

Article

Sex Workers' Online Humor as Evidence of Resilience

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Abstract: Sex workers' humor has received comparatively little attention in the literature to date, and work that does consider this phenomenon focuses on humor in face-to-face contexts. Increasingly, elements of sex workers' labor and community building take place online. This article examines the emergence of sex work humor in online spaces, considering how this humor provides evidence of resilience within this community. The article uses a critical discourse analysis approach blended with a cultural studies lens to examine 171 discrete texts drawn from sex work communities in Australia and New Zealand. These include social media postings from peer-led organizations and correspondence between sex workers and their clients, which was profiled in news media during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The humor evident within these texts falls into three major categories: humor about clients; humor as a mechanism of discussing stigma and discrimination; and humor as an agent of activism and social change. The findings indicate that humor can be evidence of resilience among sex-working communities, that it is politically productive and effective from a communications perspective, and present the possibility that it may also contribute to resilience. The presence of humor in online sex work spaces of sociality further highlights the importance of these spaces for community building, and draws attention to additional harms created by deplatforming.

Keywords: prostitution; sex work; humor; critical discourse analysis; stigma; resilience; stigmatized communities; social media; memes



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1. Introduction

While sex work has often been the target of cruel jokes, often trading on the stigma which continues to impact those within the industry, much less has been written about sex workers as the producers and purveyors of humor [1]. Research that does consider the prevalence and operation of humor within sex-working communities and workplaces has found it serves multiple functions and can act as a buffer to the emotional and mental toll of navigating stigma and discrimination, alongside the stresses characteristic of customer-facing roles [1–3]. Sex workers have also used humor for political ends, including during protests and interventions [4,5]. Additionally, sex workers have a long history of using the internet both as a medium to attract customers, and as a space to build community and organize—although this has been made more difficult through policies such as shadowbanning, deplatforming, and increasingly tightly enforced terms of service in a post-SESTA-FOSTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) world [6–8] (see Appendix A). The loss of online safety resources was one of the impacts of SESTA-FOSTA [8], indicating the importance of online spaces which are stable and secure for sex workers, and peer-led organizations highlight the criticality of developing and sustaining online community [9].

While prior work has noted that the humor deployed by sex workers within face-to-face workplaces also exists online [2] (pp. 284–285), this has not yet been considered in detail. This article, therefore, begins to map out online humor from sex workers, with a focus predominantly on online postings from peer-led organizations in Australia, supported by a second smaller corpus of texts which emerged during the first COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand, which were highlighted in news media. This article argues that the texts

are politically productive, effective from a communications perspective, and reflect many characteristics documented in the existing research on offline humor among sex-working communities. The selected texts are analyzed using a media and cultural studies lens, blended with a consideration of how they reflect characteristics of resilience documented in prior work, to present the possibility that these are multiply productive cultural objects. In doing so, this article highlights this presently under-researched area as a possibility for future study, and adds to the understanding of the multiple levels on which sex workers and peer-led organizations support their own community and foster resilience. In approaching sex worker humor as a textual site worthy of sustained and thoughtful study and critique, I also draw attention to sex workers as the producers of cultural objects, and acknowledge the work which emerges from the community—including in digital and ephemeral forms—as complex, multi-layered texts. Upon close study, these act as an additional reiteration of the point that sex workers are experts in their own lives and their own needs.

2. Theoretical Background

This article situates itself at the intersection of several different bodies of work, considering the interactions between sex work, resilience, and humor. In this section, a brief overview of each topic is provided to locate the research within the broader literature.

2.1. Resilience

Resilience in this article is used to describe the end result of ‘buffering processes’, which, while not eliminating the stressors someone is subject to, do ‘allow the individual to deal with them effectively’ [10] (p. 116). Often considered to operate on multiple levels, individual, community, and family, resilience is something that can be developed ‘rather than a static trait that a person either does or does not possess’ [10,11] (p. 1233) [12]. In the context of sex work specifically, resilience provides individuals with the ability to better respond to and manage the stressors, danger, and discrimination they face. Burnes, Long, and Schept have argued that a resilience-focused lens on sex work contains an inherent critique of studies that ‘focus on sex worker pathology but leave out strengths and resilience factors’ [13] (p. 138), and an increasing interest in resilience corresponded with these shifts away from a deficit approach [14].

Depending on the local legislation and their own individual circumstances, stress factors affecting sex workers which call for resilience or other solutions may include a fear of being outed, shame about their work, danger from clients, harassment and targeting by police, and economic stressors associated with the unpredictable nature of the industry [11,15–17]. Studies of resilience, specifically within sex-working communities, have found that possessing resilience is correlated with an increased ability to enforce sexual boundaries and safety protocols [11,15,18], or in some cases, that the enforcement of sexual boundaries, in turn, contributed to resilience [13]. Resilience was also associated with lower levels of syndemic risk [15] and improved mental health outcomes [18]. Research has found several themes or strategies which act as contributing factors toward developing and sustaining resilience. One, occurring in multiple studies, is framing sex work as a legitimate occupation and rejecting whorephobic stigmas [11,13]—an approach similar to the one used by some sex workers to manage the impacts of occupational stigma [19]. A second is through having some measure of control or agency over life and work: the ability to control where and how they work, finding ways to evade police harassment or violence, or setting boundaries about what services they offer [11,13,16,18]. A further contributor is access to community and social support, often from other sex workers—in some research, participants specifically highlight the support they receive from peer-led organizations as especially helpful [13,16,18]. In addition to these personal factors, higher resilience is also correlated with access to housing, educational attainment, and food security, identifying structural targets for interventions [17].

