluid and individualized nature of their beliefs. Their engagements with religion and spirituality challenge binary categorizations of religiosity and show how lived religion can alleviate some challenges of identity conflict. However, this is not without complex identity work as they experienced religious and spiritual rejection. For Khan, her religious transition stemmed from Christianity's rejectiion of her queer identities, while Paganism has been noted to support people to understand who they are (Moreno, 2019). Consequently, Norse Paganism can function as a non-judgemental space where people with stigmatized identities can find self-acceptance. This is important for Khan as she navigates her sex work, gender identity, and sexuality.

Khan did not say her sex work identity caused conflict with her religious identity now, but she believes this would have if she were still a Christian because of the negative views Christianity has on sex work (Peach, 2005). The Christian sex worker participants in this research also acknowledged the negative views Christianity has on sex work. For example, Tanya, a Methodist Christian sex worker stated, '. . . *I would be a pariah. If I said I was a sex worker, I would be shunned*' (Matthews, 2024). Although religious stigma was prominent for these sex workers, they wanted to stay a part of the religion, so they managed stigma

by concealing their occupation. While this was a successful identity tactic for them, they were fearful that their involvement in sex work would be found out, so internal stigma and stress were heightened for these participants. While the Christian sex workers navigated this stigma, they were not queer. As Khan holds multiple identities that conservative forms of Christianity are hostile towards, there is no possibility for identity reconciliation through believing without belonging or 'leaving the Church to keep her faith' (Packard & Ferguson, 2018), as she said, *'I don't belong and you're saying I don't belong, so why would I want to belong?'*. Therefore, the ability to reject certain religious values through religious negotiation can be constrained by how many identities are stigmatized within a religious community.

Unlike Khan, Amy had the same spiritual identity from childhood, which she felt co-existed with sex work. However, her father sees sex work as a low vibration, which decreases her spiritual wellbeing. Her father's beliefs are in the context of spiritual morality; however, they mirror societal views that sex work is dirty work (Tzeng & Ohl, 2021). These parallels illustrate the dual stigma she faces from her father's spiritual beliefs and society. The complex dynamics between these identities illustrate that although there is religious choice, which supports Khan and Amy's ability to create alternative religious and spiritual frameworks which embrace their sex work and queer identities, tensions remain because of other individuals' religious interpretations and biases against sex work.

It is also important to note that Amy and Khan are white women. While intersectionality is now used to consider multiple aspects of identity, Crenshaw's (1989) framework was originally developed to highlight the experiences of Black women. Therefore, their navigation of marginalization and religiosity does not capture the additional intersectional stigma experienced by people of colour or by sex workers in contexts where opportunities for individualized religiosity are less available (Halli et al., 2010). In addition, vibrational spirituality can be linked to class privilege. The emphasis on personal energy and on engaging only in high vibrational experiences reflects a neo-liberal sentiment and often ignores structural inequality, suggesting that individuals are responsible for their vibes regardless of their conditions (Carr & Kelan, 2021). So, while their experiences of religion enable acceptability and identity harmony, this is not necessarily applicable to all marginalized identities or social and legal landscapes external to the US.

Non-mainstream religiosity, sexuality and sexual pleasure

Queer theory highlights the erotic and political dimensions of faith, drawing out the connection between spirituality and eroticism (Althaus-Reid, 2003). Khan's reflections on how Norse Paganism can be interpreted to include sex work connect to Moreno's (2019) work, which discusses the importance of self-accepting sexuality in Paganism. In Moreno's (2019) work, Rowan, a participant in this study said, 'Paganism opened me further to the possibilities of pursuing sex work as part of sacred sexuality' (p.1). This understanding of sex and sexuality differs from the sex workers who were apart of mainstream religions. Emily, a heterosexual, Catholic, sugar baby, and a member of the Irish Traveller community, discussed how having sex outside of marriage, which is condemned within her culture and interpretation of religious texts, made her feel negatively about her sex work (Matthews, 2024). Therefore, Khan's transition to a non-mainstream religion exemplifies the possibility for religiosity to co-exist harmoniously with sex work and sexuality.

Amy's experience of sexual pleasure and spirituality differs from Khans as she does desire sexual experiences. Her discussion that sex can sometimes be spiritual connects with Lorde's (1978) work on erotic as power, which posits that eroticism goes beyond the physical and connects to the spiritual. Lorde (1978) suggests engaging with erotic energy enables women to become in tune with their inner selves and embrace their spiritual freedom, which can lead them to reject societal repression and become themselves, or in Amy's words, *'just lets me be'*. However, her mention that *'they are two different parts of my life'* suggests her sex work identity is not integrated with her spiritual identity. Althaus-Reid (2003) challenges the binary oppositions of the sacred and the erotic, as eroticism, which is the force of desire and intimate connection, is an integral part of human experience. Eroticism does not necessarily always mean sexual pleasure but is a divine connection, so theology must embrace the complexities of erotic human desire. This is true for religious and spiritual sex workers, as while their religious and spiritual identities co-exist with their sex work, there is still conflict from stigma, which they continually manage through identity work.

