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**Victim Blaming in the Age of Online Sex Work: Stigma, Stereotypes and
Perception**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the evolving perceptions of sex work, with a particular focus on victim blaming in the context of online sex work, especially on platforms like OnlyFans. Chapter 1 traces the history of sex work, from Ancient Greece to the end of fascism, and explores the implications of the digital transformation of sex work. It highlights how platforms such as OnlyFans have reshaped the industry, while also addressing the stigma and stereotypes that persist around sex work. The second chapter, presents a research study examining the relationship between the use of OnlyFans and the likelihood of experiencing victim blaming in cases of sexual harassment. Finally, chapter 3 discusses the study's findings, limitations, and suggest future research directions on victim blaming and digital sex work.

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CHAPTER 1

Perception and Evolution of Sex Work

1.1 Sex Work from Ancient Greece to the End of Fascism

The term “sex work” was first introduced by Carol Leigh in the early 1980s (Bindel, 2019) to encompass a variety of practices, including prostitution, pornography, stripping, and online sex services (Bidoli, A. 2020). By framing these practices as “work”, the terminology aims to legitimize them and recognize it as just another form of work (Bidoli, A. 2020). Despite the relatively recent introduction of the term “sex work”, prostitution – a concept that has long been acknowledged – has existed throughout history in various forms. In fact, as Schurtz pointed out, prostitution has always been present “in all places where free love is separated from passions and their satisfaction” (Clarkson, 1939) and because of its ancient origin, it is often referred to as “the oldest profession” (Glassford, 2002). A study on racial development demonstrates how prostitution existed already among aboriginal individuals and references can be found in Herodotus and in the Old Testament as well, and more than once (Clarkson, 1939). Solon is recognized as the founder of the first public brothel, frequented by the Greek companions, the slaves and both low-class and upper-class women. Among the participants, upper-class prostitutes were considered above the rest, and were referred to as “hetaerae”, emphasizing their beauty and abilities (Glassford, 2002). As to ancient Romans, despite a strong moral, they were quite favorable in terms of toleration towards prostitution and encouraged brothels, in which, however, men entered covering their head (Clarkson, 1939), a sign that could easily be interpreted as a manifestation of embarrassment or

shame. The reason why prostitution was widely accepted in these times can be attributed to the prevailing belief in the classical world that love was not necessarily a requirement for marriage, which led to a widespread social acceptance of sexual relations outside of marital unions (Glassford, 2002).

During the Middle Ages, prostitution was considered sinful yet maintained its prevalent acceptance, being defined as “a necessary evil in an imperfect world” by Saint Augustine and as something that “could not be completely outlawed by society” by Saint Thomas Aquinas. During the Medieval period, prostitution was often regulated rather than outlawed. Many towns allowed prostitution as long as it occurred outside central areas, as exemplified by Padua, where prostitutes could practice their profession but were restricted from the town center (Glassford, 2002).

With the onset of the Renaissance, due to an ever-decreasing tolerance from European society towards female labor, women were automatically excluded from high status jobs, being left with two major options available: becoming household servants or prostitutes. Consequently, this phenomenon has led many women to engage in prostitution for economic reasons and to avoid falling into extreme poverty. This period also saw the distinction between common prostitutes and courtesans, with the latter being perceived as a more elite group. Courtesans were often named, enjoyed higher incomes, and were celebrated in art and poetry, unlike common prostitutes whose identity often remained anonymous (Glassford, 2002).

In the Italian scenario of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, following the publication of a text by Ferrero and Lombroso (1894), the predominant idea that women could achieve personal fulfillment only through motherhood, led to a sharp division between "normal" women, whose sexuality was characterized by calmness

and moderation, and "deviant" women, whose sexual desire was perceived as a regression to a primitive stage (Cegna, 2023). According to this distinction, women considered deviant par excellence were indubitably prostitutes.

During the fascist regime, perception and tolerance towards prostitution was ambiguous. While prostitution was officially allowed by the institutions, it was rigorously supervised and regulated by extremely strict rules. Prostitutes could only practice their profession in designated "houses of tolerance", meant to encounter and satisfy male desires (Cegna, 2023). The atmosphere of these houses was far from the collective imagery of that characterizing a place for fun and pleasure. In fact, the house of tolerance was instituted merely for men's physical satisfaction and was marked by a cold and aseptic environment in which fun was not allowed. The activity was under constant surveillance by the police, in charge of establishing the time of opening and closing of the brothels and watching over both the visitors who frequented the houses and the women who worked there. Since prostitution became a proper service like any other for the community, it had to be available to everyone at any moment, a reason for which the houses were open throughout the day . Prostitution outside of these houses was considered illegal, and sex workers were subjected to periodical health checks to ensure a safe service for men. (Cegna, 2023). This regulation ended with the Merlin Act, which came into force on September 20th 1958, because of the socialist deputy Lina Merlin who was the first signatory against the exploitation of women's bodies in the houses of tolerance. Such law officially ended the regulation of prostitution in Italy, by closing about seven hundred brothels and leaving about 3 thousand women without work (Focus.it, 2019).

1.2 From Sex Work to Sex E-Work: Implications of the Digitalization of Sex Work

Shifting to our days, it is clearly visible that tolerance and perception of sex work have changed, along with the modalities and contexts in which this job can be practiced. Due to the widespread use of the internet, even the “oldest profession” has found its space on several platforms through a process known as “platformization” (The Autonomy Institute, 2024). Such digital phenomenon has reshaped the concept of sex work, creating new virtual spaces for it to thrive.

According to Laurel Rogers, PhD student at Goldsmith University, sex work’s platformization is the socio-cultural phenomenon that “describes the economic and cultural ascendancy of digital platforms within the sex industry” (The Autonomy Institute, 2024). Jones (2015) further describes online sex work as “the internet-mediated exchange of sexual commodities and/or services”. Various digital platforms investing on sex e-work are now very popular, including subscription content sites (e.g., Only Fans), video-sharing platforms (e.g., PornHub), and adult live camming platforms or service websites (e.g., CamSoda, AdultWork) (The Autonomy Institute, 2024).

