"It's stressful having all these phones"
Investigating Sex Workers' Safety Goals, Risks, and Practices Online

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Technology & Sex Work

Finding & interacting with clients

Community with other sex workers

Online-only work (camming, porn)

Research Questions

How do sex workers define safety?

What are the major barriers to staying safe online?

What strategies do sex workers use to stay safe?

Study Design

- Semi-structured interviews (n=29) with sex workers in Germany & Switzerland, where sex work is legal
  - Tech practices, definitions of safety, risks and protective strategies
  - In German or English
  - End-to-end encrypted video, voice, or chat

- Survey (n=65) with sex workers in Germany, Switzerland, & the UK
  - In German or English
  - Four closed-response: safety strategies, digital tools, safety concerns around legality
  - One open-response: "How do you define safety?"

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"How do you define safety?"

Physical Safety

Respect

Privacy

Financial Security

Legality

Clear Boundaries

Access to community

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Respect

Privacy

Financial Security

"If I had [financial pressure] to accept jobs against my better judgement eg someone... demanding services I don't offer, I would be unsafe." (S31)

Legality

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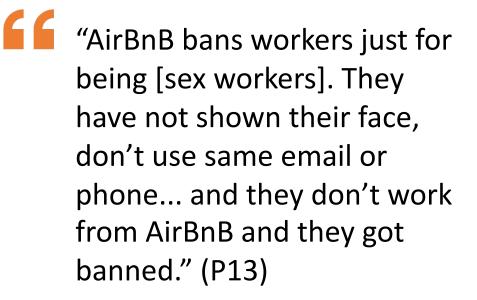
Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz

Bundesamt für Justiz

Telemediengesetz (TMG)
§ 5 Allgemeine Informationspflichten

Risks to Safety Goals

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- **Online platforms** discriminate against sex workers and facilitate interpersonal risks

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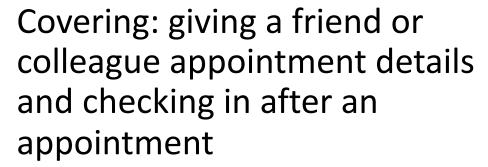- **Online platforms** discriminate against sex workers and facilitate interpersonal risks

" "AirBnB bans workers just for being [sex workers]. They have not shown their face, don't use same email or phone... and they don't work from AirBnB and they got banned." (P13)

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Safety Strategies: In-Person Work

Covering: giving a friend or colleague appointment details and checking in after an appointment

- 68% of survey respondents

Vetting clients: checking the client's reputation among colleagues, or "*separat[ing] the wheat from the chaff*" (P20)
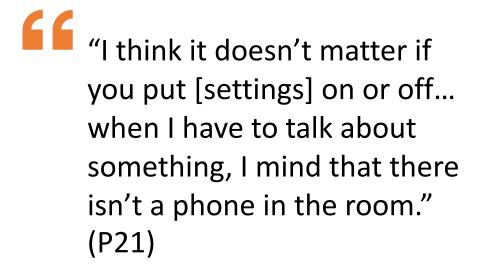
- 51% of survey respondents

Safety Strategies: Security Settings

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" "I think it doesn't matter if you put [settings] on or off... when I have to talk about something, I mind that there isn't a phone in the room." (P21)

Safety Strategies: Security Tools

- Few sex workers used technical security tools
  - Encrypted chat (Signal, WhatsApp): 32%
  - VPN: 14%
  - Encrypted email: 9%
  - Tor: 9%
  - Password Managers: 8%
  - Cryptocurrency: 5%

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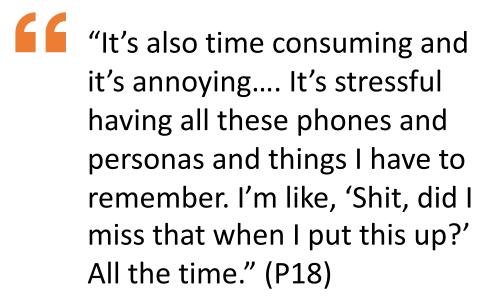- Must be cooperative with clients

" "I would gladly do all of the above, but that really only works when the customers participate: Threema / Signal / Telegram, PGP-encryption, cryptocurrency…" (S49)

Safety Strategies: Identity Management

- Keeping work and personal life separate online is critical for privacy, boundaries, and physical safety
  - 77% use an alias for work
  - 66% use separate accounts or devices

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" "It's also time consuming and it's annoying…. It's stressful having all these phones and personas and things I have to remember. I'm like, 'Shit, did I miss that when I put this up?' All the time." (P18)

Safety Strategies: Self-Censorship

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- Deleting work accounts temporarily

" "I am legally allowed to work…. [However,] I am scared of getting banned from certain countries just for being a sex worker so I remove all my info, account and website and wipe my phone before travelling." (S11)

Resignation & Regret

- Managing separate accounts, identities, devices, and information is hard, and mistakes feel inevitable

- It's hard to undo past mistakes

" "I login to Kaufmich in browser on my personal phone and my Apple account for work phone is registered to my passport name… This stuff could get me killed or deported…. I am not prepared." (P13)

Discussion: Tech for Sex Work

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- New tools designed for sex work should be led by sex workers

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- Digital safety has multiple, interdependent axes
- Sex workers optimize their safety strategies across all axes
- Technical tools fall short and are untrusted, so sex workers have developed sophisticated alternate digital safety strategies