The specific stressors that sex workers are subject to depend in part on the legislative model which they operate under. There are varied approaches to how to distinguish

between legislative approaches to prostitution. Platts et al. suggest there are five models (full criminalization, partial criminalization, criminalization of purchasing sex, regulation, and full decriminalization) [20], while Östergren has proposed three typologies (repressive, restrictive, and integrative), which distinguish legal approaches by what the policy intends to accomplish [21]. Stressors such as the threat of arrest, for example, exist under repressive frameworks. Sex workers may also have limited or reduced access to the things which bolster resilience, such as secure housing, when repressive sex work policy places them at risk of eviction if they report experiences of violence to the police [22]. Stressors such as experiences of stigma in healthcare settings, for example, are common across all models, with research from Australia finding that sex workers who were ‘working in a decriminalised jurisdiction still reported a consistent and pervasive legacy of stigma that was not simply eliminated by a lack of criminalisation’ [23] (pp. 3–4). The data for analysis in this paper are drawn from New Zealand and Australia, encompassing a range of legislative approaches. New Zealand has partial decriminalization, with migrant sex workers still criminalized. Some states in Australia (the Northern Territory and New South Wales) operate under decriminalization; at the time of writing, Victoria was in the process of transitioning from regulation (a restrictive policy) to decriminalization (an integrative policy); the other states and territories operate under a mixture of criminalization and regulation (repressive and restrictive policies). The specific stressors experienced by the sex workers who produced the humor analyzed in this article, therefore, likely vary, and concomitantly so do the barriers to developing and sustaining resilience.

Resilience is a concept that I apply with some wariness, conscious of the way that it can be used to support neoliberal approaches, which situate individual responsibility as the remedy to structural problems [14]. In the context of sex work specifically, I am conscious of the fact that ‘resilience’ as a concept was borrowed from the physical sciences and ecology, where it describes the ability of a system to persist through ‘sudden catastrophic events’, or to return after disruption to its former state [24] (p. 84) [25]. In considering the uses and promotion of resilience for sex workers, I do not want to signal an expectation that the natural consequence of doing sex work is facing ‘threats now presupposed as endemic’ [24] (p. 83), and in doing so ignoring the significant potential for positive change and safer working conditions. With this in mind, I apply ‘resilience’ here with reference to conceptions of it which view the concept as working ‘in concert with forces of social change’ [25] (p. 10) and contributing to progress, rather than a strategy which allows for the preservation of a status quo. The definition and conception drawn upon in this article also stress community support and interdependence as contributing factors, shifting from a focus on the individual to the collective.

2.2. Humor, Stigma, and Resilience

The role that humor can play in contributing to resilience has been explored in the literature. Most relevant for the focus of this article is work considering how it can play out in high-stress professions (including in the form of ‘dark humor’, ‘black humor’, or ‘gallows humor’) and how humor can be used to negotiate, manage, and resist stigma. Plester argues that ‘humour is an important component of working contexts’ and contends it would be unusual for a workplace not to have some level of joking occurring between staff, with humor contributing to group cohesion [26] (p. 25)—the contribution towards group cohesion is also highlighted in other work, focused more specifically on gallows humor [27]. Watson refers to the kind of humor deployed between members of the same profession as ‘backstage’ humor, which is not intended to be heard by, or fully understood and intelligible to, those outside the group, and adds that joking can be a way to establish or affirm a connection [28]. She notes that humor can rebalance or challenge existing dynamics of power, as the ‘teller of a spontaneous joke or funny story also wields the narrator’s power to frame and interpret events’ [28] (p. 39). In the context of a high-stress profession, such as emergency medicine, jokes can sometimes function as a way to integrate upsetting events, and allow the participants in the humor to continue to work, serving as a ‘psychic survival

instinct' [28] (p. 44). Humor may also function as a way to reframe upsetting situations, making them more tolerable or allowing an individual to better handle stress [29].

Sex work is an almost universally stigmatized occupation (although this stigma is not intractable) [30], and stigmatized populations use humor in multiple ways. Humor can be a way of highlighting the structural discrimination and stigmatizing societal attitudes that a stigmatized person or group faces [31–34]. Humor can be a defensive tactic, especially in the form of 'black' or 'gallows' humor where the taint of stigma is acknowledged, and in some instances, the stigmatized party may reject the social role which they are supposed to play, using humor to underscore this [31,32]. In these instances, humor may afford the temporary rearrangement of power dynamics or the highlighting of them. Humor can also be used as a coping mechanism or buffer against the emotional and mental effects of stigmatizing experiences and as a form of catharsis [33,34]. Finally, for stigmatized groups, humor can be a way of making taboo or heavy topics speakable, and Jensen has argued that in these contexts, humor 'not only provided emotional release but also gave the opportunity for frank discussions about important issues of the stigmatizing trait' [35] (p. 32).

Resilience describes the ability to somewhat mitigate or buffer the negative effects of stressful or adverse circumstances on mental and emotional wellbeing. The use of humor by stigmatized groups as a coping mechanism suggests it serves this or a similar function, even when not highlighted specifically under the framework of resilience. Kuiper addresses this, pointing out the development of the body of work which considered the way humor can facilitate coping with stress developed separately from research on resiliency, and considers how this first field might relate to a resilience framework [36]. In a review of the literature, multiple studies link having 'high humor' to relatively lower stress or better emotional outcomes in the face of adversity, but Kuiper notes that a limitation of some work is only paying attention to the positive dimensions of humor, rather than maladaptive forms [36] (such as humor used to exclude individuals from a group [26]), highlighting the importance of attending to the specific type of humor and joking being deployed. Cann and Collette similarly found that self-enhancing humor, which was 'based on maintaining a humorous perspective about one's experiences', was positively correlated with resilience, adding that a distinction between adaptive and maladaptive modes of humor was necessary when assessing the role of humor [37] (p. 464). Cameron et al., in their study of adolescents who were identified as possessing resilience, documented extensive use of humor, and further complicated divisions between 'benign and detrimental' humor, arguing that close analysis and contextual consideration are needed, and that forms of humor such as sarcasm and irony are not inherently negative [38]. In each instance, resilience is correlated with some types of humor, but the specific humor deployed must be contextualized and interrogated.

