

# Side Hustles and Sexual Exploitation

Australian news media reporting and commentary on the sex industry during the COVID-19 pandemic



International Women's Day

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#IWD2022



# Acknowledgement of Country

CATWA and Collective Shout acknowledge the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nations, the Wadawurrung people of the Kulin nations, the Ngunnawal people, Whadjuk Nyoongar people, and Kabi Kabi and Jinibara people on whose unceded lands this report was produced. We respectfully acknowledge their Ancestors and Elders, past, present and emerging. We also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and their Ancestors of the lands and waters across Australia where CATWA and Collective Shout undertake our work. These lands were never ceded, and are therefore stolen. We also recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are leaders in working to address the disproportionate levels of violence enacted against them, their children and their families.

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# The context for women during COVID-19



**Male violence against women** has increased in Australia during the pandemic.

At the same time, women's ability to financially support themselves and their children has decreased.

**Poverty is a major risk factor** for women in the sex industry as well as a driver for women to enter it. This risk was compounded during the pandemic.

## Our question

The media plays an important role in constructing our understandings of the sex trade, of the women in it, the women vulnerable to entering it and the male buyers of those women. In this research paper, we asked: how did the Australian news media report and comment on the sex industry during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Data

We Analysed

422

News articles

11

Australia News Sources

365

Day Period

## The Findings

# What we found

# 42

Percent of articles portrayed the sex industry positively

# 40

Percent of articles provided a neutral description of the sex industry

# 18

Percent of articles portrayed the sex industry negatively

# 64

Percent of articles discussed examples of women selling sex

**Sex buyers were virtually invisible in discussions about the sex industry** – over 60% of news articles didn't even mention the sex/gender of the sex buyer.

Despite constituting the majority of the 'demand' for the sex trade, only 36% of articles explicitly identified sex buyers as men.

Whether sold as a life raft out of pandemic-induced poverty, a "cheeky side-hustle", or the route to a glamorous celebrity lifestyle, pornographic content creation (e.g., OnlyFans) was often framed by the Australian media as entrepreneurial and aspirational for the young, modern woman in age of COVID-19.

Where there was a prior demarcation between women who work in the industry (e.g., 'porn stars') and everyday women who should sexualise themselves (e.g., for their partner's pleasure), we found there is now a dominant narrative promoting the sex industry as a viable, and even desirable, career choice or aspirational lifestyle for women.

Decriminalisation of the industry was reinforced in the Australian media, with no mention of alternative legislative approaches such as the Nordic/Equality model.

## What needs to change

The mainstream Australian news media has a dangerous blind spot in reporting and commentary on the sex industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. We urge all who work in the media to recognise and acknowledge the links between women's experiences of financial insecurity, male violence against women, and exploitation in the sex industry.

# Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a catastrophic impact on women and girls in Australia and globally. Studies show that women have been subjected to increased rates of male violence, including emotionally abusive and controlling behaviours, sexual violence, technology-facilitated abuse, and social isolation.<sup>1</sup> UN Women even described the pandemic as “the big revealer”, highlighting the conditions keeping women trapped in relationships with violent men.<sup>2</sup>

**In one study, 47% of women reported experiencing violence for the first time, while those with prior histories of violence stated that it intensified during the pandemic.**

For women in the sex industry - or those vulnerable to entering it - violence and structural inequalities have been magnified by the pandemic. Financial insecurity and unemployment predominantly affected women considered most at risk of entering the industry: young women, migrant women, and single mothers.<sup>3</sup> For women already in the sex trade, sexual violence at the hands of male sex buyers escalated, with men using women’s financial vulnerability to pressure them into unsafe practices.<sup>4</sup>

To the women of CATWA and Collective Shout, this moment in history provided a critical opportunity to focus on the conditions that pressure women into entering the sex industry, and those that keep them there.

## At a glance

As many of us were glued to our smartphones waiting for updates on COVID-19, we noticed that the sex industry received - and benefitted from - significant attention in the Australian media. References to the industry seemed to pop up regularly and in diverse publications - from News.com.au to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

On the surface, we saw articles repeating the idea that the sex industry offered amazing opportunities for women to improve their financial status overnight, running stories about women’s “cheeky side-hustles” on OnlyFans. We also noticed, however, that references to women’s growing financial insecurity throughout the pandemic were often absent or decontextualised in the same coverage. An analysis of female poverty and male violence did not appear to be a significant part of the Australian media narrative.

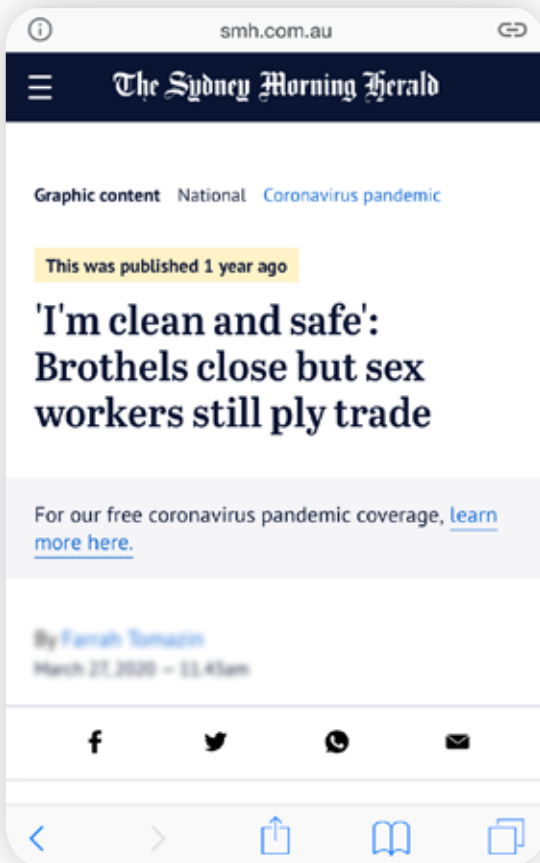
As academics, writers, trauma counsellors and campaigners, and long-time advocates for women and girls, we believed that the messages found in Australian news media warranted closer examination. Our investigation resulted in this report.

## The context for women during COVID-19

Before casting a critical eye on news media and commentary, we explored some of the most significant contexts affecting women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. These included women’s experiences with male violence and their growing financial insecurity.

### Context 1: Male Violence

Discussions of male violence have gained some traction in the Australian media in recent years. This is thanks in no small part to the voices of courageous survivors of sexual abuse, who have shared their stories and raised awareness around the urgent need to challenge harmful attitudes that too many men hold about women and girls.



Despite increasing public awareness of the issue, however, rates of male violence have skyrocketed, with the United Nations naming violence against women a “shadow pandemic”.<sup>5</sup> Research shows that factors such as extended lockdowns have exacerbated the problem. In one study, 47% of women reported experiencing violence for the first time, while those with prior histories of violence stated that it intensified during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

Experts say the pandemic has triggered “a wave of domestic violence”,<sup>7</sup> and that public health-advised lockdowns have served as an “incubator of coercive control”.<sup>8</sup> In their study on practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women during COVID-19 restrictions

in Queensland, Australia, researchers from Monash University found that the coronavirus itself has been used as a way of enacting violence, with 68% of women reporting that their partners used the virus as an excuse to prevent them from leaving the house.<sup>9</sup>

Women have also been placed at risk of homelessness due to financial insecurity exacerbated by male violence. Research shows that low-income migrant women have been particularly vulnerable to male violence, having either no or limited access to welfare payments and other social protections, support services, or access to justice.<sup>10</sup>

**For many women, experiencing violence at the hands of men has been compounded by financial insecurity.**

### Context 2: Financial Insecurity

The pandemic significantly impacted women’s ability to support themselves and their families.<sup>11</sup> During the recession, women experienced a “triple-whammy”: they were “more likely to lose their jobs, more likely to do a lot more unpaid work, and less likely to get government support”.<sup>12</sup> Research shows that women with young children at home were particularly impacted, being forced to scale back their employment to oversee remote learning and other childcare responsibilities. The same research suggests that fathers’ time in paid employment remained relatively unaffected.<sup>13</sup>

Women already struggling financially were most impacted by the pandemic.

**One report shows that 8 out of 10 women who lost work during the pandemic were single mothers.**<sup>14</sup>

Because women are more likely to be employed in casual positions, they were ineligible for receiving Jobkeeper payments once they lost their jobs.<sup>15</sup> University of Melbourne research shows women in their 20s were more likely to be financially impacted by the pandemic in comparison



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to their male counterparts, with Workplace Gender Equality Agency data indicating that “young women have been pushed out of the labor market”.<sup>16</sup> For many women in Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant sources of poverty and financial insecurity in recent history.

### The sex industry during COVID-19

The sex industry has traditionally been powered by male sexual violence and female poverty; both contexts that have been prevalent in, and exacerbated by, the pandemic.

Due to a combination of factors, including unstable housing, unemployment and poverty, many women felt pressure to enter the sex trade to survive. While most of us have been able to protect our health by working from home, or using appropriate personal protective equipment and social distancing in essential occupations, women in the sex trade were at particular risk of contracting COVID-19. In Australia,

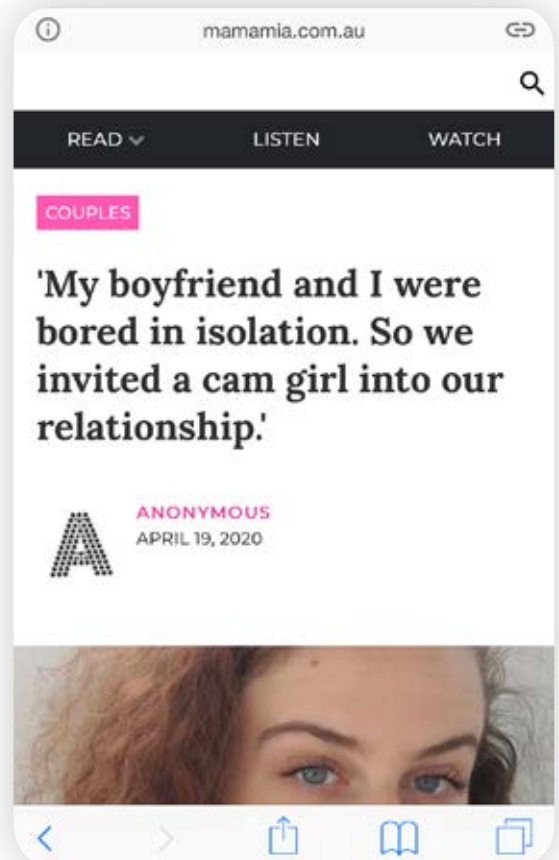
**Scarlet Alliance - described as Australia's peak sex worker body responsible for providing information on harm minimisation to those selling sex - offered advice including “play around with positions where you or your client is face down, to reduce shared breathing space”, and “think about creative ways to minimise clients touching you”.**<sup>17</sup>