The increased popularity gained by online sex work has been particularly visible since onset of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when in-person services were forbidden in most countries due to the significant health risks (ESWA, 2023). During this time, adult camming and sex service platforms reported a sharp increase in sign-ups, with OnlyFans reaching a rise of 75% in April 2020 (The Autonomy Institute, 2024). In particular, OnlyFans is a platform developed in 2016 and recognized for allowing creators to sell sexually explicit content (Atkinson, 2022). On

this site, creators share their material with fans, typically charging a monthly subscription fee (Atkinson, 2022).

The digitalization of sex work, seem to have brought mainly positive implications. For example, a survey and in-depth interviews with online sex workers conducted in the U.K revealed that 78.3% believed the internet had improved their working conditions, 89.4% noted that platformization reduced third-party involvement, and 80.7% said it facilitated the access to peer support. Furthermore, 85% confirmed that it helped them to better screen and select their clients and 65.3% indicated that they would not engage in sex work if not for the benefits of doing it on an online environment (ESWA, 2023).

One of the key advantages of online sex work is the increased autonomy it affords workers. Unlike traditional sex work, which often involves intermediaries, online platforms allow workers to manage their own profiles and decide what content to share and with whom (ESWA, 2023). This independence provides a certain flexibility, enabling sex workers to set personal boundaries and maintain control over their working hours. According to European Sex Work Alliance, the structure of these websites offers greater financial security, as sex workers can set their own rates and retain the profits. This would reduce the financial instability often associated with traditional prostitution, where managers typically control prices and incomes, which increases the chance of prostitutes facing several risks. Research shows that another benefit of engaging in sex work online is the significantly lower risk of physical violence compared that of those working in traditional indoor settings (ESWA, 2023). However, online sex workers must contend with digital-specific threats, such as stalking, online harassment, and several privacy violations.

Although the digitalization of sex work can serve as a tool of economic empowerment, it also comes with its own financial drawbacks. Platforms like OnlyFans, for instance, charge fees – keeping up to 20% of workers' income – and impose limits on how much workers can charge for services or contents, which indirectly dictate their value. Additionally, sex workers may face financial challenges due to chargebacks, where clients can request refunds even long after having received a service, further complicating their economic vulnerability (ESWA, 2023).

While online sex work has expanded opportunities for greater autonomy and financial stability, it is not without its challenges, particularly regarding platform fees and income regulation. Despite these hurdles, many sex workers consider the move to digital platforms a positive change, with improved working conditions and greater control over their professional lives, leading to a general increased well-being.

1.3 Stigma and Stereotypes in the Context of Sex Work

As knowledgeable from what has been discussed so far, prostitution has been accepted and tolerated in various forms throughout history and across different cultures. However, something that has always characterized it is a pervasive stigma which contributed to the development of several stereotypes. Before exploring the concepts of stereotypes and stigma in relation to prostitution, it is necessary to provide clear definitions of these two terms. In psychology, stereotypes are generalized and oversimplified beliefs about a particular group of individuals (Denmark & Williams, 2014). These notions serve as mental shortcuts that help people to give meaning to their social and cultural surroundings with less cognitive effort (Denmark & Williams, 2014). However, relying on stereotypes can foster

prejudice and enhance biases, leading to misunderstanding and negative social repercussions, including the development of stigma.

According to Goffman, stigma can apply both to individuals and entire categories of people (Weitzer, 2017). It can be described as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Weitzer, 2017), or also as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Armstrong, 2019). Goffman further argued that such an issue would result in the assignment of a lower status to individuals who possess a noticeable discrediting characteristic (Weitzer, 2017), leading to acts of discrimination and a reduction of life opportunities of stigmatized groups of individuals (LeBel, 2008). This indicates that stigma can be quite powerful. Labeling and stereotyping based on peoples’ attributes can result in discrimination, devaluation and social exclusion (LeBel, 2008), often leading to forms of violence, negatively impacting individuals’ lives.

Stigma is undeniably one of the most significant issues surrounding sex work. This concern has deep historical roots, particularly in the case of female sex workers, due to persistent patriarchal views on women’s sexuality (Armstrong, 2018). Women who engage in sex work are often labeled as deviant, since they reject traditional social expectations that encourage them to be sexually moderated and to seek solid and meaningful relationships motivated by emotions and desire for commitment (Armstrong, 2019). In fact, according to Pheterson (1996), societal views frequently imply that women who engage in excessive and dysregulated sexual behavior must be labeled as unchaste (Armstrong, 2019). This viewpoint is linked to the belief that when sex workers bring such an intimate aspect of life as sex into a public sphere, they are disrupting all the conventional norms surrounding women’s sexuality together with the general morals of society (Armstrong, 2019). Consequently, by

trading sex for monetary remunerations, prostitutes boldly challenge social and gender norms, thereby posing a significant *threat to the patriarchal framework of society* (Armstrong, 2019), its *traditions and its moral values*.

Despite the assumption that feminism would challenge narrow-minded societal perceptions regarding sex work, the movement reveals contrasting opinions. Some consider sex workers to be coerced victims, while others see them as liberated individuals and empowered entrepreneurs (Huang, 2015). For many, this profession can be seen as a form of liberation, allowing women to freely express their sexuality within a patriarchal context (Huang, 2015).

Although discussion about prostitution often focuses on female sex workers, research indicates that all individuals in this field – regardless of their gender identity – face significant stigma (Armstrong, 2019) together with its extensive consequences on safety, mental health and general well-being. Nonetheless, the degree of stigma varies depending on factors such as sector of employment, nationality, gender (Weitzer, 2017) and environments in which sex workers practice their profession. Notably, trans women and gender diverse sex workers experience stigma closely linked to issues of transphobia and homophobia (Armstrong, 2019).

Depending on the intensity of stigma attributed to individuals in the sex work field, they face significant risks regarding marginalization and vulnerability due to the negative societal perception of their profession. Those who are involved in full-service sex work are more likely to face higher levels of stigma and its associated consequences (Weitzer, 2017). This is particularly true for street-based sex workers, who represent the most stigmatized group in the field of sex work compared to those who work in stripping, pornography (Armstrong, 2018) or simply in indoor settings. In

addition to the stigma associated with sex work, street-based prostitutes also have to face several related stigmas and stereotypes, including the prejudice linked to drug use and a strong stigma tied to migration, which often manifests itself as xenophobic attitudes towards them (Armstrong, 2019). When it comes to street-based sex workers, research indicates that the discriminatory attitudes mentioned above often manifest as acts of violence (Lowman, 2000), which can, in the most severe instances, culminate in homicides.

