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Female Online Sex Workers' Perceptions of Exit from Sex Work

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## ABSTRACT

Although the sex work industry has evolved with the emergence of internet marketing, little research examines sex workers who advertise online (i.e., online sex workers) and how their work experiences may differ from those of other sex workers who have been studied more extensively. This qualitative study addresses this gap by examining female online sex workers' perceptions of exit from sex work. Data come from semi-structured interviews conducted in Southern California in 2014, with twenty-seven female online sex workers who provide mainstream sexual services to a male clientele. Of the 27 participants, 16 intended to exit sex work within 5 years whereas 11 had no such intentions. Participants varied in their perceptions of exit meaning, desirability, and feasibility. Whereas 9 participants viewed exit as ceasing to advertise sex work services online, 18 participants viewed exit from sex work as ceasing to provide sex work services sometime after they stopped advertising. Fourteen participants perceived exit to be desirable, 8 perceived exit to be undesirable, and 5 perceived exit to be neither desirable nor undesirable. Twelve participants perceived exit to be infeasible (i.e., difficult), and 15 perceived exit to be feasible (i.e., easy).

## **Introduction**

Growth in the online sector of the sex work industry was responsible for a 50% increase in the size of the industry from 1998 to 2008 (Cunningham and Kendall 2011). Meanwhile, street-based or outdoor sex workers have declined to just 15% to 30% of the total population of sex workers (Bimbi 2007; Moffatt and Peters 2004; Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Weitzer 2005), and yet, they receive the most attention in sex work research (Weitzer 2005). While some research has examined online communication about sex work (Katsulis 2010; Durkin 2007) and consumers who use the internet to locate sex workers (Chu and Laidler 2016; Holt and Blevins 2007), there is a need for research that focuses on online sex workers generally and exit from sex work among online sex workers specifically (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006). The present study addresses this need.

### ***Online Sex Workers***

Online sex workers are a subset of indoor sex workers, a category that also includes brothel workers, call girls, and bar hustlers. Like the majority of sex workers these days, they earn “mid-range” salaries – that is, they earn more than enough money to survive but are not affluent (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Weitzer 2005). Although limited, prior research on online sex work suggests that the conditions of such work may differ from the conditions of other types of sex work. The internet has created opportunities for online sex workers by spawning virtual communities where they can solicit consumers (Durkin 2007; Pruitt 2007). It allows sex workers to reach a broad audience with advertisements, build reputations on websites that contain consumer confirmations of value, and screen consumers by conducting background checks with internet search engines (Cunningham and Kendall 2011) or by checking lists of dangerous consumers published on industry-specific social networking sites (Davies and Evans 2007; Durkin 2007). These conditions may provide collective protection from victimization in the absence of protection from law enforcement (Davies and Evans 2007; Durkin 2007) and lower the exposure to arrest and violence (Cunningham and Kendall 2011).

Prior research on exit from sex work suggests that indoor sex workers, such as online sex workers, may approach exit from sex work differently than outdoor sex workers. For example, indoor sex workers may be less likely than outdoor sex workers to need to “hit bottom” before exiting (Dalla 2006; Sanders 2007). They may have a lower incidence of drug addiction (Murphy 2010; Oselin 2009, 2010; Sanders 2007) and fewer arrests (Cunningham and Kendall 2011). Given these differences, indoor sex workers may have different experiences of sex work and different perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of exiting from it. This study will increase our understanding of sex work by uncovering the experiences and perceptions of female, mid-range, online sex workers, the largest and most understudied segment of the sex work industry; analyzing facilitators of and challenges to exit from sex work; and examining variation in the perceived desirability and feasibility of exit.

### ***Exit from Sex Work***

Prior research shows that exit from sex work may not be a single, concrete event but rather a process. It may involve specific preparations, such as preparing financially for exit, undergoing psychological therapy, reconciling with family, severing ties with industry friends, and/or receiving assistance with housing and vocational skill development (Månsson and Hedin 1999; Sanders 2007). The nature of the exit (i.e., whether it be swift or gradual) depends on what factors are present prior to and during the process of exit (Månsson and Hedin 1999; Sanders 2007). Little is known about the factors associated with exit from sex work among online sex workers.

With regard to sex workers’ desires to exit sex work, researchers generally find that among outdoor sex workers, the desire to exit is high (Dalla 2000; Oselin 2010; Sanders 2007). Relative to outdoor sex workers, indoor sex workers report greater enjoyment of their jobs (Weitzer 2005). Previous research has taken for granted that sex workers would want to exit; this study examines variation in online sex workers’ desire to exit.

The desire to exit sex work may be related to working conditions. Among outdoor sex workers, dangerous working conditions involving exposure to arrest, disease, rape, robbery, and assault by consumers are associated with a high desire to exit (Månsson and Hedin 1999; Dalla 2000; Oselin 2010). Relative to outdoor sex workers, indoor sex workers have less exposure to police and violence (Weitzer 2005). Online sex workers, in particular, have numerous strategies at their disposal for managing risk and reducing the perceived costs of engaging in sex work. They may use the internet for relatively easy screening of potential consumers and to share information about dangerous consumers (Davies and Evans 2007). Better working conditions may equate to less desire to exit. However, changes in work conditions may motivate exit. For example, perceptions that the work is becoming more physically dangerous or too competitive (Dalla 2000; Månsson and Hedin 1999; Oselin 2010; Sanders 2007), declines in sex work revenue, whether due to advancing age or competition (Sanders 2007; Romenesko and Miller 1989; Moffat and Peters 2004), and feelings of being too old or psychologically and physically fatigued are related to the motivation to exit sex work (Dalla 2000; Månsson and Hedin 1999; Oselin 2010; Sanders 2007).

Other changes may also relate to exit. Sex workers' perceptions of the opportunity costs of sex work (e.g., foregone romantic relationships) may change as they advance beyond an age at which people typically start long-term committed relationships or enter the traditional workforce and establish career trajectories. Changes in goals or priorities may lead to exit. For example, Oselin (2010) found that sex workers became motivated to exit when the incompatibility of sex work with their religious beliefs became intolerable to them, they grew weary of having sex with men to whom they were not attracted, and when they developed a new desire to maintain sobriety, often obtained while incarcerated for sex work. Turning point events, be they traumatic (e.g., violent encounter with a consumer or pimp, incarceration, hospitalization) or positive (e.g., falling in love or giving birth) (Månsson and Hedin 1999), are particularly likely to prompt exit (Oselin 2010). Finally, changes in identity may relate to exit. Identity change occurs as people break away from the sex worker role and create a new identity (i.e., the ex-role) (Månsson and

Hedin 1999; McCray, Wesely, and Rasche 2011). Sex workers who experience positive turning points, such as finding a new job or entering into a romantic relationship, more seamlessly create an ex-sex worker role (Månsson and Hedin 1999). Sex workers who experience negative turning points may need formal organizational assistance to create a new identity and successfully exit sex work (Oselin 2010).