While prostitution is treated as ‘sex work’ in various Australian states and territories, either through legalisation or decriminalisation of the industry, women on temporary visas were ineligible for government support during the pandemic. Indeed, despite being in either legalised or decriminalised states/territories, many women opted not to disclose their source of income to make a Jobkeeper claim, indicating that stigmatisation of women in the industry persists regardless of legalisation or decriminalisation.<sup>18</sup>

Male sex buyers have also taken advantage of women's increased vulnerability during the pandemic, with some demanding cheaper ‘services’ and displaying heightened levels of aggression.<sup>19</sup> In instances where the industry has migrated online due to physical distancing measures, male violence has amplified, with the pandemic providing new opportunities for exploitation, coercion and violence. Online grooming, exploitation, and trafficking are said to be “occurring at three times the normal rate”, targeting children and adolescents who spent more time online during the pandemic.<sup>20</sup> Reports show that traffickers using social media platforms to commit crime have capitalised on women's financial insecurities.<sup>21</sup>

### The media's role in sex industry promotion

The pandemic has resulted in greater dependence on news media to receive information.<sup>22</sup> It has also been a significant site of promotion for the sex industry, often through click-bait and sensationalism.<sup>23</sup> Understanding what is being said in the media - and how it is being said







- is important, as the media is a key site for the contestation and reproduction of ideas and narratives about our world.<sup>24</sup> These narratives shape our understanding of the world around us - they prompt us about what issues we should focus on, and they frame those issues in a certain light.<sup>25</sup> Media narratives can even influence our behaviour and beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Of relevance for the purposes of this report is the fact that the media can contribute to our understandings of sex, sexuality and health.<sup>27</sup> As such, what the media says about the sex industry is vital to how we come to understand it, and the messages we repeat about it in the world.

Researchers have been divided about the role the media plays in informing our understandings about the sex industry. Some have focused on popular cultural discourses and their role in the sexualisation of women and girls. Others have focused on news sources for their perceived stigmatising and oppressive portrayals of those working in the sex industry.

Those focusing on popular cultural perspectives on commercial sex have argued that its representations in film

and television have contributed to the glamorisation of 'pimp / ho chic', where women's sexual subordination is presented as an empowering lifestyle. Coy and colleagues argue that pop cultural representations of the sex industry sit in stark contrast to the realities of commercial sex and the exploitation of women. They argue that the mainstreaming of the sex industry can more accurately be described as the 'McSexualisation' of popular culture; reflecting the intersection between prostitution and global consumerism.<sup>28</sup>

**Online grooming, exploitation, and trafficking are said to be "occurring at three times the normal rate", targeting children and adolescents who spent more time online during the pandemic.<sup>20</sup>**

By contrast, much of the literature on other media discourses - such as news reporting on commercial sex - suggests that stigmatising and oppressive narratives about people in the sex trade are dominant. American sociologist Ronald Weitzer argues that news sources "legitimise the views of anti-prostitution activists" by reinforcing an "oppression paradigm", one that sees "sexual commerce rest[ing] on structural inequalities between men and women". Weitzer argues that news stories are "saturated" with themes of violence and criminality, and that claims of sex trafficking are often exaggerated.<sup>29</sup> Researchers in Canada and New Zealand have also argued that news stories about commercial sex predominantly focus on negative portrayals of the industry and those within it.<sup>30</sup>

Given these competing understandings of the role of the media in constructing the sex industry, we wanted to examine the role the Australian media plays in reinforcing narratives about the industry, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Our question

We asked ourselves: What stories about the sex industry are the Australian news media telling us? More specifically, we wanted to know:



How did the Australian media cover the sex industry during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Key Terms

We used the following broad key terms to collect news articles on the sex industry in Australia:

Sex Work\*  
Sex Industr\*  
Prostitut\*  
Brothel  
Strip\*  
Cam Girl  
Adult Platform  
FOSTA  
Adult Industr\*  
Porn\*  
NSFW (i.e., 'Not Suitable for Work')  
Amateur  
X-rated  
Adult Website  
Modelling  
Lap Danc\*  
Exotic Danc\*  
Live Cam\*  
Adult Content  
Sex Traffic\*  
Escort

## How we did it

### Data collection and analysis

For our analysis, we examined 11 online Australian news sources, collecting articles and editorial/opinion pieces from March 1, 2020 - the start of the pandemic - to March 31, 2021 (13 months). We used online database Factiva to retrieve articles from The Age, Herald Sun, Daily Telegraph, The Australian, ABC and SBS. We also visited websites of news sources directly to retrieve other articles that were not available through Factiva (e.g., news.com.au; Junkee, Mamamia, New Matilda, Guardian Australia). We excluded articles that were not primarily about the sex industry (e.g., articles that mention the industry once with no specific focus on it), and those published before March 2020 and after March 31, 2021.

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We selected these terms in an attempt to capture all articles related to the sex industry published during the time window, encompassing pornography, prostitution, strip clubs, and sex trafficking. A total of 308,676 articles were found in our initial article search (see Figure 1 on pages 22 and 23 for breakdown across news sources).

We then screened them for relevance using our inclusion and exclusion criteria, adding each title and full-text copy of the article into tables. Eight coders from CATWA and Collective Shout scanned articles and removed duplicates. Following the screening process, 679 articles remained. Upon reading the articles, we further excluded duplicates we did not identify the first time around, including articles that did not meet our inclusion criteria. A total of 422 articles were retained for analysis.

We coded each article both deductively (i.e., through pre-existing codes) and inductively (i.e., self-identified in the text). For the deductive portion of the study, we looked for the following information:

**Articles written in a ‘mostly negative’ way contained over 80% of a negative focus with some neutral references. Articles written ‘somewhat negatively’ contained approximately 60% of a negative focus.**

**Value Judgement** (negative, mostly negative, some negative, neutral, some positive, mostly positive, positive). For this code, we were interested in understanding whether news articles and editorial/opinion pieces were written with a specific value attached. For example, articles that were ‘negative’ were written with an entirely negative slant on the sex industry.

Articles that were ‘neutral’ did not contain a perspective on the sex industry either way, and so on. News articles considered ‘neutral’ typically discussed a news event in relation to the sex industry from a descriptive point of view.

**Location** (Yes - add below, No/Unclear). Location refers to where the events of the article occurred (e.g., Melbourne, etc).



**Sex/Gender of Prostituted Person** (Male; Female; Trans\*/Gender-Diverse/Non-Binary; Unclear/Unspecified; Male and Female; Male and Trans\*/Gender-Diverse/Non-Binary; Female, and Trans\*/Gender-Diverse/Non-Binary; Male, Female, and Trans\*/Gender-Diverse/Non-Binary). The sex/gender of the prostituted person was recorded to denote either a person employed formally in the sex industry or those who have been victims of crime and had their photographs / filmed sexual abuse uploaded to pornographic platforms.

**Sex/Gender of Sex Buyer** (Male; Female; Trans\*/Gender-Diverse/Non-Binary; Unclear/Unspecified; Male and Female; Male and Trans\*/Gender-Diverse/Non-Binary; Female, and Trans\*/Gender-Diverse/Non-Binary; Male, Female, and Trans\*/Gender-Diverse/Non-Binary). The sex/gender of the sex buyer denotes either traditional understandings of sex buyers (e.g., in brothels) or online sex buyers (e.g. through consumptions of pornography, etc).

**Race/Ethnicity of Prostituted Person** (Specified - Add below; Unclear/Unspecified). As participation in the Australian sex trade is highly racialised, we noted any information that relates to the race/ethnicity of the prostituted person.<sup>31</sup>



**Extra Notes** (e.g., open-text box). We included an ‘extra notes’ open-text box option to identify any codes that may be relevant but not officially included in the coding framework. The most frequent notes that were written were in relation to the sex/gender of brothel managers, pimps, and human traffickers.

We decided on these codes and sub-codes through regular meetings. Value judgements, in particular, were decided on the basis of the percentage of text that contains positive, negative, and neutral perspectives.

We also coded our data inductively, by going through each article and identifying codes and sub-codes based on the most dominant patterns in the data. Some of the most frequent codes we identified included: ‘Digital Censorship’, ‘Sex Work is Work’, ‘Entrepreneurship’, ‘Empowerment’, ‘Crime’, ‘Social Distancing’, ‘Human Trafficking’, and so on. Significant overlap was identified between coders. Once coding was complete, we met as a group and identified themes that stretch across codes. These themes included: ‘Selling Sex, Buying Sex, and Objecting to it: Differential Media Treatment’, ‘The Online Sex Boom: Entrepreneurship and Exploitation’, ‘Scandal and Illegality: Violence in the Sex Trade’, and ‘Boom or Bust? The Financial Realities of the Sex Trade’.

# What did we find?

During coding and analysis, we looked for both quantitative and qualitative patterns in the data. Quantitatively, we were interested in the value judgements present in the article, and whether the sex/gender of the prostituted person and sex buyer were identified. Qualitatively, our analysis generated themes from the words and language used by the writers of the articles.

## Unpacking the numbers: Quantitative findings

We identified a number of quantitative patterns in the data based on classifying our articles according to any ‘value judgement(s)’ that were present in the article, the ‘sex/gender of prostituted person’ and the ‘sex/gender of sex buyer’.

### Value Judgements

Out of a total of 422 articles analysed, over 40% were classified as ‘neutral’, which indicates that the tone of the article was descriptive rather than containing a value judgement (see Figure 2).

In contrast to much of the existing literature which argues that the news media portrays the sex industry in largely negative terms,<sup>32</sup> we found that many articles merely described events rather than presenting a critical stance on the industry itself.

