



Subverted agency: The dilemmas of disempowerment in digital practices

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Abstract

A common view is that marginalized groups benefit substantially from strategic use of digital technologies. An intersectionality perspective, however, suggests that these outcomes may vary depending on individuals' social positionality. We propose the concept of “subverted agency” to emphasize that use of digital technologies may be personally empowering but might reinforce normative regimes contributing to sociostructural marginalization. We investigated digital practices of 17 online-soliciting transfeminine sex workers through semi-structured interviews in Singapore, where attitudes toward gender diversity and sex work remain conservative. We highlight three dilemmas of digital media environments, namely, presentation of gender identity and embodiment, intimate relationships characterized by persistent liminality, and competitive pressures related to authenticity of identity. The subverted agency perspective suggests that digital practices do not straightforwardly transform unequal sociostructural conditions; instead, it offers a frame to rethink inclusion by attending to contextual intersections of marginalization.

Keywords

Digital, empowerment, intersectionality, marginalized, sex work, transgender

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Scholars argue that agentic practices enacted by individuals and conceived as manifestations of self-determination (Sen, 1985) can straightforwardly lead to empowerment. Increasingly, digital practices undertaken by individuals facing multiple axes of marginalization (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, occupation) are viewed as enactments of personal agency, through which marginalized individuals respond to socio-structural oppression (Ang et al., 2021; Chib and Chen, 2011; Pei and Chib, 2020). However, this view arguably overlooks the complexities of how personal agency functions dynamically within social reality.

For Giddens (1986), agentic practices make sense only when we consider individuals' ongoing negotiations with existing social structures. For example, Nguyen et al. (2017: 7) reveal that marginalized foreign brides respond to socio-structural immobilities by enacting mobile phone practices that "enhance their essentialist performance of femininity," allowing them to assert agency. These "subtle strategies of resistance" that appear, superficially, to be acts of conformity, are examples of "situated agency" (Peter, 2003: 27). It would be inappropriate to dismiss these digital strategies as conditioned subservience to the existing social order, since agents actively negotiate their immediate social constraints utilizing digital tools. We define digital strategies as those enacted within online, mobile, and social media communication contexts.

We propose subverted agency here as the flipside of "situated agency" to describe how acts of personal resistance can perhaps lead to disempowerment in the longer term by reproducing conditions of marginalization. Specifically, this describes how marginalized individuals undertake digital strategies that benefit their immediate situation, even though these strategies reinforce extant social structures, further contributing to inequality and discrimination.

In addition, we describe two key aspects of subverted agency. First, subverted agency accounts for how agentic practices can offer a *feeling* of personal empowerment, even if these reproduce the social structures that lead to marginalization. This broadens the concept of empowerment, which is hitherto conceived as measurable outcomes of agentic practices (Malhotra et al., 2002; Williams, 2005). Subverted agency demonstrates how feelings of empowerment derived from personal agency may not lead to, and may even be counterproductive to, collective empowerment in the form of substantive sociostructural change. Second, situating agentic practices within their sociostructural context and the social positionality of the actor foregrounds the unexpected vulnerabilities faced by marginalized *social groups* that result from constituent *individual* actions that appear personally empowering *prima facie*. These unexpected effects arise from the unique social contexts within which actors reside and engage in digital practices.

Intersectionality theory allows us to examine how agentic practices can in fact cause disempowerment when enacted by individuals facing multiple axes of discrimination. To validate subverted agency as a critical lens, we examine the digital practices of transfeminine sex workers in Singapore. These individuals face intersectional marginalization owing to two aspects of their social positionality: transgender identity and sex work occupation, both of which—separately and in combination—expose them to heightened levels of risk and vulnerability. This study addresses the research gap related to the intersectional experiences of transgender sex workers unique to digital spaces (Jones, 2015).

Literature review

Online sociostructural oppression and agentic strategies of sex workers

Sex workers experience vulnerability in diverse ways (FitzGerald and Munro, 2012), notably due to structural marginalization. Beyond social stigma due to normative regimes of sexual morality that demonize sex work, they face risks to their physical well-being due to violence, sexually transmitted diseases, labor exploitation and trafficking (Ganju and Saggurti, 2017; Yea, 2014). Sex workers increasingly engage in online sex work, defined as “the Internet-mediated exchange of sexual commodities and/or services” (Jones, 2015: 560), including online-only sex work (e.g. webcam models). Research on online sex work is distinct in focusing on sex workers who use digital platforms to advertise and solicit offline sexual encounters. Jones (2015) notes myriad dangers unique to online sex work, including the risk of being doxxed, hacked, stalked, surveilled, or being recorded online without permission. Sex workers face significant levels of online harassment, including racism, xenophobia, threats of violence, surveillance by authorities, and crimes unique to the online context, such as clients who evade payment (Ashford, 2009; Cunningham et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2018).