2.3. *Humor and Sex Work*

The presence and functions of humor in sex work have been explored in some existing works, both focused primarily on humor [1–3] and mentioning it tangentially [4,5,39,40]. Humor has been identified as serving to help workers both manage and resist discrimination and oppression [1–3], echoing existing work that considers the uses of humor by other stigmatized groups. Downes argues that sex workers in Costa Rica use humor to resist marginalization and contest stigmatizing ideas about sex work, and to gain a sense of belonging and community while contending with a broader social landscape that labels them as the 'other' [3]. Güler found that street-based sex workers in Turkey used humor as a mode of resistance, using it to reject hegemonic arrangements and to highlight the absurdity and unfairness of the discrimination they faced [1]. Güler notes, too, that while she did not originally intend to consider humor as part of her research, 'it is such an integral aspect of my research participants' sociality that leaving it out would misrepresent . . . their daily lives' [1] (p. 244). Sanders' research, which draws on an ethnographic study of sex workers in Birmingham, UK, offers a typology of different forms of humor identified: jokes at clients' expense told in private, coded jests about clients told or performed in front of them, retellings of the disclosure of sex work told in a humorous fashion, humor as a

way to resist harassment, humor as a strategy when communicating difficult experiences to figures such as medical personnel, and humor as a way to negotiate and define group membership [2]. The typologies identified here echo many of those outlined in the previous section about the uses of humor by stigmatized groups more generally. Sanders argues that ‘humour contributes to a range of defence mechanisms that are necessary to protect personal and emotional well being’ of sex workers [2] (p. 273). Brewis and Linstead found that sex workers sometimes used humor to subtly remind clients of their own subjectivity, further suggesting its more complex and expansive uses [39].

Sex workers have also used humor to deliver serious messages about their demands for labor rights and freedom from discrimination and stigma. Jeffreys describes a humorous intervention and performance at the AIDS2014 conference, which she argues helped the protesting group avoid didacticism without softening the message being conveyed [4] (pp. 96–104). Gall similarly highlights how sex workers used humor to draw attention to their political organizing, with the Exotic Dancers Union in San Francisco encouraging union membership with posters reading ‘like an orgy, it only works if there’s a lot of us’ and ‘united we stand—divided we bend over’ [5] (p. 17). A shrewd deployment of humor ‘can carry out political work on a number of ways’ [41] (p. 361), and although, in keeping with the topic of the Special Issue, the primary focus of this article is resilience, as I show, the political potential of sex workers’ humor is inherently intertwined with this.

To date, analysis of the humor of sex workers has focused primarily on the humor which arises from face-to-face interactions, especially in shared workplaces. While Sanders notes that sex workers who interact online also use humor and storytelling to develop camaraderie [2] (pp. 284–285), exactly how this plays out has gone under-examined. This article uses contemporary examples of sex worker humor from two sites to examine how online humor may be viewed as a mechanism to support resilience within sex-working communities.

2.4. Sex Worker Theory

This research both draws upon and is located within sex worker theory. As Berg notes, sex worker theory pays attention to what sex workers think—the cultural objects produced by sex workers I highlight in my introduction—rather than assuming that what they do at work is the only part of their lives worth documenting [42]. Sex worker theory reflects the demands for rights by sex workers [43], and respects the expertise and knowledge of sex workers about their own lives and work [4]. This article is informed and grounded in an understanding of sex work as work—also central to sex worker theory [4,44]—and accordingly, research into the use of humor in workplaces has been drawn upon here to further understandings of how sex work resembles other forms of work in some ways, while departing in others. In relation to my own positionality as an author, I am a pākehā (white) transgender person who has done sex work myself for many years. The analysis in this article is informed by this relationship to the material, and takes a perspective that within sex worker humor, there is evidence of the production of knowledge that emerges from within the community [4], which warrants dutiful attention and description. The material used for analysis in this article is drawn from public postings and news articles and, as outlined in the following section, from social media postings used with explicit permission. Analysis of sex worker humor is work that fundamentally cannot exist without the cultural production of sex workers. With this in mind, sex worker theory underpins this research in an attempt to do justice to the material, treat it with the respect it is due, and use it to produce work that may contribute in some small way to furthering the rights and protection of the community.

3. Materials and Methods

Studies of workplace humor will often situate the physical workspace as the site where the relevant humor and joking are observed—and indeed, this has been the case for many prior studies of humor among sex workers. In this article, online spaces are examined as a working and organizing space both because, increasingly, sex workers carry out some of

their work in online spaces [6,45], but also because these spaces often serve as a place where sex workers can form and maintain supportive, collegial relationships, especially when they work alone [9,45,46]. The texts used for analysis in this article are drawn from news articles and from posts that peer-led sex work organizations have chosen to make viewable to the general public, even if the anticipated audience is primarily other sex workers. This distinction means that the humor is unlikely to be directly comparable to that observed in ethnographic studies in sex workplaces [1,2], but can likely be considered parallel to the humor deployed by sex workers in public demonstrations for their rights [3–5].

During New Zealand's COVID-19 response in 2020, sex workers and advocacy organizations made effective use of the media to advance their image as public health-minded community members [47]. While carrying out research looking at this period more broadly, I came across news media texts which documented the exchanges which some sex workers were posting to their social media, in which they rejected attempts from clients to book during lockdown periods, when in-person work was restricted [48,49]. One text interviews a sex worker and uses images supplied by her of exchanges with clients to illustrate the story [49]. The second text is illustrated by screencaps of text message exchanges and social media postings from sex workers [48]: these were published in the article with the individuals' permission and sourced in a process mediated by the local sex work advocacy organization, the NZPC [50]. These texts form the first objects for analysis for this article, and taking each embedded image and the accompanying article as separate objects, they comprise 16 discrete texts. The exchanges showcased in these texts were familiar in format, reminiscent of the screencapped exchanges shared on Twitter accounts which exist as a kind of clearinghouse of notably absurd or unreasonable approaches and requests from clients to sex workers. This portion of the dataset, therefore, is reflective of a larger trend, although the specific negotiations about services that sex workers can have with their clients are impacted by New Zealand's decriminalization framework.