When value judgements were evident in news stories, these judgements often depicted the sex industry in a positive light. Overall, 42% of articles were written using positive descriptions of the industry. These articles often included references to the growing popularity of online sex industry businesses and the celebrities and social media influencers making money through pornography. Of these generally positive accounts, 21% were considered to be entirely positive of the sex industry, 11% were ‘mostly positive’ (containing some neutral content), and 9% contained ‘some

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Figure 2

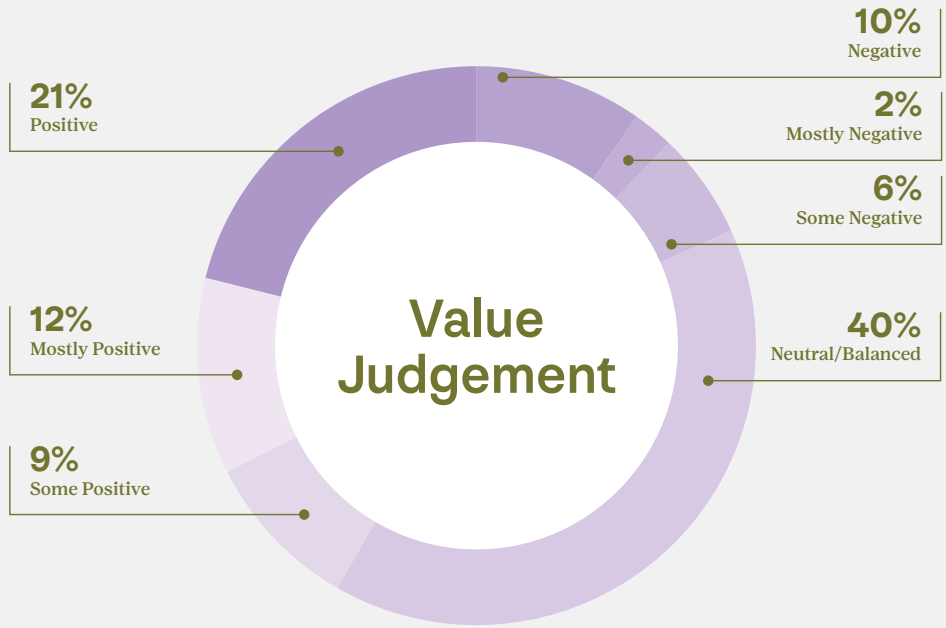
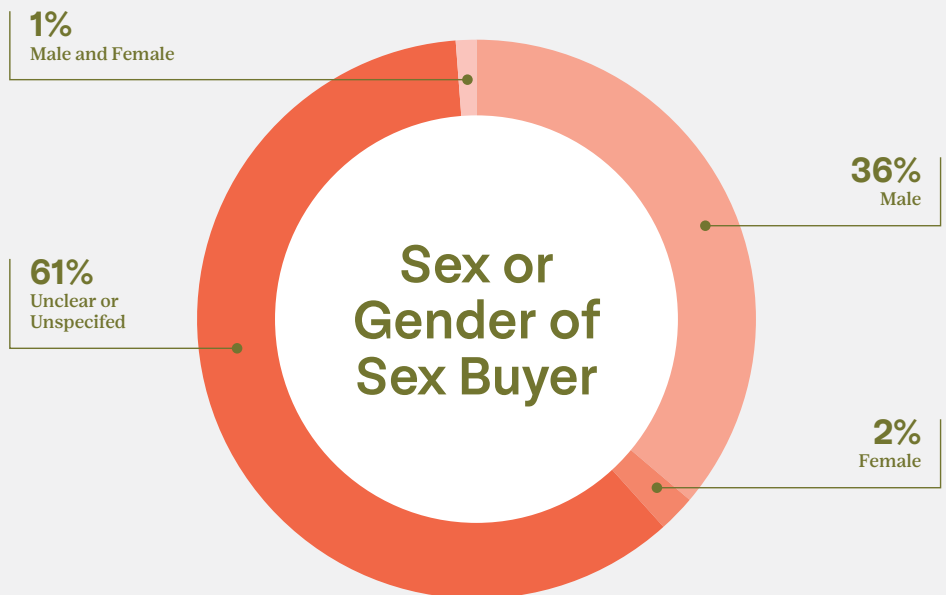


Figure 3



Figure 4





positive' references (containing some neutral content). By contrast, only 18% of the articles painted the sex industry in a generally negative light. While negative portrayals of the sex industry were infrequent, they often referenced the harms associated with the industry, such as sexual violence and its connections to organised crime.

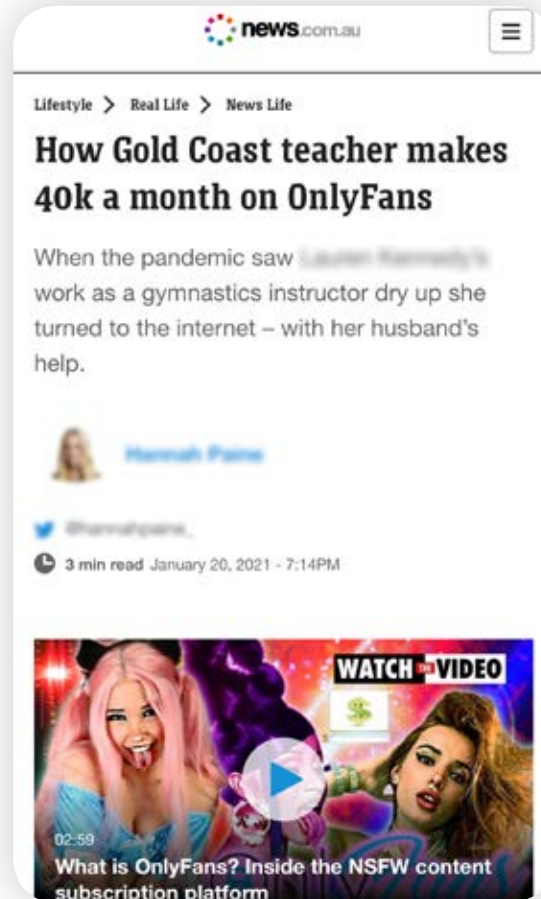
**42% of articles presented the sex industry in a positive way, compared to 18% that described it negatively.**

**40% of news articles talked about the sex industry in a neutral way, often through descriptions about specific incidents.**

### Sex/Gender of Prostituted People and Sex Buyers

Research suggests that most prostituted and trafficked people are women and girls and that most sex buyers are men.<sup>33</sup> Our findings, however, showed that only 64% of news articles clearly identified women as those selling sex, with 26% of articles being unclear about the sex of the prostituted person. In those articles that did not specify the sex or gender of the person selling sex, we cannot know the author's intentions, nor how consumers interpreted the article. It may be that there was an inbuilt assumption on one or both sides. For example, potentially the author did not identify the prostituted person as a woman, because this was seen as the default position. Similarly, readers may rely on contextual knowledge to assume that the person selling sex was a woman. However, this was beyond the scope of our analysis. Male (6%) as well as trans and gender-diverse (2%) people selling sex were less frequently the topic of news stories (see Figure 3).

Despite constituting the demand for the industry and fueling sex trafficking, our findings show that only 36% of news articles explicitly identified male sex buyers. In cases where men were explicitly labelled as sex buyers, articles focused on violence



committed against women (i.e. in the sex industry) and intimate partners. Overall, in 60% of the articles, the sex/gender of the sex buyer was not specified (see Figure 4). Our findings support research suggesting that sex buyers remain largely invisible in discussions about the sex industry, and are only ever mentioned when they have committed a violent crime against a prostituted person.

**64% of news articles described those selling sex as women, while only 36% identified men as sex buyers.**

**60% of news articles failed to identify the sex of the person fuelling demand for the industry.**

### Analysing descriptions of the sex trade: Qualitative findings

We also analysed descriptions of the sex trade and identified four themes from our analysis:

1. Selling Sex, Buying Sex, and Objecting to it: Differential Media Treatment
2. The Online Sex Boom: Entrepreneurism and Exploitation
3. Scandal and Illegality: Violence in the Sex Trade
4. Boom or Bust: The Financial Realities of the Sex Trade

#### Selling Sex, Buying Sex, and Objecting to it: Differential Media Treatment

“OnlyFans is another platform that’s become a popular way for sex workers to take control of their content” (Conaghan, 10/07/21, Junkee).

**“And if you consume porn, make sure it’s ethical and not from giant corporations who profit off exploiting women. Like your groceries, shop local and direct from the creators” (Mia Khalifa as cited in Rennex, 28/09/2020, Junkee).**

Different narratives were written about those selling sex, those buying it, and groups objecting to the sex industry. For those selling sex, themes of choice and empowerment predominated, focusing specifically on the ‘empowerment’ of some groups of women (e.g., low-income single mothers) over others. While the sex/gender of sex buyers was largely missing from news articles and commentaries, references to female sex buyers were present, while references to male sex buyers were infrequent. Dissenting voices - or the diverse voices who oppose the sex industry - were often one-dimensionally portrayed as conservative and motivated by religious

reasons. Overall, this theme highlighted differential media treatment in stories about the sex industry.

#### Construction of the ‘sex worker’

In stark contrast to the depictions of violence, scandal and illegality in the data we analysed, prostitution was frequently portrayed as not just a job, but an expression of female sexuality and the means to autonomy and empowerment. Selling sex - mainly in the form of creating pornographic content on OnlyFans - was promoted as a confidence-building endeavour for women. For instance, The Daily Telegraph glowingly described one woman’s “rewarding” experience of using the platform, even presenting her as a role model and quoting her as saying that **“the confidence I now have has helped not only myself but many other men and women following my journey”** (Burley, 28/12/2020, Daily Telegraph). News.com.au similarly drew connections between women’s experiences of producing pornography on OnlyFans and ‘confidence’, with one woman reported as saying **“I surprised myself by being confident enough to sit in front of a camera half-naked and perform sexual gestures to several anonymous eyes”** (Anonymous, 15/10/2020, News.com.au).

Beyond merely instilling confidence in women, ‘sex work’ was also portrayed as a way for women to achieve personal fulfilment and to be their **“true self”** (Burley, 28/12/2020, Daily Telegraph). **For example, women were reported as crediting platforms like OnlyFans with making them “so much happier” by allowing them to unashamedly be “the true sexual being I’ve always been” and to feel “more comfortable in my own self”** (Burley, 28/12/2020, Daily Telegraph). These narratives were reinforced by a number of articles that emphasised women’s independence, crediting “celebrated” platforms such as OnlyFans with giving women “control”. At the same time, reports of celebrities joining pornography platforms were presented as evidence that women participate out of “choice” rather than necessity (Rennex, 28/9/2020, Junkee; see also Conaghan, 10/7/21, Junkee). Through these narratives, **platform participation**



was often rhetorically or explicitly linked to women's "full autonomy over their own bodies", which was positioned as "no one else's business" - and therefore beyond reproach or query (Rennex, 28/9/2020, Junkee).

However, these reports of positive, confidence-building experiences are in stark contrast to the reality of the sex trade. Women in the sex industry are among some of the most marginalised and economically disadvantaged - with indigenous women, migrant women and women of colour overrepresented within it.<sup>34</sup> Despite this, news media outlets overwhelmingly told stories of the outliers; positive reports from the small minority of women who were presented as regarding "sex work" as an affirming and profitable experience.

Voices of women who were exploited and harmed, or who made very little money, were rarely included. Narratives of women's 'choice' and 'empowerment' were presented with almost no consideration of the circumstances under which women entered the sex trade. In particular, financial desperation as a key driver - often made worse due to COVID-19 - was absent. In some cases, the nature of what women had

to do to earn high sums was glossed over as something to be grateful for ("Being someone in dire need of disposable cash...", Anonymous, 25/10/2020, News.com.au), or merely a "cheeky side-hustle" (Anonymous, 25/10/2020, News.com.au). In this way, the position of the sex industry as a financial last resort was trivialised, or even celebrated, by the Australian media during the first year of the pandemic.

