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#### EDITORIAL

THE ROLE OF TRAINING AND SKILLS FOR THE CLINICAL TEAM (FERTILITY MIDWIVES/NURSES) IN MEDICALLY ASSISTED REPRODUCTION UNITS (M.A.R.U.)

#### RESEARCH ARTICLES

COVID-19 FEAR AND COVID-19 ANXIETY AS PREDICTORS OF EXERCISE BENEFIT-BARRIER PERCEPTION IN TYPE 2 DIABETES PATIENTS PROCESS

THE EFFECTS OF THE DARK TETRAD OF PERSONALITY BY GENDER ON ANIMAL ABUSE: A MODERATION ANALYSIS

THE EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN SURVIVORS OF CRITICAL ILLNESS AFTER DISCHARGE FROM INTENSIVE CARE UNIT: A PROSPECTIVE COHORT STUDY

DANCERS IN THE DARK: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IDENTITY PERCEPTION OF FEMALE SEX WORKERS

SUITABILITY, USABILITY AND SAFETY OF FULLY IMMERSIVE VIRTUAL REALITY APPLICATIONS FOR MOTOR AND COGNITIVE REHABILITATION IN STROKE PATIENTS: PRELIMINARY DATA

#### LETTER TO THE EDITOR

THE CASE OF "NATURE-DEFICIT DISORDER" (NDD) AND ITS COMPLICATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A UNIVERSALLY RELIABLE AND VALID SELF-REPORTED TOOL

#### SPECIAL ARTICLE

A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANXIETY DISORDERS EXPLAINED BY BIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK FACTORS

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## DANCERS IN THE DARK: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IDENTITY PERCEPTION OF FEMALE SEX WORKERS

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Sex workers, particularly those involved in prostitution, face elevated risks of violence and psychological distress. While existing research has focused on harm reduction strategies, limited attention has been given to the psychological protection of sex workers.

**Aim:** This study explores the concept of a "manufactured identity," a persona constructed exclusively for the workplace, which serves as a defence mechanism for sex workers. The manufactured identity enables them to distance themselves from the intimate nature of their work and shield their true selves from work-related distress. Additionally, it may facilitate better emotional management, a sense of control, and empowerment. Employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach, this research aims to gain insights into the objectives and effects of maintaining a manufactured identity among female Greek sex workers and to explore the perspectives of those who reject its presence in their work.

**Material and Methods:** Five women who work as sex workers voluntarily participated in the study excluding women who were victims of trafficking. Participants were recruited through professional networks, online forums and advertisements. Three subthemes emerged from the analysis: "Better Control of the Inner World," "The Negative Aspects of a Manufactured Identity," and "The Rewards of a Manufactured Identity."

**Results:** The findings suggest that a manufactured identity may serve many purposes such as an opportunity for self-expression and not just as a protection strategy. The participants' narratives also revealed that their work identity, which is empowered and autonomous, enhances their true selves outside of their workplace.

**Conclusions:** The above findings could challenge common societal interpretations of sex workers as victims. Further research is suggested focusing on the self-expression aspect of sex work, which appears to be a growing phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Sex work, prostitution, identity, manufactured identity, self-expression.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sex workers, particularly those involved in prostitution, face a high risk of violence and damage. While some studies have focused on strategies for minimizing harm, there is limited research on the psychological protection of sex workers, with some findings indicating that for some women, prostitution could potentially contribute to psychological distress.<sup>1</sup> Research has identified pragmatic, symbolic and psychological defence mechanisms, employed by sex workers to protect themselves, which have been found to be separating their private lives from their work.<sup>2,3,4</sup> One mechanism, analysed by Sanders<sup>4</sup>, posits that sex workers create a "manufactured identity", which according to her is a "character constructed only for the workplace" [p. 337]. She also stated that the creation of this persona is created for two primary reasons: as a psychological protection from work-related distress, and as a business strategy. In addition, this manufactured identity, also referred to as a work identity, is believed to serve as a distancing technique due to the intensely intimate nature of their work. With various approaches and methods utilized by sex workers, to maintain the mask or series of masks, they are more able to earn a living through the sale of sex.<sup>5</sup> It is also supported that sexuality is closely linked to the "self", thus by selling sexual activities, a sex worker is selling herself in a "very real sense"<sup>6</sup> [p. 207], therefore, to preserve her sense of meaning and personal identity, she must distance herself. It is a profession where the human body is "produced and consumed"<sup>7</sup> [p. 210] simultaneously. In cases where the worker's "self" is perceived as a service being offered, there is a risk to the self-identity.<sup>8</sup> Another crucial purpose for maintaining a manufactured identity was highlighted by Abel<sup>9</sup>, who stated that the manufactured persona may offer better management of emotions of the sex worker's true self. O'Neill<sup>3</sup> [p. 89] further described how disconnecting the self from the body, can lead to an "exceptional control of the inner world". Another interesting reason for maintaining a manufactured identity was observed by Gauthier<sup>10</sup>, who stated that engaging in sexual activities for financial gain, could be an expression of sexual liberty. This viewpoint is also evident in other theories that support the fact that sex work can provide a space for sexual expression and libera-

tion, with no feelings of shame.<sup>11,12</sup> Liberation has been interpreted in a dual meaning; First, as freedom from societal control; the second as freedom from constraints that limit self-fulfilment. Getting through societal norms, such as family, profession, nationality and body rights, were included.<sup>13</sup>