The second set of texts for analysis is drawn from the social media accounts of two peer-led organizations from Australia: Scarlet Alliance (national) and Vixen Collective (Victoria). Australia's sex work legislation varies across different states and territories, with current approaches including decriminalization, licensing, and criminalization. These organizations make use of humor, sometimes via popular meme formats, to build community, disseminate knowledge about campaigns for sex worker rights, and draw attention to their messaging. Using social media data in research has the potential to expose it to a broader or different audience than that which was originally intended [51]. With this in mind, permission was sought from the two organizations to analyze their memes for this article. The organizations were asked if they would prefer to be identified or to be referred to pseudonymously. The posts analyzed here were drawn from public social media profiles, which did not require a user to be logged in or to 'follow' the accounts to view. Texts were collected across a four-month period, from November 2022 to February 2023, and a total of 155 discrete objects were considered. In the case of Instagram posts with multiple slides (images), each combination of slide and caption (where relevant) was considered a discrete object. Drawing on earlier work that aims to analyze cultural objects drawn from multiple sites, the intention is that these texts are illustrative rather than exhaustive or representative, and they have been located and collected via a strategy of following objects through their interconnectedness [52,53]. Objects are addressed and examined using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, blended with a media and cultural studies perspective on cultural analysis [53]. As Orgad and Gill put it, this approach to analysis more closely resembles a 'craft skill' than something which can be clearly delineated as a series of explicit steps, setting it apart from methodologies that are more dominant in the (social) sciences [53] (p. 25) [54]. The analysis encompasses an emphasis on analyzing texts as operating on multiple discursive levels simultaneously [55], and on considering them with explicit reference to the context in which they occur [56]. One of the ways in which humor can be a mechanism of resistance is through its ability to bring power dynamics to light [57] or to temporarily shift them. CDA, especially feminist CDA, is carried out with a

consideration of the manifestations and operations of power, making it particularly suitable for the analysis of this topic [58,59]. Additionally, humor is dependent on context for its meaning and ability to spark amusement, and often operates on multiple levels simultaneously, points which are encompassed by a CDA approach. Furthermore, CDA takes an explicitly political approach, which, as far as possible, is ‘a perspective that is consistent with the best interests of dominated groups’ [59] (p. 96), which is methodologically aligned with sex worker (rights) theory.

The collected texts were examined and hand-coded by the author to identify recurring and interlocking or overlapping themes. In this article, ‘text’ is used in the cultural studies sense to refer to the object for analysis which can encompass visual and occasionally aural components, as well as written texts—all of these elements are considered as part of the broader discourse examined. A key component of CDA is reflexivity and acknowledging the lens which our own subjectivity brings to the research; in this case, the analysis of the data is influenced by my work as a media studies researcher and as a sex worker. The identified themes were then compared to the characteristics of and contributors to resilience identified in prior work looking at sex-working communities specifically to determine if the humor present in this corpus showed linkages to resilience. Additionally, the themes were analyzed with reference to existing narratives about sex work to consider their intertextual operation, including through manifest intertextuality [55], and to understand them as potential challenges to stigma. When undertaking the analysis, the entirety of the text, including the multiple contexts it is presented within, whether social, temporal, geographic, or the specificities of online platform contexts, is considered. That is, the meanings in the text are read and analyzed not just through a consideration of their content, but also their form and the surrounding cultures [60].

4. Results

The texts could be identified as falling predominantly into three broad thematic categories, with some crossover between the themes. This is consistent with the ways that humor more generally operates: on multiple levels simultaneously, with some meanings or interpretations only evident to those with the correct knowledge to interpret a text and place it into the appropriate context [1] (p. 244) [57]. A fourth minor category was also identified: humor which can be interpreted as ‘backstage’ humor, reliant on in-group knowledge about particular irritations or occurrences typical to sex work. Owing to the constraints of space, this has not been analyzed in detail within this article, but it can be viewed as functioning to reinforce and support a sense of community and collective identity [61], which is also important to resilience.

4.1. *Humor about Clients*

One key theme within the texts was humor that made clients, and their behavior, the source of amusement, reminiscent of observations from Sanders about the prominence of humor, which made clients the butt of the joke [2]. This was present across both sets of texts: the news articles and posts from peer-led organizations. In the case of posts from peer-led organizations, this typically took place via memes. Memes are cultural artifacts, comprising an image overlaid with text which is reworked and shared online, with specific common characteristics: they are intertextual, they include a visual element, and they serve a social role and in some instances may ‘serve as critiques of the dominant hegemonic culture’ [62] (p. 385). They can, in some instances, contribute to in-group solidarity-building and a sense of belonging [63]. Frequently they use images drawn from pop culture properties as their basis, in the form of screenshots from films and television shows.

Mememes from peer-led organizations would often focus on client behavior that was annoying, unreasonable, or crossed boundaries. Interrelated sub-themes here concerned clients who attempted to cross boundaries related to privacy or the professional nature of the relationship; clients who shared inappropriately personal information about themselves; and the challenges of appearing engaged when clients were talking. A common thread

among humor about clients attempting to encroach on workers' boundaries regarding privacy was about asking for a 'real name'. One iteration showed a promotional still for Mariah Carey's 'All I Want for Christmas is You', showing the singer smiling broadly and throwing her arms up, which now read 'All I Want for Christmas is a client who doesn't ask for my real name'. Another showed actress Jennifer Coolidge triumphantly raising a Golden Globe statuette in the air, captioned 'That feeling when you make it through an entire booking without being asked for your 'real' name'. A third was composed of two panels with stills from *Love Actually*, with Mark (Andrew Lincoln) standing in a doorway holding up a card that reads 'Can you pls tell me your real name?' and the other showing Juliet's (Kiera Knightley's) reaction, with cartoon eyes and a mouth inserted over her face in an exaggerated expression of frustration. Clients ask for a worker's 'real' name in an attempt to acquire a kind of authenticity and intimacy that is typically not on offer, and the memes here frame this attempt to evade sex workers' safety precautions as frustrating. Through their repetition, they also make it clear that clients' belief that their relationship with a sex worker is unique—and therefore warrants the additional intimacy of this disclosure—is misguided, producing a meta-discourse within the broader context of online sex worker humor. In the case of the *Love Actually* meme, online discourse in recent years has highlighted that Mark's behavior in the film is inappropriate, self-absorbed, and creepy; while not all viewers would have this intertextual reference point, for some, it would add additional depth to the meaning of the text.

