

Article

# “Carefully Curated/For Heart and Soul”: Sensing Place Identity in Sex Workplaces

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**Abstract:** In the face of ongoing interpersonal and structural violence towards sex workers in Canada, this research inquiry explores nine women and gender-diverse sex workers’ experiences of place identity within their workplaces. Employing multisensory and arts-based ethnographic fieldwork, the co-researchers storied their embodied place-based experiences of identity. The research findings illuminate place-identity processes within sex workplaces, suggesting that the context, materiality, and multisensory atmospheres of the co-researchers’ work environments were entwined with internal and external self-concepts. The co-researchers created personalized multisensory atmospheres in their workplaces through the use of colour, visual art, and music. Having workplaces that positively supported place identity fostered workplace comfort, control, and empowerment. Ultimately, this research suggests that place-identity processes in sex workplaces have the possibility to resist and shift sex work stigma.

**Keywords:** sex work; place identity; multisensory studies; identity; ethnography

## 1. Introduction

The material environments of sex workplaces, particularly sex workers’ needs and desires surrounding their places of work, remain elusive within scholarship [1]. Research conjoining sex work and place—defined as a “meaningful location” (p. 7) [2]—is sparse [1,3]. However, widespread scholarship demonstrates that outdoor sex work has much higher risks, including violence, compared to sex work occurring in studios, brothels, and the sex workers’ own homes [4–9]. Women who work in indoor locations are shown to experience enhanced quality of life, self-esteem, and workplace happiness [5,10]. The academic literature identifies this deficit as a concern: Shannon et al. [11] express a pressing need for “environmental–structural prevention and safer environment interventions” (p. 6) for sex work, and Benoit et al. [12] put forward a call to action for researchers to integrate existing knowledge around sex work stigma and working conditions.

Most importantly, Canadian sex workers have called for a focus on workplace environments. Women in Winnipeg, Manitoba, repeatedly identified their wish for a “a safe place to go do dates” (p. 13) [13]. A sex worker in Seshia’s [13] 2010 study offered her opinion that “any city, town, whatever, needs a safe prostitution place” (p. 13). A sex worker in Vancouver, Canada, told researchers: “Having a self-respect looking place, a respectful environment, gives you a chance at having a better chance at him treating you better or maybe wear a condom ‘cause he thinks you respect yourself” (p. 1157) [7].

While sex workers advocate for environments that foster dignity, equity, and safety, they continue to experience spatial apartheid and place-based marginality across Canada [14]. The multi-layered juridical web governing sex work in Canada exists from the federal level, dictating the essential question of criminality, down to municipal bylaws that determine the spatial occupancies of sex work. Canadian federal legislation—the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (Bill C-36)—criminalizes the purchase of sexual services (along with numerous other activities related to sex work) but positions the selling of some sexual services as legal [15]. This legislation is inherently spatial, dictating where



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sex work and communication for the purposes of sex work may occur [15]. At a provincial level, Alberta's Safer Community and Neighbourhood Act (SCAN) [16] supports community members reporting suspicions of property occupations that include "prostitution or activities related to prostitution" (p. 6) [16]. Finally, at a municipal level, the City of Calgary's Prostitution Response Framework [17] supports the criminalization of sex work and "promoting public safety and vibrant communities by addressing prostitution-related issues" (p. 8) [17]. Further, the City of Calgary's [18] land-use bylaws prohibit dating or escort services from being home-based business occupancies. This Canadian legislative regime stigmatizes and endangers sex workers' lives by exiling them from private and community spaces, as well as revoking their "social and political citizenship" (p. 38) [19].

In the face of this research gap and the ongoing interpersonal and structural violence towards sex workers in Canada, this research inquiry explores sex workers' experiences of place identity within their workplaces located in Calgary, Alberta. The findings, grounded in the voices, needs, and embodied experiences of sex workers, illustrate how sex workplaces are entwined with experiences of identity. This research unfolds novel understandings of sex workplaces as a "constitutive ingredient in individual and collective well-being" (p. 139) [20] rooted in sex workers' conceptions of self and environment.

### *1.1. Theoretical Framework*

#### *1.1.1. Critical Place Theory*

Critical place theory has emerged in recent years as a theoretical orientation for understanding that the multidimensional aspects of the physical world and social world (including power) intertwine in fluid and complex ways so that experiences of places are heterogeneous and dependent upon the positionality of the person in a place [21]. Critical place theory consists of the following four elements: (1) a specific location in the world, (2) a material setting and concrete form, (3) a diverse and fluid meaning experienced by individuals with unique subjectivities, and (4) a context of power [20,22]. Together, these four dimensions of place create "an inextricably intertwined knot of spatiality and sociality" (p. 6) [23]. Houses, apartments, office towers, institutions, streetscapes, sidewalks, parks, and monuments are situated in geographic locations with unique cultures and histories. Individuals inhabit these environments and create experiential and embodied meaning which operates both independently and reciprocally from the physical dimensions of place [24,25]. These dimensions converge to create place.