According to Gravelin (2019), the hypersexualization and sexual objectification of women in society are key factors that contribute to a higher tolerance of violence against women and an increased tendency to blame victims. A primary feature contributing to the development and reinforcement of the stigma and violence against sex work is in fact the way this profession is portrayed in the mass media, which predominantly reflects a negative bias (Huang, 2015) and tends to objectify and sexualize women's bodies. These representations often focus on themes of victimization, emphasizing abuse and trafficking, while many documentaries highlight economic exploitation and physical victimization, often using emotionally charged imagery to convey their messages (Huang, 2015). Furthermore, street-based sex work is often depicted in mainstream media discussions as problematic, dangerous, and threatening. In such narratives, sex workers are rarely featured in interviews, leaving their voices unheard and their perspectives overlooked (Armstrong, 2019). This negative framing extends to popular culture, where representations of street-based sex workers can perpetuate stigma and can incite violence against them. For instance, the video game "Grand Theft Auto", allows players to virtually pick up and murder street-based sex workers, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and attitudes (Armstrong, 2019). These representations intensify the stigma faced by

based-street sex workers, emphasizing that the link between stigma and violence is driven by their objectification and dehumanization (Armstrong, 2019). This helps explain why street-based sex workers, who endure the highest levels of stigma, are also the most vulnerable to experiencing violence (Armstrong, 2019).

Another prevalent stereotype is that sex workers choose their profession solely due to traumatic circumstances, such as childhood abuse (Huang, 2015). However, this is often just a stereotype. A study aimed at de-stigmatizing sex work revealed that participants were offended by being labeled as victims or as individuals without will power. Such views suggest that sex work is inherently a bad choice, disregarding the autonomy and control these people have over their own professional lives (Huang, 2015).

Finally, it is crucial to mention that the several risks associated with such stigma, often compel many sex workers to hide their involvement in the industry. Consequently, they choose to use pseudonyms in order to protect their identities and this often leads them to a life of duality (Armstrong, 2019). This choice is not necessarily driven by shame for their job, but rather as a protective measure against social shaming and discrimination (Armstrong, 2019). For such reasons, sex workers' lives can often induce intense psychological tension, as they are subjected to societal attitudes and judgements.

While progress has been made in recognizing sex workers as fully human and entitled to legal protection against the stigma and violence they are often forced to suffer, negative cultural attitudes towards them remain a significant problem and are probably one of the main reasons why sex workers still persist. These attitudes are a

major factor in why sex workers are so frequently targeted by violent, and sometimes deadly assaults (Sullivan, 2007).

1.4 Victim Blaming

Victim blaming, often referred to as secondary victimization in social psychology, is a widespread and harmful phenomenon whereby individuals perceive the victim of a crime, trauma, or abuse as partially or entirely accountable for their situation (Juli, 2023). Since this involves an inaccurate perception of the actual situation, this phenomenon may be regarded as a form of reality distortion. Such distortion can be particularly concerning for two primary reasons. To begin with, it alters societal understanding of these issues. Furthermore, it impacts how victims perceive themselves, frequently resulting in feelings of guilt and self-blame (OPL, n.d). As a result, victims often find themselves being victimized twice: first from the trauma they have suffered and subsequently from the blame placed upon them for their experiences, becoming, as Romito points out, trapped in a real “continuum of violence” (Juli, 2023).

In most cases, attributing blame to the victim can represent a form of defense that can provide social reassurance regarding the ability to control events (Tennen et al., 2019). In fact, if certain characteristics are correlated with a higher risk of experiencing sexual violence, and thus seen as possible predictors of victimization (Tzani et al., 2024), individuals who lack those traits would perceive a false sense of protection from the crime. This viewpoint is grounded in deep-rooted social biases and is associated with two important theoretical models. The first is the “just world hypothesis”, according to which people generally believe that the world is a “largely

safe and fair place in which to live” where “good things usually happen to good people” (Johnson et al., 2002) and negative events happen only to those who deserve them. The second one is the “defensive attribution hypothesis”, which suggests that individuals frequently associate responsibility based on perceived causal relationships (Burger, 1981). As a result, perceiving victims as different offers further comfort to those who tend to blame based upon characteristics (Grubb & Harrower, 2008).

Although secondary victimization can occur in several different circumstances, it seems especially prevalent in cases of sexual crimes. This phenomenon, indeed, has significant consequences for survivors of sexual violence, as “it is a key driver of society’s acceptance of violence against women” (Beddows, 2022). Several factors are closely intertwined in sexual assault cases and can influence the tendency to hold the victim partially or wholly responsible (Bevens et al., 2018; Gravelin, 2019). These factors include “the features of the assault, the victim, and the perceiver” (Gravelin, 2019).

One crucial factor is once again the objectification of women’s bodies, which is frequently reinforced by media representation. These images, that cater to the male gaze, often imply that men have the right to look at or touch women, treating them as objects rather than autonomous individuals (Bevens et al., 2018). This objectification diminishes moral concern for sexualized women’s well-being, which in turn makes it easier to blame the victim for the assault (Bevens et al., 2018). As a result, the victim’s suffering is denied, and responsibility is shifted onto them, reinforcing harmful attitudes that contribute to sexual aggression (Bevens et al., 2018).

Beyond objectification, other factors, such as the victim's physical attractiveness and sexual history - including sexual orientation and number of previous sexual partners - and behavior play a significant role in reinforcing victim-blaming attitudes (Gravelin, 2019). For instance, a study conducted by Muehlenhard and MacNaughton (1988) revealed that people are more likely to blame victims of sexual abuse if they were wearing revealing or provocative clothing at the moment of the abuse (Gravelin, 2019). This leads to the erroneous belief that the victim "led the perpetrator on", perceiving the latter as less culpable and effectively justifying the assault. Such views reinforce the dangerous misconception that rape is motivated by sexual desire, implying that the victim "asked for it", simply by being perceived as attractive or desirable (Gravelin, 2019).

Sexual history also plays a significant role in victim blaming attitudes. Research shows in fact that victims who are perceived as more promiscuous or had multiple sexual partners prior the assault, are more likely to be blamed, compared to those with fewer sexual experiences (Gravelin, 2019).