Yet, amid sociostructural oppression, sex workers’ digital practices demonstrate the significant degree of agency they possess. Sex workers respond to online abuse and policing by blocking harassers, deleting digital traces, and actively controlling online identities as sex workers by their selective revealing and performance (Chib et al., 2021; Koken, 2012). Sex workers have transformed the industry by inhabiting and strategically utilizing digital spaces (Cunningham and Kendall, 2011), eliminating their potential exploitation by middlemen such as pimps and brothel owners (Veena, 2007). Appropriating digital technologies, sex workers become self-reliant entrepreneurs (Pezutto, 2019) that target unique market niches (Phua and Caras, 2008), leading to an expanded and more affluent client base (Burghart, 2018) and improved earnings (McLean, 2015). Sex workers can pre-screen clients online (McLean, 2015), providing greater security from abuse by clients and from harassment by law enforcement (Argento et al., 2018). Such digital strategies constitute manifestations of sex workers’ personal agency to cope with sociostructural oppression. Furthermore, some sex workers also engage in digital practices to achieve collective empowerment, such as by forming online communities for mutual support (Cunningham et al., 2018) and fostering activist movements that rally for shared political interests (Jones, 2015).

Online sociostructural oppression and agentic strategies of transgender people

Transgender people are often marginalized in society through the effects of multiple ideological normative regimes that maintain and enforce gendered norms and expectations. First, the normative regime of cisgenderism “denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth” (Lennon and Mistler, 2014: 63). Online, transgender people are exposed to (transphobic) abuse at a rate that is much higher than the abuse experienced by cisgender people (Powell et al.,

2020), with abusers emboldened by the anonymity afforded on online spaces (Cannon et al., 2017). Such victimization also results from a second normative regime that polices gender identity and expression, transnormativity, in which only people who conform to the “medical model of transgender identity” (Johnson, 2016: 467) are considered legitimately transgender. Therefore, the experiences and identities of people who identify as transgender but do not want to medically transition (e.g. by surgery, hormones), as well as those who identify as genderqueer or gender non-binary, are marginalized by this normative valorization of binary gender.

Transgender communities online often reproduce such sociostructural oppression, where some transgender people enact essentialist gender identities that reproduce the normalization of binary gender (Prinsloo, 2011). Many such forums also alienate and harass people who do not conform to transnormative standards (Dame, 2016; Siebler, 2012). Transgender people must also contend with their “digital footprint” (Haimson et al., 2016), traces of previous online identities that can never fully be erased. Furthermore, certain technological features reinforce the permanence of identities, such as Facebook’s policy requiring an “authentic name” which makes it difficult for transgender people to change profile names. Encountering such permanent traces may be traumatic and dysphoria-inducing for transgender people who have transitioned beyond previously performed identities (Cavalcante, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019).

At the same time, transgender people employ digital technologies as informational resources, for emotional support and identity affirmation (Selkie et al., 2020), and for community building (Chaiyajit, 2014), so as to counter these sociostructural constraints online. They gain agency by experimenting online with gender expression that may be hazardous to enact in offline settings (Cipolletta et al., 2017; Marciano, 2014). Transgender users adopt digital strategies to cope with sociostructural oppression that manifests online such as securely separating their gendered identity presentations to different audiences (Haimson, 2018), avoiding what Marwick and boyd (2010) label “context collapse,” wherein different audiences (e.g. friends and allies vs family) can access the same digital content.

Examining transgender sex work online through intersectionality

Intersectionality can shed light on the (dis)empowerment which results from marginalized individuals’ strategic performances of online identities. First theorized by Crenshaw (1989), intersectional analyses pay attention to how experiences of marginalization faced by certain groups (e.g. Black women) are qualitatively different from others that are marginalized alongside fewer dimensions (e.g. Black men and White women). This research focuses on two intersecting social positions, being transgender and a sex worker, that “are intertwined and influence each other” (Buggs, 2020: 252). This does not preclude the salient interplay of other intersecting social positions that our participants inhabit (e.g. migrant status).

Intersectionality calls for attention to how regimes of normativity are often mutually reinforcing. For example, social demands for transfeminine individuals to conform to ideal, sometimes hypersexualized, femininity—lest they be ridiculed and invalidated—is an expression of trans-misogyny, where feminine gender norms are reinforced through

the policing of transfeminine bodies (Serano, 2007). That hierarchies overlap also suggests that many people occupy positions of simultaneous privilege and marginality; by reinforcing intersectional oppression against others, such individuals inadvertently reproduce the systems that oppress themselves (Ehrenreich, 2002).

Prior research on the intersectional marginalization of transgender sex workers has revealed a range of dilemmas, such as the need to appeal to desires of clients even though these desires may fetishize them (Hwahng and Nuttbrock, 2007; Miller and Nichols, 2012; Ocha and Earth, 2013). Transfeminine sex workers in Singapore face unique challenges owing to their intersectional positions. While heterosexual sex work is technically legal, associated activities such as street solicitation and pimping remain criminalized, as are sexual acts between men. Transfeminine sex workers who have not surgically transitioned cannot change their legal gender (TransgenderSG, 2019), thus may face penal consequences for engaging in sex work (Project X, 2020). Moreover, Singapore regulates sex work in an “extra-legal” manner through the Medical Surveillance Scheme, which determines who is de facto licensed to do sex work; consequently, transfeminine people who have not transitioned are denied authorization (Chapman-Schmidt, 2015). Here, transnormative legal and social structures reinforce heteronormativity and cisgenderism within the sex industry, and vice versa.