#### *1.1.2. Place Identity*

Place identity is an important subconcept of critical place theory that seeks to explicate how physical contexts interplay with identity formation. In other words, how do our environments interact with our sense of self, and how do we shape our environments to reflect our identities? Twigger-Ross and Uzzel [26] advise that "all aspects of identity will, to greater or lesser extent, have place-related implications" (p. 206). Elements of place knit together as individuals interact with their everyday socio-spatial environments, shaping their self-concepts [27,28]. Place identity explicates how everyday environments impact identity through self-esteem (the value, confidence, identity, and sense of belonging you ascribe internally towards yourself) and self-efficacy (a person's belief in themselves to accomplish the goals they set) [26]. These place-identity processes are theorized to be positively or negatively impacted by how well everyday environments support personal needs [26]. Dixon and Durrheim [27] offer four key dimensions of place identity cultivated through social-spatial interactions: (1) intense familiarity; (2) an emotional connection; (3) a symbolic relationship between the self and the environment; and (4) the physical environment enabling the achievement of "identity-relevant projects" (p. 458). Finally, Peng et al.'s [29] review on defining place identity asserts that individual experiences of place identity are "part of individuals' personalities related to places that are significant in the formation of their identities" (p. 14).

Originating in the field of environmental psychology, early forms of place identity viewed it as a combination of individual cognitive processes wherein beliefs, thoughts, purpose, and assumptions all entwine and emerge from an individual's everyday interactions with the physical world [30]. In 2000, Dixon and Durrheim [31] proposed an expanded theory of place identity to show ways in which place identity is socially constructed, linking place identity to power and practices of domination. They conceived place identity "as a collective construction, produced and modified through human dialogue, that allows people to make sense of their locatedness" (p. 40). This conceptualization aligns with Rose's [32] earlier work surrounding place identity that explores how identity can be generated through disassociating with places, as well as forging place identity through individual connections (or disconnections) to dominant cultures and belief systems. Place attachment is associated with place identity, asserting that feeling emotionally attached to a specific location and material environment serves a fundamental human need to belong; this feeling of attachment and belonging is necessary to develop and maintain a positive sense of self [33].

Dixon and Durrheim [31] term place-identity processes as "discursive;" created by language and socio-cultural contexts. Understanding place identity involves "studying the multiple cultural, historical and political contexts within which person-place relations are constituted and recognizing how, in turn, such relations may constitute those wider contexts" (p. 41). For this research inquiry, this means examining the material contexts of sex workplaces and explicating the ways in which socio-structural contexts manifest within everyday sex workplaces and are experienced by sex workers.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This paper shares one area of a larger design ethnography [34] inquiry that explores the co-creation of spatial justice with women and gender-diverse sex workers in Calgary, Alberta. Nine co-researchers with lived experience in sex work contributed to this research, engaging in multisensory and arts-based fieldwork [35–37] that explicates their embodied experiences within their workplaces. This research received Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) approval at the University of Calgary (REB20-1874).

### 2.1. Research Process

#### 2.1.1. Recruitment

To participate in this project, individuals had to be 18 years old or older, identify as women or gender-diverse (e.g., non-binary, genderqueer), and have provided sexual services in exchange for material gain in the Calgary area within the 12 months prior to September 2021. The research took place over five months from October 2021 to March 2022.

Purposeful sampling occurred through sharing the recruitment flyer with sex work support programs, women's centres, social media, online forums, community posters, and personal networks. In recognition of their time, commitment, and expertise, all co-researchers received honorariums based on the time involved to complete the chosen activities.

#### 2.1.2. Data Collection

This research was guided by Heron and Reason's [38] Participatory Paradigm and Extended Epistemology, which demands that all involved "engage together in democratic dialogue as co-researchers and as co-subjects" (p. 283). Thus, the participants were positioned as co-researchers with their needs, lived expertise, and wishes centred throughout the research process in partnership with the researcher leading the project [39]. The co-researchers had the choice of engaging in one, some, or all of the four multisensory and arts-based activities [35,36] and go-along workplace interviews [37,40,41].

The fieldwork data collected included multisensory art, video recordings of go-along interviews, co-researcher-lead observations, fieldwork interviews, audio memos, soundscapes, and music. Multisensory and arts-based methods unfold place as an atmosphere and materiality that is encountered and understood through an embodied multisensory

process [36,42]. These activities involved independent research notes and art that explored workplace experiences, and the formats included sound recordings, video recordings, photography, mental maps, collages, and other modes of multisensory art. The co-researchers chose their preferred sensory modalities for each fieldwork activity. Each set of activities had online tutorials and examples to guide the fieldwork, and the activities were organized around the following workplace aspects: Neighbourhood Context, Workplace Materiality, Sensing the Workplace, and Workplace Futures. These four areas of fieldwork were initially crafted by the primary researcher; the co-researchers then identified any changes and expanded on the activities to suit their own sensibilities. As this manuscript explores a smaller piece of a larger research inquiry, some fieldwork aspects are not included. All research activities were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2.1.3. Analysis

Throughout all phases of the inquiry, data analysis was ongoing, moving through “different registers of engagement with a variety of research materials” [37]. The analytical process involved both experiential and thematic analyses. An experiential analysis involves repeated immersions in the multisensory material (e.g., go-along interviews, multisensory field notes, drawings, and transcriptions), approaching them as “sensory texts” (p. 122) [37]. As material objects, these items are embedded and connected to both the research process and the multisensory environments they emerged from, and they continue to be “evocative of the research encounter through which they were produced, and of the embodied knowing this involved” (p. 122) [37]. These materials offer “the ethnographer a corporeal route to the sensorial and emotional affects of that research encounter” (p. 124) [37]. Additionally, all go-along interviews, audio memos, and fieldwork interviews were transcribed verbatim and then imported into NVivo software to facilitate analysis.