Similarly, sexual orientation can impact how blame is assigned. Studies indicate that heterosexual women, for example, are often seen as more responsible for sexual harassment compared to lesbian women who are sexually abused by a man (Gravelin, 2019). This dynamic can be traced to the "rape as sexual desire" myth, where a heterosexual woman is often perceived as sexually provocative toward her male assailant, leading to a perception of greater guilt than that attributed to a lesbian victim (Gravelin, 2019). In addition to these factors, women who challenge traditional gender roles are often blamed more than those who conform to them. Similarly, women who consume alcohol prior to an assault tend to be blamed more than those who are sober, as their intoxication is viewed as contributing to the

assault. These various elements, from appearance to behavior, are all tied to the broader societal tendency to blame victims and justify perpetrators' actions, reinforcing harmful attitudes toward sexual violence (Grubb & Turner, 2012).

Given that rape and sexual harassment are widely acknowledged as prevalent issues within the sex work industry (Sullivan, 2007) and that victim blaming is strongly associated with sexual crimes (Gravelin, 2019), it becomes evident why working in this industry is often considered to carry a high risk of victim blaming. Several factors help explain why sex workers, despite being victims of sexual crimes, are frequently more likely to be held responsible for their victimization. Historically, significant barriers have prevented the prosecution of individuals who assaulted or raped sex workers, leaving such crimes largely unpunished by law (Sullivan, 2007). As a consequence, sex workers not only face a higher likelihood of being assaulted, but also a reduced likelihood of reporting the violence they were subjected to, often deterred by feelings of shame and powerlessness. An additional important reason why sex workers may be reluctant to report is the fear of being charged with prostitution, rather than receiving support (Sullivan, 2007).

Ultimately, another factor contributing to victim blaming of sex workers is the belief that they are not entitled to consensual sex (Sullivan, 2007; Randall, 2010). Because sex work is their profession, it is often assumed that they are always obligated to engage in any sexual activity with anyone who pays for it (Clarkson, 1939). This view is supported by the historical misperception of prostitutes as powerless individuals, who were seen as women who are always consenting and, thus could never be raped, due to the nature of their work (Sullivan, 2007). Such perception is deeply objectifying and dehumanizing, reducing women to mere objects of sexual service. Unfortunately, this perspective represents a significant obstacle in

ensuring that sex workers receive equal treatment under the law and often results in them to being blamed for the sexual violence they endure (Sullivan, 2007).

CHAPTER 2

The Current Research

2.1 Objectives and Hypotheses

To provide empirical support for the concepts discussed so far, this chapter provides a detailed review of a psychosocial research study that explores public perceptions of individuals who create and share content online. In particular, it will focus on the context of sex work on OnlyFans, where content creators often share explicit sexual material in return of monetary compensations. The study aimed to examine how people perceive content creators based on different motivations (intrinsic or extrinsic) for joining such platforms, as well as how these perceptions might vary depending on the platform itself (e.g., OnlyFans vs. Instagram).

This dissertation, which is part of a bigger project, will primarily investigate the correlation between the use of the OnlyFans platform and the likelihood of experiencing victim blaming in cases of sexual harassment, as well as the likelihood of receiving help and support in such situations.

It is hypothesized that, in line with the existing literature on victim blaming, there is a positive correlation between the use of OnlyFans and the likelihood of experiencing secondary victimization, suggesting that OnlyFans users are more likely than non-sexual content creators to be blamed for the abuse they are subjected to. Moreover, it is hypothesized that generally participants would exhibit higher levels of victim blaming and a reduced willingness to offer help to individuals involved in activities on OnlyFans (vs. Instagram), and specifically in the experimental condition

labeled "OnlyFans User with Extrinsic Motivation." This latter condition is expected to evoke stronger perceptions of societal threat, leading to an increased tendency to blame the individual for their circumstances and a decreased likelihood of providing assistance.

Finally, it is predicted that a negative correlation exists between platform use and the likelihood of receiving help in such circumstances, with online sex workers being less likely to receive assistance in cases of sexual violence as compared to non-sexual content creators (i.e., Instagram users).

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Participants

The data has been collected via an online survey administered through the Qualtrics platform (<https://www.qualtrics.com>), with an initial sample of 816 participants accessing the questionnaire. However, 244 were excluded from the study due to the following reasons: 224 did not complete the survey, 15 failed the manipulation check by providing incorrect responses or selecting "don't remember", and 5 were removed for not providing final consent. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 580 participants, among which 27% self-identified as male ($n=154$), 72% as female ($n=414$), 2% as non-binary ($n=10$), and 0.2% ($n=1$) did not identify with any of the provided categories.

The age of participants ranged from 18 to 75 with a mean age of 28.61 ($SD=12.3$). On a self-reported economic class assessment, measured on a scale

ranging from 1 (lower than average) to 7 (higher than average), the mean score was 4.18 ($SD= 0.953$), indicating a prevailing middle-class sample.

Regarding educational attainment, 49% of the sample had completed high school, while 49% held a university degree. This suggests that the overall sample had a medium-to-high level of education.

On measures of religiosity, participants rated themselves on a scale from 1 (not religious at all) to 7 (extremely religious), with the mean score being 2.32 ($SD=1.47$), suggesting that the sample tended to identify as relatively non-religious.

Finally, political orientation was assessed using a single ideological self-placement item that ranged from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative), with the mean score falling at 3.11 ($SD=1.12$), reflecting a general left-wing lean within the sample.

This profile provides a comprehensive view of the demographic and socio-cultural characteristics of the sample, which is important for interpreting the findings and understanding the context in which the study was conducted.

2.2.2 Procedures

The research method involved distributing the aforementioned online questionnaire mainly through social media platforms. Participants were primarily recruited online, where a QR code linked to the online survey was shared, as well as through personal contacts. The survey was designed to take approximately ten minutes to complete. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were asked to read a consent form that outlined the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their

participation, and how the data would be collected. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Only after acknowledging and agreeing to these conditions were participants invited to provide their formal consent in order to proceed with the survey. After each goal manipulation, participants were presented with a list of 15 positive traits outlined in a pretest, including three *morality traits* (i.e., sincere, honest, trustworthy), three *sociability traits* (i.e., kind, friendly, likable) and three *competence traits* (i.e., intelligent, competent, capable) taken from Brambilla et al. (2011). Participants evaluated the traits' relevance on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *absolutely no* to 7 = *absolutely yes*). At the end of the questionnaire, participants were properly debriefed, thanked, and released.