Sex work also introduces complexities into transfeminine sex workers’ performances of gendered social roles, that is, their enactment of gender interactionally by “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Transfeminine sex workers do enact sexualized and gendered personas (both offline and online) not just for their work, but also to affirm their transgender identity (Capous-Desyllas and Loy, 2020; Samudzi and Mannell, 2016). Having a diversity of transfeminine embodiments (especially partial surgical transitions, such as having only breasts or a vagina but not both) can be beneficial for sex work as these cater to various market niches; simultaneously, online sex work is a means of financing processes of physical transitioning to better affirm their transgender identity (Ocha and Earth, 2013). Performance of (trans)gender identity and the demands of sex work are thus interrelated. We expect these intersectional complexities to be more pronounced in online environments, which afford greater flexibility in identity presentation (Marciano, 2014), while occurring outside the social and legal protections associated with offline sex work.

Dilemmas posed by intersectional online identities

Transgender sex workers desiring flexibility in online identity performance may not truly possess such freedom owing to their intersectional position. Such flexibility in self-presentation assumes that online identities can be cleaved from offline identities (Marciano, 2014). Yet, when transgender sex workers meet clients in person for sex, embodied aspects of their gender (e.g. sex organs and gendered physical features) are expected to conform to online depictions. The inability to simply conceal their transgender identities online makes the compartmentalization of online identities (Haimson, 2018) considerably more difficult. This likely constitutes a major dilemma, since both transgender and sex work identities remain heavily stigmatized. Emphasizing a distinctly transfeminine persona along with a sex worker aesthetic is likely to increase the risk of

online harassment (Chib et al., 2021). Furthermore, even though sex workers make the conscious decision to present their transgender identities and bodies to clients, these clients are often not gender-affirming. Handling sexualized comments that are often blatantly or tacitly transphobic is emotionally arduous for transgender sex workers and deleterious to their mental well-being (Jones, 2021).

Multiple intersections of marginalized social positions generate unique tensions that individuals must contend with online. Sanders (2005) coins the term “manufactured identities” to describe how sex workers craft personas that appeal specifically to clients’ sexual desires. This allows them to compartmentalize their personal (non-work) aspects of life from their (often hypersexualized) work-related persona. Digital platforms arguably allow the crafting of more diverse “manufactured identities,” making identity management additionally salient for online sex workers. Sex workers can mobilize various axes of their identities as sexual commodities for economic gain, such as deliberately emphasizing their ethnicities on online advertisements, acceding to the sexual fantasies of clients (Phua and Caras, 2008). While such racial (commodity) fetishism can increase personal agency to some extent, it arguably contributes to broader problems of structural disempowerment of both sex workers and racial minorities. As a manifestation of subverted agency, such practices reinforce discourses that multifarious identities of sexuality and race can and should be reduced to immutable traits that can be assigned an exchange value and commoditized. Similarly, Chib et al. (2021) note how transfeminine sex workers present themselves as sexual objects online by performing hypersexualized feminine personas that emphasize submissiveness.

These tensions illustrate two aspects of subverted agency: first, that individual actions which are seemingly empowering carry unforeseen negative consequences; second, that personal agency in digital practices may counteract collective empowerment. To investigate these issues further, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1. How does intersectional (social positioning) marginalization pose unique dilemmas?

RQ2. How might digital strategies, in response to intersectional marginalization, instantiate the tension between personal agency and collective empowerment?

Methods

This field research employed qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews to gain insights into sex workers’ lived experiences and digital practices. Interviews are considered appropriate for revealing human stories and exploring individual experiences and subtle emotions (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001). Most studies on intersectionality focus on a single group of users to highlight the multiple axes of discrimination faced. To better understand how experiences of transfeminine sex workers differ from sex workers in general, we interviewed both transfeminine ($n = 17$) and cisfeminine sex workers ($n = 17$). However, our findings do not discuss cisfeminine experiences as our research focus is on how intersectional marginalization affects digital practices.

Fieldwork extended over 8 months in designated red-light areas, particularly Orchard Towers—a landmark entertainment complex in downtown Singapore where many sex workers were active and visible on location-based social media. One researcher volunteered with Project X, a non-profit organization focusing on empowering sex workers in Singapore through advocacy, charity, and activism. Contacts with sex workers were mainly made through Project X, and using a snowballing method subsequently. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour and were audio-recorded. These were carried out face-to-face at convenient locations for the sex workers, for example, coffee shops, offices, massage parlors, or hotel rooms. Interviewees were invited to sign a form of informed consent, thus guaranteeing anonymity and right to withdraw from the research project, confidentiality of their personal information and identifiable data, and access to the final report (Table 1). Each participant was given a token of appreciation of S\$30. The research protocol was approved by the ethical review board of Nanyang Technological University.