The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s [43] six phases of thematic analysis: data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing findings. The primary researcher completed the first three steps of the thematic analysis independently, analyzing the fieldwork using a combination of experiential multisensory immersion [37], reflexive art and collage making [44], and coding textual data in NVivo. The co-researchers then individually reviewed the analytical material and initial themes, which were placed and shared on a Miro board, a collaborative digital whiteboard for multi-modal forms of data. Reviewing the analytical materials on a Miro board allowed the co-researchers to add ideas, move materials, and make connections across the data as part of the reviewing, defining, and theme-naming process. The primary researcher then wrote the findings, which the co-researchers reviewed and provided comments for, all of which were incorporated into the findings.

### 2.1.4. The Co-Researchers

The lengths of time spent by the nine co-researchers in the sex trade spanned from four to twenty-eight years. While their work experiences were primarily situated within Calgary, the co-researchers also brought experience from two other Canadian provinces (British Columbia and Ontario), as well as Kenya. The co-researchers were heterogenous in their identities and life experiences, ranging in age from 24 to 40 years. Racially, six co-researchers identified as white and three as black. Six co-researchers identified as members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, and three identified as heterosexual. Six co-researchers identified as cis-gender women, and three identified as non-binary/genderqueer. Most co-researchers also identified as living with some form of disability or neurodivergence.

All co-researchers worked indoors from in-call workspaces (where clients travel to receive services), which is an under-represented workplace typology within sex work scholarship [45,46]. The majority worked from their personal residences, which were one- or two-bedroom rental apartments. One co-researcher worked from a one-bedroom apartment rented specifically to operate as a workplace, which she shared with two others. The remaining three co-researchers worked in hotels, where they rented rooms to operate

as in-call spaces. One of these workers also worked indoors at out-call spaces (e.g., clients' homes or hotel rooms clients had rented) and occasionally out of their vehicle.

The co-researchers in this study are situated towards the side of the sex work spectrum [47] with more privilege, agency, and power, yet they arrived in this position only after experiencing exploitation by agencies, parlours, and in one self-identified case, sex traffickers. All co-researchers maintained that they worked in sex work as it met their unique needs and was the best income-generating option for them within inequitable socio-structural systems. As Lucy explained:

*It feels like a less degrading way to get money. I'm not wheeling and begging for a job and I'm not like, beholden to this manager that treats me like shit or these people that don't value my time or don't pay me enough.*

The subsequent findings emphasize narrative quotations and art from the co-researchers. The names used in the findings are pseudonyms chosen by each co-researcher and are often the name they use in their work. One co-researcher described being publicly open in all areas of their life about their work as advocacy from their relative position of privilege within the sex industry. The other eight workers reported controlling the disclosure of their work status only to trusted individuals.

### 3. Results

The findings elucidate ways in which sex workplaces are identity projects. The co-researchers shared how they navigated multiple aspects of interlocking vulnerabilities through their workplace environments, emphasizing multisensory atmospheres as critical means of cultivating place identity and resisting structural vulnerabilities (e.g., sizeism, sexism, and homophobia) related to their identities. The multisensory strategies included colour, visual art, and music. Ultimately, cultivating positive place identities in their workplaces generated comfort, control, and empowerment within societal contexts that are rife with sex work stigma.

#### 3.1. Sex Workplaces Are Identity Projects

Throughout this research study, all co-researchers consistently stated that their workplaces were deliberate manifestations of self, carefully crafted to the highest level possible under critical social and economic constraints. Whenever possible, the workplaces were curated to embody their unique identities in relation to the world and their work. While specific expressions of identity shifted from co-researcher to co-researcher and workplace to workplace, the connection between identity and the workplace as an expression and connection with the self is a consistent theme throughout the inquiry. Faye described that *"the way you set up your space talks a lot about . . . who you are as that person."* Leanne also identified the connection between her workplace and her identity, commenting that *"it shows my unique character. . . I can't say I'm perfect, but I've some good character."* These connections operated as avenues for communicating their identities and values in the world.

##### 3.1.1. Multisensory Atmospheres

Multisensory atmospheres represent one of the primary ways the co-researchers cultivated symbolic and affective relationships between their self and their workplaces. Each co-researcher carefully navigated their diverse identities and engaged in counter-stigma activities through multisensory atmospheres. While creating desired multisensory environments was most possible for co-researchers with their own home-based in-call spaces, co-researchers who worked in other types of workplaces still utilized multisensory control to address their identity needs. The co-researchers generated multisensory atmospheres through colour, visual art, and sonic workspaces.

##### Colour

Six co-researchers created workplace self-portraits as part of the fieldwork activities, depicting themselves within their work environments. The connection to sense of self and

workplace was particularly prominent for the four co-researchers who worked from home: Bieber, Minerva, Lula, and Eden. For these co-researchers, the colours they used for their workplaces were the same colours they used to depict themselves.