**Selling sex was presented to single mothers as a way to rebuild their lives post-separation, to provide for their children and to 'run their own show'.**

The sex industry was frequently sold within our media sample to single mothers and divorced women. Selling sex was presented to these groups as a way for them to rebuild their lives after separation, provide for their children, and 'run their own show'. Even women who turned away from the industry when they had children were portrayed as always welcome to return to their sex work 'career'. News.com.au was especially willing to cover both their plight - and the solution:

"When I had my son and daughter by two different relationships in my twenties I did come out of the industry and tried living a more conventional life. The disappointments and breakdown of those relationships showed me how much better I am suited to running my own show, so I resumed my career in sex work to put food on the table and raise my son and daughter." (Glyde, 27/06/2020, News.com.au)

Despite the difficulties, News.com.au presented the single mother - motivated by maternal love to push through - as grateful for the "gift" of 'sex work'. The outlet reported:

"The days can be rough when you are working your tail off around the clock, living in two separate worlds. I was working at night, then had to be up early for the breakfast shift and family time. I would try to sleep during the day and stay perky and energised, but catnapping in batches is never as restful as a good night's sleep. I was grateful for sex work though - the gift that keeps poverty at

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bay. I would look at my children sleeping and think, I gotta make good". (Glyde, 27/06/2020, News.com.au)

Articles such as this often failed to point out that if 'sex work' is indeed the only safety net keeping a family from poverty, this is an abject societal failure. The lack of flexible, unskilled work options for single mothers, or adequate social security, was absent from narratives such as the one above. Rather, women with few options to feed their children were deemed 'lucky' to have opportunities within the industry.

Always ready to help a struggling single mum, or a newly single woman in need of a "confidence boost", OnlyFans was pitched as holding special appeal. **As News.com.au reported, women were "attracted to OnlyFans for many reasons", with notable groups including "single mums wanting to support their family through the pandemic" and "the recently-single who were after a confidence boost"** (Carey, 23/02/2021, News.com.au).

Divorced mothers were similarly positioned as in the ideal position to become wealthy sex industry models, able to rediscover their true selves after a failed marriage and feel sexy, glamorous and confident.

**...a "mum-of-four" could thus become "a Playboy glamour model", "showcasing her body in a series of saucy snaps" to regain confidence post-divorce (Kilgallon, 16/10/2020, News.com.au)**

After spending large sums on cosmetic improvements including botox, breast enhancements and nose jobs, and acquiring silk lingerie, women were hailed as newly reborn model mummies who could provide inspiration to all single mothers. As News.com.au again advertised, **a "mum-of-four" could thus become "a Playboy glamour model", "showcasing her body in a series of saucy snaps" to regain confidence post-divorce** (Kilgallon, 16/10/2020, News.com.au). In doing so, the publication applauded the message this might send, by **"show[ing] other mums that it is never too late to fulfil your modelling dreams"** (Kilgallon, 16/10/2020, News.com.au).

Rather than highlighting the ways in which patriarchal forms of social organisation marginalise and financially disadvantage single women, articles such as these repeatedly sold the sex industry to single women, especially mothers. This marketing not only drew on narratives of financial freedom, but also positioned the sex trade as a way to confirm single women's worth through sexual objectification.

### Construction of clients and consumers

The sex trade is a highly gendered industry, with buyers overwhelmingly men and those being bought primarily women and children.<sup>35</sup> Yet the sex or gender of sex industry customers was rarely mentioned, except where their violence was a key feature of the news article. The sex of the buyer was clearly specified, though, when the buyer was a woman. One article published on Mamamia recounted the experience of an 'enthusiastic' female sex buyer who had to convince her reluctant male partner to participate in her purchase of online sexual services while stuck at home during lockdown:

COVID-19 had us on house arrest... we'd played the board games, made the banana bread, had a few D&Ms with my house plants... I was bored, bored, bored. I needed a rush. I had always liked girls... especially naked beautiful ones so whacking, I mean slapping, I mean entering... my credit card deets into a random site seemed like the most sensible idea for a Thursday evening. My boyfriend wasn't convinced. As he started voicing his concerns with there being no PayPal services, I rolled my eyes at Danny Downer and dove headfirst into the categories section. (Anonymous, 19/04/2020, Mamamia)

It is worth noting that this account is a reversal of the norm. Research shows not only that buyers in the sex trade are overwhelmingly men, but that men all too often exert pressure on or coerce female partners to watch pornography. For example, a recent survey of intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic found that a third of respondents who experienced sexual violence said their partner "forced them or tried to make them





watch pornography when they did not want to”.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the reality of men as the primary sex buyers, female sex buyers were the subject of multiple stories on Mamamia. Women’s participation in the sex industry as buyers was often positioned as a form of sexual education or the means to developing their sexual identity. These articles explained how the sex industry provided **“hands-on education ... to improve ... skills and ... techniques”** (Jepsen, 04/10/2020, Mamamia). The industry was also positioned as a way for women to **“get to know [their own] body”**, or even their **“own mind”**, with pornography identified as **“a route of exploration and revelation”** and a **“path to [one]self”** (Clark-Flory, 16/02/2021, Guardian Australia). As emerging research has found, a rhetoric of self-care, “mind-body” exploration and psychological healing is also a feature of how the online pornography industry directly sells itself to women.<sup>37</sup> This striking similarity between the media’s commentary on the pornography industry and the way the industry promotes itself was a troubling correlation in our findings.

Further, while our data found women’s consumption was foregrounded, men’s violence was simultaneously made invisible. The real harms to women, including from violence from men, were instead framed as the result of stigma or an undesirable regulatory model. As former ‘sex worker’ Kate Holden wrote in *The Australian*:

Of course there is trauma. We say “of course” not because it’s inevitable that a sex worker is abused but because any intimate account of badly regulated physical work is likely to include injury, upset, abuse (Holden, 06/06/2020, *The Australian*)

In one concerning case, women were framed as aggressors who put men at risk of COVID-19 exposure. News.com.au reported, **“Dozens of men locked down in a beachside hotel in Melbourne have had their isolation compromised by sex workers offering ‘anything for \$50”** (Smith, 28/08/2020, news.com.au). In this article, women were depicted as a threat to men’s health and safety, with no consideration of the women’s situation and of how financially desperate they must have been to risk arrest and potentially even death from COVID-19 by inviting unknown men to use their bodies - without limitations - for the small sum of \$50.

### Those who criticise the sex industry

The sex trade was further normalised within our data by presenting those who object in a negative light. Critics of the industry - or more specifically, men’s violence, exploitation and abuse of women and children within it - were frequently portrayed as being religiously motivated, making unsubstantiated claims of harm, and cast as aggressors in a moralistic **“holy war”** against the sex industry (Clark-Flory, 16/02/2021, *The Guardian*). Articles questioned research links between pornographic depictions of harm and harm-perpetration by consumers, while at the same time accusing critics of neglecting safety questions within porn production itself:

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“Fictionalized scenarios of coercion or abuse, from casting couch to faux-incest films, are argued without actual evidence to encourage the real thing. Meanwhile, when porn performers speak out about the very real problem of nonconsensual porn proliferating on monopolistic websites, or on-set abuses within the industry, they are routinely ignored”.  
(Clark-Flory, 16/02/2021, The Guardian)

Articles such as this presented critics of the sex trade as inconsistent, ill-informed and moralising, while inconsistently presenting the industry as safe and glamorous. The sex industry was presented as safe and glamorous, despite these passing references to incidents such as “on-set abuses” and “nonconsensual porn”. But any negative critique was framed as unacceptable. These mixed narratives obstruct an honest reckoning by the news media with the realities of the sex trade.

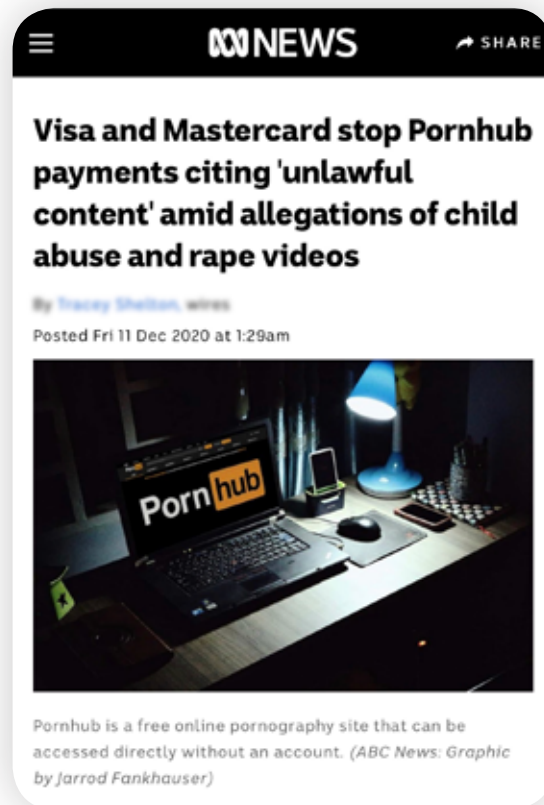
Individuals who objected to the sex trade were also frequently portrayed as ‘anti-sex’. This dismissive label appeared frequently in discussions of Pornhub’s hosting of illegal child sexual abuse material (actual videos of children and toddlers being raped and abused), sex trafficking, and non-consensually shared content.<sup>38</sup> Articles questioned the motivations of critics, charging them with objecting to child abuse and exploitation out of a broader desire to shut down the online sex trade:

**“...on the one hand, no child abuse videos should be on the internet. Period. But on the other hand, a lot of people in the sex work community are reading this as a conservative attack cloaked as concern”. (Scott, 17/12/2020, Junkee)**

Industry critics were undermined by being framed as part of a broader **“war on sex work”** (Scott, 17/12/2020, Junkee). Through linking specific concerns (e.g. around trafficking), to an unwarranted “war”, media narratives positioned objections to the sex industry as unfounded and malicious.

Platforms which had been linked to crimes of sexual exploitation were often portrayed in the Australian news media

as progressive. Executives at Mindgeek, the parent company of Pornhub – which hosted videos of child rape, sex trafficking and image-based abuse (commonly known as ‘revenge porn’), some featuring drugged



The image is a screenshot of a news article from ABC News. The article title is "Visa and Mastercard stop Pornhub payments citing 'unlawful content' amid allegations of child abuse and rape videos". The author is Tracy Shelton, and it was posted on Friday, 11 Dec 2020 at 1:29am. Below the text is a photograph of a desk with a laptop displaying the Pornhub logo, a smartphone, and a blue desk lamp. A caption below the photo reads: "Pornhub is a free online pornography site that can be accessed directly without an account. (ABC News: Graphic by Jarrod Fankhauser)".

and unconscious women – were called before the Canadian Parliament’s ethics committee to answer the accusations about sexual exploitation on its site. There have since been calls for a criminal investigation.<sup>39</sup> Yet news media often depicted the porn site as progressive, in contrast to regressive, anti-sex objectors. Junkee reported that **“Pornhub is arguably the most well-known for its public branding as sex-worker positive, and supportive of LGBTIQ+ and racial justice issues”** (Richards, 16/12/2020, Junkee). The fact that Pornhub is presented in such positive language in the same publication where those who object to Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM), trafficking and abuse are dismissed as conservative wowsers hung up about sex, is cause for deep concern.