Another meme showed a drawing of a woman holding a phone out with the caller ID showing 'circus' captioned 'it's for you', accompanied by various captions representing things clients have done or said to workers. One reads, 'I wish I'd met you outside of here', meaning outside the workplace, such as at a club or brothel. The assumption from clients that the worker would be attentive and interested in them outside of a professional context if only they had met in a different way, or that workers want or need a client's companionship, is here cast as absurd with an implied direction to 'stop clowning'. Similarly, memes poked fun at clients who asked for discounts 'coz I'm your fave', with the request paired with a gif of Hilary Duff smiling and laughing, then typing 'lol' into a mobile phone. A separate three-panel meme opens with a man reading a book titled 'How to make a sex worker you've paid to see fall madly in love with you', an image of the book open to a page that reads 'you can't :)', and a final panel showing him frowning, eyes full of tears. The humor is at the expense of clients that fundamentally misunderstand or wilfully misinterpret the bounded authenticity [64] of the experience they have paid for, and the nature and limits of sex workers' interest in them. The use of a visibly amused Duff and the cheerful but borderline passive-aggressive ':)' serves to emphasize the seeming absurdity of these requests or desires.

A linked sub-theme was clients who inappropriately shared personal information: a recurring motif was clients showing sex workers photographs of their wives and children. The *Love Actually* meme format was used again here, this time captioned 'Would you like to see photos of my wife and kids from my latest vacation?', again drawing upon intertextual understandings of the dynamic in the depicted scene. Another, captioned 'Client (mid-booking): 'look at this beautiful photo of my wife and kids!' is paired with an image of singer Beyonce looking confused, overlaid with a partly transparent error message window which reads 'brain.exe has stopped working'. Another shows *Spongebob Squarepants* character Mr Krabs frowning and squinting at a sign which reads '0 days without zoning out while a client shows me photos of his wife and kids during a booking', while other memes focused on the challenge of maintaining an appearance of interest and engagement while clients were talking. Conveyed here is the idea that this behavior from clients is boring, annoying, or baffling, which, appearing alongside memes that focus on other inappropriate behavior from clients, contributes to forming a generalized picture of them as socially inept. This functions, in part, to convey the power dynamic as being one where the control and confidence in professional interactions do not favor the client, and gives workers back the 'narrator's power' to frame the events [28] (p. 39). Through

displaying frustration as a typical response to client attempts to breach boundaries, it reinforces that the boundaries are reasonable, and contributes to a social environment in which upholding them and expecting them to be respected, is a norm.

Jokes which were made at the client's expense or with the client's behavior as the butt of the joke were also the dominant theme in the two news texts examined. Both news texts reported on clients who attempted to make bookings for face-to-face appointments during New Zealand's initial COVID-19 lockdown, and the methods that sex workers used to rebuff them [48,49]. One news text interviewed a worker whose responses to clients were used as supporting images accompanying the story: the responses here drew on the absurd, with multiple clients seemingly not being put off by the worker telling them she currently had COVID-19 [49]. The second news text described sex workers as 'public health educators', contextualizing their responses to the threat of COVID-19 within a longer history of dealing with public health crises, specifically HIV/AIDS [48]. More responses were included to illustrate the second text, which specifically highlighted the humor evident within them, and noted that the profiled responses had been publicly shared by sex workers on social media. Within these exchanges, clients were criticized by sex workers as, variously, 'horny mouth breathers' and 'morons'. In multiple screencapped text exchanges, sex workers enquired deadpan if a client's penis was 2 meters long, since that was the required social distancing. In others, they soberly proposed the ludicrous scenarios which would be required to take an appointment: one says she is happy to see a client, but he will need to join her bubble for the rest of lockdown, which 'could be romantic', adding her children might start calling him daddy. In another, a worker cheerfully tells a client she will wear a new outfit for their meeting, then sends a photo of a person in a biohazard suit. As well as being amusing, these responses demonstrated a clear understanding of the rules which applied during the lockdown period, and comically highlighted to prospective clients why their requests were unreasonable.

As the second news text explained, these exchanges were posted for the amusement and edification of an audience on sex workers' client-facing social media. The exchanges attracted significant attention, showing a savvy reframing of an event that has the potential to be a significant stressor within sex work [65] (p. 101) (fielding frustrating or time-wasting inquiries) into a promotional opportunity. As well as being amusing, these exchanges also exhibit the worker displaying agency and enforcing boundaries—about how they expect clients to treat them, and the consideration they expect clients to show for their health. These boundaries are not just stated but displayed for an audience of non-sex workers, as well as their peers. A meme from one of the peer-led organizations covered a similar topic, with a two-panel meme that shows first the face of a seemingly panicked figure barely above water, captioned 'clients being refused service', with the second panel showing that the figure is actually sitting comfortably in very shallow water, captioned 'the fact they'd get service if they just showered as asked'. The meme emphasizes that client objections to being asked to shower are melodramatic, validating workers' decisions to enforce boundaries and exercise agency in making showering a condition of providing services. Although the intended audience of posts from peer-led organizations will be other sex workers, meaning the educational dimension present in posts on client-facing accounts is likely diminished, in both cases, they model the enforcement of boundaries as normal and reasonable.