The study employs a between-subjects experimental design, in which participants are randomly assigned to four different groups, each receiving an identical description of a person named Alice who works as a freelance graphic designer and whose hobbies are art, photography, travels and cooking. The only key variable that changes across the conditions is Alice's involvement with the platform OnlyFans. In three of the four conditions, Alice is depicted as a content creator on OnlyFans, while in the fourth one she is described as an active user on Instagram.

The four experimental conditions are reported below.

- ***Condition 1: OnlyFans Creator***

In this condition, representing the Only Fans control group, participants are introduced to Alice as a content creator on OnlyFans. On this platform she actively shares exclusive content for her subscribers, but no specific emphasis is placed on

her motivation for doing so. This condition provides thus a neutral depiction of her engagement with the platform.

Biography: Alice Rossi is a graphic designer passionate about art and creativity, working as a freelancer on creative projects for various companies. Recently, Alice opened an account on *OnlyFans*, offering exclusive pornographic content to her supporters.

- **Condition 2: *OnlyFans with External Motivation***

In this condition Alice is a content creator on OnlyFans, but this time her motivations are made clear. The focus is on the external, extrinsic factors – such as financial rewards and the desire for material gain – that drive her decision to create and share explicit pornographic content online. In this version, Alice is depicted as using the platform primarily as a source of income, with an emphasis on maximizing her earnings through selling sexual content with her subscribers.

Biography: Alice Rossi is a graphic designer passionate about art and creativity, working as a freelancer on creative projects for various companies. Recently, Alice opened an account on *OnlyFans*, offering exclusive pornographic content to her supporters. Among the various reasons that motivated her to join OnlyFans, the most important is to have an additional source of income.

- **Condition 3: OnlyFans Creator with Intrinsic Motivation**

In the third condition, Alice's engagement with OnlyFans is driven by intrinsic factors. Her motivation is framed around personal fulfillment, creativity, and the opportunity to explore new life experiences. Alice views OnlyFans as a platform for self-expression rather than simply a financial pursuit.

Biography: Alice Rossi is a graphic designer passionate about art and creativity, working as a freelancer on creative projects for various companies. Recently, Alice opened an account on *OnlyFans*, offering exclusive pornographic content to her supporters. Among the various reasons that motivated her to join OnlyFans, the most important is the desire to explore new life experiences.

- **Condition 4: Non-OnlyFans User (Instagram Active)**

In the fourth condition, Alice is presented as an active Instagram user, where she posts and promotes her graphic projects. This condition serves as a general control condition to the others, as it focuses on a different social media platform and highlights a non-sexual use of online content sharing.

Biography: Alice Rossi is a graphic designer passionate about art and creativity, working as a freelancer on creative projects for various companies. Recently, Alice opened an *Instagram* account to share and promote her graphic design projects.

Participants were randomly and homogeneously distributed to the four conditions as follows: 146 participants (25%) were assigned to the first condition (**OnlyFans Creator**), 145 (25%) to the second condition (**OnlyFans Creator with External Motivation**), 150 (26%) to the third condition (**OnlyFans Creator with Internal Motivation**) and 139 (24%) to the fourth condition (**Non-OnlyFans User**).

After reading Alice's description, participants were first asked to answer a manipulation check, but only in the two experimental conditions reporting the motivations. This question was designed to assess whether participants were paying attention to the details in the description and to ensure they were engaging thoughtfully before proceeding with the rest of the survey.

"Based on the description provided, what is the primary reason Alice decided to open an OnlyFans profile?"
a) There was no specific motivation
b) I don't remember
c) Explore new life experiences/Increase her income

Participants who answered a) or b) were excluded from the research as mentioned above.

2.2.3 The Variables

After each goal manipulation, participants were presented with a list of 15 traits outlined in a pretest and had to evaluate the traits' relevance on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *absolutely no* to 7 = *absolutely yes*). At the end of the questionnaire, participants were properly debriefed, thanked, and released.

Materialism. One of the key constructs investigated was *materialism*, measured using eight items, each asking how likely it was that Alice could be associated with a certain behavior or characteristic (e.g., *Cares about having more luxurious products; Is focused on money; Is obsessed with fashion and beauty*). To ensure that these items accurately represented the construct *materialism*, reliability was assessed. The mean score for these eight items was calculated, and Cronbach's Alpha was found to be .83, indicating a good index of reliability. This confirmed that the items could be reliably averaged into a single variable representing materialism.

Trait attribution. This section of the questionnaire also assessed Alice's *morality*, *sociability*, and *competence* based on participants' perception. The subjects rated Alice using three traits for each construct: "*sincere*", "*honest*", and "*trustworthy*" for morality ($\alpha=.85$); "*friendly*", "*kind*", and "*likable*" ($\alpha=.83$) for *sociability*; and "*intelligent*", "*competent*", and "*skillful*" ($\alpha=.82$) for *competence*. These nine traits were selected from those used by Brambilla et al. (2011).

Participants were also asked to assess, based on their perceptions, the likelihood that Alice was "*heterosexual*" or "*bisexual*", "*frequently engaged in casual sex*", "*interested in having a stable romantic relationship*" and whether she "*posed a threat to the values and interests of society*".

Emotions. The next task required participants to indicate how likely they were to experience the following emotions on a scale from 1 = "not at all likely" to 7 = "extremely likely.". They included: *Empathy*, *Compassion*, *Envy*, *Admiration*, *Contempt*, *Disgust*, *Anger*, *Jealousy*, and *Pride*. These emotions are derived from the *Stereotype Content Model*, which posits that the levels of *agency* and *communion* we

attribute to others influence the perceptions and emotions we associate with them (Cortes, 2024).

Enjoyment of sexualization. Next, participants completed a section assessing the index of *enjoyment of sexualization*, which measures the extent to which individuals enjoy being sexualized and admired by others. This was evaluated using the Enjoyment of Sexualization scale for diverse populations (Visser et al., 2022b), a validated scale measure adapted from the original scale by Liss et al. (2011). The construct *enjoyment of sexualization* consisted of eight items ($\alpha = .92$), including statements such as: "Alice feels stronger when she looks good", "Alice enjoys feeling sexy" "it is important to Alice that people find her attractive".