Social networks play a role in exit. Sex workers often hide their work, reduce contact with family members, and have few social ties with people outside the sex work industry (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006). Social isolation from people outside the sex work industry and strong identification with the occupation is associated with a lower likelihood of exit (Velarde 1975). Social ties to people outside the industry, including former sex workers, may provide sex workers information about available rehabilitation programs, emotional and practical support during the process of exit (Månsson and Hedin 1999; Oselin 2009, 2010), and proof that exit is possible (Oselin 2010). Formal social support, in the form of sex worker intervention or rehabilitation programs, facilitates exit by preparing sex workers for exit. The programs assist sex workers with education, job placement, and recovery from drug addiction (Oselin 2010) and promote incremental attitudinal and behavioral changes to facilitate exit (McCray, Wesely, and Rasche 2011; Oselin 2009).

Social ties to people within the sex work industry also matter. Among outdoor sex workers, ending relationships with people inside the sex work industry may facilitate exit (Oselin 2009; Sanders 2007). Little research has investigated online sex workers' relationships with each other. The newly emerged online forums for sex workers may mitigate against social isolation and loneliness among sex workers and facilitate relationships that operate to retain workers in the industry. While previous research examined how social networks facilitate exit in various ways, this study examines whether and how social networks may motivate exit.

Even when motivated to exit, sex workers may find that challenges to exit make it infeasible (Baker, Dalla, and Williamson 2010). For example, challenges to exit may include financial instability,

limited occupational skills, limited employment alternatives, homelessness, drug addiction, limited awareness of alternative opportunities, and psychological “addiction” to elements of the job itself, such as the lifestyle, the fast money, and attention from consumers (Dalla 2000; McCray, Wesely, and Rasche 2011; Murphy 2010; Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Oselin 2010; Parsons et al. 2007; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008; Sanders 2007; Williamson and Folaron 2003). Furthermore, the need for money may pull sex workers back into the industry after an attempted exit (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Sanders 2007; Williamson and Folaron 2003).

Several factors have been identified as retaining sex workers in the industry. Defining sex work as a career and anticipating career advancement are associated with a lower likelihood of exit (Bryan 1966; Murphy and Venkatesh 2006). Sex workers who view sex work as allowing them to express important personal attributes that consumers recognize and appreciate, derive intrinsic reward from sex work in the form of personal fulfillment and enhanced self-esteem (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006), do not feel guilty about engaging in sex work (Sedyaningsih-Mamahit 1999), and value the flexibility and autonomy of sex work (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008) are less likely to exit.

The present study addresses gaps in knowledge left by prior literature on exit from sex work. First, most prior work examines outdoor sex workers who had already exited or were attempting to exit from sex work. The present study examines active online sex workers (a subset of indoor workers) who may vary in their perceptions of and intentions to exit. Second, prior work has focused on exit stages and facilitators of and challenges to exit. This study focuses on intentions to exit and factors that influence them. It also analyzes the association between desirability and feasibility of exit among online sex workers and examines whether and how online sex workers prepare for exit.

## **Research Methods**

### ***Design and Sample***



This study involved one-time, semi-structured interviews. Following Murphy and Venkatesh (2006), the sample included current sex workers, not sex workers who wanted to and did exit sex work. It consisted of 27 female online sex workers who provided mainstream sexual services to a male clientele, charged mid-range rates for their services (\$180 to \$400 per hour), advertised online that they offer penis-to-vagina intercourse with condoms and some form of oral sex. The sample excluded sex workers who operate only in fetish niches (e.g., massage, foot and shoe worship, and bondage), are male or transgender, or only offer computer-mediated sex such as via web cameras. Participants were not asked about their sexual orientation. Some of their commercial transactions with male consumers may include an additional female sex worker.

Participants were recruited from a website (not named here to protect participants' identities), established in 2005, that connects female sex workers in the United States with male consumers. Users of the website include sex workers and consumers. It combines advertising and consumer reviews with social networking features of sites like Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)). Members have profile pages with daily updates, descriptions of their hobbies and other personal attributes and communicate with one another using a personal messaging system which works like email. The website also hosts public discussion threads, or blogs. Anybody who has access to the internet can view these public blogs and browse the classified advertisements, including an escort section that contains offers of companionship from sex workers. However, a \$25 membership is required to comment on blogs and/or utilize the personal messaging system. Website members may meet in person for parties and/or commercial exchanges. This website is distinct from other websites that contain advertisements for sex work in that it offers a formal system of networking. Sex work consumers who are members of the website look at the network of a sex worker who is a website member, and send personal messages to other consumers to ask about the sex worker's service, before contacting her for an appointment. If a consumer contacts a sex worker for an

appointment, the sex worker can message other sex workers in his network to ask for information about the consumer and verify that he is safe.

The first author purchased a website membership in 2010, and over time, developed contacts with other members by participating in the website's online discussions, volunteering to help members who needed favors, such as local transportation from one city to another, and attending parties hosted by members. He sent an invitation to participate in the study, via the website's private messaging feature, to 58 sex workers with whom he had developed contacts via the website. Twenty-seven of these women completed an interview.

Table 1 provides sample descriptives. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 38 years old. The average age was 24.8 ( $SD = 5.0$ ) years. Participants varied in their sex work tenure, ranging from 1 year to 9 years, with an average of 3.9 ( $SD = 2.4$ ). The sample breakdown by respondents' self-reported race/ethnicity was: 16 non-Latina White, 3 Latina, 3 Black, 2 Middle-Eastern, 2 Mixed race/ethnicity, and 1 Asian. Family-of-origin socioeconomic status was indicated by parents' occupation, using the Nam-Powers-Boyd occupational status index (Nam and Boyd 2004). Seven participants came from upper-middle-class families. Eleven participants came from middle-class families. Nine participants came from lower-class families.

### ***Data Collection***

The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The first author conducted the interviews, which ranged in length from 45 to 130 minutes and were audio recorded, and employed recruitment and interviewing techniques that have been used successfully in prior sex work research (Murphy 2010; Sanders 2007; Walby 2010; Dalla 2006; Jackson, Bennett, and Sowinski 2007; Katsulis et al. 2010; Parsons et al. 2007; Williamson and Baker 2009). The interviews were held in locations chosen by participants: fourteen in hotels, eight in homes, and five at outdoor eateries. Verbal informed consent

was obtained prior to starting the interview. For their participation in the study, participants received \$50 and entry into a drawing for the chance to win a \$150 gift card.

The interview included questions to elicit participants' perceptions of their work conditions and exit from sex work. Participants were asked what tasks are involved in sex work, what they like and dislike about it, what types of feelings sex work generates, and how their interactions with people in the workplace affect their experience of the work. They were asked about plans for the future and for exit, their perceptions of challenges to exit, what exit means to them, whether they view exit as positive or negative, and whether their perceptions have changed over the past year.

### ***Data Analysis***

The digital audio recordings of interviews were transcribed into WORD documents. We then analyzed the transcripts, conducting a line-by-line, inductive analysis (Hinduja and Patchin 2008) to identify initial themes. Then, all transcripts were reviewed again to determine whether initial codes were appropriate and whether other themes or subthemes were suggested (Nehlin, Nyberg, and Oster 2015). We identified subthemes in the areas of the meaning of exit to participants (whether exit meant ceasing to advertise or ceasing to provide services), the desirability of exit (desirable, undesirable, or neither), current intentions to exit (intending to exit or not intending to exit), and the perceived feasibility of exit (feasible or infeasible). Each participant was placed into a mutually exclusive subtheme (i.e., category), within each theme. The categories emerged inductively. We also identified themes associated with challenges associated with exiting and factors that operate to retain sex workers in the industry.

