

Bending the Binary: LGBTQ Sex Workers' Gender Presentations

By Nicole White

ABSTRACT. The lived experiences of LGBTQ sex workers are largely unknown. Of the few representations of LGBTQ sex workers in media and academia, most are shrouded in inaccurate and dehumanizing stereotypes. Through qualitative interviews with eight LGBTQ sex workers in Denver and Boulder, Colorado, this thesis attempts to portray an accurate view of the way LGBTQ sex workers negotiate their gender and sexual identities. LGBTQ sex workers were found to balance their queer and trans identities and presentations with clients' perceived desires for hegemonic gender presentations, maintaining a unique blend of authentic presentation and marketability.

Introduction

Sex work has long been debated in academic, feminist, and mainstream discourse. Shrouded in stereotypes and moralistic claims, representations of sex work often swing between polar extremes. At one end of the spectrum, dominance feminists claim that sex work is inherently oppressive, often portraying sex workers as helpless victims of patriarchy and/or capitalism (Showden 2012). In an attempt to combat this harsh view, sex positive feminists began describing sex work in a more positive light, sometimes going as far as claiming that the sex industry is inherently queer and progressive (Barton 2001; Mai 2012; McKay 1999; Read 2013).

Given these focused views and general claims about the sex industry as a whole, it is not surprising that little research has been conducted on sex workers' actual lives and experiences. As such, most studies on sex workers focus on their risks of contracting sexually transmitted

infections and/or facing physical and sexual violence (Begum et al. 2013; Gorry, Roen, and Reilly 2010; Jackson, Bennett, and Sowinski 2007; Mai 2012; Vanwesenbeeck 2013; Weitzer 2010). Additionally, research focused on LGBTQ sex workers specifically is rare (Barton 2001; Smith and Laing 2012). Barton (2001) theorizes that most scholars studying sex workers avoid talking about gender and sexual orientation out of fear of alienating their informants. Rather than protecting informants from feeling shame, however, researchers contribute to the stigma LGBTQ sex workers face by perpetuating their invisibility in academia (Smith and Laing 2012).

Thankfully, new definitions and conceptualizations of sex work allow for the diversity of sex workers' lives to be more accurately represented. Scholars are now contending that a singular sex worker identity does not exist (Orchard et al. 2013). Additionally, philosophical debates about the morality of sex work are often dehumanizing and patronizing. As such, this thesis will explore the rich experiences of LGBTQ sex workers, a group that lives on the crux of many complex socio-cultural contexts (Smith and Laing 2012). LGBTQ sex workers illuminate the importance of intersectionality with their multiple oppressed identities and can teach us much about gender identity, sexuality, identity management, authenticity, and performativity. By listening to their stories, we can greatly increase knowledge in the fields of queer theory, feminism, sexuality, and identity.

With this approach, I hope to emphasize that individuals' gender/sexuality identities and presentations, within both their working and non-working personas, are varied and mutable (Ocha and Earth 2013). LGBTQ sex workers, like all other individuals, can "enact multiple, overlapping, intertwined, contradictory and simultaneous identity roles" (Read 2013:244). LGBTQ sex workers do not oscillate between an 'authentic' self, where workers would theoretically present their gender and sexual orientation as they do in everyday life, and an 'inauthentic' self, where workers would conform completely to clients' expectations.

Instead, LGBTQ sex workers integrate various aspects of themselves and their lives at different times in their work, as all individuals bring out diverse parts of themselves in varied social interactions (Webber 2013). I hope to let my participants speak for themselves to reveal the complex, diverse, and rich lives of LGBTQ sex workers.

Methods

I used a qualitative in-depth interview design to explore how LGBTQ sex workers think about and present their gender and sexual orientations. I conducted interviews from January to March 2014 with LGBTQ current and former sex workers living in the Denver-Boulder area of Colorado.

Eight individuals were interviewed in my sample, all of whom I assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. (See Table 1 for a description of participants' identities.) Their ages ranged from 21 to 34 years old, with an average age of 26. Four participants identify as cisgender women, one identifies as a transgender guy, one identifies as gender queer on the masculine spectrum, one identifies as gender fluid, and one does not identify with gender. Four participants identify as white, one identifies as white with some Native ancestry, one identifies as Latina, one identifies as bi-racial, and one identifies as Mediterranean. All eight participants identify as queer. Six participants identify as polyamorous and two identify as non-monogamous.