Weighing up stigma and intimacy: challenging monogamous ideologies

Amy and Khan detailed how CNM helps manage their intimate partner relationships and occupational demands. Their experiences illustrate the variability of sexual engagements, challenging dominant ideologies of monogamy and heterosexuality in sex work research and society (Stardust, 2015). Because of sex work stigma, sex workers engage in a complex decision as to whether to share their work with their partners or potential partners (Sanders, 2005b). Khan discussed how she is transparent about her occupation with her partners. As they are already rejecting heteronormative frameworks of private intimacy by engaging in CNM relationships, sex work may be more accepted, which allows Khan to be open about her work. Her engagement with polyamory and long-distance relationships aligned with her sexuality yet, her demi-/asexuality conflicts with escorting. She manages this tension by compartmentalizing her sex work identity to *'not let it affect me'*, which connects to earlier analysis of how Amy saw her sex work and spiritual identity as *'two different parts of my life'*. Khan separates her identities to negotiate stigma and to manage conflict between her sexual desires versus her work actions. Although this may be interpreted as a negative impact of sex work, sex workers employing emotional management strategies does not mean they are passive to male desires or 'worse off' than women in non-sex work occupations (Sanders, 2005a). Instead, their identity work illustrates the complexities in sexual behaviours for economic income and in private intimate relationships.

While engaging in CNM can help queer individuals balance work demands, sexuality, and private intimate relationships, it also exposes them to religious and social stigma because their relationships deviate from heteronormative norms and remain a minority dynamic (Mahar et al., 2022). This complicates their identities, since non-mainstream religious or spiritual affiliations can sometimes alleviate religious disapproval of CNM, yet they remain vulnerable to stigma from mainstream religions that promote monogamous, heterosexual relationships (Frankenberry, 2018). Weighing up potential outcomes for harmonious identities and experiences can be noted in their decisions. For example, if they were not in CNM relationships, they might not have been able to have

private intimate relationships or sex 'off camera' in the case of Amy. Yet, they risk experiencing CNM because of its non-normative status.

Intersectional stigma shaping engagements with sex work

Internal and external stigma management influenced how Khan and Amy saw and understood their work. Both gained access to the labour market by working in the sex industry; however, Khan's decision to sex work was shaped by broader structural inequalities, linked to her mental health challenges and transphobia. Despite this, she still has agency in her decision to sex work and challenges the idea that the sex industry is inherently exploitative. As opposed to reinforcing stigmatizing beliefs that sex workers have no agency or are victims (Mac & Smith, 2018), it is crucial to offer better welfare support and work opportunities to people who are gender transitioning or suffering from mental health issues. In the case of Amy, as her sex work is known to her father, she cannot hide her work to navigate stigma, so she chooses to embrace it: *'maybe low vibrations are where it is at'*. Her experience shows how sex workers can reclaim agency through their feelings about their occupation (Benoit et al., 2020; Grant, 2014); yet stigma disrupts her positive feelings, creating harmonious-dissonance.

This article has argued that religious and secular perspectives on sex work should not be examined separately. Vocal anti-sex work religious groups, alongside abolitionist feminist movements, actively seek to eradicate the sex industry in the US (Weitzer, 2020). This alliance perpetuates stigma, forcing sex workers to engage in complex identity negotiations to manage the dissonance they encounter in their everyday lives. Consequently, navigating negative societal and religious perceptions, alongside the effects of criminalization, is a persistent aspect of sex workers' lived experiences. Literature shows how implementing decriminalization, which means sex workers can work without the threat of criminal prosecution, creates optimal working conditions for sex workers (Armstrong, 2021). While decriminalization improves sex workers' rights, and is the first step in reducing stigma, it is not a silver bullet, because even with the implementation of decriminalization, there are still additional oppressions faced by sex workers (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; Mac & Smith, 2018). Weitzer (2018) highlights that it is also important to address public attitudes through education for society to understand sex work as legitimate labour rather than deviant or immoral. Therefore, addressing the intersecting struggles, such as queer stigma and beliefs in religions and spiritualities, alongside seeing sex work as an acceptable form of work, is instrumental to alleviating the need for sex workers to engage in complex identity negotiations and stigma management.

Conclusion and recommendations

The case studies presented in this article have offered insight into queer religious and spiritual sex workers' identity management and everyday lives. Their multifaceted experiences and reflections contribute to sex work research by offering rich understandings of religiosity, intimate partner relationships, and sexual expression, demonstrating sex workers' complex stigma management. This article contributes to a growing body of work in queer theology by showing how sex work, sexuality, and religiosity can exist

harmoniously through engagement with non-mainstream religious frameworks. Because of religious choice, religious and spiritual spaces can serve as a source of empowerment, belonging, and meaning-making. At the same time, the persistent queer and sex work stigma they face shows the precarious nature of their harmonious identities.

This article does not claim generalizability; rather, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions within sex worker rights advocacy by calling for broader recognition of sex workers' complex identities. This includes their diverse sexualities and genders, as well as their religious and spiritual identities. Similarly, practitioners, professionals, and services that support sex workers must acknowledge identities beyond their occupation to best meet their needs. Addressing wider structural inequalities related to mental health and transphobia is as important as challenging social and religious heteronormative norms and moral beliefs that frame sex work as deviant, sinful, or objectifying. Ultimately, this article argues for moving beyond simplistic binaries between religiosity and sex work, challenging both condemnation and saviour narratives, and moving towards holistic acceptance and inclusion within religious and secular spaces. Doing this, alongside legal reform through the global decriminalization of the sex industry, will play an instrumental role in improving sex workers' lives.

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