After coding participants based on their meaning, desirability, and feasibility of exit, and their intentions to exit, we compared groups. Specifically, we assessed whether intentions to exit varied by the desirability of exit or by the perceived feasibility of exit. We also assessed whether the feasibility of exit varied by the meaning and desirability of exit. In addition, we examined how these perceptions of and intentions to exit varied by age, sex work tenure, race/ethnicity, and family-of-origin socioeconomic status.

## Findings

### *Meaning of Exit*

Although the study authors defined exit as the complete cessation of the provision of sex work services, participants varied in their interpretations of the meaning of exit (see Table 2, 2nd column). Some participants viewed exit as ceasing to advertise – that is, ceasing to advertise sex work services would co-occur with the cessation of the provision of sex work services. Others viewed exit from sex work as ceasing to provide sex work services but not co-occurring with the cessation of advertising.

Nine participants viewed exit from sex work as ceasing to advertise. For example, Sofia (22 years old, White, 1 year of experience) said that, “It’s time to give it all up, and move on...I’m planning on throwing everything away, phones, everything that’s connected to the business.” Natalie (20 years old, Asian, 2 years of experience), Molly (19 years old, Latina, 1 year of experience), and Doris (20 years old, White, 2 years of experience) expected to permanently cease transacting with all consumers when they stopped posting advertisements because “retirement” would be an accomplishment that marked the end of one phase in their lives and the beginning of a new one. Natalie said “retirement would mean that” her sex worker persona “has died...and (Natalie) is living what she was supposed to be doing...I’ve succeeded.” Molly said it “means I’ve gotten to where I plan to be for the rest of my life... I’ve gotten to the top.” Doris said that, “I really want to reach my goal (i.e., achieve a milestone), and then have retirement (i.e., stop advertising), and then delete my profile” (i.e., sever her connection to the industry).

Eighteen participants viewed exit from sex work as coinciding with circumstances that would arise sometime after ceasing to advertise. In this group, ceasing to advertise was a necessary but not sufficient step toward exit and could be associated with an incremental exit (i.e., gradual reduction in service provision). Three participants said that they would gradually reduce their base of clients before exiting. Crystal (24 years old, White, 6 years of experience) intended to “just slowly like drift out... not see new clients”, and keep seeing “regulars” as long as they adequately paid her. Until she had a child, Nina’s

objective was to cultivate relationships with “high paying guys” so that she could voluntarily scale back her online marketing before aging reduced her marketability. After ceasing to advertise, Nina would continue working in dance clubs and other nightclubs. Similarly, Vicky planned to “become more exclusive: less posting, more regular people that I know, and more longer arrangements, rather than like hours and half-hours.” In other words, Vicky (like Crystal and Nina) would decrease her advertising for sex work and transactions with strangers, and increase her transactions with consumers who paid her on a monthly rather than hourly basis. At some point later, she would cease providing services completely.

Eleven participants identified specific circumstances that would prompt an exit sometime after ceasing to advertise. Four participants reported that opening their own business would either allow or force them to exit. Wendy (22 years old, Latina, 1 year of experience) and Kelly (25 years old, White, 5 years of experience) believed that opening businesses, which they aspired to do, would force them to completely cease transacting with consumers. Wendy suggested that after she quit posting advertisements for sex work, she might be considered “semi-retired” until her business opened because she would keep her sex worker website account open in case she “really needed the money” and wanted to contact regular consumers. Kelly reasoned that although she would continue seeing regulars after she ceased to advertise, “I see myself opening my own studio and not being an escort because that will make a bad business name.” Kelly feared that people would not patronize her dance studio if they knew she was a sex worker.

Two participants reported that parenting would force them to exit. Polly (38 years old, White, 3 years of experience) said that she would stop advertising when “my prime's done” because she did not want to compete with younger sex workers and feared that she would get burned out. However, Polly intended to “be available” to her regulars until she could no longer hide sex work from her six-year old son. Nina (24 years old, White, 4 years of experience) said that she would exit if she gives birth, reasoning that, “I couldn't kiss my baby on the mouth” after a day of sex work.

Five participants cited marriage as a circumstance that would either allow or force them to exit. After ceasing to advertise, they might return to transacting with consumers or continue seeing some consumers until they got married. Chloe said, “Retirement (i.e., cessation of advertising) isn’t really retirement (i.e., exit) for a girl like me, unless I’m in a relationship (i.e., married).” She specified that she could engage in sex work while having a boyfriend, but not while having a husband. At the time of the interview, Chloe said that she had an intimate partner who did not prevent her from engaging in sex work. She said, “right now, I’m in a relationship.” Chloe distinguished between the intimate relationships she has while engaging in sex work and a “healthy relationship and true love and marriage.” Chloe explained that if she were married and transacted with consumers, “that would be cheating.”

Seven participants did not identify the specific circumstances that would prompt an exit after ceasing to advertise. Because returning to transacting with consumers would be easy for Helen (23 years old, White, 1 year of experience), she would remain open to the idea of it. She said, “It’s kind of one of those jobs that you can come back to even if you decided to leave.” Angie (26 years old, White, 4 years of experience) also reasoned that returning to sex work would be easy because sex work is unlike occupations that subject employees to termination. She said, “It’s not like it’s gone forever. If I really wanna do it, I can. If I don’t, I won’t...It’s not like, ‘Hey, I’m a lawyer, and I got fired, and I can never get that back’.” Because leaving sex work would be different than being terminated, Angie intended to return to sex work before permanently ceasing to transact with consumers. Whereas some people delay retiring from a job to avoid losing healthcare and vested benefits, Helen and Angie could drift in and out of sex work without sacrificing health coverage, paid vacation days, employer contributions to savings accounts, stock options, or the like, since these benefits are not formally provided by sex work.

Eva (22 years old, Black, 1 year of experience) expected to continue transacting with consumers after she stopped advertising. She explained, “I view retirement as after you got a really nice car, you have a stable home...you can retire and not be on any type of site, and still text your regulars...not like, ‘I’m so

over this. Going into retirement'...That's called quitting." Eva defined retirement as the cessation of advertising (i.e., "not be on any type of site" that hosts advertisements for sex work services) due to acquiring financial comfort, as opposed to "quitting" without saving money. However, Eva did not foresee any event that would compel her to stop transacting with "regulars." Eva asked, "Why would I ever give them up?" Likewise, neither Barbie (21 years old, White, 8 years of experience) nor Rachel (27 years old, White, 8 years of experience) saw a reason to stop transacting with regular clients when they stopped posting advertisements for sex work. Rachel said, "If somebody wants to give me some money after I'm thirty-five, I'm not gonna turn it down."

There were no differences in the meaning of exit by age, sex work tenure, race/ethnicity, or family-of-origin socioeconomic status.