4.2. Stigma and Discrimination

A second theme evident within the analyzed texts was commentary about sex workers' experiences of stigma and discrimination, including some which showed evidence of what is called 'reframing' in the literature about resilience and stigma [11,19,32,37]. Research into how humor can contribute to the management of stigma has often highlighted that joking about experiences of oppression or discrimination can be one way to cope with them, partly mitigating the mental and emotional toll of this. Memes from peer-led organizations would often focus on this topic. Sometimes this would be in fairly general or high-level terms: one

showed Heidi Klum dressed as a giant worm, with her tail pinning down a person lying on the floor. The figure on the floor is labeled 'me', while Klum is labeled 'the ongoing trauma of experiencing daily whorephobia'. In another, an image based on Spotify's annual 'wrapped' reports is presented, listing top genres as including 'the relentless daily experience of whorephobia', as well as more specific experiences of discrimination such as 'getting banned on insta for posting feet pics', and 'angering incels online by merely existing'. Other memes presented the impacts of stigma in ways that were more subtle and arguably clearer at first glance to those within the community: a recurring joke across multiple peer-led organizations concerned being an accountant. This included a panel drawn from another part of the Spotify wrapped set, which labeled the viewer as 'The Accountant'; a meme about being anxious in a social situation where people were discussing what they did for work captioned with musical notation, and the words 'Nobody asks you questions when you say you're an accountant'; and an image headed with the words 'I'm an 'accountant' starter pack' which included inset images of winged eyeliner, an error message after being banned from Instagram, a Lucite-soled Pleaser, a red umbrella, condoms, and cats. Another variation of the Mariah Carey Christmas meme contained the words, 'All I want for Christmas is to be able to apply for a job, a bank account or housing and not be worried they'll reject me because they're kinda whorephobic lol'.

Each image depicts or explores the experiences and dimensions of stigma and whorephobia [4] (p.19; footnote 4) [66]: either in absurdist terms (whorephobia feels like being pinned beneath a giant worm at all times) or in more concrete examples (whorephobia affects the ability of current and former sex workers to access financial services, housing, and employment). The memes make use of irony, notably in the Mariah Carey meme, which pairs Carey's ebullient facial expression and gesture with a commentary on the dire material impacts of stigma, as well as the final punctuating 'lol', a common shorthand within online discourse, to add ironic detachment to a statement. The 'starter pack' meme functions on multiple layers to articulate experiences of stigma and responses to it. First, it presents a common tactic among sex workers of using information control to manage stigma [19] by obscuring what their job is. Second, as well as images related to sex work that would be identifiable to non-sex workers (platform Pleaser shoes; condoms), it also shows the experience of having social media accounts deactivated—as a consequence of discrimination against sex work online—as common within the group. Finally, it suggests a resistance to stigma tangentially, through the inclusion of the red umbrella, and its association with sex worker rights.

Other texts showed evidence of reframing. One drew on the topic of clients asking for 'real' names and showed three panels of the character Squidward from *Spongebob Squarepants*. In the first, he looks drawn and exhausted, and is captioned, 'Getting asked for your real name before the session even starts'; in the second, his expression is blank, with the caption, 'Having the client fish for your real name towards the end in a way they think is inconspicuous but is blatantly obvious'; while the third shows a transformed and handsome Squidward with a chiseled jaw, and the caption 'Giving them a fake real name to avoid all the drama'. In this instance, the dynamic is reframed with workers highlighted as anticipating and pre-emptively responding to the client's attempts to evade boundaries. Another meme queried and inverted ideas about the desirability of sex workers as romantic partners. The first panel shows a figure saying they would not date a sex worker; the second poses the question, 'Does a sex worker want to date you?'; a third panel shows an uncaptioned neutral expression (a visual translation of the pause for comic effect); and a final panel depicts them frowning. This meme takes a characteristic statement of sex work stigma and folds it in on itself to create a discursive counterpractice [67] (pp. 48–52). A rejection from someone whom a sex worker is not romantically interested in is irrelevant—an opinion offered which was unasked for—and the prejudiced speaker is the butt of the joke, finding themselves located in the position of being un-dateable. The sex worker is not an object who is chosen or discarded in this arrangement, but an agentic subject. Built into this, and other posts which remind the reader they are intelligent, attractive, and

possess multiple positive attributes, is a sense of pride and self-esteem, a buttress against the pervasive stigma which workers may encounter in other venues. Sometimes this is directly correlated with pride in holding a sex-working identity or a rejection of the kind of whorearchy which sees some forms of sex work as more acceptable than others: one text shows a series of images of Bugs Bunny in more and more sumptuous outfits, captioned 'I'm a private escort', 'I'm a sex worker', and in the final panel, 'I'm a whore'.

Finally, humor was also used to challenge stigma in the series of texts from New Zealand sex workers during the COVID-19 lockdown. A persistent stigma that affects sex workers, and influences legal responses to the industry [68], is the idea that sex workers are vectors of disease. While historically, this has often centered on the idea of sex workers as a vector of sexually transmitted infections, during the pandemic, sex workers were sometimes vilified as potential sources of contagion of COVID-19, too [69,70]. The exchanges posted by sex workers in which they declined attempts by clients to book them function effectively to position sex workers as public health-minded and able to engage in effective education. While the attention this drew would initially have been limited to their own social media reach, the elevation of the texts via the news media extends the influence of this. Although this limited example of an alternate narrative, of course, cannot undo the much longer-standing stigma which labels sex workers as vectors of contagion, it does present this alternative for consideration and provides something to build upon. Stigma and stereotypes are perpetuated in multiple ways, but within news media, stereotypes are sometimes used as framing devices partly because they are identifiable and culturally intelligible to the intended reader [71]. For these to be supplanted, alternative narratives about sex work, which are identifiable and comprehensible to the intended audience, are needed.

4.3. Activism and Making Change

Within the texts sourced from peer-led organizations, a third significant theme was the use of humor to support campaigns for improved labor rights and protections for sex workers, and for greater awareness of sex workers' needs. Existing work on the function of humor for sex workers posits that it is productive, with the outcome or action usually understood to be a protective effect for mental health or buffering against stress. Here, I argue that it may, in fact, be multiply productive: producing benefits with regard to resilience, but also politically productive, especially when presented in formats and mediums where it can reach a larger audience.