The interviews focused on each respondent's (1) life experiences; (2) digital literacy and usage patterns; (3) how digital media supported their lives and livelihoods; and (4) problems and challenges caused by digital use. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and likewise reported to retain the authentic cadence and vernacular of their speech. We coded the transcripts based on the research questions and noted emergent themes arising from the data. Theorized and emergent themes were coded and triangulated following abductive and inductive data analysis approaches deriving from a grounded theory research method (Urquhart et al., 2010). The co-authors met at intervals to iteratively draw out major findings and implications. Initial analysis identified respondents' digital strategies and use of affordances. Next, we analyzed whether these strategies seem to lead to empowering or disempowering outcomes. Finally, subverted agency emerged conceptually based on our observations that intersectional social positions influenced choices of digital strategies and complicated the straightforward binary between dis/empowerment.

Findings and discussion

Dilemmas of intersectional marginalization

A central dilemma for transfeminine sex workers, situated within ongoing dynamics between sociostructural oppression and personal agency, concerns the authenticity of identity performance. Digital media do not just act as a “platform for solicitation of sex work but also for performance of transgender identity” (Chib et al., 2021: 11). The separate and comingled nature of transfeminine identity performance and sex work, combined with the melding and separation of online and offline environments, create unique dilemmas for respondents. We note the salience of authenticity in identity performance by respondents, with different social audiences imposing different demands on what they considered to be “authentic.” Failing to meet these demands could lead to severe social and economic repercussions. The interviews revealed two identity-related dilemmas online that arise directly due to respondents' unique intersectional marginalization as transfeminine and sex workers: (1) economic liberation and necessity and (2) pre- and post-operative status.

First, whether the decision to engage in online solicitation is truly agentic can be questioned in the face of employer discrimination, as described by Mimi, “especially

Table 1. Table of interviewees.

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Age	Nationality	Type of sex work
Carrie	Transfeminine (pre-op)	25	Singaporean	Online escort
Mimi	Transfeminine	Unknown	Singaporean	Online escort
Aminah	Transfeminine	23	Indonesian	Online escort
Aisyah	Transfeminine (pre-op)	53	Malaysian	Street
Chi	Transfeminine	25	Vietnamese	Street
Rosmah	Transfeminine (pre-op)	Unknown	Malaysian	Online escort
Farah	Transfeminine	Unknown	Malaysian	Brothel
Jasmine	Transfeminine (pre-op)	Unknown	Singaporean	Online escort
Putri	Transfeminine (pre-op)	30+	Singaporean	Online escort
Sofia	Transfeminine	30+	Singaporean	Online escort
Munah	Transfeminine (pre-op)	37	Singaporean	Street
Siti	Transfeminine (pre-op)	18	Singaporean	Online escort, street, club
Pamela	Transfeminine (pre-op)	Unknown	Singaporean	Online escort, street
Tanya	Transfeminine (pre-op)	23	Singaporean	Online escort, masseur
Nazra	Transfeminine (pre-op)	28	Singaporean	Online escort
Hong	Transfeminine (post-op)	43	Singaporean	Street, online escort
Haryati	Transfeminine (pre-op)	35	Malaysian	Brothel
Maribel	Cisfeminine	30+	Filipino	Bar entertainer
Theresa	Cisfeminine	24	Filipino	Bar entertainer
Lydia	Cisfeminine	30	Filipino	Bar entertainer
Regina	Cisfeminine	Unknown	Filipino	Bar entertainer
Gabby	Cisfeminine	Unknown	Filipino	Bar entertainer
Chen	Cisfeminine	40+	Singaporean	Masseur
Thuy	Cisfeminine	Unknown	Vietnamese	Masseur
Lim	Cisfeminine	20+	Singaporean	Online escort
Anh	Cisfeminine	30+	Vietnamese	Street
Sanah	Cisfeminine	40+	Sri Lankan	Street
Xuan	Cisfeminine	40+	Singaporean	Street
Min	Cisfeminine	50+	Singaporean	Masseur, online escort
Mahsuri	Cisfeminine	30+	Singaporean	Masseur, offline escort
Kasih	Cisfeminine	50+	Singaporean	Masseur
Izzati	Cisfeminine	56	Malaysian	Brothel
Shi	Cisfeminine	60+	Malaysian	Brothel
Bao	Cisfeminine	40+	Vietnamese	Street

your ID is not stating who you are. You look like a woman, but it writes male.” For respondents, sex work may arise not as an objective decision, but in response to the sociostructural constraints to attaining a conventional livelihood.

It’s so hard for you to get jobs here in Singapore, if you’re trans, you know. Especially a pre-op one . . . I’ve been through many job interviews. I get doors slammed in my face. (Pamela, pre-op¹)

Furthermore, respondents face a double bind in transitioning to a transfeminine identity while engaged in sex work. Respondents need to have transfeminine aspects of embodiment to appeal sexually to clients, which conversely creates new financial constraints.