### *Desirability of Exit*

Participants fell into one of three categories capturing the extent to which they perceived of exit to be desirable: exit as desirable, exit as undesirable, and exit as neither desirable nor undesirable (see Table 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> column). Fourteen participants perceived exit to be desirable – that is, something they wanted. Among these participants, ten were enthusiastic about exiting. For example, Sofia said that exit would feel "amazing." Elle, Dana, and Lucy said that exit would feel "good." Elle elaborated that, "I just can't wait for (exit)." Courtney, Jamie, Doris, Natalie, and Molly said that exiting would feel "good" because it would mean that they had achieved their financial goals. Natalie equated exit with fulfilling "a dream that I'm chasing." The four remaining participants who perceived exit to be desirable expressed reservations regarding exit. Wendy said that exit would enable her to "focus on my real life, not just my (hidden) life," and spend more time with friends and family. However, Wendy felt "sad" about exiting because she would miss the abundant income. Likewise, Susie (36 years old, White, 5 years of experience) reasoned that exit would generate negative emotions because she would miss the money, but it would also generate positive emotions because she could stop hiding her work from everybody. Vicky said "retirement now to me, it

kind of just makes me feel like I gotta get on the ball” to prepare for it. Chloe said that she felt “good” about exit and “anxious” because “it’s a whole life change,” and “fear of what it’s gonna be like.”

Susie and Doris said that exit was desirable because they could never tell their very traditional parents about sex work and the burden of hiding it from them had increased. Susie said that she had “closed up” and avoided her parents. Doris said that, “my family is ultimately number one in my life...I feel guilty, and I cry myself to sleep some nights.” Chloe said that exit was desirable because her daughter entered college and, “now it’s time for me because...I don’t need to be home. Now, I can go to school.” Susie and Chloe also both wanted to get married. Dana explained that exit was desirable because “if I continue doing this, I’m never gonna stop. I’ll just be comfortable with what I’m doing”, and then later have regrets such as, “I’ll never get a real job.” Furthermore, although Dana did not hide her work from her intimate partner, Dana said that exit was desirable because she wanted to improve her relationship with her intimate partner.

Eight participants perceived exit to be undesirable – that is, something they did not want. For example, Nelly (22 years old, Middle-Eastern, 4 years of experience) said that exiting made her feel “scared.” Nina said that, “thinking about (exit) makes me nervous” because she did not want to exit. Polly recognized that, “everything’s perishable” and “it’s got a shelf life,” referring to the likelihood that consumer demand for her services would decline as she aged. Polly said that her inevitable exit would sadden her because “I look forward to going to work.” Similarly, Kelly reasoned that, “the older you get, the harder it gets...guys want the young, perky, pretty girl.” Kelly said that exiting would “devastate me emotionally”, and exclaimed, “Do I wanna retire at thirty-five? Hell no! If I could keep it going like it is when I’m young, I would still do it.” Polly and Kelly were, thus, adamantly opposed to exiting.

Five participants perceived exit to be neither desirable nor undesirable. They felt indifferent about exit. Tristen (26 years old, White, 4 years of experience) said that the thought of leaving the sex work industry felt neither good nor bad because “I’ve already done it before and not had any issue. Like, I got a



job that fast...I've been able to adapt to anything and been good at everything that I've done, ever in life.” Tristen’s previous departure from sex work gave her confidence and reduced her dependency on sex work, which made her unconcerned about her future in sex work. Helen also explained that, “I wasn’t here because I had nothing else. I was here because I knew this was gonna help me.” She expected to exit on her own terms because she was not desperate. Thus, regarding exit, Helen said that, “I’m not really like too worried about it either way.” Angie said that she did not “really feel any type of way about” exit, and that, “I’m happy in whatever I choose to do because if I choose to do something, then obviously I want to.” Angie, Barbie and Crystal expected to exit on their own terms because they were still young. Angie said, “I’m young. I can do what I want now. Plenty of fucking time.” Barbie said that, “I’m young, I’m twenty-one. I still got a little while.” Crystal said that, “I’m still gonna be hot when I hit thirty.”

There were no differences in the desirability of exit by age, sex work tenure, race/ethnicity, or family-of-origin socioeconomic status.

#### *Current Intentions to Exit*

The sample divided into two categories of exit intentions (see Table 2, 4<sup>th</sup> column): women who intended to exit sex work (i.e., exiters) and women who did not intend to exit. Exiters expressed having a definite timeframe for exiting and the others did not. Among the sixteen women intending to exit, there was variation in their timeframe for exit. Twelve participants intended to exit in less than two years (i.e., near-term exiters) and four participants intended to exit in three to five years (i.e., long-term exiters). The three participants who had the shortest timeframes for exit gave similar reasons for exiting. For example, Doris said, “I plan on doing this for maybe another month and a half, maybe two months...and then go into another profession.” Doris described sex work as a lucrative phase in her life that would end when she entered a new “profession”, and linked her exit intentions to the guilt she felt for deceiving her parents. Nelly said that she intended to exit within six months because she reached a crossroads that forced her to choose between sex work and other interests, such as pursuing a traditional career. Sofia intended to exit in

a few days. Like Doris and Nelly, Sofia felt guilty and wanted to reconnect with her parents and make them proud of her career achievements outside of sex work. The guilt that intensified Sofia's intention to exit was fueled by her upbringing and her recent discovery of religion.

All of the near-term exiters listed among their reasons for exiting that sex work interfered with other priorities and relationships outside of sex work. Dana's satisfaction with sex work had declined because sex work interfered with other priorities. Dana said that she, therefore, intended to exit within one year because "I want to go to school. I want to better my relationship with my boyfriend...and then, I guess, get a career going." Dana also hoped that her relationship with family members would improve after she exited. She was working on saving money so that, "when I stop, then I can have money to fall back on." Elle also said that she intended to exit within a year or two, after saving money and paying off debts, so that she could improve her relationship with her romantic partner. She said that although she wanted to exit immediately, continuing to work for one year would mean that, "by the time I'm ready to have a family, and I'm ready to start an actual adult life, I'll be done with all of the debt." Thus, her new "adult" life would begin when she exited from sex work, entered a new occupation, and started a family.

The four long-term exiters intended to exit in three to five years. For example, Vicky said, "I give myself a solid five years. I feel like by (age) thirty, I should have businesses open, and I should be able to move on." Lucy intended to exit in three years when she finished training for a healthcare job in a hospital. She said that, "I'm gonna retire in three years, once I have my certificates." Chloe intended to exit in four years, "when (her daughter) graduates college...because my whole reason for getting in this industry was to provide her a great life." Chloe added that sex work "was a means to an end." Thus, she will no longer need the relatively high income that sex work generates when her daughter becomes financially independent. In other words, Chloe will exit when sex work has served what she sees as its purpose.