In her workplace self-portrait, Bieber drew herself on her work bed in multiple positions, showcasing her body for clients (Figure 1). She shared that she visualized herself and her bed as green because “Green is life. Vegetation is green. Green brings life.” Bieber has children, and she connected her workplace with materially providing for them: “Sex work is also another hustle that sex workers use to bring something to their table.” In attributing green to both her self and her workplace, she centred her identity and work within her power to cultivate and sustain life.



**Figure 1.** Bieber’s workplace self-portrait shows both her body and the bed as green.

Minerva outlined their body in purple in their self-portrait (Figure 2), explaining that “my whole workspace is purple. . . it’s a cozy luxury colour to me.” Purple is replete throughout their workplace, appearing in the hand-dyed linens on their bed, curtains, and lighting. Their favourite piece of living room furniture is a purple velvet chaise. In their workplace self-portrait, Minerva’s silhouette lies in bed, gazing through the window towards their backyard and the moon, with “This space is mine” handwritten across the drawing.

The colour blue is such a part of Lula that it constitutes part of her work name, Lula Blue. Lula’s blue hair identifies her in the world and is centred in her workplace self-portrait, with offset waves of purple and pink emanating outwards from her hair (Figure 3). Her workroom has a distinctly blue atmosphere created by a blue neon sign that shines the word “Paradise” above her bed, bathing Lula’s work bedroom in blue light. An oversized, flouncy blue negligee hangs on the wall of the room, originally used in a photoshoot for online marketing. The lighting in the client bathroom is predominantly blue; clients bathe themselves in water and blue light before entering the inner sanctuary of her workplace, and the atmosphere is “very personal. So, they get to know me as they come into my space”.

For their self-portrait, Eden drew the interior landscape of their body in pink with “more of a masculine outline in blue”, creating two silhouettes that relate to their identity as non-binary, situated in the centre of their work environment (Figure 4).

Eden explained their self-portrait choices as follows: “It’s not just when I’m working that I try to embody what I put down on the paper. This is me. This is my safe space. This is how I am in my workplace and hopefully out in the world”. For Eden, their gender identity and the “safe space” of their workplace are intertwined. Their workplace holds “their safest selves”.



Figure 2. Minerva's workplace self-portrait.



Figure 3. Lula's workplace self-portrait.



**Figure 4.** Eden's workplace self-portrait.

#### Visual Art

Most of the co-researchers' workspaces harnessed art to sensorily reflect their identities, passions, and values, as well as to counter individual experiences of oppression. Minerva displayed a series of fat porn polaroids that covered the wall at the foot of their bed, along with other pieces of fat art throughout their apartment. Anyone welcomed into Minerva's home is repeatedly reminded of their fat identity. Minerva explained the following:

*I love my body and I think bodies like mine are beautiful. And that's why they're on my walls, and that's why they're on my bookshelves, because they deserve a place. And they deserve to take up space in my life.*

Minerva's use of fat-focused visual art reinforces their identity as a fat person and creates a bastion against anti-fat bias in their home and workplace. Covering their walls with fat-bodied art nurtures a multisensory atmosphere of fatness: wherever the eye rests, celebrations of fat bodies appear. Fat bodies are engaging in pleasure are centred and are intended to evoke pleasure in the viewer. The art contrasts and resists contemporary societal demands that fat be eradicated and shrunk into invisibility. In Minerva's workplace, fat is displayed as sensual, desirable, and worthy of occupying space.

Art covers every wall in Nina's two-bedroom apartment that she shares with Edgar, her sugar daddy. (Figure 5). While Nina shares the apartment with Edgar, she alone holds the power of art curation within their home. For Nina, the art she collects and displays affirms that she has secure tenure and a home, countering her past experiences of homelessness.



*A sex worker in the community, actually, made this for me. And it's based off of one of my selfies that I posted on Twitter. So, she actually mailed this to me. We did a little art exchange, and she mailed me this postcard of me.*

Lula's workplace also has objects made by other sex workers, like a "little Sailor Mercury doll that my duo partner gave me a while back, because I dressed up as Sailor Mercury for an orgy party that we went to" and a hand-embroidered pillow proclaiming, "slut". These visual pieces are sensorial reminders that Lula is a supported member of a community.

Working from a shared in-call space, Faye was unable to hang her preferred art but admitted to having a cache of "nerd art" stored in her work closet at the ready for when she is able to afford her own in-call space again. Faye quickly asserted that in her own space, the walls would be covered in "femme fatale" and "super nerdy" art (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** An example Faye's femme fatale and nerdy art. *Note.* This piece of art, Helena Harper Resident Evil 6, was created by @Sabtastic and has a creative commons license for non-commercial use: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/legalcode> (accessed 13 December 2022).

Faye's choices in art reinforce her identity alliance with "nerddom", which she positioned as intertwined with her identity as neurodivergent.

#### Sonic Workscapes

Music was another primary means of sensorily navigating identity within the co-researchers' workplaces. Music was described as composing multisensory environments that soothed, hyped, connected, and sexualized. Music reinforced who each co-researcher was in the world, composing and reinforcing their identities within their workplaces.