### The Online Sex Boom: Entrepreneurism and Exploitation

“A Melbourne waitress, who lost her job in the coronavirus lockdown, is now earning a whopping \$4000 a month thanks to phone sex and other cheeky side-hustles” (Anonymous, 25/10/2020, News.com.au)

“Three survivors of ‘revenge porn’ share their stories, as a major new report reveals the majority of image-based abuse cases are linked to family violence - but that’s just those that make it to court” (Wiggins & Carrick, 27/10/2020, ABC News)

The online space was one of the most visible themes in the news articles analysed, often in relation to the production of pornography. As demonstrated by the two quotes above, we noticed early on that a number of contradictory messages were present in reporting on the digital realm. Most notably, there was an uncomfortable juxtaposition between the “booming”, “lucrative” online sex industry market in the wake of the pandemic, and issues of safety and sexual exploitation.

#### An Easy and Glamorous Source of Income

One of strongest themes that emerged in media reporting about the online sex industry was the idea that online pornographic content creation was financially rewarding for women; part of their financial wellbeing and independence. Articles frequently claimed that online platforms such as OnlyFans<sup>40</sup> offered women a significant income, framing the production of explicit content as both ‘easy money’ and highly lucrative.

As one typical example from News.com reported, **“a gymnastics teacher has revealed how turning to OnlyFans has seen her rake in more than \$40,000 a month, with her husband playing director and shooting her X-rated content”** (Paine, 20/01/2021, News.com.au). Porn and porn-inspired content creation was also often framed as a career opportunity for women, or as an entrepreneurial solution to

pandemic-induced job losses. For example, one writer for The Age commented approvingly in reference to porn creation, stating that **“the pandemic ... has sparked entrepreneurship in some quarters, and the mastering of new online skills”** (Fyfe, 20/11/2020, The Age).

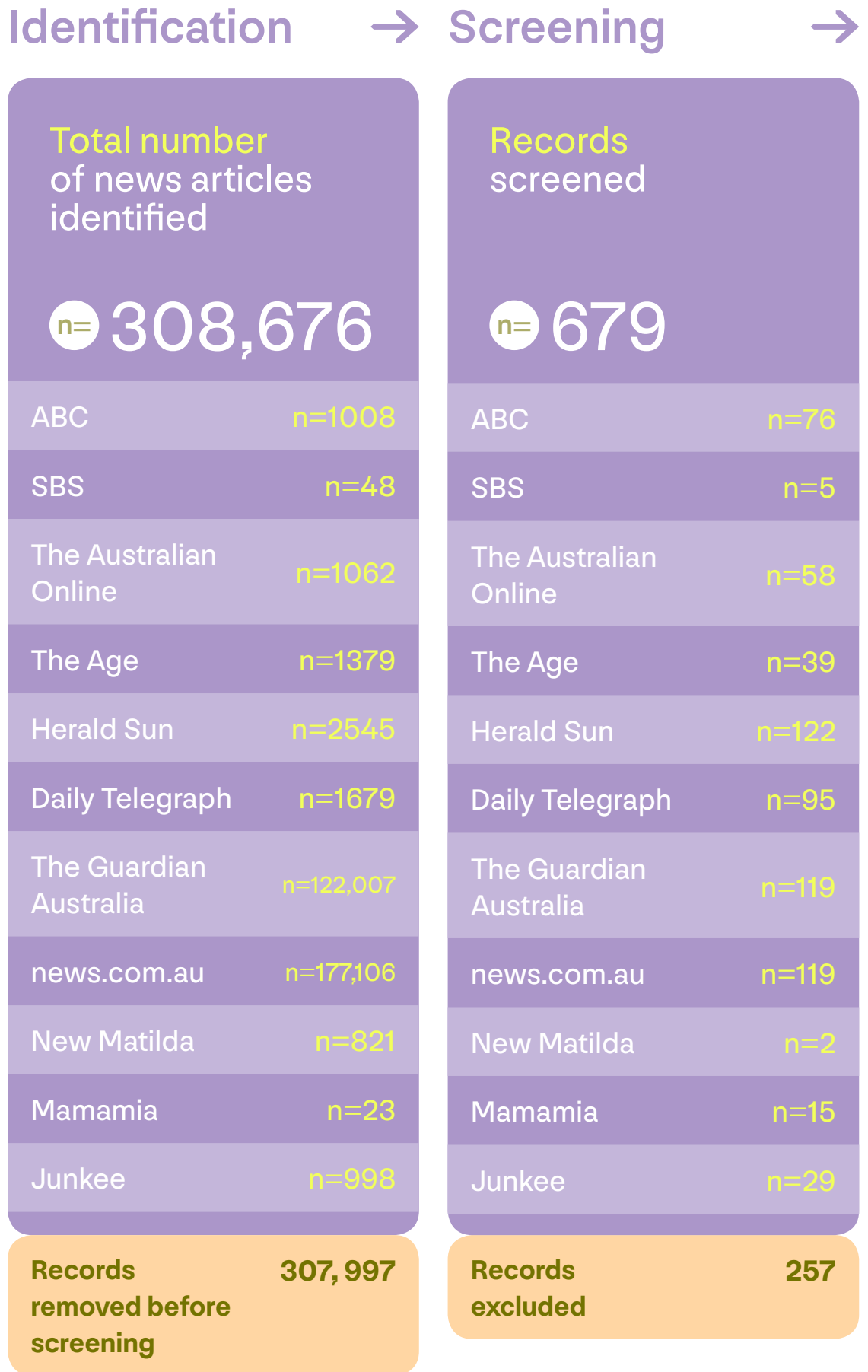
Beyond presenting the online sex industry as a lucrative career path, media articles frequently attached glamour to the industry via celebrity participation. News.com.au applauded celebrities’ ability to boost their incomes through pornographic platforms, reporting that:

**“when [name redacted] joined the app in August, she broke a record by earning US\$1.39 million (\$A1.9 million) on her first day on the platform”** (Reslen, 15/12/2020, news.com.au).

In this way, whether sold as a life raft out of pandemic-induced poverty, a cheeky side-hustle, or the route to a glamorous celebrity lifestyle, pornographic content creation was often framed by the Australian media as entrepreneurial and aspirational for the young, modern woman in the age of COVID-19. This dominant framing within the media centring on choice and agency belies the reality of the sex industry. Women’s involvement in the online sex trade is increasingly understood as being driven by the coercive practices of both individual buyers and industry insiders, as well as the industry system itself.<sup>41</sup> User-generated pornography platforms trade on the expectation that, over time, women produce more explicit, more violent content for less money,<sup>42</sup> in what some have described as a highly competitive “race to the bottom”.<sup>43</sup>

Not only is the media’s framing of content creation as an entrepreneurial career path in stark contrast to the coercive reality, it is also contradicted by the market structure. Recent reports confirm that the median revenue for OnlyFans accounts is \$155 per month.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, we found little acknowledgement within our data of the income platforms generate from women’s content creation.

Figure 1: Flow Chart



## Screening

→ Included

**News Articles**  
sought or retrieval  
and assessed for  
eligibility

n= 422

ABC n=51

SBS n=2

The Australian  
Online n=39

The Age n=19

Herald Sun n=71

Daily Telegraph n=92

The Guardian  
Australia n=37

news.com.au n=86

New Matilda n=1

Mamamia n=12

Junkee n=12

**News Articles**  
included in the  
report

n= 422

## Side Hustles and Sexual Exploitation

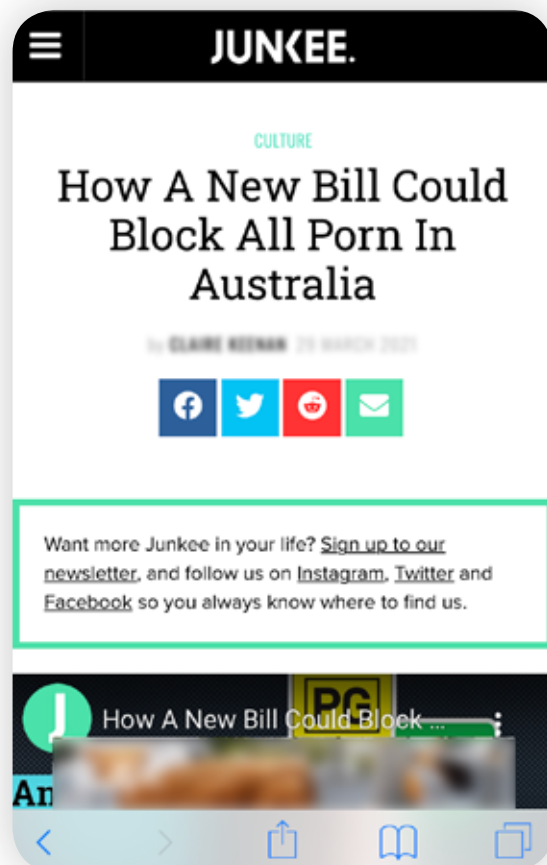
One of the few references we found to platforms' revenue actually framed their profit as insignificant, stating that **“OnlyFans creators pocket a majority of their monthly subscription fees, with the platform taking a small slice”** (Irving, 01/03/2021, Herald Sun). In reality, however, this ‘small slice’ is widely reported to be twenty percent of all payments<sup>45</sup> — what feminist legal scholar Catherine Mackinnon describes as OnlyFans’ ‘pimp’s cut’<sup>46</sup> — with the platform projected to amass over 12 billion US dollars in sales in 2022.<sup>47</sup>

## Safety and Exploitation

While many news articles written during the pandemic noted the “booming” online sex market, some reported on safety issues arising from the online migration of the industry. Quite often, these discussions referenced the rise of ‘revenge porn’ as a serious and emerging threat to women’s and children’s safety, and focused on male perpetrators uploading images of women to existing pornographic websites and platforms.

Typical of this style of reporting was an example from the ABC, which described how **“a Perth married father of two ... sent his lover’s family sexually explicit photos and videos of her and uploaded them onto a pornographic website”**, resulting in a 20 month jail term (Menagh, 28/08/2020, ABC News). Alongside references such as this, which point to examples of image-based abuse of women by intimate partners, some articles also reported on underage girls and trafficking survivors being exploited and re-exploited through online sex industry platforms. In January 2021, for example, Maree Crabbe’s commentary for The Age stated:

**Late last year Pornhub, one of the world’s most popular porn sites, removed millions of videos after an investigation by The New York Times found content featuring under-age subjects and sex trafficking victims (Crabbe, 07/01/2021, The Age).**



Despite these concerns, this piece from researcher Maree Crabbe was one of the few articles in our sample critical of the structure and broader social impacts of pornography platforms.