Eleven participants had no intentions to exit sex work. Women in this category believed that they would eventually exit, but they did not have a definite timeframe for exit. For example, Barbie said, "I

don't think about it too much, but I know one day, I will retire." She clarified that her exit would not occur within five years and probably not within ten years. Barbie explained that, "being sexual is part of my personality. It's fun to me. So maybe as long as I could be sexual. I might not do it like every day when I'm older, but I think for a pretty long time." In other words, because sex work was a good fit for her personality, Barbie would continue to be a sex worker until physical maturation forced her to slow down. Natalie's intentions to exit were undeveloped because she did not know how long it would take her to accomplish her financial objectives as a sex worker. She said that, "It could be five years. It could be ten years." Molly's intentions were the least developed of all the non-exiters. She said, "it's all gonna happen at the right time...everything's gonna play out right." This outlook resembled Barbie's belief that, "everything's gonna come when it needs to come."

Some non-exiters intended to engage in sex work until their marketability declined due to age. For example, Kelly (25 years old) said, "Retire? No...I don't think I'd ever turn down (money). But there is a retirement age...you can't do it forever." In other words, Kelly did not intend to exit until she reached an age that placed her at a competitive disadvantage due to consumer preferences for younger sex workers. Kelly elaborated, "I'd like to be done by the time I'm thirty-five" because "I just don't wanna be doing it at forty. It just seems too stressful" with the heightened competition that accompanies aging. Kelly added, "You're going against twenty-five, eighteen-year old girls." Nina said that she had no intentions to exit because "I'm super young still. So, I got to do all that I can, now because there's an expiration date." Like Kelly, Nina expected consumer demand for her labor to decline beyond a certain age (i.e., the "expiration date") and she wanted to capitalize on her youth until then. Like Kelly and Rachel, Nina said "if you want to put money in my account, I'm not gonna say no." At the same time, Nina also explained that she was too old to exit. She said, "I'm twenty-four now. It'd be weird if I move back" with her parents and attended college. She said that getting arrested, "made me want to quit...but it's too late. You already got caught. You have a record that says prostitution."

There were no differences in current intentions to exit by age, sex work tenure, race/ethnicity, or family-of-origin socioeconomic status.

**Intentions to exit by desirability of exit.** Intentions to exit were not clearly related to the desirability of exit. Among participants who perceived exit to be desirable, eleven intended to exit and three did not. Natalie, Molly, and Jamie perceived exit to be desirable but had no intentions to exit. They wanted to achieve vague, ambitious objectives before exiting. Natalie would exit when “my dream is complete,” Molly when she had “gotten to the top,” and Jamie when she had “saved up to invest in what I want to do.” Among participants who perceived exit to be undesirable, four intended to exit and four did not. Chanel, Abigail, Nelly, and Polly perceived exit to be undesirable because they enjoyed sex work, but they intended to exit because sex work interfered with their goals and/or relationships. To some extent, they felt forced to exit due to their age. Polly would soon reach the age of “retirement” within the industry, created by consumer preferences for younger sex workers, and the other three described urges to participate in institutions (i.e., advanced education or marriage) that were normative for their age group (i.e., people in their mid-twenties). Among participants who perceived exit to be neither desirable nor undesirable, one intended to exit and four did not.

#### *Perceived Feasibility of Exit*

Twelve participants perceived exit to be infeasible for them, and fifteen participants perceived exit to be feasible (see Table 2, 5<sup>th</sup> column). The narratives revealed two factors that relate to perceived feasibility: perceived challenges to exit and retention factors. Challenges to exit included things that increased the difficulty of exiting from sex work. Retention factors included things that increased the motivation to stay in sex work.

Among the 12 participants who perceived exit to be infeasible (i.e., difficult), two (Rachel and Heidi) perceived exit to be slightly infeasible due to the presence of one challenge which they viewed as minor (e.g., the need to save money or pay off debts). Five participants (Susie, Chloe, Nina, Barbie, and

Eva) perceived exit to be moderately infeasible due to one major challenge or retention factor, such as a spending habit that makes them dependent on the relatively easy and high income that sex work provides. Five participants (Dana, Chanel, Crystal, Nelly, Polly) perceived exit to be highly infeasible due to the existence of several challenges and retention factors.

Among the 15 participants who perceived exit to be feasible (i.e., easy), seven (Doris, Natalie, Molly, Abigail, Wendy, Vicky, Helen) perceived exit to be moderately feasible despite the presence of challenges. Eight participants (Angie, Tristen, Elle, Lucy, Jamie, Kelly, Sofia, Courtney) perceived exit to be highly feasible due to the absence of challenges and retention factors. Among the participants who perceived exit to be highly feasible, their narratives revealed evidence suggesting that some of the women may be misperceiving challenges to exit. For example, Angie saw no obstacles to exit, but her self-described resistance to planning could impede her exit. She wanted to open a business but had not developed a plan to achieve that objective. Furthermore, Angie insisted that, “If I do anything besides what I’m doing, then I’m gonna go bigger...I make more money than a 9 to 5...I would never go down to less money. I would never go to a 9 to 5.” Angie’s reluctance to pursue an alternative source of income, whether through preparing to enter another career or open a business, may be an obstacle to exit from sex work. Tristen said that, “I can stop right now. I have a degree. I could go get a job like that.” However, Tristen noted that she had “retired” once before, “got a regular job,” and later returned to sex work because she “missed the traveling” and “the fun aspect of it.”

**Feasibility of exit by meaning of exit.** Feasibility of exit was related to the meaning of exit.

Among the nine participants who viewed exit as ceasing to advertise, all but one perceived exit to be feasible. Among the eighteen participants who viewed exit as ceasing services, seven perceived exit to be feasible, and eleven perceived it to be infeasible. Thus, participants who viewed exit as ceasing services more frequently perceived exit to be infeasible than did participants who viewed exit as ceasing to advertise.

**Feasibility of exit by desirability of exit.** Feasibility of exit was related to the desirability of exit.

Among the fourteen participants who perceived exit to be desirable, all but four perceived exit to be feasible. Among the eight participants who perceived exit to be undesirable, all but two perceived exit to be infeasible. Among the five participants who perceived exit to be neither desirable nor undesirable, three perceived exit to be feasible, and two perceived it to be infeasible. These patterns suggest that as the feasibility of exit increased, so too did its desirability.

**Intentions to exit by feasibility of exit.** Perceptions of exit feasibility were not clearly related to exit intentions. Among the fifteen participants who viewed exit as feasible, six nonetheless had no intentions to exit. As described above, Natalie, Molly, and Jamie wanted to achieve vague, ambitious objectives before exiting, but they perceived exit to be feasible. Kelly, Angie, and Helen perceived exit to be feasible but had no intentions to exit because they did not perceive exit to be desirable and, thus, were not motivated to exit. Among the twelve participants who viewed exit as infeasible, seven nonetheless intended to exit. These women discussed things they were looking forward to after exit (e.g., school, alternative work, marriage). Thus, for them, although it would be hard to break out of the comfortable and lucrative routine of sex work, doing so would bring about circumstances that the women highly valued. Note that assessing exit feasibility appeared to be more difficult for participants who had no intentions to exit than for participants who had intentions to exit. For women in the latter category, exit was real whereas for women in the former category, it was hypothetical at the time of interview. This difference in the salience of exit due to its immediacy may explain the lack of relationship between perceptions of feasibility and intentions to exit in the sample.