The individuals in my sample represented many different branches of the sex industry, and most have worked several different jobs. The different types of sex work that participants have done include being a sugar baby⁴⁹ (n = 3), escorting⁵⁰ (n = 3), web camming⁵¹ (n = 3),

⁴⁹ Sugar babying involves going on dates, talking, or having sexual interactions with a sugar daddy or sugar mommy. Sugaring normally replicates a dating relationship, instead of exchanging money for a single service.

⁵⁰ Escorting involves having sexual interactions with a client.

stripping⁵² (n = 2), giving erotic massages⁵³ (n = 2), being a financial domme⁵⁴ (n = 2), and performing in porn⁵⁵ (n = 2). The average age of entry into the sex industry was twenty years old. At the time of being interviewed, three participants were currently working in the sex industry, while five were not. Only one participant expressed that she did not want to do sex work again in the future.

Findings

Each of the participants in my sample struck a careful balance between authenticity and playing a role when it came to presenting their gender to clients. They incorporated their personal identities, personal emotional needs, the desires of their clients, and the demands of the sex industry into their work. Each LGBTQ sex worker felt pressured to present as more “vanilla” and heteronormative than they would like in order to be successful in the industry. Regardless of their personal gender identities, MAAB (male assigned at birth) sex workers acted more in accordance with hegemonic masculinity, while FAAB (female assigned at birth) sex workers acted more in accordance with hegemonic femininity. However, they each found ways to weave their queer identities into their work.

⁵¹ Web camming, sometimes shortened to ‘camming’, involves talking, stripping, masturbating, or modeling online, usually in a live chat with clients.

⁵² Stripping involves dancing at a strip club or at private parties, such as bachelor parties.

⁵³ Erotic massage involves giving a full body massage to clients. The ‘erotic’ component can come from the sex worker being partially or fully naked, giving the client manual sexual stimulation, engaging in other sexual interactions, or a combination of the three.

⁵⁴ Financial domination involves extorting money from consenting clients, usually in a BDSM context.

⁵⁵ Porn performers involves being filmed having sex with others. Amateur porn usually involves filming yourself having sex, as opposed to working for an outside company that sets up the filming.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of the Sample

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Preferred Gender Pronouns	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Orientation	Race	Sex Work Done Over Lifetime
Riley	27	Does not identify with gender	He / him / his	Queer	Polyamorous	Mediterranean	Webcam model, sugar baby
Zoe	28	Cisgender woman	She / her / hers	Queer	Polyamorous	White with Native ancestry	Escort, stripper, amateur porn performer
Shane	21	Gender fluid	They / them / theirs	Queer	Polyamorous	White	Webcam model, sugar baby, financial domme
Cameron	27	Transgender man	He / him / his	Queer	Non-monogamous	White	Erotic massage
Ariadne	28	Cisgender woman	She / her / hers	Queer	Polyamorous	Bi-racial	Escort, porn performer, webcam model, sugar baby
Lilith	22	Cisgender woman	She / her / hers	Queer	Polyamorous	Latina	Financial domme
Laine	34	Genderqueer on the masculine spectrum	He / him / his	Queer	Non-monogamous	White	Erotic massage
Jolene	21	Cisgender woman	She / her / hers	Queer	Polyamorous	White	Stripper, escort, sugar baby

All of my participants stated that they identified themselves as cisgender to most, if not all, of their clients in order to appear more mainstream. These identifications seemed to be based largely in clients' perceptions of gender and sex. The cisgender women had the privilege of having clients guess their gender correctly, since they all presented as feminine and female. The genderqueer and gender fluid individuals allowed clients to misgender them as males or females, in accordance with the sex they were assigned at birth. Shane, a gender fluid person who formerly did webcam and sugar baby work, explained how clients assumed their gender identity. They stated,

“Most people aren't even aware that you can be anything other than a cis woman or a cis man. Like, I didn't need to put on this big show to prove that I was a woman or anything, it was just, 'you have boobs, you're a girl.'”