Despite references to family violence, child sex abuse and sex trafficking in several articles in our dataset, potential solutions to tackling sexual exploitation online and critique of the industry itself were often overlooked in favour of critical discussions about online censorship. When proposed online safety legislation was discussed, the focus was often on the potential impact of eSafety measures for those working in the sex industry, and not on the exploitation of women and children. Guardian Australia reported that **“sex workers and civil liberties groups have warned” that such legislation “could censor all adult content online and force sex workers off the internet”** (Taylor, 02/03/2021, Guardian Australia), while ABC News warned that it may **“make it harder - and more dangerous - to earn a living”** (Purtill, 19/02/2021, ABC News).

Discussions of ‘ethical pornography’ were one proposed solution to avoid exploitation online. The idea that paying for pornography

(i.e., online sex buying) will decrease exploitation of the performer was presented as a solution to the ‘unethical’ qualities of the online sex industry. A writer for Junkee epitomised this perspective, asking in one article **“How Can You Tell Whether Your Porn is Ethical?”**. The answer provided states that **“it’s not easy” and therefore, “the best thing you can do is pay for it”** (Conaghan, 10/07/2020, Junkee).

Linked to this idea that ethical consumption starts with payment, a prevailing narrative across news sources, was the idea that some platforms provide women - or the ‘performers’ of sexual content - with the ability to control their own images. These discussions were often couched in an overarching narrative of empowerment, which encapsulated both the experiences of everyday women, and those who describe themselves as ‘sex workers’. For example, Junkee enthused that **“OnlyFans is such a celebrated platform because it gives women, who happen to be interested in sex work, full control over what they do and how much they are paid”** (Rennex, 28/09/2020, Junkee). These reports of women taking ‘control’ of their images frequently named the same platforms identified in cases where people were being violated.

These conflicting reports about the safety of platforms sometimes led to confusing narratives about online safety. In some instances, different articles would name the same website as either a site of exploitation of women and children, or as a positive place of empowerment in contrast to exploitative or poorly regulated platforms (e.g., Roberts, 08/12/2020, Daily Telegraph). For example, while Pornhub was at times identified as a progressive platform, this article from The Daily Telegraph suggested otherwise, asserting:

Pornhub has come under increasing scrutiny since December 2019... It followed allegations the site was hosting videos containing rape and abuse videos and image-based abuse material also known as revenge porn and child porn... Concerns over how sites like Pornhub operate has pushed women like Sydney sex worker [name redacted], known as [name redacted] on OnlyFans, to steer clear of the industry. “I find websites like

Pornhub repulsive. I’m not sure whether I would work with a porn company either - the way they promote videos using incest and teenagers is not something I would ever consider”, she said. [Name redacted] uses the thousands she earns to invest in the stock market. (Van Homrigh, 19/02/2021, Daily Telegraph)

In this example and others like it, conflicting messages about the online sex industry were displayed. Overall, the online world was celebrated by many news sources as a “booming” and “lucrative” market for women during the pandemic, but also identified by others as a site of violence, exploitation and criminal behaviour.

### Scandal and Illegality: Violence in the Sex Trade

**“‘Branded’ women in slave ring”**  
(Antrobus, 15/03/2021, Daily Telegraph)

**“The NSW police are investigating allegations by the woman that [name redacted] raped her without her consent at a meeting for paid fellatio in 2019”**  
(O’Doherty & Caldwell, 30/03/2021, Daily Telegraph)

While the Australian media in the time of COVID-19 often sold the sex trade as a financial boom or a titillating form of empowerment for women, they also often focused on darker elements within the industry. Scandal, violence and illegality were common themes. In particular, media reporting frequently depicted forms of physical and sexual violence against women in the industry, as well as describing human rights abuses such as trafficking. Notably, these darker elements of the sex trade were linked to both the legal and illegal industry in media reporting - they were not exclusively associated with those operating outside of regulated, state-sanctioned systems.



## Side Hustles and Sexual Exploitation

### Trivialisation of Crime and Individualisation of Abuse

Illegal or violent conduct related to the sex industry was often framed in salacious ways. Reporting on an inquest into the death of a woman in the sex industry, for example:

...an article for the Daily Telegraph described a key suspect as “the last person to see her alive when he *hired her for a sexual escapade*” (Clark, 27/07/2020, Daily Telegraph; italics added)

Describing the incident in racy terms as a “sexual escapade” reduces the seriousness of the incident and the dignity of the deceased woman.

There was also a notable lack of analysis concerning why the industry might frequently be linked to illegal or troubling content. Violent and concerning aspects of the industry were often framed in terms of individual misconduct, rather than providing an analysis of the industrial or patriarchal conditions that might foster such misconduct. Those perpetrating violence were framed as ‘one bad apple’ or ‘monsters’ who did not represent the majority of sex buyers or brothel owners. This also often fed into the framing of violence as sensationalist. For example, reporting on a murder trial, The Australian described how:

“[Name redacted] murdered [name redacted], 24, after meeting the sex worker for a \$250 ‘girlfriend experience’ at her [location redacted] apartment at 1.30pm ... He was armed with at least one knife and attacked her without mercy, stabbing her and cutting her throat so severely the wound was ‘deep enough to reach the spinal cord’” (Parkes-Hupton, 28/10/2020, The Australian).

Other publications used similarly unnecessarily graphic language to describe the ‘sick’ individuals committing violence within the industry, with an article title in the Herald Sun exclaiming: “**Butcher Baker’ and his sickening live human hunt**” (Staff Writers, 14/03/2020, Herald

Sun). In presenting aggressive sex buyers as troubled individuals, news media narratives about the sex industry invisibilised the system of male demand as the driving force which perpetuates the sex trade. Indeed, buyers were often invisible altogether in reporting on the sex industry. When they were visible, they were presented as atomised individuals who only perpetuated violence if they were psychologically unstable. Men’s demand for paid access to women’s bodies as part of a patriarchal system, or even as a core element driving the industry, whatever your perspective on it, was never apparent. Rather, men were often the silent element in the transaction to purchase women’s bodies.



This is in stark contrast to the move in recent years to understand violence against women as structural and to underscore that male perpetrators are often everyday men.<sup>48</sup> When men’s violence against women happens in the home, we understand it to be part of a broader system of behaviour;<sup>49</sup> when violence or unsafe practices are rife in an industry, we ask questions about its conditions;<sup>50</sup> yet when men’s violence against women is a frequent topic of reportage linked to the sex industry, it is framed as a problem related to troubled individuals.



### Confusion around definitions of trafficking, assault and consent

Confusion around key terms and concepts, such as trafficking, sexual assault and consent were also evident in the data. While discussion of trafficking was often explicit within the data, there were also articles that described situations which met the definition of trafficking under international law but were not named as such (e.g. Dunlop, 25/08/2020, Daily Telegraph). It was unclear whether this was due to confusion about what constitutes trafficking, or simply uneven reporting of trafficking.

Language regarding the exploitation of children in the sex industry was at times alarming. One article in The Age described the commercial sexual abuse of a child by reporting that **“a child has allegedly been operating as a sex worker in Melbourne’s north-east”** (Sakkal, 16/04/2020, The Age). This language neutralises the reality of sexual exploitation and violence, overlooking the fact that under the law, a child cannot consent to selling sex, while at the same time ascribing agency and choice to a child who has been criminally abused. What happened here is non-consensual, and is therefore sexual abuse - potentially even rape of a child. This kind of linguistic normalisation of abuse in the sex industry is especially troubling.

Descriptions of consent also at times appeared confused, or sanitised. In the Daily Telegraph, one article described the absence of consent given by a woman in the sex industry as **“a breach of contract and boundaries”** (Gusmaroli, 31/03/2021, Daily Telegraph). While framed in terms of a workplace agreement, it is also sexual assault or rape. Describing rape as a “breach of contract” sanitises violence against women as a contractual dispute. Other articles referred to a woman being **“raped ... without her consent”**, or uncritically quoted NSW Labor MP Trish Doyle as saying that a fellow politician had **“assaulted [a prostituted woman] ... in a way she had not consented to”** (O’Doherty & Caldwell, 30/03/2021, Daily Telegraph; Ore & Ferguson, 24/3/21, The Australian). Given that rape and assault are

non-consensual by definition, this raises alarming ideas that women can consent to sexual violence, potentially buying into rape myths that perpetuate the dangerous idea that women - even if protesting - actually want to be violated.

### Boom or Bust: The Financial Realities of the Sex Trade

**“Sex workers are in more dire and drastic situations than they have ever seen before”** (Johnson, 29/01/2021, Guardian Australia).

“Soon, Ms Michaels went from making \$7 an hour working in an ice cream shop to hundreds of dollars a night. She found her new well-paid job [stripping] thrilling” (Paine, 15/03/2020, News.com.au).

### Financial Insecurity for ‘Sex Workers’

During the first year of the pandemic, the Australian print media positioned the sex industry at two opposite ends of the financial spectrum: as a site of financial hardship or an easy road to financial freedom.

As face-to-face operations such as brothels and strip clubs were forced to close during lockdowns, a number of articles highlighted how women were catapulted into financial turmoil. In particular, women’s lack of access to employee entitlements or government support was noted in media reporting:

“During Victoria’s second-wave lockdown, all in-person sex work was banned due to COVID-19, sending brothel and massage parlour workers, escorts, strippers and even porn stars into a hinterland of extreme hardship, usually with no sick pay, superannuation, holiday pay or savings to fall back on. In Victoria, where some sex work is still criminalised, many workers, particularly newly arrived migrants and

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international students, have been unable to access JobSeeker or JobKeeper” (Fyfe, 20/11/2020, The Age)

These hardships were identified by the media as unprecedentedly **“dire and drastic”** and as forcing women (back) into the industry, or into unsafe practices (Guardian Australia, Johnson). The Guardian reported that **“women who had left the sex trade have fallen back into it, others who had regular clients and who had stopped working on the streets have had to return and some have taken up sex work for the first time because they have no money and are desperate”** (Johnson, 29/01/2022, Guardian Australia).

Reporting often underscored that many women in the industry depend on ongoing work to earn a living. One article pointed out that while some women had opted out of escorting for COVID-19 safety reasons, others **“feel they have no choice because they need the money to survive”** (Tomazin, 27/03/2020, The Age). Despite this reporting of the financial challenges faced by women in the industry during the pandemic, there was little discussion about the structural factors contributing to these challenges.