**Feasibility of exit by age, sex work tenure, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.** There were no differences in perceptions of exit feasibility by race/ethnicity or family-of-origin socioeconomic status. However, age and sex work tenure were negatively related to exit feasibility. Younger sex workers in the sample were more likely to report that exit seemed feasible to them than were older sex workers.

Likewise, sex workers with shorter tenures were more likely to perceive exit to be feasible whereas sex workers with longer tenures were more likely to perceive exit to be infeasible. Several women with longer tenures described unsuccessful exit attempts that occurred earlier in their careers, and this experience may have led them to perceive exit to be infeasible now. Women with shorter tenures may perceive exit to be feasible because they underestimate challenges associated with exiting or because they entered sex work with the understanding that it would be for a short term. These women tended to have specific financial goals and view sex work as a vehicle for accomplishing those objectives. As described below, many participants, regardless of their sex work tenure, explained that they entered the industry with the intention of exiting soon afterward but changed their minds when they became comfortable with the work and satisfied with the income. Thus, sex work tenure may be related to perceived feasibility of exit because the increasing comfort and satisfaction become difficult for some women to give up.

**Challenges associated with exiting.** Participants identified several challenges associated with exiting, including inadequate financial resources, insufficient employment alternatives, and lack of a plan.

Ten participants identified financial challenges associated with exiting, including the need for money to cover emergencies and the lack of money after exiting sex work. For example, Rachel cited the need for money to deal with “unexpected shit,” such as car repair fees and financial penalties for law violations, as a challenge to exit. She regularly broke a number of laws, such as by driving without a license. She explained that financial losses stemming from her criminal convictions would always need to be recouped through sex work before she could exit. The concern here was that savings might be depleted by unexpected expenses (e.g., “some major health issue” or “a financial blunder”). Participants who wanted to save money before exiting from sex work would not be able to exit if unanticipated expenses temporarily interfered with this objective.

Four participants identified insufficient employment alternatives as a challenge associated with exiting. Three of them were concerned that another job would be financially unsatisfactory (i.e., pay too

little relative to sex work). For example, Polly said, “My skills are just entry-level.” The fourth person in this group explained that she could not exit because she could not get another job. Barbie said, “I’ve been prostituting since I was thirteen. This is all I know how to do pretty much.”

Three participants stated that the absence of a plan for either how to exit or what to do after sex work was a challenge associated with exiting. Polly, for example, explained that exit would be difficult due to “the whole goal problem that I have. I can’t set goals ‘cause I can’t think long-term.” Nina said that exit was infeasible because “I don’t have a retirement plan,” and “I don’t like to make plans at all.” In addition to having no plan for what to do after exiting from sex work, Nina perceived that her difficulty with developing an investment strategy would be a challenge to exit. She said that she regretted squandering her income on apparel and beauty products because “When you get a little bit older, you start thinking...I should have saved all that money. I could be in a house right now.”

Just as some participants described the inability to save money and/or plan as an exit challenge, the ability to save money and plan for the future was described as facilitating exit for nine other participants. Helen was saving money and planning for the future. She explained that, “I try to put like a logical reason for each of my monetary goals I make in a day...This’ll go toward like a house payment, or this’ll go toward this bill.” She created daily earnings goals and connected them to long-term financial goals. Thus, Helen perceived exit to be feasible because she was committed to financial goals and planning. Doris was saving money, and she connected her goal-orientation to exit. Doris said that, “I think that once I do reach this (savings) goal that I had in mind, once I reach that, it’s done (i.e., she would exit).” Vicky explained that she had become more dedicated to saving money, and that, “I feel like it’s more important now than ever, especially ‘cause I want to do other things.” In other words, Vicky was saving money so that she could open a business and exit sex work. Wendy also had no problem saving money and was focused on her goal of using her sex work earnings to open a business. Kelly was saving money for exit and said that, “I have goals set in my head and I wanna do it. I’m very goal-oriented.”



Courtney said, “Every night, I put one-hundred dollars in three piggy banks.” She explained that, “One box is for savings, one box is for bills, and one box is to spend. So at the end of the month, you have nine racks (i.e., \$9,000).” She intended to follow this plan for approximately five years because “that’s a lot of money in five years...I have a goal, and I’m just doing it.” Thus, Courtney had concrete financial goals that she connected to exit and no problem saving money. Sofia had achieved her goal of saving money for school, and thus perceived no obstacles to exiting. Sofia stated, “I can move on, and just never remember this business again.” She explained that, “I didn’t get involved in the designer stuff,” and “I kept one focus, which was school, and I’m ending with that focus.” In other words, Sofia knew that other sex workers had difficulty exiting because sex work fueled their conspicuous consumption, but she felt she could exit because she focused on allocating most of her earnings to paying for an education that would give her an alternative career.

All participants mentioned whether they could obtain alternative employment. Thirteen participants said that they could find or currently had jobs outside of sex work, and fourteen participants said that they could not find alternative employment. Women in the former group were more likely to perceive exit to be feasible and to view exit as involving no challenges. Similarly, women who were preparing to either enter a new career or open a business were more likely to perceive exit to be feasible than women who made no such preparations.

**Retention factors.** Twelve participants identified factors that compel them to stay in sex work, including the satisfaction they derive from interacting with consumers and the ample and “easy” income they earn. For example, Polly enjoyed “the validation” she got from consumers. “Who doesn’t like someone giving you compliments? It boosts you.” Exiting, Polly said, “would almost be like I wouldn’t be pretty anymore.” Helen enjoyed nurturing consumers and felt that it would be difficult to stop transacting with them.

Some participants said that it would be difficult to give up the ample and “easy” income they earn from sex work. In some of these cases, the women worried that if they exited sex work, they could not afford the luxurious lifestyle they currently enjoy or change their spending habits. Wendy described sex work as “addicting” because “the money comes so fast.” She said that, “I can go to the mall right now, spend \$500, come back, and make \$600.” She called this a “luxury.” Similarly, Polly said that, “I’m spending what I make because I have a fucking problem with shopping, basically.”

For some women, the high value placed on a luxurious lifestyle is associated with their prior experience with poverty. Barbie, who in childhood “never had nothing” said, “I got in the habit of spending stuff and not managing (money).” She recognized that, “to be able to retire, to become successfully retired” from sex work, she would need to start “budgeting and managing.” However, Barbie explained, “Right now, I’m young, and I want the hair, the nails, the expensive clothes, the shoes.” Chloe said, “I’ve become accustomed to a lifestyle...it’s just such easy money.” Chloe likened exiting from sex work to a return to her impoverished past.

Other women reported that if they exited, they could give up the lifestyle, but they would miss the ability to earn or obtain “easy” money through sex work. For example, Crystal said that, “You’ve got guys just throwing money at you. It’s really addicting.” She also said, “I tried to quit” several years ago, but “I lasted four months, and then I was like, I don’t wanna work at the Disney store in the mall.” Crystal said she liked being able to get consumers to give her substantial sums of money. She described cases in which she got consumers to wire her \$3,000 “just for the fuck of it” – that is, without expecting immediate reciprocation in the form of sexual services. Similarly, Eva did not express that, if she exited, she would have spending problems or miss the luxury. Rather, she would miss the thrill of texting her consumers to get them to give her money.