At the time the data were collected, Victoria was in the process of enacting decriminalization legislation, and an active campaign for decriminalization was underway in Queensland. Achieving the decriminalization of sex work in all states and territories of Australia was identified as a key issue by the national body Scarlet Alliance [9]. Multiple memes circulated information about the importance of decriminalization to improve sex workers' rights and safety, and compared it to other legislative approaches. In one, a large teapot with multiple spouts, labeled 'full decriminalisation of sex work', pours tea into four cups, each of which was labeled with a positive outcome of this legislative model. Another showed a popular format from the HBO series *White Lotus*, which showed Tanya (Jennifer Coolidge) with subtitles at the bottom of the image, which now read 'These stupid archaic discriminatory laws. They're trying to murder me'. A third showed an illustration of a lush and green futuristic utopia, captioned 'how society would look when we wake up tomorrow if we decriminalised sex work today'. Each meme supports the decriminalization of sex work but communicates different elements of the campaign: the first is an easily shareable image that gives specific detail about why the model is preferred by sex workers, while the third allows for a humorous yet optimistic imagining of possible futures. The second meme, drawn from *White Lotus*, does what I consider to be interesting discursive work to underscore the importance of decriminalization. The format used experienced a brief surge of popularity online at the time of the release of the first season of the series, with the original line being: 'These gays. They're trying to murder me'. This phrase was quickly adopted and used in a hyperbolic manner: to caption selfies or group photos from pride or

other queer events, or adopted to express intense admiration for musical performances, for example, used to describe things that obviously did not pose any actual threat to life and limb. The meme takes a format that had, by that point, been repeatedly used to describe threats hyperbolically, and then uses it to highlight the impacts of laws that discriminate against sex workers. On first reading, the instinct is to laugh, especially if—as many among the audience would have—one has recently seen dozens of iterations where the topic of the meme is something, at worst, mildly inconvenient. The moment where the meaning of the meme becomes more apparent comes fractionally later, at which point it becomes clear that, in this instance, ‘trying to murder me’ is literal. Discriminatory laws *do* make sex workers less safe, and the impacts of this are sometimes fatal. The meme exposes and emphasizes this jarring reality through a skillful deployment of gallows humor, using humor to make a taboo or heavy topic speakable [35].

Some memes highlighted the shortcomings of other legal models. Several critiqued the Nordic model (criminalization of the purchase of sex) [72]. One especially effective use of humor here relied on a popular format which shows four panels: the first has a hand raised out of a body of water, seemingly signaling for help; the second panel shows a hand reaching towards it; the third panel reveals the hand high-fiving the person drowning, rather than helping; the final panel shows only fingertips above the water as the person in it sinks and presumably drowns. The typical use of the meme is to make light of offers of help or solutions which are comically inappropriate and ineffective, sometimes with the additional layer that the person offering them is self-congratulatory about their act of ‘charity’. In the iteration from the peer-led organization, the drowning hand is labeled ‘sex workers’, the hand reaching for them is labeled ‘SWERFs’, and the high five ‘the Nordic Model’. Complementing other posts which gave specific detail about the benefits of decriminalization compared to other models, this image uses humor to effectively convey some critiques of the Nordic model: it is shown here as being offered under the guise of help, while actually providing none of the things sex workers most urgently need. The image is amusing to people who are already familiar with the shortcomings of the Nordic model and have enough contextual knowledge to decode it; it is potentially both amusing and informative to people who are less familiar with the model, efficiently conveying a general sense of the peer-led organization’s position on the model without being didactic. Similar approaches were used in memes from Vixen Collective, Victoria’s peer-led organization, comparing the model of decriminalization to licensing. In some instances, these memes included specific detail about the benefits of decriminalization compared to licensing; in another example, a combination of intertextual knowledge about the dynamic between two characters in the film *Zoolander*, combined with emoji use, conveyed the organization’s position on each.

Finally, many of the posts from the peer-led organizations focused on the needs and experiences of other marginalized groups, which many sex workers also belong to, reflecting the necessity of an intersectional approach in sex work activism [71]. Frequently, a post would use the same meme template to express multiple ideas, making use of the ability to add several images to a single Instagram post. One using a template of the video game character Mario included two images where the humor related to experiences of sex workers, one about the experiences of racialized people, one about profiting from housing and, by extension, the needs of unhoused people and people experiencing housing insecurity, and one about a public figure known for their transphobic views. Presenting commentary on each of these issues within the same post implicitly suggests solidarity with other marginalized groups and signals that the expected audience of sex workers will be diverse. Multiple memes also critiqued capitalist systems, highlighted the impacts of worsening wealth inequality, and drew on ideas about labor rights and organizing. In doing this, the position that sex work is work is emphasized, and the meaning of it is clarified: calling it ‘work’ is not done with the intention of valorizing it as a way to access neoliberal acceptability or with any notion that doing ‘work’ is in and of itself good [73]. Rather, that sex work is work is used to explain the broader structures and operations of

power which it operates within, and to offer a set of tools and heuristics which may be used to organize for better wages and safer conditions.

5. Discussion

Within the first theme—humor about clients—multiple contributors to resilience can be observed, as well as elements that may be understood as evidence of resilience. Humor about clients, which shows workers setting and enforcing boundaries, emphasizes their ability to exert some control over their working environment. For sex workers, having a degree of agency in when and how they work contributes to resilience, and confidence that this agency can be exercised and boundaries enforced is a positive outcome of possessing resilience [11,13,16,18]. Posts that draw their humor from clients misunderstanding the nature of the relationship they have with sex workers can be understood as emphasizing that sex work is work, similarly identified as a significant contributor to improving resilience. In these instances, the job's status *as* work is taken to be a self-evident fact, and the operation of the jokes hinges on this, with the comedy in these approaches from clients coming partly from their mistaking a professional relationship for a personal one. This also functions as a kind of 'backstage humor' [28], which, although it is presented to a broader audience, is intended to be most amusing to other sex workers, thereby contributing to creating closer community links, or establishing a specific worker as part of an in-group [2]. Effective uses of online humor likely also improve the reach and effectiveness of other messaging from peer-led organizations, too. The exact operations of social media algorithms are obscured by the platforms, leaving users working on assumptions based on observation and received wisdom [45,74]. One widely held tenet is that greater engagement begets greater visibility, and creating posts that are 'likeable' and 'shareable' produces preferential treatment by the algorithm, in turn making it more likely users will see other future posts [74].