The low incomes generated from insecure work within the industry, which exist against a backdrop of inadequate social security options and a lack of alternative work opportunities for unskilled women, were rarely touched on. Rather, news

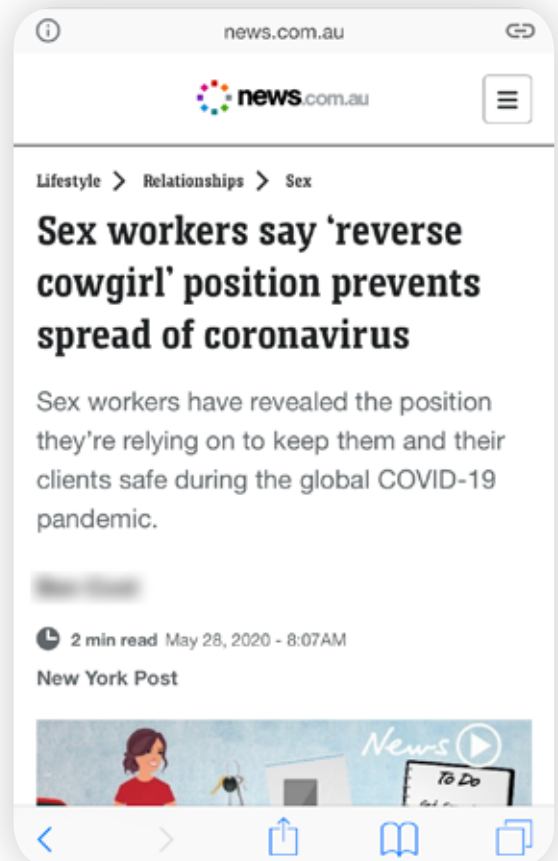
**...some women had opted out of escorting for COVID-19 safety reasons, others “feel they have no choice because they need the money to survive” (Tomazin, 27/03/2020, The Age)**

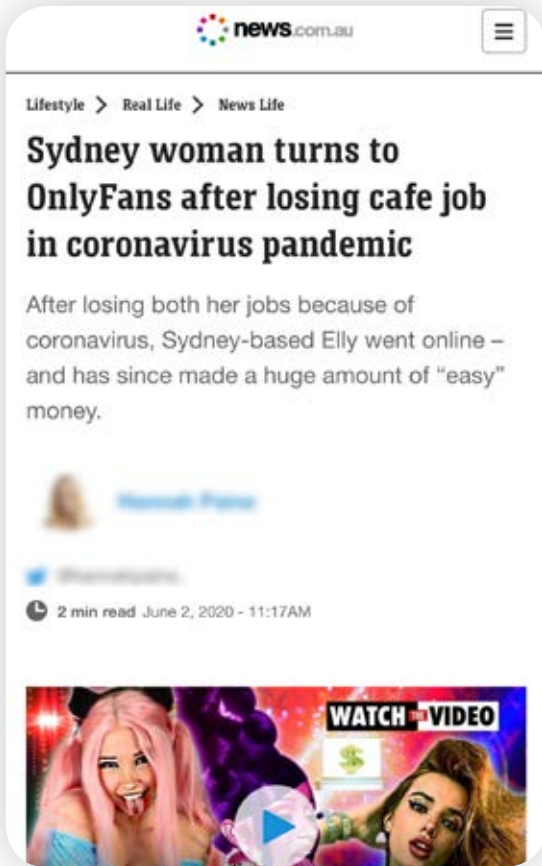
articles assumed that women would continue to work in the industry. As a significant body of research shows, to rely on the sex industry for income is to rely on a trade that subjects women to increased risk of ill-health, homelessness, substance misuse and violence.<sup>51</sup>

Despite these risks, selling sex was normalised in news articles through its unquestioned depiction as ‘work’.

Media reporting in the time of pandemic positioned women as ‘workers’, without access to the same ‘employee rights’ as others. This normalisation was reinforced through the language of ‘sex work’ and ‘sex workers’. While it is certainly important to highlight how those in the sex industry may have fallen through social safety nets, there was a lack of analysis regarding whether the sex industry provides an acceptable or decent form of work for women in the first place, or what it means for women to be dependent on an industry which is both frequently exploitative and a common site of violence.<sup>52</sup>

Missing from media discussions of prostitution during the pandemic were women’s everyday experiences of poverty and its relationship to the maintenance of the industry. Quotes from data utilised throughout this report highlight the financial desperation women felt during the pandemic, and in particular, their lack of options: whether they had no choice but to remain in the industry, pandemic hardships forced them to return having previously left it, or, for some, being pushed to enter





the industry for the first time. For the most part, however, the role of poverty in driving women to enter and continue in the sex trade remained unaddressed.

Discussions of how to safely exit the industry - or seek alternative income - during the pandemic were non-existent. Moving into the online sex industry was encouraged as a financial life-raft.

### A road to financial freedom

At the same time as media discussions pointed to the financial suffering faced by those in the industry, reporting also framed the sex industry as a successful entrepreneurial space for women - especially online. Many articles represented a career in the sex industry as a lucrative pathway for self-made women to achieve financial freedom. In addition to marketing the online sex industry as a financially rewarding career (as explored in "The Online Sex Boom", above), in-person 'sex

work' was also at times promoted as an opportunity to create a better life:

Not only was the sex industry identified as a route to individual freedom, Melbourne's famous historical brothel owner, "Madame Brussels", was lauded as a glamorous business mogul, with the Herald Sun

**“I had friends who were all [strip club] dancers, who were all going to college, or finished with school completely. Yet, dancing gave all of them such freedom that not one of them rushed to settle down and get a 9-5 job using their degree” (Anonymous, 26/04/20, Mamamia).**

reporting that **“the woman once dubbed the ‘high priestess of prostitution’ built an empire of opulent high-class brothels in a lucrative career spanning 33 years” (Kelly, 13/07/2020, Herald Sun).** Tales of

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fame and success such as this sit in stark contrast to the challenges outlined above.

The devastating financial losses detailed in our dataset were thus complicated by the reporting of tempting stories of financial abundance. Nestled between these narratives of freedom, however, news stories often failed to reveal that it is largely men (e.g., pimps, brothel owners) who profit from women's sexual services.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, when women earn money by selling sex, it does not come freely: significant physical injuries, depression, traumatic stress, and psychological dissociation are common.<sup>54</sup> When entering and once in the industry, women and girls are often subject to damaging practices, including grooming, coercive psychological and physical requirements or practices, and pressure to perform sexually humiliating acts.<sup>55</sup>

Repeated exposure to such practices encourages women to view themselves - and others to see them - as sex objects; subject to the needs and whims of male buyers and pimps.

The Australian news media, therefore, paints a conflicting message. In many articles, women were positioned as bound to the sex industry for income by necessity and financially devastated by the closure of face-to-face work. Yet, simultaneously, the sex industry was presented as an enticing road to financial security, or even success. Despite both narratives appearing in the data, positive messages were more commonly represented. Marketing the sex industry in this way served to obscure its darker realities, and the role that poverty plays in fuelling the demand for commercial sex.





# Discussion

Our analysis of Australian news media content on the sex industry demonstrates that a significant proportion of articles framed the industry in a positive light during one of the worst periods of financial insecurity in women in recent history. Sex buyers - who are predominantly male<sup>56</sup> - were discussed without clearly mentioning sex / gender in 60% of stories, while references to those selling sex - predominantly low-income or financially insecure women - focused on how financially and sexually 'empowering' entering the sex industry is.

In this section of the report, we reflect on these findings and consider the overarching narratives in Australian news articles and commentaries on the sex industry. These include contradictory reporting on the sex industry, mainstream promotion(s) of the sex industry, a hyper-focus on the individual, and a push for full decriminalisation as a legislative solution.



## Dangerous and empowering: Contradictory reporting

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian media wove a contradictory narrative about the sex trade. On the one hand, the industry was painted as a wild and dangerous place of murder, mayhem, illegality and scandal, and identified as a site of financial loss and despair. For example, reporting from the Australian newspaper underlines the abject horror media depictions often invoked about the industry, describing how two men **“strangled two Thai prostitutes and threw them, alive but unconscious, into a crocodile-infested river. The sex-workers’ bodies resurfaced two days later, alongside a tourist boat”** (Aikman, 10/11/20, The Australian). On the other hand, the horrific violence of the industry was juxtaposed in our data with more celebratory rhetoric. Media narratives often simultaneously sold the industry to audiences as a financially lucrative career pathway and a conduit to economic, sexual and emotional empowerment. We found that reporting frequently described how **“celebs [were] making eye-watering amounts of money” on OnlyFans, which had “exploded in popularity”** (NewsDNA, 02/02/2021, News.com.au). The industry was not only normalised and made alluring by stories of celebrities, our data also repeatedly suggested that everyday women could, for example:

**...go from “making \$7 an hour working in an ice cream shop to hundreds of dollars a night” in a new job in the industry (in this case, stripping) that was marketed as “thrilling”** (Paine, 15/03/2020, news.com.au).

That these incompatible narratives were two of the most dominant themes in our data is difficult to reconcile. While the media repeatedly portrayed the sex trade as physically and sexually dangerous and financially precarious, it more often lauded it as a site of empowered female sexuality,



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a place to ‘find oneself’ and a profitable career choice. We argue that this is a form of discursive gaslighting, whereby audiences (in particular, women readers) are told in one ear that the sex industry is unsafe, but more loudly in the other that they should nonetheless enter it to achieve financial and sexual fulfilment.

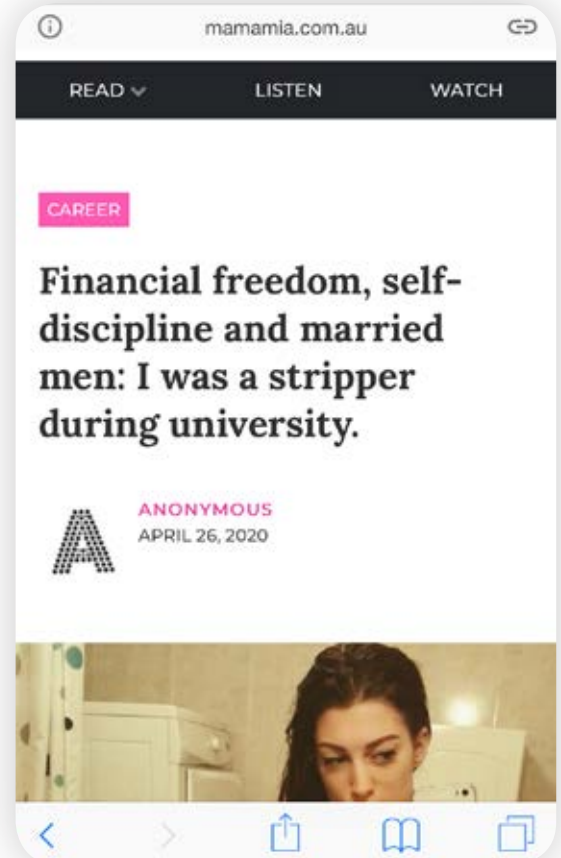
### Desirable and aspirational: Mainstream sex industry promotion

Although the two contradictory threads of danger and fulfilment were highly visible in our media data, promotion of the sex industry was nonetheless a strong theme in the first year of the pandemic. Importantly, discussions of the sex industry as an industry – that is, driven by profit and operating within a global economic system<sup>57</sup> – were largely absent. While there was an acknowledgement that parts of the industry had ‘boomed’ during the pandemic, the financial consequences of this were largely framed as economically rewarding or beneficial only for individual workers (predominantly women),

**with significant neglect of how this ‘boom’ was feeding the highly profitable commercial system that comprises the global sex industry.**

Concerningly, in reporting the sex industry as a form of individualised work, we found the media was selling a promotional narrative, representing a significant escalation on previous decades of reporting. The ‘pornification of culture’ has historically seen the media sell elements of the sex industry to women as desirable and aspirational. Examples of this include the media’s promotion of ‘pornified’ bodies, highly sexualised self-displays and sex tips based on the sex that is bought in the industry.<sup>58</sup>

Previous media narratives, however, have rarely gone so far as to suggest women should be entering the industry. So where there was a prior demarcation between



women who work in the industry (as ‘pornstars’ or prostituted women) and everyday women who should sexualise themselves (for their own or their partner’s pleasure), we found there is now a dominant narrative of the sex industry as a viable, and even desirable, career choice or aspirational lifestyle for women. In selling the sex industry to women in this way, we found the media was not only reporting about the sex industry but actively promoting it.