Two participants said that the ample income may have at one time operated to retain them in the industry, but it did so no longer. For example, Lucy said that, “I got addicted to the money,” but exit

became feasible when the “addiction” faded. Doris said that, “it's like an addiction,” but she thought that she would be able to exit because her “addiction” had diminished.

## **Discussion**

Using qualitative interviews and analysis, this study addressed the need for research on online sex workers and their perceptions of exit from sex work. In this section we discuss what we learned about perceptions of exit among online sex workers and factors associated with those perceptions. We also review limitations of the study and offer suggestions for future research.

### *Perceptions of Exit*

Participants varied in how they interpreted the meaning of exit, whether they perceived exit to be desirable, intended to exit, and perceived exit to be feasible. Whether participants interpreted exit to mean ceasing to advertise sexual services (a swift exit) or ceasing to provide sexual services sometime after ceasing to advertise (a gradual exit), many of them expected exit to occur when they had what previous researchers have referred to as “positive turning points” (Månsson and Hedin 1999; Oselin 2010; Sanders 2007), such as entering a new occupation, getting married, becoming a parent, or opening their own business. In contrast to research on outdoor sex workers (Månsson and Hedin 1999; Oselin 2010; Sanders 2007), no participants in this sample of online sex workers identified negative or “traumatic” turning points that would prompt them to exit. This difference between the present and prior findings may be explained by safer working conditions due to working indoors rather than outdoors (Weitzer 2005) and to utilizing online consumer screening procedures. Only one-third of the participants in this study cited the risk of encountering police or violent consumers as a cost of sex work. Only six participants had ever been arrested for sex work, five of whom had no intentions to exit.

The narratives of participants who interpreted exit to be a gradual process offer insights into perceptions of exit that previous research has not identified. Among these women, some intended to gradually cease transacting with strangers, some identified specific circumstances that would prompt them

to exit after ceasing to transact with strangers, and others did not. These women shared a willingness to transact with regular consumers after they discontinued advertising for sex work. Participants explained that transactions with regulars are less costly than the transactions with strangers, which entail greater risk and more labor associated with advertising and communicating with and screening prospective consumers. Thus, the decision to continue transacting with “regulars” after ceasing to advertise may be a rational choice that maximizes the net benefits of engaging in sex work by minimizing its costs. Unlike women who intend to exit gradually, women who intend to exit swiftly, therefore, would be expected to have particularly strong motivation to exit. Accordingly, all nine participants who interpreted exit to be swift perceived exit to be desirable.

Slightly more than half of the participants perceived exit to be feasible for them, and the participants who perceived exit to be feasible tended to perceive it to be desirable also. The challenges associated with exit that participants described in the present study differed from those identified in previous research. For example, large numbers of outdoor sex workers in previous research (Dalla 2000; Murphy 2010; Oselin 2010; Sanders 2007) had drug or alcohol addictions, but sex workers in this sample reported no such conditions in their discussions of exit. According to the prior research, sex workers who were addicted to drugs would not exit, despite fearing they might lose their lives while working to support their addiction. When such an overwhelming barrier to exit is absent, challenges associated with exit have greater salience. Among online sex workers, therefore, the perceived desirability and feasibility of exit are shaped by challenges. For example, consistent with prior research (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Parsons et al. 2007; Williamson and Folaron 2003), participants in this sample described being “addicted” to the relatively easy income from sex work, the lifestyle that it affords, and the ego boost produced by interactions with complimentary consumers. These perceived challenges make exit seem infeasible and undesirable, and when these challenges are not present, participants are more likely to perceive exit to be feasible and desirable.

In contrast to previous findings (Dalla 2000; Månsson and Hedin 1999; Oselin 2010; Sanders 2007), in the present study most participants who viewed exit as desirable intended to exit. This may be a function of varying levels of sex work income across settings (indoor versus outdoor), which is associated with varying levels of perceived exit feasibility. Sex workers generally earn more money as sex workers than they would in alternative occupations available to them, which means that exiting involves a reduction in income. Whereas the low-range outdoor sex workers who have been the focus of much previous research could not survive on less income than they made as a sex worker (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008), this sample of mid-range indoor sex workers could potentially live with less income, if they adjusted their spending habits and/or developed a budget. For this reason, intentions to exit in the sample were associated with a shift in personal priorities that reduced the importance of maximizing income. Thus, it appears that structural factors and substance use addiction operate to retain low-range sex workers in the industry (Oselin 2009, 2010; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008), whereas personal factors, such as conspicuous consumption, may operate more significantly in retaining mid-range sex workers in the industry. Mid-range sex workers who perceive exit to be desirable may be more likely to intend to exit because they generally do not have personal factors retaining them and perceive exit to be feasible.

#### *Factors Associated with Exit Perceptions*

Previous research on exit from sex work (Dalla 2000; Månsson and Hedin 1999; Oselin 2009, 2010; Sanders 2007) focused on the process of exit and studied women who had either already exited or initiated the process of exit. Because the intentions to exit were invariable in those studies, factors associated with exit intentions could not be analyzed. The present study included a sample of current sex workers who varied in their intentions to exit. This sample, thus, allowed for an examination of factors that relate to the variation in exit intentions. A limitation of this approach is that intentions to exit may not correspond with actual exiting behavior. However, an examination of study participants' online activity in the two years since the interview suggests that most have followed through with their intentions, at least in

terms of ceasing to advertise. All but one of the participants who had no intentions of exiting still had active accounts on the sex work website, and so did the participants who intended to exit in three to five years. Just three of the twelve participants who intended to exit within two years have recently posted advertisements for sex work on the site. Most of the others deleted their accounts. Although it is possible the sex workers have not exited because they could return in the future, that possibility applies even when “former” sex workers are studied, as in the prior research.

The outdoor sex workers in Rosen and Venkatesh’s (2008) study maximized their utility by engaging in sex work because they had limited alternative employment opportunities. Participants in the present study who lacked alternative employment opportunities were more likely to perceive that exit was infeasible than were participants who had alternative work opportunities. As in previous research (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Sanders 2007; Williamson and Folaron 2003), participants in the present study identified financial challenges associated with exit, such as problems with spending and saving money. Whereas some participants who perceived exit to be infeasible had difficulty with planning and setting goals, participants who perceived exit to be feasible reported having success with saving money and planning for the future.

The most commonly cited reason for perceiving exit to be desirable and for intending to exit in the sample was that sex work interfered with priorities and relationships outside of sex work. Some participants wanted to reconnect with their family members and make them proud of their career achievements. Others wanted to improve their relationships with romantic partners. All but two of the participants who intended to exit said that sex work interfered with relationships with people and priorities outside of the sex work industry, such as furthering their education and pursuing alternative careers. In contrast, all participants who had no intentions of exiting said that sex work was currently compatible with their goals or did not interfere with their goals. This finding supports claims based on macroeconomic data

that the opportunity costs of engaging in sex work may be related to perceptions of exit from sex work (Moffat and Peters 2004; Rocha et al. 2010).