When someone expect to pay you like five or six hundred dollars to spend a good time, expect you don't look like shit. . . . As for girls [cisfeminine sex workers], are naturally born petite, small, beautiful, you don't need too much make up. But for transsexuals, we need to go a lot of surgeries, breast surgery, supplement hormones, face surgery, you know, from your head to toe . . . It's very very expensive. (Rosmah, pre-op)

Transfeminine respondents not only feel compelled to perform stereotypical feminine identities to attract an affluent clientele, but in comparison to cisfeminine sex workers, feel that they require additional investments, perhaps leading to a greater necessity to engage in sex work (Ocha and Earth, 2013). The constructing of a hyper-feminine persona online to meet the masculine gaze can be an affirmative experience (Lefebvre, 2020), but can also invite criticism regarding whether sex work can be an authentic means to empowerment given the potential for objectifying transgender identity.

Second, our interviews reveal that respondents face contrasting demands for authenticity in terms of their embodied identities as *transfeminine* and *sex worker*. Thus, an agentic choice to perform identity in one way or another easily leads to backlash from certain social audiences, such as clients, the authorities and cisgender sex workers. Transfeminine sex workers face a central dilemma between presenting and embodying a pre-op transfeminine identity (which fulfills a niche within the sex industry) and post-op identity which is perceived to allow them to better assimilate into cisgender-centric society (protecting them from legal and social discrimination). Recognizing their unique positioning in a competitive marketplace, transfeminine sex workers, especially those who have only undergone a partial surgical transition (pre-op), selectively present their appeal as distinctive from ciswomen.

There's two types of bisexual² [men]. One is purely straight bisexual means they will not touch anything that's below and there's another part where they so call have a fetish for it. They adore it, so they say that if I were to go for my sex change, they wouldn't meet me. They rather go for a woman. (Munah, pre-op)

The benefit to embodying the pre-op identity is that it fits a market niche that avoids competition with cisfeminine sex workers (Ocha and Earth, 2013). Yet, this agentic decision begets new challenges. First, pre-op sex workers are often fetishized, meaning that clients are specifically attracted to pre-transition aspects of embodiment (e.g. penis). An interviewee mentions client expectations to perform a dominant and sexually penetrative role, which requires added emotional and sexual labor.

When they have connection with me, only then I can entertain to their needs if they want me to be dominant and stuff. . . . He wants the five-minute dominant thing, but I can't do it. . . . I cannot pretend because it will never get hard too. (Tanya, pre-op)

This inability to assume a sexually penetrative role on demand to meet the fetishistic desires of clients relates to Jones' (2020a) concept of "embodied authenticity" (p. 18), which describes how clients expect sex workers to embody bodily arousal and pleasure on demand, even if it requires emotional investment that the sex worker is unable to provide.

A second dilemma related to transitioning is that pre-op sex workers face greater risks of exposure and entrapment from soliciting sex work online. Respondents are often compelled to disclose their transfeminine identity despite the attendant risks, as they may be rejected or even accused of duplicity if their online self-presentation fails to match their physical embodiment. As Mimi notes, "you try to look like your [online] picture. If not, they [clients] try to find excuse [to reject you] for not looking like a picture." Such instances sometimes occur even if sex workers disclose their transfeminine identities upfront.

So, when I meet him [the client] at his hotel, then he told me, "Oh, you cheat me, you told me you are a girl." I said no, I said I told you who am I and you agreed with it. (Carrie, pre-op)

Third, pre-op sex workers have increased legal vulnerability, as the legal status of their sex work is ambiguous and possibly illegal.

When they get arrested right, okay, for those operated ones, they put in a different cell. Okay, they won't bother the one that is operated. But they will disturb the one that is not operated . . . Discrimination. Because if you're not sex change, you're like this [at risk]. They [authorities] will try to be funny, or do something stupid to us. But if we have a female identity, maybe they'll think twice, because in women's law, we are under the women's category, protected by law. (Hong, post-op)

A final dilemma unique to transfeminine sex workers relates to challenges to their identity by cisfeminine sex workers. For sex workers who can and choose to transition fully (post-op), this decision also begets sociostructural oppression, such as discrimination that perpetuates cisgenderism within the sex work community. Cisfeminine sex workers denigrate transfeminine sex workers as being inferior due to their gender transitioning, invoking moral arguments along legal and religious lines to justify transphobic views. The following cisfeminine interviewee feels the impetus to distinguish herself from transfeminine peers because they pose a potential economic threat when presenting bodies that effectively pass as women; owing to the intersectional position of the sex worker, these embodied identities appear "manufactured" to specifications (Sanders, 2005).

Majority of them [transfeminine] will say, "Oh, you look at me, look at my eye, look at my boobs." . . . These will make you irritated . . . According to the law, you are a female. I was created by God. Okay! I cannot talk back to them because their words are very harsh . . . In my heart, I'm like "Basket [pejorative], you all are full of plastic. How many thousands you spent on yourself? Mine is original!" I feel very proud. (Izzati, ciswoman)

These dilemmas suggest that, for respondents, pre-op and post-op identities are intersectional social positions that are important to consider, as these can be interpreted as

both outcomes of choice and of determination by sociostructural conditions. These complexities regarding how transfeminine sex workers navigate “authenticity” concerns demonstrate that every agentic choice responds to and potentially begets intersectional marginalization.