Music played a foundational role in Eden's workplace. They offered the metaphor that creating connection in their work is like creating music:

*I always have tunes on, I have music on. It's a big part of my atmosphere even when I'm not working or just in my workspace. And then I also kind of think, I get to make my own music, it's just music of connection.*

To accompany their workplace floorplan (Figure 7), Eden recorded themselves playing their piano, which they inherited from their grandmother. The piano sits in the corner of

their open kitchen–dining–living room area so that the music they play and the connection to family and lineage the piano evokes permeates the open areas of their home-based workplace. Eden shared that playing the piano was critical for making their workplace suitable for their “safest selves/carefully curated/for heart and soul.”

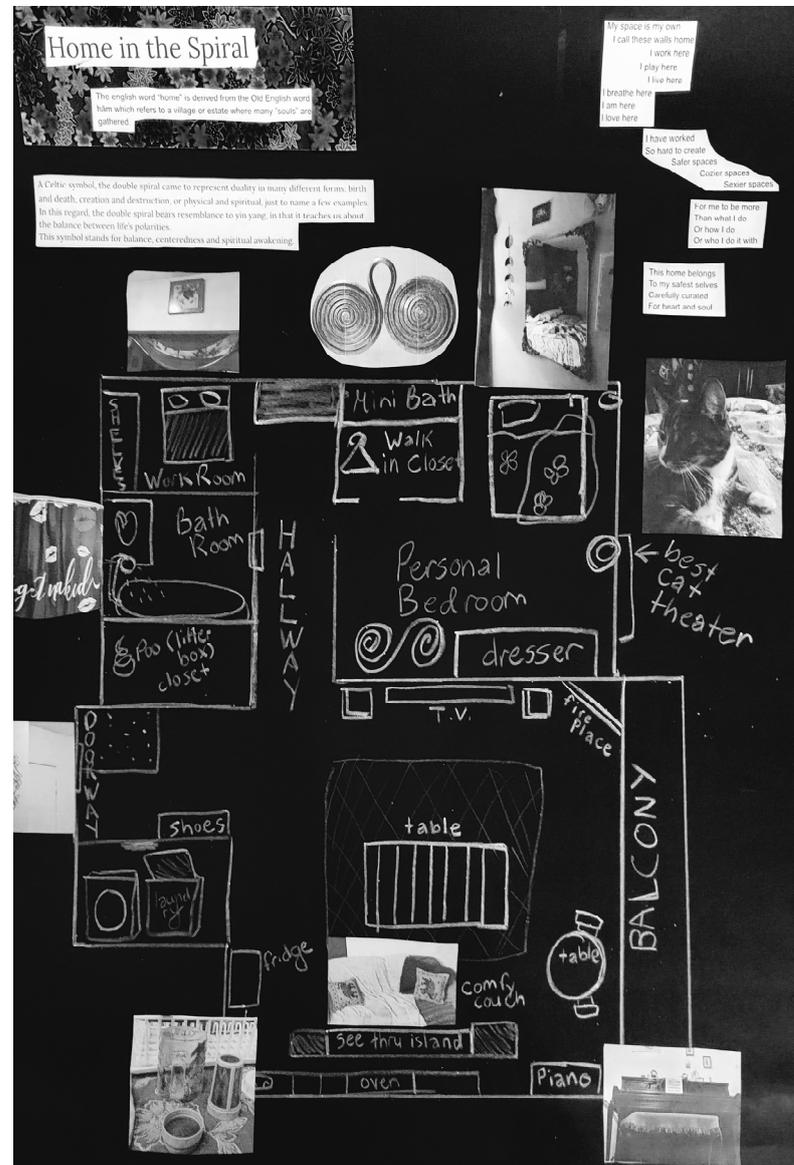


Figure 7. A floor plan of Eden’s workplace.

Faye stated that she carefully constructed her identity through the music she plays at work, with a “jazz or lo-fi” playlist usually on rotation. Jazz sets the atmosphere for the embodiment and movement she channels to perform her job. Faye explicates the impact of jazz music as follows:

*Jazz music for me has always been . . . really sexy. I find it sexy. It’s arousing, in a way, and so it makes me want to move, and so it does impact my [work]... I’ve had sessions where I’ve had clients request specific music, and they’re fine, too, but the flow is different. The energy is different that comes from it.*

For Faye, jazz creates an atmosphere of desire through which Faye composes her workplace and identity, driving her engagement with the work.