Previous research also found that sex workers' perceptions of sex work were related to the compatibility of sex work with priorities and relationships outside of sex work. For instance, outdoor sex workers who perceived that sex work conflicted with parenting were dissatisfied with sex work and motivated to exit (Månsson and Hedin 1999; Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Oselin 2010). Sex workers who reported that sex work facilitated parenting perceived that the benefits of sex work exceeded its costs (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). Other sex workers perceived sex work to be rewarding if it was compatible with going to school, writing, or opening a business (Whelehan 2001). The present study extends these findings from previous research by showing evidence of a wider variety of ways that sex work may interfere or be compatible with personal priorities and relationships outside of sex work. Participants in the present study discussed concerns about whether sex work enabled them to maintain relationships with many more people than just their children. Their exit perceptions depended on whether sex work interfered with their relationships with romantic partners, parents, and friends. Some participants perceived exit to be desirable or undesirable because sex work did or did not contribute to furthering their education or opening a business.

The present study identified how social ties to people outside the industry may encourage exit. Whereas Murphy and Venkatesh (2006) found that the illiquidity of social capital prevented sex workers from exiting, the present study found that when people who are important to a sex worker will not be impressed by the sex worker's status within the industry, the online sex worker will report intentions to exit so as to find another way to make those people proud. Furthermore, Murphy and Venkatesh (2006) explained how sex workers become disconnected from family and friends, and the present study found that online sex workers who perceive isolation to be costly often intend to exit. It is possible that the relation between social networks and exit is a function of role conflict in this population. Participants in the present

study attributed their levels of satisfaction with sex work to its compatibility with engaging in behaviors related to identities that are formed through relationships with people outside of the sex work industry. Furthermore, some forms of role conflict that participants described were unrelated to their social ties, such as the conflict between engaging in sex work and achieving an education or finding an alternative career. Thus, when engaging in sex work interferes with a person's relationships or personal objectives, we might think of that as a specific type of goal incongruence that reduces the benefits of sex work and leads to exit. Furthermore, intrapersonal changes in these variables may heighten the probability of exit. When a person's priorities and social relationships change, intrapersonal conflict may arise and lead to exit.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

In addition to the limitations mentioned elsewhere in the discussion, several other limitations of the study should be considered when interpreting the results. First, regarding sampling, the findings may not generalize to other online sex workers. Although participants in the present study post advertisements on numerous websites, the sample was recruited from a list of members at one website. Thus, the findings may not apply to sex workers on other websites. Other sites may provide more or less features which then translate to different experiences of sex work and thus, different perceptions of exit. In addition, online sex workers who operate on the West Coast, and specifically in a large urban area in Southern California, may have different experiences than online sex workers who serve other regions of the U.S. and other countries. Finally, as previous research has indicated (Bimbi 2007), the experiences of female sex workers may differ from male sex workers. Therefore, these findings may not apply to male online sex workers. Second, other limitations of the present study are related to design. Because the study focused on mid-range online sex workers, it did not include comparisons to low-range or outdoor sex workers.

The following are opportunities for future research to build on the findings presented here. First, a longitudinal study would allow for an examination of the correspondence between intentions to exit and actual exit and for the specification of causal relations. Second, future research could examine exit



intentions in other groups of online sex workers, such as sex workers from other websites, sex workers from other regions of the U.S., and sex workers in different income scales. Third, a study directly comparing online sex workers with outdoor sex workers could inform broader statements about exit from sex work. Fourth, the relation of goal incongruence to exit from sex work could be further examined. Finally, given that some online sex workers do desire and/or intend to exit from sex work, future research could examine what these women feel would help them to achieve an exit; such research could determine whether existing sex worker interventions, largely developed for outdoor workers, require modification to meet the needs of online sex workers.

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**Table 1 Key Characteristics of Participants**

Pseudonym	Age	Tenure	Race/ethnicity	Family-of-origin socioeconomic status
Barbie	21	8	White (Norwegian and Romanian)	Lower class
Abigail	24	5	Mixed (Italian, Spanish)	Lower class
Angie	26	4	White (Italian)	Lower class
Heidi	24	7	White (Greek, Dutch, Swedish, Turkish, Irish)	Lower class
Lucy	23	4	Black	Lower class
Rachel	27	8	White (German, Russian, Polish, Irish)	Lower class
Chanel	27	4	White	Lower class
Courtney	20	1	White	Lower class
Tristen	26	4	White (Italian, Irish)	Lower class
Wendy	22	1	Latina (Central-American)	Middle class
Dana	23	5	Latina	Middle class
Molly	19	1	Latina	Middle class
Vicky	24	3	Black	Middle class
Chloe	38	9	White	Middle class
Crystal	24	6	White (British)	Middle class
Kelly	25	5	White (French)	Middle class
Eva	22	1	Black	Middle class
Doris	20	2	White (Bulgarian)	Middle class
Jamie	24	1	Middle-Eastern	Middle class
Elle	25	5	White (Russian, Japanese)	Middle class
Nelly	22	4	Middle-Eastern	Upper class
Nina	24	4	White	Upper class
Natalie	20	2	Asian	Upper class
Helen	23	1	White (Ukrainian)	Upper class
Sofia	22	1	Mixed (Cuban, Armenian, Lebanese)	Upper class
Susie	36	5	White (Eastern European)	Upper class
Polly	38	3	White	Upper class

**Table 2 Participant Perceptions of Exit by Dimension**

<b>Participant (N = 27)</b>	<b>Meaning of exit</b>	<b>Desirability of exit</b>	<b>Intentions to exit</b>	<b>Feasibility of exit</b>
Doris	Cease advertising	Desirable	Near-term	Feasible
Sofia	Cease advertising	Desirable	Near-term	Feasible
Elle	Cease advertising	Desirable	Near-term	Feasible
Courtney	Cease advertising	Desirable	Long-term	Feasible
Lucy	Cease advertising	Desirable	Long-term	Feasible
Jamie	Cease advertising	Desirable	No Intentions	Feasible
Molly	Cease advertising	Desirable	No Intentions	Feasible
Natalie	Cease advertising	Desirable	No Intentions	Feasible
Dana	Cease advertising	Desirable	Near-term	Infeasible
Wendy	Cease services	Desirable	Near-term	Feasible
Vicky	Cease services	Desirable	Long-term	Feasible
Heidi	Cease services	Desirable	Near-term	Infeasible
Susie	Cease services	Desirable	Near-term	Infeasible
Chloe	Cease services	Desirable	Long-term	Infeasible
Angie	Cease services	Neither	No Intentions	Feasible
Helen	Cease services	Neither	No Intentions	Feasible
Tristen	Cease services	Neither	Near-term	Feasible
Crystal	Cease services	Neither	No Intentions	Infeasible
Barbie	Cease services	Neither	No Intentions	Infeasible
Abigail	Cease services	Undesirable	Near-term	Feasible
Kelly	Cease services	Undesirable	No Intentions	Feasible
Nelly	Cease services	Undesirable	Near-term	Infeasible
Chanel	Cease services	Undesirable	Near-term	Infeasible
Polly	Cease services	Undesirable	Near-term	Infeasible
Eva	Cease services	Undesirable	No Intentions	Infeasible

Nina	Cease services	Undesirable	No Intentions	Infeasible
Rachel	Cease services	Undesirable	No Intentions	Infeasible