Digital strategies as subverted agency

Digital strategies can provide a strong sense of personal empowerment. Respondents engage in online sex work to financially fund the transition into and maintenance of transfeminine aspects of embodiment, as described by Pamela, an online escort, “Why I chose sex work is because that was the easiest way for me to get to . . . my goals: to go through my surgeries, to have enough money for myself,” which may arguably be considered a form of personal agency. Online sex work allowed some interviewees to engage in personal branding, and to do sex work overseas, including in societies where street-walking and brothels are prohibited. As Rosmah describes, “I haven’t been home for one and a half year. . . . If [overseas clients] pay me, they pay me for me to come over, of course they need to pay for everything.” Several interviewees used online platforms to investigate clients and evaluate risks before meeting them. As Farah describes, “[We will] check his background, appearance, [only then we] ask them to come . . . We can tell from photos in WeChat whether it is clean and ok . . . then we can assume the [client’s] personalities.”

While digital spaces afford agency in the performance of gender-diverse identities, these digital strategies may not only fail to foster sociostructural transformation but possibly even reinforce normative regimes (e.g. cisgenderism, transnormativity) that marginalize people who occupy gender-diverse and sex worker social positions. We conceptually apply subverted agency to account for instances where agentic actions that produce feelings of personal empowerment reproduce sociostructural conditions for marginalization. From the data, we identify three dilemmas faced by transfeminine sex workers in digital media environments, concerning: (1) the presentation of gender identity and embodiment, (2) the formation of intimate relationships characterized by persistent liminality, and (3) the weakening of collaborative spirit by competitive pressures.

Dilemmas of gender identity and embodiment. First, transfeminine sex workers face a dilemma between a pre-op gender identity that is perceived to be potentially more lucrative in sex work, and a post-op identity that is better positioned to assimilate more with socially acceptable cisgender norms—and thereby gain both increased societal recognition and legal protection as women. Considering these two choices as a binary renders the transgender identity as a false dichotomy that fails to recognize the plurality of transgender identities. Several issues arise from this dilemma.

At first glance, the strategy of presenting a pre-op identity of a sexually desirable transfeminine sex worker seems to weaken the norms of the gender binary in society, making gender diversity more accepted as a spectrum. Indeed, online spaces afford greater fluidity in gender performance, providing sex workers greater latitude to construct manufactured identities that “make financial gain by exploiting the male customers” desire for a stereotypical display of female sexuality’ (Sanders, 2005: 323).

However, the online personas of pre-op sex workers do not just reproduce essentialized femininity but may leverage on both extremes of sexualized femininity and masculinity to appeal to fetishistic desires. For example, Tanya's (pre-op) online profile describes her in a hyperfeminine way: "Spend a slow romantic moment with me, example kissing you while I run my fingers slowly caressing you . . . I'm the tall smooth skin curvy Asian, full-figured T girl with a very big rounded natural ass and beautiful tear drop cupcakes." Alongside presenting an essentialist feminine image online, pre-op sex workers retain a conventionally masculine embodiment (e.g. penis) to serve their market niche, as Tanya (pre-op) describes profiles created by her peers: "I've seen [another transfeminine sex worker's] pictures like really sexy, like [posting a] 6-inch rock hard dick . . . That really gains some market because a lot of people want to have that."

The two extremes of online gender performance by pre-op sex workers (extreme femininity and masculinity) are reconciled precisely through the hyper-sexualization of pre-op online personas. Given the general lack of positive cultural representation of transgender people in Singapore society, this entrenches the stereotype that transfeminine people must be hypersexual and/or involved in sex work. Some interviewees noted that disclosing a transgender identity (on multipurpose social media, such as WeChat) was often enough to elicit assumptions by potential clients that they offer sexual services. Rosmah (pre-op) corroborates this stereotype: "they call 'tranny', they classify as a sex worker, even if you're entrepreneur for certain products."

Agreeing with Samudzi and Mannell (2016), we argue that pre-op sex workers remain unlikely to be recognized by society as fully women, despite their freedom to perform feminine identities online that may help them reaffirm their womanhood and thereby feel personally empowered. Since their online gender performance is integral to attracting clients, pre-op sex workers are caught in a double bind. Those who do not disclose their masculine embodiment upfront risk being accused of duplicity (Yavorsky, 2016). Conversely, those who emphasize their masculine embodiment online contribute to a culture where pre-op transwomen are predominantly seen as exotic objects of sexual fascination (Capous-Desyllas and Loy, 2020).