Creating an appropriate sonic atmosphere for their work and life space was so important for Minerva that they wired their entire apartment for the best sonic experience. They

have music playing 24 h a day, with the music supporting Minerva across her day-to-day life, from vacuuming to preparing for work. When she described her process for preparing for a client, she chooses what lingerie to wear, and then:

*I'll look at myself in the mirror to make sure I'm looking good, feeling great. And I'll usually dance a little bit to the music while I'm getting ready. . . And I'll take usually some cute bum selfies while I'm getting ready, with the plant in the mirror.*

Minerva's musical atmosphere is devised to generate positive emotions towards their body throughout the day and night, both while working and not. This is particularly crucial for existing in power systems that continually attempt to convince Minerva that they are "less than" because of their body's fatness, disability, and queerness. Music also reminds Minerva that their life stage and class situation hold beauty, as the lyrics to Minerva's workplace theme song, "One Bedroom Apartment" [48], croon:

*It's gonna' take a minute to get your key unstuck  
And when you walk in it It's not gonna' look like much  
The appliances are from the 80 s  
They've been talkin' renovations lately If I were you  
I wouldn't hold my breath I kinda' think it's perfect as is  
Oh, these walls saw everything  
From fallin' in love to chasin' a dream  
Yeah, a lot of growin' up happened  
It ain't a mansion in a millionaire's market  
But you'll be surprised at the memories you can fit  
In this one-bedroom apartment*

Listening to this song connects Minerva's home and workplace to common struggles of young adulthood, continually seeking an income and community while navigating life transitions. For Minerva, music infuses their workplace and home with connection and shared belonging, a sonic bastion against their proximate physical neighbourhood, where she lives as an outsider, squeezed among conservatives, mansions, and "ableist fucks".

Lucy works in out-call spaces and views her car as her travelling workplace (Figure 8). While driving to meet clients, Lucy blasts a specific song on repeat: "Let Me Solve That 4 U" by Borscht [49]. The lyrics trouble heteronormativity:

*I have waited my whole life  
Dreaming of being your wife  
Making you breakfast for lunch while you're drinking a beer  
With a dog and a game, and you calling me dear  
Your dreams come alive, while mine painfully die*

In the song, heteropatriarchal standards are countered with visions of untethered female sexuality and autonomy:

*I am single as fuck  
And I like that a lot  
And I like to fuck  
And I love To get off. . .  
I am not your queen  
I am not your girl  
I am only mine*

Lucy sings along to this song during every commute, rejecting heteronormative norms that run counter to their queer, transgender, and polyamorous identities. Singing and driving, they reinforce and embody these identities while preparing to submerge them while with clients. Clients assume their gender and sexual identities are normative; men

hire them to be the “girl next door”. Explaining their identities is too complicated as clients “don’t get it anyways”. Instead, they sing their identity into their car’s atmosphere as they drive to and from meetings, a sonic bookend reaffirming their sense of self to counter the heteronormative performance their work demands.



**Figure 8.** Lucy’s car navigating workplace neighbourhoods [48,49].

Leanne offered “My House” by Flo Rida [50] as the theme music for her workplace. She shares: “The title, ‘My House,’ . . . I love it”. The lyrics bounce along to a joyful party beat:

*Hear a knock on the door and the night begins  
‘Cause we done this before so you come on in  
Make yourself at my home, tell me where you been  
Pour yourself something cold, baby, cheers to this*

Leanne works out of a hotel. For her, the song communicates that she has ownership and agency over her workplace, despite it being a shifting rental room. The song reminds her that in the face of instability, she is in control; she performs as a generous and convivial host who is welcoming clients into her space, where they can be comfortable: “It’s my house, just relax” [50].

### 3.2. Environments of Empowerment and Power

The co-researchers all shared that from place identity comes empowerment, agency, and self-efficacy over their work. From an empowerment perspective, when environments support personal needs, individuals increase their self-assurance in exercising power in various levels of relationships [26,51].

The co-researchers described how workplaces that supported their multidimensional needs and were deeply familiar increased their confidence and ability to exert control over their work and client relationships. Individual in-call workplaces were particularly impactful for empowerment. Eden explained that having control over their workplace equated to feeling in control of their work and client relationships, sharing the following:

*They sit right on the couch, and they're telling me about their day. . . It's a different experience than when I first started sex work, where I was working in their space, and so I felt sort of like I didn't have any control of really how the direction went. It was harder for me to put boundaries in place, but having this be my space, I just really get to control the energy flow and what's exchanged and what's shared, and so it makes me feel more confident.*

Welcoming clients into their curated workplace affords Eden a sense of power in their work. Sharing the safe space and home they created for themselves with clients, along with empathy and compassion, was also empowering. They subverted traditional expectations of power dynamics between clients and sex workers, wherein clients are understood as a source of violence, by positioning themselves and their space as a source of safety for clients. Their current experience of power and control sharply contrasts with their prior experiences in out-call spaces, as they elaborated:

*The mental health aspect of just walking into a space where I have nothing. I'm going in completely blind. That was more emotional labor than having the stability and comfort that working out of my own space brings, because there's also that aspect of, when I was doing a lot of out calls, I felt like I had to go. Then, if that person no-showed me, I had this like, "Well, I'm already out. I need to find someone". There's that urgency, where it kind of took the power out of my hands a little bit.*

Having their own in-call space transformed Eden's experience with their work, moving them from seeking and settling into control and comfort. Lula experienced a similar sense of power and control through familiarity:

*I find being able to work from my living space. A space, that I'm familiar with, a space that I feel comfortable in, and a space that I feel more in control of any situation. . . I have a sense of this ease and empowerment to provide the services.*

For Lula, all the decisions and care she puts into her workplace are interwoven with the empowerment she holds in her work, noting that together these actions