Finally, it is notable that the emphasis within Australian media reporting on promotion of the sex industry, in conjunction with a lack of structural analysis of the industry, is in contrast to how the sex industry is increasingly reported in the international media. North American and British outlets and progressively moving towards greater critique of the sex industry’s harms and its highly profit-driven business models.<sup>59</sup>

## Bad apples and sole traders: A hyper-focus on the individual

One aspect we identified in the Australian media’s reporting on the sex industry was a consistent focus on the individual. This was prevalent in two keys ways:

1. That the sex industry was a (financial) solution for enterprising and ambitious individuals - chiefly women; and
2. That any harms from the industry were the result of individual ‘lone wolf’ perpetrators.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the financial hardship women were experiencing were widely reported. Yet, far from this being addressed as a structural problem requiring structural solutions - such as increased welfare provisions or government assistance - the sex industry was offered as a solution to such hardships. In this way, structural issues exacerbated by the pandemic were framed as the problem of individuals, which could be solved through self-enterprising, individual women empowering themselves through their engagement with the sex industry. Although brothel owners were discussed, the inherent power relations and hierarchical structure of the industry were also largely ignored. Indeed, through a prevailing focus on individuals, the industry itself was largely constructed as the amalgamation of individual women as ‘sole traders’.

Critically, this focus on individuals also ignores the intersectional forms of oppression that make women more vulnerable to being victimised by the sex industry - that is, not only their vulnerability through class disadvantage but also structural and interpersonal racism and colonialism. Although there was an ongoing acknowledgement that women (and children) from racially diverse backgrounds were part of the industry, especially women from Asian nations (see Figure 5), there was a significant neglect of how the Australian sex industry critically relies on the trafficking of women from Asia.<sup>60</sup> Thus, through focussing on individuals, media reporting ignores the central role the sex industry plays in exploiting and profiting from women’s intersecting forms of oppression, such as those relating to race, class, and Aboriginality.

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In tandem with the individualisation of women’s experiences in the sex industry, we also found that any harms were reported as the result of individual perpetrators. Instances of violence and abuse were portrayed as far removed from the inherent functioning of the industry, and disconnected from its commodification of women. By highlighting a narrative of perpetrators of violence as individual



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outliers, not only was there little to no acknowledgement of the organised crime syndicates that commonly traffic women into the Australian sex industry,<sup>61</sup> but also, the violence women experience in this industry was primarily framed as ‘exceptional’ or a one-off incident.

Adding to this, through a dominant construction of a ‘wrong place wrong time’ narrative, we found the media reporting failed to make links between the violence and the industry itself. Although reported violent incidents most often occurred because women were in the industry, there was barely any discussion of the fact that being a woman in the sex industry entails being exposed to violent men as sex buyers, pimps and brothel owners.

**The media’s failure to report on the Nordic model, which decriminalises prostituted women but criminalises pimping and sex buying, is deeply concerning.**

Making visible structural forms of patriarchal violence, including within the sex industry, is crucial to achieving gender equality and eliminating all forms of violence against women. We urge the Australian media to follow their European and North American counterparts in critiquing the sex industry as an industry and situating violence against women in the sex industry within a broader landscape of sexual objectification and men’s violence.

## Questionable solutions: The promotion of full decriminalisation

Finally, we found that news media articles repeatedly advocated for the full decriminalisation of the sex industry.<sup>62</sup> Support for full decriminalisation was consistent with the broader representation of prostituted women identified above: as neoliberal, independent and empowered subjects; depictions which promote ‘sex work’ as a desirable, chosen career for autonomous and entrepreneurial women. Presenting full decriminalisation policy as desirable also legitimises the sex industry as an acceptable form of employment, negating the very real harms associated with the industry and the inescapable fact that it is predicated on the objectification of women.

Viewing prostitution as legitimate, empowering work, however, is highly contested. Although full decriminalisation policy’s stated aims often relate to the protection of prostituted women from stigma and victimisation, it invisibilises men’s demand for the women’s bodies - driving the industry - as well as the associated harms (e.g., the involvement of organised crime rings, increased drug use, coercion, sex trafficking and the enablement of paedophile networks). Notably, while media reporting frequently posited full decriminalisation as the solution to many of these challenges, it failed to inform the public of the Nordic/Equality Model of prostitution, which is currently gaining traction in many governments around the world.<sup>63</sup> The media’s failure to report on the Nordic model, which decriminalises

prostituted women but criminalises pimping and sex buying, is deeply concerning.

Given the negative outcomes associated with the implementation of a fully decriminalised model of regulation of the sex industry, the Australian media's support for full decriminalisation is problematic. When a country or sub-national region legalises or fully decriminalises prostitution, there is often a significant increase in trafficking, as the industry moves from countries where it is illegal to jurisdictions where criminal offences can be more easily avoided.<sup>64</sup> Evidence of this problem is found in Denmark, where prostitution is largely decriminalised; they have four times more trafficking victims than Sweden (where the Nordic policy has been in place since 1999).<sup>65</sup> Writing for Rolling Stone, Geist explains that in the Netherlands, Amsterdam was also forced to impose restrictions on the industry, due to a rise in crime after legalisation was implemented.

While full decriminalisation is often promoted as a way to improve the lives of prostituted women, under the policy, the state, pimps, brothel owners and buyers

all benefit.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, there is no evidence from the three jurisdictions where full decriminalisation has been introduced (New Zealand, New South Wales, and the Northern Territory) that enacting such legislation makes women safer or reduces stigma and discrimination directed at them.

We know that media narratives influence public opinion.<sup>67</sup> By promoting full decriminalisation, the media is likely to be influencing consumers to view decriminalisation as a solution to the challenges associated with the sex trade. Yet, by failing to discuss the Nordic/Equality Model, the quality and breadth of public debate on this issue is limited. This limited discussion of alternative regulatory models in the Australian media is compounded by the secrecy involved in Victoria's 2021 policy review process; a process which led to the recent passage of a full decriminalisation bill in the state.<sup>68</sup> The lack of active and open public debate on this issue has left the Victorian community ill-informed regarding alternative policy options.

Prostitution is a polarising public policy challenge. As such, the media should contribute to raising public awareness and promoting healthy discussion and debate regarding regulatory alternatives. In failing to engage with a prominent and globally recognised policy option in the Nordic/Equality Model, Australia - and our news media - are falling behind the global conversation.

The screenshot shows a mobile news interface. At the top, the 'news.com.au' logo is visible. Below it, the navigation path 'Lifestyle > Real Life > News Life' is shown. The main headline reads: **'I went back to my career in sex work after I had my two kids'**. A sub-headline states: **Madison Hoffman is not ashamed of her job and doesn't believe it makes her a bad mum – even if she gets stares in the playground.** Below this, there is a '4 min read' indicator and the date 'June 27, 2020 - 2:23PM'. A 'kidspot' logo is present. A video player is embedded, with the title 'News EXPLAINS' and a play button. The video thumbnail shows a woman with red hair and the text '5 things you never knew about sex work'. Below the video, a caption reads: 'Kate Iselin explains five things you never knew about sex work.'



# Conclusion

At a time of heightened challenges for women exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including social isolation, financial insecurity, family pressures, and increased experiences of coercive control, emotional abuse and physical violence by male partners, the relationship between these factors and the sex industry was not visible in the Australian media.

### The Australian media presented an overwhelmingly positive narrative about the sex trade during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The media delivered conflicting narratives around the sex industry as a site of financial autonomy and empowerment on the one hand, and poverty, exploitation and violence on the other. However, overall, the celebratory rhetoric was more visible - especially in relation to the online market, in particular Only Fans. When negative aspects of the sex industry were covered, these references were both infrequent and portrayed in a sensationalist way which individualised misconduct and masked systemic patterns of male violence.

We found the Australian media presented an overwhelmingly positive narrative about the sex trade during the COVID-19 pandemic. While women experienced financial insecurity during the repeated lockdowns, the media discussed the sex industry as a place where women achieve personal growth in a 'lucrative career'. This narrative is contrary to established research, which strongly links the sex trade to negative physical and mental health outcomes.

We noted a significant shift in current media narratives in comparison to past representations. Where there was a prior demarcation between women who work in the industry (as porn stars or prostituted women) and everyday women who should sexualise themselves (for their own or their partner's pleasure), we uncovered a dominant narrative of the sex industry as a viable, and even desirable, career choice or aspirational lifestyle for women. In selling

the sex industry to women in this way, we found the media was not only reporting on the sex industry but actively promoting it.

No consideration was given to feminist solutions increasingly being implemented throughout the world, such as the Nordic/Equality model, which address the demand for purchasing women's bodies for sex. Instead, when policy solutions were discussed, they were often framed through the lens of decriminalisation (or deregulation of the industry). In an industry based on the sexual objectification of women's bodies, and various forms of male violence and exploitation of women and children, the Australian media's endorsement of a reduction in regulation should be of significant concern to anyone who seeks to uphold the human rights of women and girls.

Our report has revealed a dangerous blind spot in Australian media reporting of the sex industry. We call on the Australian media to recognise the links between women's experiences of financial insecurity, male violence against women, and exploitation in the sex industry. This involves engaging with survivors of the sex trade who have exited the industry and are now critical of it. It also involves including survivor voices in broader public discussions about the prevention of men's violence against women.

**In the midst of an overdue national dialogue about men's violence against women and how to prevent it, the reality of the harms of the sex industry should not be excluded from public discussion.**



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