While gender non-conforming expressions (such as drag performances) are sometimes argued to destabilize traditional gender categories (Butler, 1990), these intersectional dilemmas faced uniquely by transfeminine sex workers show how affirmation of diverse gender identities may, in certain social contexts, have its emancipatory qualities subverted. While the post-op identity strives to conform to normative regimes surrounding binary gender, the pre-op identity of sex workers is unique as an expression of social diversity that has been co-opted by capitalism, with its difference commercialized and mainstreamed to conserve the patriarchy. Specifically, the pre-op sex worker can be viewed as a hypersexualized identity mediated by market forces and constructed to cater to heterosexual masculine desire. Conversely too, since transgender representation is already insufficiently pluralistic, the predominance of the hypersexualized transfeminine image not only worsens stereotypes, but further reinforces fetishistic masculine desires (Jones, 2021), leading to a vicious cycle. The pre-op sex worker, perhaps aided by their hypersexualized online personas, may have become the predominant synecdoche for the entire transgender community. Conceivably, this might lead to transfeminine sex

workers being blamed for negative representations of transgender people and thereby stigmatized even within transgender communities.

Persistent liminality of emotional relationships. A second dilemma arises from the fact that, via sex work, transfeminine sex workers sometimes build intimate (emotional and romantic) relationships with current and former clients. The ability to enter into and maintain such relationships is greatly enhanced by digital technologies, where mediated communication allows relationships to be conducted across distances, sometimes furtively. Jasmine (pre-op) describes her ambiguous relationship with a client: “my this loyal friend, if you SMS him, you ask for money—he will send it to you. . . . If he feels like asking me to go out, he will automatically SMS me. ‘Are you keen in going overseas?’” Such blurring of lines between clients, friends, and romantic partners provides the sense of an emotional relationship, with transfeminine sex workers investing in mediated digital communication, both simultaneous and asynchronous, to maintain the relationship.

About one to three [long-term clients]. Some of them are staying in Singapore, some of them are not . . . sometimes he may just say “hey, please come back again, just contact” you know, then suddenly like one day he just give me a text and say “hi I’m coming back” you know? So it’s so important to maintain the relationship and that’s the only way—video call. (Tanya, pre-op)

Such relationships are, however, characterized by liminality and ambiguity, in that these often cannot be stable or sustainable. Client partners are often already married, so meetings are clandestine and perhaps defined by physical transaction. Consequently, these relationships cannot attain mainstream social or legal recognition (e.g. through marriage). The following quote illustrates how calculated digital strategies must be constantly employed to prevent situations where context collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2010) can lead to undesirable social consequences.

Like maybe I WhatsApp my own photo to him [regular client/friend], but no don’t use that. I just like that SMS him . . . Because he’s a married man . . . We don’t talk much [on the phone] because he might be afraid that his wife will suspect. So, all through SMS. (Jasmine, pre-op)

Transfeminine sex workers, owing to their intersectional marginalization, cannot conform to heteronormative monogamous standards of relationships deemed socially respectable. These relationships are often concealed from the public eye and—mediated by digital communication—are characterized by instability, deception, and concealment. This has the potential to perpetuate the problematic representation of gender-diverse (including transgender) people as having illegitimate identities and being socially dysfunctional. This research corroborates Sanders’s (2008) finding that sex workers form relationships with regular clients, blurring the distinction between commercial and non-commercial relationships. However, a subverted agency perspective reveals that when intersectional positions are considered, commercial relationships may remain characterized by a particular sense of transience and illegitimacy. Transfeminine sex workers seek personal empowerment by forging social relationships with clients, but this comes at the

cost of suffering the stigma of being associated with illicit relationships that threaten the heteronormative family (especially when the clients are already married).

Undermining of collaborative resistance by neoliberal individualism. A third dilemma arises from the pressures of the online marketplace for transgender sex workers to echo a “neoliberal” individualistic mind-set (Chib et al., 2021; Pezzutto, 2019), where the responsibility for success and failure is placed entirely on the individual sex worker. Tanya (pre-op) explains the burden of blame with, “The risk, it’s on you. Being responsible is the most important thing la. . . . [If you get arrested,] then you have to put the blame on yourself. What kind of social media you use, who to trust?” Under the logic of neoliberal capitalism, rather than working collaboratively for sociostructural change, sex workers view each other as competitors, leading to distrust. Compared with offline settings, sex workers can easily view each other’s online offerings, leading to competition between them becoming more intense and visible (McLean, 2012). This sense of alienation among sex workers undermines the formation of collective transgender identity for representation and advocacy.

A lot of transsexual, you know, they have attitude problems. Not all, yeah, but some. Maybe they’re OK when you help them. After that, they’re like, gone. And they don’t wanna give back to community . . . So normally transsexual, if you’re good friends, you’re good friends. If you’re not, you’re competitor. So that’s difficult for people like us. We’re not together. (Rosmah, pre-op)

The hyper-competitiveness of the online marketplace further discourages sex workers from sharing their digital skills and experiences with their peers. This impedes fellow sex workers from learning to adopt contextually specific digital strategies, limiting the online sphere’s benefits to those who are already more privileged in terms of education and digital savviness.