*All contribute to the sort of comfortable environment, that feels safe, and the easiest for me and the healthiest for me, to be able to provide the services . . . I feel the most strength and power, knowing that I am in complete control in this space.*

For Minerva, the power they gained in having their own in-call space that reflects their needs and identity is foundational to being able to do the work:

*I don't think a lot of us could work if we didn't [have a personal in-call space]. And I mean, I started out as a survival sex worker, so I did work in a space that [felt unsafe], but I did genuinely fall in love with the work. So, when I decided to keep doing it, not out of survival, I was like, no, I need to make this intentional and create these spaces for me.*

Minerva now ascribes her in-call home-workplace with ". . . the comfort of being on [my] own, and serene, that is empowering at the same time." For Minerva and the other co-researchers, crafting positive place identities within their workplaces is an agential act that generates empowerment each time they invite a client into their space. Their positive experiences of place identity facilitated comfort, control, and power in their work.

### 3.3. Resisting Sex Work Stigma

The co-researchers identified that sex work stigma emphasized the need for positive place-identity and empowerment processes. For many, their past and present neigh-

bourhood landscapes were sources of stigma, violence, and social exclusion due to their occupation. As Bieber explained:

*I dislike going to places . . . around the sports centre. The people around there, do not appreciate us as sex workers. They still have that mentality, that sex work is evil or stuff like that . . . I . . . cannot walk around that place . . . there's drunk stuff like that and then kills can arise.*

Similarly, Sean spoke about avoiding an area in her neighbourhood because it reminded her of the violence that is often perpetuated against sex workers: “At the cemetery there's a certain case where a woman was murdered due to prostitution, and [her body] was thrown out at the cemetery.” Leanne shared the connection between workplace control and contextual manifestations of stigma and violence:

*There are places . . . [where] I prefer [to work] because people are [OK] there. Other places that I left out are not that favorable for me to work. So, I feel if you're not comfortable with that place, choose another comfortable place just for your safety. Because maybe people can be violent, beat you up. Discriminate [against] you... avoid places that you're not accepted just for your own safety.*

For Minerva, resisting contextual sex work stigma meant saturating their workplace and home in purple, velvet, and soft lighting. Minerva explained that an atmosphere of luxury resists sex work stigma:

*A word that I've used a lot is luxury. I'm very much a princess energy. And so, making it a luxurious job kind of really helps against that pushback. I am a princess, and I still do this work. And I do this work being a princess.*

Through their workplaces and sensory environments, the co-researchers resist widespread narratives that position sex workers as victims, vermin, tainted, risky, and homogenous [52–54]. To counter these stigmatizing beliefs, the co-researchers composed their workplaces to reflect their multifaceted identities, communicating that they are individuals who hold power and are valuable members of their communities.

#### 4. Discussion

This research illustrates how sex workplaces are place-identity projects. The findings illuminate place identity processes within sex workplaces, suggesting that the contexts, materiality, and multisensory atmospheres of the co-researchers' workplaces were entwined with internal and external self-concepts. The co-researchers created personalized multisensory atmospheres in their workplaces through colour, visual art, and music. Having workplaces that positively supported place identity fostered workplace comfort, control, and empowerment. The co-researchers storied deep intimacy and familiarity with their workplaces, emphasizing “a sense of bodily, sensuous, social and autobiographic ‘inside-ness’” (p. 457) [27].

Familiarity endeared an emotional relationship and sense of ownership with in-call environments; for example, on her workplace self-portrait, Minerva writes “This space is mine.” The co-researchers nurtured place-identity processes of familiarity and emotional connection through material and multisensory atmospheres, which included objects of connection such as a family piano, gifts from fellow sex workers, visual art, books, plants, and childhood blankets. Further, the co-researchers who curated their own in-call workplaces continually communicated the representational and embodied relationships between their identities and their workplaces. Their workplace environments manifested how they needed their identities to be seen by themselves and clients, including “classy”, “cozy”, “luxurious”, “safe”, or “life-giving.” Leanne, Sean, and Lucy, who laboured out of hotel spaces, did not express the same place-identity processes connecting their senses of self to their work environments. However, Lucy, who travelled to out-call spaces via their car, situated their identity-making process within their vehicle.

#### 4.1. Place and Sex Work

This research illuminates the ways in which critical place theory and place identity concepts can broaden the extensive existing body of scholarship concerning sex work. Through the lens of place, this research offers expanded insights into long-understood phenomena within sex work, such as differences in violence between indoor and outdoor sex work and the ways in which sex workers can be supported in setting and maintaining boundaries with their clients. Prior scholarship identified that indoor sex work comes with increased safety. Prior and Crofts' [45] research identified that home-based sex workers in Australia experienced higher levels of control and safety than their counterparts working in commercial establishments. Benoit and Shumka's [55] research within Canada supports the widespread understanding within sex work scholarship that outdoor sex work is "overwhelmingly more violent than indoor work" (p. 12). These research findings shine light on some of the place-based reasons indoor sex work, particularly home-based sex work, has much lower levels of interpersonal violence from clients.

Further, these place-based processes support sex workers in resisting some of the structural violence they experience from sex work stigma and other intersections of vulnerabilities that impact their wellness, self-concepts, and social exclusion. These place-based aspects that influence experiences of violence within sex work expand our understandings of identified phenomena.