On the other hand, Cameron, a trans man who does erotic massage, experienced much more conflict surrounding his gender identity. He explained how he manages presenting as a cisgender women to clients while taking testosterone:

People can tell that I'm not quite a woman at this point because of hormones, but they can't totally figure it out. They're not really sure what's going on or what it is, so they just assume that I'm a trans woman. So this guy came in and he was like, 'Are you a man?' And I was like, well the answer is kind of yes, but not in the way that you're thinking.

Since Cameron's hormones have changed his secondary sex characteristics, including deepening his voice, clients occasionally think that he is a trans woman. It is interesting to note how Cameron must balance transitioning into a man in his everyday life and appearing as a cisgender woman in his work, especially since most previous research on transgender sex workers has focused on individuals who present themselves as transgender within their work.

Although they presented as cisgender in most circumstances, some LGBTQ sex workers have been more open about their gender identity. Cameron has a section on

his website about gender bending. Although he says that few people request him to dress up like a boy, it does happen occasionally. Laine, a masculine-of-center genderqueer individual, explained that he recently had a client who broke his rule of presenting “strictly as male and masculine” in his work. Laine was able to admit that he wore women’s clothes to a client after that client asked open, non-judgmental questions about gender.

In accordance with previous research that has found that sex workers utilize beauty practices to appear conventionally beautiful, the individuals in my sample tended to adhere to more stereotypical gender presentations (Marvin and Grandy 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013; Spanger 2013). Since almost all studies on beauty in the sex industry have focused on individuals who present as cis and trans women, it is important to recognize that the male-presenting sex workers in my sample felt pressured to conform to gender stereotypes, as well. Most of the sex workers in my study explained that they wore more feminine (for FAAB sex workers) or masculine (for MAAB sex workers) clothes while working than they did otherwise. Lilith, a cis woman who used to be a financial domme, said, “I dressed super sexy [for work]... And, I mean, you can see me now, I’m wearing a baggy t-shirt and I’m not wearing a bra. When I’m online, I definitely wear a bra.” Riley explained how he toned down his normally “flamboyant” appearance for work. He stated, “Normally I’ll wear my hat to the side, but I might flip it back. And I’ll take out my piercings and dangly stuff.”

However, many found ways to incorporate their own personal style into their work outfits, or chose not to alter their clothing at all. Although Jolene, a cis woman who is a sugar baby and used to strip and escort, has felt pressure to dress in more stereotypically feminine or sexy ways, she does not change her clothing for clients. She stated, “I don’t really put on a show for anybody these days.” Laine, on the other hand, has found a more subtle way to weave his authentic self into his working attire. He explained, “I wear clothes that are really masculine, except

sometimes I'll wear women's jeans and women's shirts. I just do it in hidden ways that no one would really recognize." Laine is thus able to portray himself as masculine to clients, while secretly expressing his more queer gender identity.

One of the few beauty rituals that the LGBTQ sex workers in my study did not participate in was choosing a strategically gender-normative haircut. This is in contrast to previous research that emphasized the importance of sex workers having stereotypically feminine or masculine haircuts (Rivers-Moore 2013). This may be because most research examines cisgender sex workers, who may have non-deviant haircuts to begin with. Within my sample of queer and trans sex workers, however, only one person, Cameron, expressed that he waited to get a certain haircut out of fear that it would reduce his marketability. Many of the participants in my study had eccentric, short, or dyed hair. The tendency for LGBTQ sex workers to feel less restricted in choosing a haircut may be because haircuts are more permanent markers of appearance. It is easy to change one's clothes and makeup for a few hours for work, but maintaining a work-friendly haircut would impede on individuals' abilities to express their queer or trans identities in their everyday lives. Thus, sex workers are less likely to consider clients' reactions when deciding how to cut their hair.

While few of the sex workers expressed distress over choosing their clothing and hair—most found those processes to be somewhere between slightly annoying to fun—many of the feminine-presenting sex workers had complicated feelings about shaving. Four out of the six feminine-presenting individuals in my sample expressed that they normally do not shave their armpits, legs, or pubic hair. They seemed to be anxious about how clients would react to their body hair. This is certainly understandable, since women are usually expected to have hairless legs and armpits and are frequently demonized if they do not shave.