When you go to another country [to engage in online sex work], it’s difficult for you . . . you must know where to advertise your ad. Nobody will tell you, not even transsexual will tell you. Because if I tell you everything, what do I profit from it, you know? (Rosmah, pre-op)

This undermining of collective agency by personal interests mirrors the situation for transgender online pornography performers (Pezzutto, 2019), where an obsession with “self-branding” and “self-reliance” (p. 52) encourages performers to engage in online abuse against other performers, rather than supporting each other collaboratively. This perception of intense competition in the sex industry in turn conditions the agentic practices that sex workers adopt. For example, some older sex workers perceive themselves as less digital-savvy and less sexually desirable, incentivizing them to eschew online solicitation for lower-end street solicitation. Aisyah (pre-op) describes her situation, “I don’t feel inferior, but I know my worth. First, I haven’t done the operation. Second, how old am I? 50 + . I cannot pick my customers now, but it is them who’s picking me. I have to be realistic.” This finding is similar to Hwahng and Nuttbrock’s (2007) description of older transgender sex workers in New York City who transition back to masculine embodiments when faced with younger competitors.

Chib et al. (2021) found transfeminine sex workers in Singapore who engaged in community building, yet these collaborative efforts were focused on the transgender identity sans a sex work intersection. Moreover, it is possible in our sample that the pre-op identity is one intersectional axis that increases the tendency for interviewees to engage each other competitively, rather than collaboratively.

Conclusion

This research questioned whether agentic digital strategies enacted by transfeminine sex workers had unexpected effects that deepened their sociostructural marginalization. We propose the concept of subverted agency to account for how actions that generate feelings of personal empowerment can reproduce sociostructural conditions for marginalization, thus leading to collective disempowerment. We therefore challenge the idea that digital practices of marginalized communities straightforwardly improve their wellbeing. Prior research on digital inclusion for vulnerable communities has focused on access, “meaningful” use of digital technologies, and technological appropriation (Van Deursen and van Dijk, 2015). However, we caution that emphasizing only the empowering benefits of digital practices inadvertently resurrects assumptions that digital exclusion is the primary—if not only—cause of marginalization and overlook its sociostructural causes. So long as repressive sexual morality in broader society goes unchallenged, proposals for increased digital inclusion may even be dismissed by policymakers and civil society groups as misguided attempts to promote vice. For example, the Röda Paraplyt project (a Swedish website providing educational resources for sex workers on their rights and sexual health) was accused by many groups in society (including some feminists) of encouraging people to engage in sex work (Dennermalm, 2014). The perspective taken by these well-meaning detractors misguidedly assumes that the profession itself is the root cause of sex workers’ marginalization. Accordingly, Mariën and Prodnik (2014) argue that digital inclusion strategies too often translate into micro-interventions that ignore immense social inequalities, thus placing the burden of sociostructural transformation on individuals who often lack the human, financial, and social capital to do so.

Consequently, the notion of subverted agency raises a salient question: while everyone has some degree of agency to negotiate their sociostructural constraints, might the ability to directly challenge normative regimes (like cisgenderism) itself be an outcome of privilege? For example, researchers have suggested that the experiences of transgender people who have transitioned may plant the seed for a feminist consciousness. Dozier (2005) notes how some transmen understood the struggles faced by women, and so altered their behavior to practice feminist ideals. Connell (2010) describes a transwoman who began to understand the struggles of women in the workplace after her transition and utilized her position as a workplace supervisor to raise awareness of gender inequality. In both cases, the individuals seemed to have some level of detachment from the struggles they empathized with and were in positions of (masculine and occupational) privilege to advocate for social change. In contrast, transfeminine sex workers who depend on hypersexualized gendered personas for their livelihoods are arguably less likely to be in a privileged position to critique the established gender order.

This research provides insights on the intersectional struggles of transfeminine sex workers in an East Asian society, which is helpful to counterbalance the abundance of literature in Western liberal contexts (Jones, 2015). Research has examined how embodiment conditions identity tensions faced by transgender individuals (Westbrook and Schilt, 2014). In this vein, we have foregrounded how transfeminine sex workers negotiate these complex tensions instantiated within contextual systems of oppression, such as the legal discrimination of “pre-op” sex workers in Singapore. In this context, another possible axis of marginalization observed is age. In other contexts, other axes such as class have been found to be salient along with gender (Pei et al., 2021). We thus reiterate the call to not consider transfeminine individuals monolithically but to attend to localized manifestations of intersectional oppression. Finally, we restate Jones’ (2020b) call for further research on transmasculine and gender non-binary sex workers’ digital practices, which remain under-researched. Capturing the underlying tension between personal agency and collective empowerment, our theoretical contribution of the concept of subverted agency should be generalizable to similar marginalized contexts.

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Notes

1. We use the term “post-op” (contra “pre-op”) to indicate transfeminine sex workers who have undergone complete surgical transition (removal of male genitalia), as this is the in-vivo terminology used by many transfeminine interviewees. Post-op individuals can or have changed their legal sex to “female.” In using these terms, we do not intend to reify transmedicalist discourses that valorize post-op identities.
2. We note that these men may not identify as bisexual; the quote denotes this respondent’s own perception and categorization of her clients as bisexual.

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