#### 4.2. Place Identity, Structural Vulnerabilities, and Sex Work Stigma

The findings support the discursive nature of place identity [27], which is forged through language, socio-cultural contexts, and everyday material environments. This understanding is particularly critical in conjunction with sex work stigma as the discursive nature of place identity means that sex workplaces are potential avenues for challenging the prevailing sex work stigma that asserts sex workers are vermin, community outsiders, and disposable [54]. Sex work stigma is increasingly recognized as the most pernicious issue facing sex workers and is the main contributor to the pervasive violence sex workers experience [12,13,53,56,57].

The co-researchers in this study all faced multiple intersecting, subordinate subjectivities within Collins' [58] matrix of domination that interacted with sex work stigma. These systems of power include heteropatriarchy, neo-liberal capitalism, ableism, racism, and sizeism. Each co-researcher harnessed their environments to the best of their ability to address, shift, and resist manifestations of power in relation to their unique subjectivities and experiences. For example, Minerva lives in and works from an apartment that lacks physical accessibility, washroom facilities that are suitable for fat bodies, is physically deleterious, and is surrounded by what they describe as politically conservative neighbours. Their home-based workplace options are constrained by class and access to transportation for both themselves and their clients. However, Minerva transformed their home-based workplace to support their needs through multisensory comfort that includes custom lighting, textures, and music, celebrates fat bodies through art, and resists ableism by performing both their "muggle" call-centre job and sex work from their bed draped in soft purple linen.

Through place, sex workplaces hold the potent possibility of resisting and shifting internal and external sex work stigma. This research suggests that sex workplaces that favour sensory personalization and foster positive place-identity processes might support sex workers in resisting stigma, as well as changing how clients and broader society view sex work. Place and place identity are always in process with "relations which are still to be made, or unmade, or re-made" (p. 17) [59]. Because place is an ongoing site of creation, it is a site of possibility for advancing future political and social changes [59]. Thus, identity-informed interventions in sex workplaces are a previously unexplored opportunity for countering and displacing sex work stigma.

However, the workplaces illuminated in this inquiry, and the situated place identity processes, are all extra-legal. The co-researchers must advertise to bring clients to these

obfuscated residential locations, which are located within neighborhood fabrics that contain schools, playgrounds, daycares, and religious institutions, activities and spatial occupations all criminalized within Canada. Further, these workplaces are in residential land-use zones where escort services are prohibited. One phone call from a neighbour to Alberta's Safer Community and Neighbourhood reporting line would endanger the work, tenure, and safety of each co-researcher. Criminalizing sex work in these ways forces sex workers in Calgary, and across Canada, to operate in isolation, perpetuating sex work stigma and associated violence [1,60]. Belonging, control, and positive place-identity processes within sex workplaces ultimately require decriminalization at a federal level.

#### 4.3. Limitations

##### 4.3.1. Recruitment, Identity, and Workplace Typology

The recruitment strategies resulted in a specific, privileged type of sex workplace and identity experience. Cisgender- and transgender-identifying men were excluded from the study. All the co-researchers worked indoors and, excepting Lucy, worked from in-call spaces they controlled. No outdoor workers participated, although recruitment flyers at targeted agencies would have reached outdoor workers. Outdoor work is the most precarious and stigmatized of all sex work [53]. Indigenous women, girls, and queer individuals constitute the preponderance of outdoor workers in Canada and are also most at risk of trafficking and exploitation [61]. A different recruitment approach, methodology, and targeted community research partnerships are likely required to address these areas of research and justice.

##### 4.3.2. Study Context

As place-based research fundamentally involves specificity of geographic location [22], this research focuses solely on sex workplaces within Calgary, Canada. Social, cultural, and historical contexts across Canada vary, as do built forms, urban planning, and landscapes. Differences abound between rural and urban environments. The findings in this research are not generalizable to sex workplaces across Canada or in other places in the world but instead offer a pathway for achieving a deep understanding of the interaction between the material environment of sex workplaces and human meaning-making. Further research is required within other geographic contexts to expand and illuminate place-relationships within sex workplaces.

##### 4.3.3. COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all research activities took place online. The original research design centred collaborative in-person activities and discussions, and the on-line discussion opportunities planned in lieu were not taken up by the co-researchers. While the co-researchers had an opportunity to experience and reflect on the other co-researchers' fieldwork during the analysis portion of the research, sharing fieldwork ideas and processes while the data collection was ongoing may have generated different perspectives and modalities, as well as fostering community. Finally, some sensory aspects (e.g., smell and taste) can only be sensorily imagined remotely.

## 5. Conclusions

This research illuminates how sex workplaces are entwined with sex workers' relationships with self and society. Across multifaceted identities, each co-researcher harnessed the material and sensory environment of their workplace to curate their place-based relationships with self and to mediate identity. Colour, visual art, and music were common multisensory strategies related to positive identity formation, which fostered empowerment and resisted sex work stigma. While this study focused on the specific locality of Calgary, Canada, it illuminates the importance of place identity within sex workplaces, ultimately highlighting the need for place-based action, policy, and legislation rooted in the lived experiences and voices of sex workers.

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