Humanness. Participants were then asked to rate the degree of *humanness* they attributed to Alice using a scale from previous research (Formanowicz, 2018). Such a scale asked to rate humanness from 0 to 100, based on the description they had been given.

Psychological studies show that people tend to attribute different levels of humanity to various groups and individuals. The following scale represents levels of humanity, where 0 represents a very low degree of humanity and 100 represents a very high degree of humanity. **Choose a number that represents the level of humanity you would attribute to Alice.**

Acceptability. They were also asked to assess the acceptability of being active on OnlyFans or Instagram, using a scale from 1 ("not at all acceptable") to 7 ("completely acceptable").

Victim Blaming and Intention to Help. In the following section, participants were asked to imagine that Alice had experienced sexual harassment from a client of one of her graphic design projects. Using a scale from 1 ("not at all likely") to 7 ("extremely likely"), participants were then asked to answer the following questions:

- How likely do you think it is that Alice might, in some way, be at least partially responsible for the employer's behavior (i.e., victim blaming)?
- How likely is it that you would help Alice address the issue (i.e., intention to help)?

Benevolent Sexism. Participants were asked to answer several questions regarding sexism, measured by a scale consisting of five items ($\alpha = .74$). We used the Benevolent Sexism subscale from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), a 22-item tool designed to capture the complex nature of positive and negative perceptions toward women.(Glick & Fiske, 1996). In particular, participants were instructed to indicate their level of agreement with each statement, based on their opinion. The response scale ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree." The statements included, for instance, *"women tend to have a greater moral sensitivity than men"*, *"every man should have a woman to adore"*.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide demographic information, including gender, age, education, economic status, political orientation and religiosity. Additionally, they were asked to rate on a scale from 1 ("absolutely no") to 7 ("absolutely yes"), whether sharing sexual contents and sexual services online could be defined as "prostitution". They were also asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 ("not at all") to 7 ("completely"), how much they would agree if a person they cared for opened an OnlyFans account. Finally, they were asked to select from a list

of social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, Pinterest Twitter/X, OnlyFans, Other) to indicate which ones they were currently subscribed to or active on.

Before officially completing the survey, participants were presented with a debriefing section, where the objectives and purpose of the study were explained. At the end of this section, they were asked to provide their final consent in order to use their survey responses for the purposes of the research.

In the context of this dissertation, we focused specifically on two variables –that are, *threat to society*, and *victim blaming*, in relation to the experimental condition. All other dimensions of the research are addressed and discussed in separate analyses and, therefore, will only be briefly mentioned in the analysis of the results of this dissertation.

2.2.4 Results

We begin by presenting descriptive statistics and the correlations among variables, followed by an analysis of the mediation model applied to investigate the research questions. All the data was analyzed using SPSS software.

Descriptive Analysis and Correlations. *Table 1* presents the means and standard deviations of the variables considered in this study. The following section highlights some of the key findings.

Table 1: Means (Standard Deviation) of all the variables.

	OnlyFans (Control)	OnlyFans (Extrinsic Motivation)	OnlyFans (Intrinsic Motivation)	Non-OnlyFan s User
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Materialism	4.2(.9)	4(.9)	4(1)	3.8(.8)
Morality	4.5(1.2)	4.7(1.2)	4.5(1)	4.5(.9)
Sociability	5(.9)	5(1.2)	4.9(1)	4.9(.9)
Competence	5(1)	4.9(1.2)	4.9(1)	5.1(.8)
Humanness	74.4(18.7)	74.6(20.4)	75.4(17.2)	75,5(15.2)
Tends to have casual sex often	4.5(1.5)	4.3(1.6)	4.3(1.4)	3.6(1.2)
Is interested in a stable romantic relationship	3.9(1.6)	3.9(1.7)	3.9(1.5)	4(1.1)
Represents a threat to the values and interests of society	2.6(1.8)	2.3(1.6)	2.4(1.5)	1.9(1.1)
Heterosexual	4.3(1.4)	4.2(1.3)	4.3(1.1)	4(1.2)

Bisexual	4.2(1.4)	3.9(1.3)	4.1(1.2)	4(1.2)
Compassion	2.4(1.6)	2.5(1.7)	2.5(1.6)	2.3(1.4)
Envy	2.2(1.5)	2(1.4)	2(1.4)	2.5(1.4)
Disgust	1.9(1.4)	2(1.5)	1.9(1.4)	1.5(.9)
Admiration	3(1.6)	3(1.7)	3.2(1.5)	4.4(1.3)
Contempt	1.9(1.3)	2(1.4)	1.9(1.3)	1.6(.9)
Empathy	3.9(1.7)	4(1.8)	3.9(1.5)	4.2(1.5)
Anger	1.4(.8)	1.6(1)	1.6(1.1)	1.5(.9)
Jealousy	1.8(1.2)	1.7(1.1)	1.8(1.2)	2.1(1.3)
Pride	1.3(1.4)	2.3(1.4)	2.3(1.4)	2.8(1.6)
Victim Blaming	1.5(1.1)	1.6(1)	1.4(.9)	1.4(1)
Help	6(1.2)	6(1.6)	5.9(1.4)	6(1.3)

Table 2 shows the correlations between all the variables, while *Table 3* specifically reports the correlations between the variables that are the primary focus of this paper: *victim blaming, threat to society and help*.

Table 2: Correlations between all variables. Pearson Correlation is also presented.