The feminine-presenting sex workers in my sample seemed well aware of this beauty standard. Each of the

feminine-presenting sex workers who did not shave tried to work out a process for hiding their body hair from clients. Shane expressed, "When I was camming, I just set the lighting up so my leg hair wouldn't show and I just, like, never raised my arms. I don't think anyone noticed." Cameron employed a similar tactic with clients. He stated, "I kind of just keep my arms down...but I don't think people are too weirded out by me not shaving my armpits. Not shaving my legs is a much bigger deal. I wear thigh high stockings at all times when I'm working." Jolene is much more open about her body hair. She stated, "[My sugar daddies] know that I don't shave my armpits because I wear short sleeves. Nobody's said anything." Still, she stated that she thinks she will need to confront her sugar daddies about her unshaved pubic hair if they start to have sex.

The main reason individuals altered their appearance was to fit what they believed were the demands of the industry. Sex workers tend to assume that most clients prefer to see young, traditionally attractive workers, and so they feel they must adhere to those standards to succeed (Marvin and Grandy 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013; Trautner 2005). Ariadne described how clients influenced her gender performance to be more conventionally feminine when she was webcamming. She said, "When I would get on one-on-one chat, that's what people wanted a lot of the time, was for me to do things that were more feminine... I got requests to put on heels and to put on lipstick, too." She explained this phenomenon of clients requesting feminine presentations by stating, "I think it's this ideal that people are paying for." Zoe summed up her tendency to appear more feminine very succinctly. When asked why she alters her appearance, she simply responded, "Because that's what the demand is for." Although Laine did not have as many aspects of his appearance to change for sex work as the feminine-presenting sex workers, he still felt pressured to present in a masculine way to be successful. He stated, "I default to almost a caricature of a gay sex worker identity... I don't

feel at liberty to express gender in a variety of ways at work. I think that undermines my marketability.”

These motivations did not stay static over time or across participants, however. I found that individuals who have been in the sex industry longer and who have more economic privilege were less likely to adhere to gendered scripts. Those who have done sex work for several years slowly began incorporating their authentic selves more into their work, and found that they were still able to retain clients. Those who were wealthier or had income from other jobs, on the other hand, felt they could take risks with how they presented themselves because they would not be negatively affected by losing clients.

Conclusion

Most previous research on sex workers' gender and sexual presentations has focused on individuals whose personal and working identities overlap (e.g. cisgender women who present as cisgender women for work). Since my participants all identified as queer and have varying gender identities, I found that they possessed many more opportunities for expressing or hiding their queerness in their work than previously thought. The LGBTQ sex workers in my study managed their personal identities, individual preferences, and the desires of clients to construct their gender performances.

In accordance with previous research, my participants felt pressured to present themselves as more stereotypically masculine or feminine in order to retain clients. However, each individual found ways to weave their queer and trans identities into their presentations with clients. Despite much criticism of the sex industry for being patriarchal and heteronormative, making decisions about what beauty norms to adopt was not a helpless process of succumbing to hegemonic gender roles (Mai 2012; Read 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013). Rather, LGBTQ sex workers skillfully balanced their needs for being authentic, having fun, and making money in choosing how to present their

gender at work. These findings point to the complex natures of gender, sex, and the sex industry.

This study contributes significantly to academic understandings of LGBTQ sex workers. Previous research has offered limited portrayals of LGBTQ sex workers steeped in stereotypes, inaccurate claims, and dehumanizing assumptions. My research shows that there is not a singular sex worker identity (Orchard et al. 2013). Each individual working in the sex industry develops their own tactics for presenting themselves and interacting with clients. Although it is understandable to want to condense individuals' experiences into easily digestible themes, making claims about how all sex workers are exploited, powerful, heteronormative, or queer violates how actual sex workers live their lives. The LGBTQ sex workers in my study wanted to be viewed primarily as normal people with complex experiences and identities. Rather than fitting into a simple dichotomy of oppression or empowerment, queer and trans sex workers simultaneously reinforce, subvert, are subordinated by, and overcome heteronormativity within their work.

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