The second theme, focusing on stigma and discrimination, is evidence of sex worker humor fitting within an identified model of workplace gallows humor, while simultaneously functioning as a mechanism for handling the cognitive and emotional loads of stigma and producing the kind of buffering typical of resilience. The overlap between different kinds of resilient humor here again reflects the value in drawing on existing literature that considers work and labor generally [65] (pp. 84–88), not just sex work specifically, when conducting research about sex work. Within this, there is also evidence of some characteristics which produce and reflect resilience, notably reframing. Although the use of irony is often viewed as inherently negative and maladaptive, as Cameron et al. point out, this is not necessarily the case [38]. One characteristic of positive or adaptive humor is that the humor is deployed with the intention of amusing others, and these examples of sex worker humor, posted publicly and in modes that allow and encourage sharing, are inherently offered to provoke these positive social responses as one desired outcome. Linked to this are memes that make reference to the recurrent experience of being deplatformed—as in the 'starter pack' meme, and in captions from peer-led organizations that would sometimes make reference to being shadowbanned. As other researchers have noted, following SESTA-FOSTA, social media platforms updated their terms of service and began more stringent enforcement of them, with a 'significant chilling' effect on sex workers online [7,8] (p. 368). The productive potential of sex workers' online humor is limited by an increase in deplatforming, then, indicating a tension and hindrance which is inherent in using these platforms to build community.

In the final theme, which concerned posts that focused more explicitly on sex work politics and activism, there is evidence of the sort of optimism and hope for an improved future that has been identified as characteristic of resilient people [11,18]. Additionally, I would argue they also offer an opportunity for the exercise of agency and exertion of some degree of influence or intervention into discourse. Many of the posts were both amusing and informative, presenting an easily digestible way to share information about sex worker rights, potentially even without explicitly outing oneself. In some research into resilience among sex workers, finding ways to evade harassment, and avoid or temper negative

experiences, were highlighted as contributing to resilience, as well as to confidence in knowing what their rights are and demanding them be honored. Humor that focuses on sex worker rights and labor rights reflects these themes: even posts about rights that are not yet legally owed situate these as human and moral rights, something it is justifiable and reasonable to expect and demand. Structural and material factors influence resilience too, and postings from peer-led organizations that draw attention to the material needs of sex-working communities, such as safe and affordable housing and the ability to meet their living costs, draw attention to this. Decriminalization, too, creates a baseline from which it becomes easier to address and provide these basic material needs for sex workers. Humor that contributes, even in a small way, to generating greater support for decriminalization and an understanding of why it is beneficial may help to further progress in this, producing downstream effects to improve access to housing, employment, and education.

While this article has taken resilience as its central consideration, reflective of the theme of the Special Issue, I do not want to dismiss the other potential uses of humor, building on work that has articulated sex worker humor as a kind of resistance [1]. As well as being a potential coping mechanism for dealing with stigma, sex workers' humor can also be read as a politically productive critique, as a space where the development of distinctive sex work community cultures can be discerned, and as a site for the transmission of knowledge (how to effectively manage clients who ask for a 'real' name, to take just one example). There is a tendency in some prior work on humor in sex work to understand jokes about clients as functioning primarily to alleviate stresses, or to make tolerable what is sometimes situated as an inherently grueling and distressing kind of work. However, it is possible to take a different and more productive reading of jokes at the expense of clients. Humor that hinges on the blundering and witlessness of clients is not necessarily intended exclusively to provide a salve against the frustration of dealing with them, but instead can be viewed as something which intends to 'suggest the possibility of different ways of ordering society and the distribution of . . . authority' [41] (p. 363). That is, the joke functions not (just) by proposing an inversion of the power dynamic popularly imagined as existing between a sex worker and their client, but instead offers a new framework within which to understand one typology of the client. This imagining of the client collapses many of them together into an archetype—and not a flattering one. This sits in striking parallel to the unflattering archetypes often used to render the sex worker in public discourse and conjures into being a sphere within which the knowledge held by sex workers is instead foregrounded and shapes the schema of the dynamic. Core among these is the knowledge that sex work is work, with this archetype of the client distinguished through their persistent misreading of the professional dynamic. As with discourses that offer a new formation of the sex worker as a public health advocate and educator discussed previously, I do not argue that this archetype undoes much longer and more embedded stigmas about sex work. Rather I intend to point out that this draws upon systems of knowledge developed by sex workers to shape a new comic foil within this micro-context which centers, however briefly, the perspective of sex workers.

Based on the texts analyzed in this article, it appears that many behaviors and perspectives consistent with the production and maintenance of resilience are reflected and communicated within sex workers' humor. The humor texts are evidence of resilience from the creators and also, in a possibility that warrants additional study, may in themselves function to support and produce resilience. In some instances, this humor may have political dimensions, which, in a less direct manner, may also support or contribute to resilience. Sex worker humor is an important function of online sex worker spaces, just as central to their operation and character as it is in physical sex workplaces [1,2]. The deplatforming of sex workers from online spaces has negative emotional impacts [45]. Considering the operation of humor in these spaces adds to existing understandings of the importance of these platforms, which play a role in the establishment of supportive social networks and offer mechanisms for affecting political change.

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Appendix A

SESTA-FOSTA made website operators liable for content on their platforms that could promote or facilitate prostitution or illegal sexual commerce [7,8]. Responses from website operators were to take a broad interpretation of this, which led to the loss of online safety resources, as well as what is termed ‘deplatforming’, or the deletion of social media accounts or posts of sex workers, activists, lingerie brands, and sex educators [45]. Although SESTA-FOSTA originates in the United States of America, the enforcement of it on social media sites is global [45]).

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