		Correlations							
		Materia	Moralit	Sociabi	Compe	Victim		Human	Threat
		lism	y	lity	tence	Blamin	Help	ness	to
						g			society
Materialism	Pearson	1	-.115**	0,029	-0,057	.172**	-.170**	-.255**	.380**
	Correlation								
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,006	0,490	0,170	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	579	579	579	579	579	579	579	579
Morality	Pearson	-.115**	1	.688**	.661**	-.207**	.204**	.414**	-.281**
	Correlation								
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,006		0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	579	579	579	579	579	579	579	579
Sociability	Pearson	0,029	.688**	1	.675**	-.145**	.160**	.312**	-.173**

	Correla tion								
	Sig. (2-taile d)	0,490	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	579	579	579	579	579	579	579	579
Compe tence	Pearso n Correla tion	-0,057	.661**	.675**	1	-.189**	.154**	.319**	-.291**
	Sig. (2-taile d)	0,170	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	579	579	579	579	579	579	579	579
Victim Blamin g	Pearso n Correla tion	.172**	-.207**	-.145**	-.189**	1	-.308**	-.226**	.267**
	Sig. (2-taile d)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	579	579	579	579	579	579	579	579
Help	Pearso n	-.170**	.204**	.160**	.154**	-.308**	1	.285**	-.182**

	Correlation								
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000
	N	579	579	579	579	579	579	579	579
Human ness	Pearson Correlation	-.255**	.414**	.312**	.319**	-.226**	.285**	1	-.324**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000
	N	579	579	579	579	579	579	580	579
Threat to society	Pearson Correlation	.380**	-.281**	-.173**	-.291**	.267**	-.182**	-.324**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	
	N	579	579	579	579	579	579	579	579

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Materialism	-	-.11**	.03	-.06	.17**	-.17**	-.25**	.38**
2. Morality		-	.69**	.66**	-.21**	.20**	.41**	-.28**
3. Sociability			-	.67**	-.14**	.16**	.31**	-.17**
4. Competence				-	-.19**	.15**	.32**	-.29**
5. Victim Blaming					-	-.31**	-.23**	.27**
6. Intention To Help						-	.28**	-.18**
7. Humanness							-	-.32**
8. Threat to Society								-

As shown in the table, there is a significant negative correlation between “*victim blaming*” and “*help*”. This means that the higher the level of victim blaming, the lower the likelihood of receiving help. Another notable correlation exists between “*threat to society*” perception and “*victim blaming*”. The more an individual is perceived as a threat to the traditional values of society, the more likely they are to be blamed for their adversities. Specifically, higher levels of perceived societal threat are associated with higher levels of victim blaming and lower levels of help offered.

In conclusion, these three variables are interrelated: the more someone is seen as a threat to societal values, the more likely they are to be victimized, and, the less likely they are to receive help.

Table 4: Correlations between the variables “victim blaming”, “threat to society”, “help”

		Correlations		
		Victim Blaming	Help	Threat to Society
Victim Blaming	Pearson Correlation	1	-.308**	.267**
Help	Pearson Correlation		1	-.182**
Threat to Society	Pearson Correlation		*	1

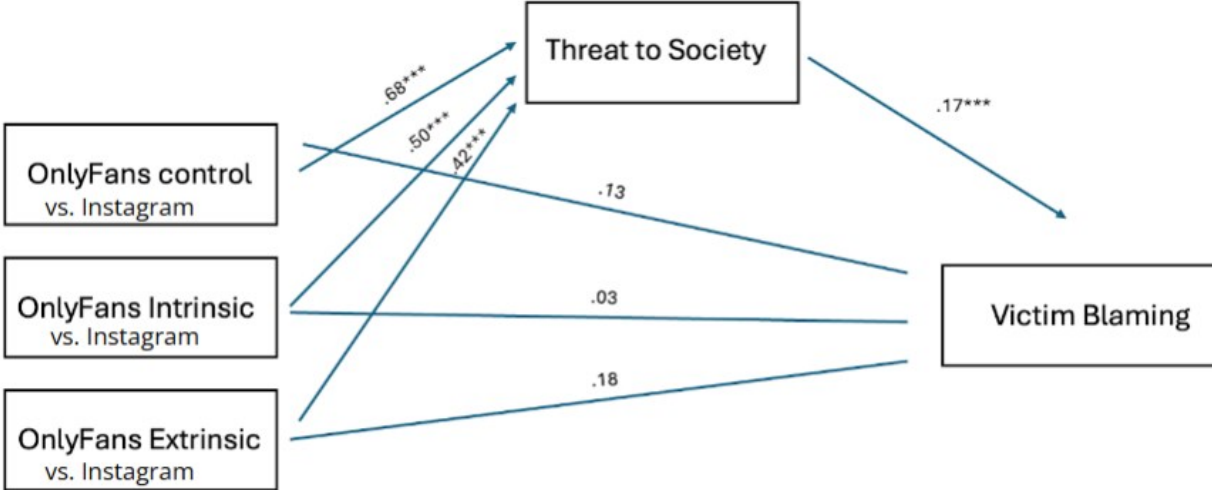
** .Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Mediation Analysis. To further support the findings of this research, an additional exploration was conducted to examine the relationship between the constructs of "threat to society," "victim blaming," and "help." Specifically, a mediation analysis was performed to assess whether an indirect relationship exists between the experimental condition and victim blaming, with "threat to society" acting as a mediator. The primary aim was to investigate how the perception of "threat to society" is influenced by the experimental condition, and whether this perception mediates the effect of the experimental condition (being associated with OnlyFans vs. Instagram) on the victim blaming of the target individual. To achieve this, Model 4 from the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) was used, as it allows for robust inference of indirect effects using bootstrapping (with 5000 boots).

In the analysis, the experimental condition (OnlyFans vs. Instagram) was treated as the independent variable, the perception of "threat to society" as the mediator, and "victim blaming" as the dependent variable. A second mediation analysis followed, having "intention to help" as a dependent variable. It is important to note that not all variables were continuous; the experimental condition was dummy coded for analysis purposes.

As shown in Figure 1, the perception of "threat to society" significantly predicts an increase in victim blaming. The mediation effect of the perception of "threat to society" was confirmed by examining the confidence intervals for the indirect effect, which did not include zero (for *OnlyFans Creator* condition $ab=.12$, $se= CI95\% [.05,.21]$; for *OnlyFans with Intrinsic Motivation* condition $ab=.09$, $se= CI95\% .03[.16]$ for *OnlyFans with Extrinsic Motivation* condition $ab=.07$, $se= CI95\% [.02,.14]$), thus supporting the significance of the indirect path.

Figure 1:



These findings suggest that the experimental conditions—specifically, reading about an OnlyFans user versus an Instagram user—were significant in influencing the perception of a "threat to society." Participants exposed to the OnlyFans conditions in general, and with no differences among the three OnlyFans conditions, were more likely to perceive the individual as a societal threat compared to those who were exposed to the Instagram condition. This result is further supported by the fact that none of the confidence intervals for the indirect effect contained zero, confirming that the effect of the experimental condition on victim blaming was entirely mediated by the perception of a societal threat.

In summary, these results demonstrate that the perception of a societal threat plays a key role in mediating the relationship between exposure to the experimental conditions and the tendency to engage in victim blaming. The stronger the perception of a societal threat, the more likely individuals are to blame the victim. Interestingly this pattern of results was true only for the experimental conditions where the target was described as an OnlyFans content creator.

CHAPTER 3

Discussion and Conclusions

3.1 Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore whether a correlation exists between being an online sex worker and the likelihood of experiencing victim blaming. Additionally, the study examined the relationship between the motivations driving individuals to engage in online sex work on platforms like OnlyFans and their susceptibility to victim blaming. It was hypothesized that creating and sharing pornographic content on OnlyFans would be positively correlated with the risk of being subjected to victim blaming. Furthermore, it was expected that the motivation behind choosing this profession would significantly influence perceptions of blame, with sex workers driven by extrinsic motivations (e.g., financial gain) expected to be perceived more negatively - and therefore more likely to be blamed for harassment - than those motivated by intrinsic reasons, such as seeking new life experiences.

According to the findings, the first hypothesis was confirmed. Specifically, it was shown that participants were more likely to blame Alice for the abuse she suffered when she was presented as an OnlyFans user, compared to when she was described as an Instagram user. Interestingly, however, the findings did not support the second hypothesis, as no significant difference was revealed in how Alice's motivation (whether extrinsic or intrinsic) influenced the likelihood of her being blamed. This finding highlights the pervasive stigma associated with sex work, emphasizing that merely being a sex worker is enough to elicit negative perceptions and, consequently, to consider the victims responsible for the abuse experienced.

A potential understanding of these findings can be explained by the mediation analysis conducted in this study. The analysis revealed that the negative perception of online sex workers stems from belief that they and their profession pose a threat to societal norms and traditional values.

Historically, sex work has been regarded as transgressive and deviant, often viewed with suspicion and despise (Armstrong, 2018; Pheterson, 1996). It was and it is still perceived as a challenge to conventional notions of morality and sexuality, which are deeply intertwined with society's idealized image of the "perfect woman" (Ranjitha et al., 2010). According to prevailing societal norms, the ideal woman is typically portrayed as chaste, family-oriented and modest, leaving little room for the idea of a woman who embraces a free and independent sexuality, unbound by societal judgment or moral constraints (Ranjitha et al., 2010).

The rise of online sex work on platforms like OnlyFans further challenge these traditional ideals, by promoting the open expression of sexuality and disrupting the traditional ideal of private intimacy. OnlyFans, in particular, has become a powerful and empowering platform, giving many individuals - often women - greater control over their sexuality. This empowerment calls into question the patriarchal structure of society (Huang, 2015), (The Autonomy Institute, 2024). However, while some view this shift positively, others perceive it negatively, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that associate sex work with moral corruption or danger. These perceptions often push sex work further into a taboo status (Huang, 2015) increasing the levels of stigma surrounding it.

The stigma attached to sex work is not only profoundly harmful but also life-threatening. It forces sex workers to lives filled with fear and vulnerability, exposing them to threats ranging from harassment, to physical violence, sexual

assault, and even murder, often with little or no protection from legal systems. A striking example of this is the case of Carol Maltesi, a 26-year-old OnlyFans creator who was brutally murdered by a man who meticulously planned her death. The violence she had to suffer was horrific. She was murdered because she was an online sex worker. She was murdered because she sought financial independence and personal autonomy through her work in the sex industry. She was murdered because a man sought revenge. She was murdered because she was a woman, and he felt entitled to take her life.

As highlighted in the reviewed literature, the case of Carol Maltesi exemplifies the enduring harm inflicted upon victims, not only through the violence they experience but also through the societal response that follows.

Even in death, Carol was subjected to further injustices. Attempts were made to defend her killer through speculative psychiatric diagnoses, attempting to absolve him from his responsibility for his actions. Such defenses reflect a society deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, where violence against women is too often excused or ignored. Furthermore, Carol herself became a target of victim-blaming narratives, accused of being overly uninhibited and, thus, somehow complicit in her own tragedy. Such rhetoric perpetuates harmful stereotypes that justify violence and shift responsibility onto the victim, reinforcing a culture of impunity. Carol's case is not just a singular tragedy but a reflection of a systemic issue where society often fails to confront gender-based violence and instead finds ways to rationalize or diminish its severity.

I would like to conclude this discussion with a simple yet deeply thought-provoking question: can we honestly believe that anyone could “*invite*” or “*deserve*” such a death? Can a low-cut top really be an invitation to violence?

3.2 Limits and future applications

Although the study provided valuable findings, it is not without limitations. One major limitation is the sample composition, which may not accurately reflect the diversity of a broader population. The participants in this study were, in fact, primarily drawn from a specific demographic, namely the University of Padua and users of social media platforms, which tend to be used predominantly by a particular age group. This could introduce biases and limit the generalizability of the results. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different populations perceive and react to online sex work, future work could manage to expand the sample to include more diverse group.

Additionally, the use of self-reports presents a potential limitation, as participants may answer in ways they perceive to be socially acceptable or in line with societal expectations. These biases could alter the results, thus future studies could employ observational methods or interviews to complement self-report data and offer a more reliable analysis of the phenomena.

Since the study was primarily conducted with the Italian speaking population, it would be valuable and interesting to broaden the research in a cross-cultural perspective. This approach could help determine whether the findings remain consistent or vary depending on the rigidity of gender and moral norms across different countries.

To conclude, the findings to our study carry important implications. First, they emphasize the need for nonjudgmental support services for victims of sexual violence, ensuring that sex workers feel safe reporting crimes without fear of stigma or blame, and without worry of not being believed or of seeing their assailant be let unpunished by the law. Moreover, they suggest that reforms aimed to protect the

rights of sex workers should be prioritized in order to fight discrimination and violence against them.

Finally, it is important that also the media representations of this category radically changes the way sex workers are depicted together with a increase in education aimed to spread reliable narratives that do not portray sex work as a threat but as a career as any other, where sex workers deserve the same respect and consideration of any other worker. Only by spreading awareness about this issue, fighting the taboo, it is possible to reduce the stigma this category still suffers everyday.

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