However, the process of creating emotional distance isn't necessarily easy; according to Grandey<sup>14</sup>, emotional labour may lead to burnout, which is described as a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal competence, resulting from persistent work-related stress.<sup>15</sup> This could also lead to a loss of one's true identity. In Kramer's study,<sup>16</sup> 65% of women with a past in the profession, reported a significant deterioration in their private sex lives. On the other hand, the need to distinguish between personal and professional roles is not exclusive to sex work. In fact, Hochschild<sup>2</sup> contends that the majority of individuals in service occupations, engage in mental detachment as a coping mechanism, "an altered state of consciousness characterized by a sense of separation from aspects of everyday experience"<sup>17</sup> [p. 5]. She further states that there may be consequences when individuals become alienated from their emotions, but also suggests that a healthy form of distancing, characterized by a clear separation between one's self and role, can reduce the susceptibility to burnout. Abel's study<sup>9</sup> found that most sex workers can successfully differentiate their professional and personal lives, using distancing techniques and emotional labour,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that rather than being detrimental, such tactics serve as effective protective measures. In addition, numerous researchers support the fact that sex work can also provide benefits, such as improved self-esteem, positive body image perceptions, and a sense of control and empowerment.<sup>4,18,19,20</sup> This can be supported by findings that illustrate an increase in satisfaction and self-esteem among call girls who have previously been involved in prostitution.<sup>21,22</sup> From a feminist perspective, Perkins<sup>18</sup> suggests that sex work presents a unique setting where females have greater power over males. Perrucci<sup>23</sup> further elaborates that sex work can alter the power dynamics in gendered interactions, achieved through aspects of the sex worker's subjectivity, including her sense of privacy, and sexuality. The manner in which a woman embodies

her sexuality within her workplace reshapes the discourse surrounding masculine and feminine desire and sexuality. A woman's emotions towards engaging in sex work, and her decision to reveal or conceal those emotions within that context, are facets of her agency and subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Schwarzenbach<sup>24</sup> argues that a sex worker, by choosing to express her sexuality through work, her sexual autonomy is demonstrated. She compares sex workers that choose to express themselves through work, with dancers, supporting that if a dancer decides to perform and earn money from it, society will not regard it as a breach of her moral character. Her autonomy will remain intact even when others observe or interact with her body's movements. Therefore, it's the performer's choice to publicize and profit from certain physical activities for a short period of time.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it is argued that women are allowed to have sexual self-determination and engage in commercial sex as a "potentially liberating terrain" [p. 1].<sup>25</sup> This argument emphasizes that women are autonomous individuals that are free to decide what they want to do with their bodies without any restrictions. Consequently, feminist supporters, point out that all sex workers search for their autonomy and liberty within their workplace, including those who engage in unsafe conditions.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned above, following the feministic perspective, sex work can provide an opportunity for self-expression and sexual liberty. It is important to note that the notion of a manufactured identity doesn't apply to all sex workers. A portion of individuals within this profession, identify themselves as "prostitutes-as-workers", claiming that their participation in prostitution is unrelated to sex work [p. 43].<sup>27</sup> In order to promote the "professionalisation of prostitution" [p. 14],<sup>4</sup> in which an environment is respectful, and offers access to fair wages, rather than being stigmatized, advocates of this argument support that the normalization and acceptance of the profession within the society, is the answer. By doing so, sex workers gain control over the settings of their workplace.<sup>28</sup>

### Rationale

Sex workers, particularly those engaged in prostitution, are exposed to a heightened risk of violence and damage, highlighting

the urgency to address their psychological protection. While existing research has focused on harm reduction strategies, limited attention has been given to understanding the psychological defence mechanisms employed by sex workers. Some findings suggest that prostitution may contribute to psychological distress for certain women. To bridge this gap, the current study aims to explore the concept of a "manufactured identity" as a potential protective mechanism among sex workers. This persona, created exclusively for the workplace, serves to distance themselves from the intensely intimate nature of their work and to shield their true selves from work-related distress. Moreover, it may offer better management of emotions and contribute to a sense of control and empowerment. By using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach, this research endeavours to provide a deeper understanding of the objectives and effects of maintaining a manufactured identity among female Greek sex workers and to explore the perspectives of those who assert the absence of such an identity in their work.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via online platforms (zoom, skype etc.) depending on the preferences of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow an in-depth investigation and include open-ended questions<sup>29</sup>, thus, making it possible for the interviews to be flexible and adaptable while making sure that critical subjects were covered. According to the study's topics and pertinent literature, a list of 10 open-ended questions and prompts was created.

#### Participants

Five sex workers aged between 19 and 40 years old participated in the research. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that all individuals had experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to identify as a woman, and their engagement with sex work was "voluntary". This criterion was established to exclude the investigation of underage individuals who are exploited or are victims of trafficking. Exclusion criteria ruled out those who were victims of trafficking and those who did not speak English

fluently. Participants were recruited through professional networks, online forums and advertisements.

### Analytic approach

In order to explore the lived experiences of the participants, this study employed a qualitative research methodology known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The choice of IPA was driven by its focus on understanding the subjective meanings and interpretations individuals ascribe to their experiences, thereby facilitating a detailed and thorough examination of the phenomena being investigated.<sup>30</sup> The theoretical underpinnings of IPA are grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenology underscores the importance of delving into individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives of the world. Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, acknowledges researchers' active role in interpreting and deriving meaning from participants' experiences. Lastly, idiography emphasizes the necessity of examining individual cases in depth, which in turn allows for a context-sensitive and nuanced understanding of the phenomena.<sup>30</sup>

### Materials

An audio recorder device and online platforms were used for the interviews. Also, a personal computer for the transcription of the interviews was used. Consent and debrief forms were also included and a list of 10 questions was also used as a guideline for the interviews.

### Procedure

Prior to the interview, the participant received a written invitation and an information sheet regarding the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and the interview process's structure. Additionally, the participant completed a written consent form before the interview. The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 40 minutes. Upon the study's conclusion, participants were thanked for their participation and provided with a written debrief sheet that explained the study's objectives. Following an accuracy check, transcripts were made anonymous to preserve participant privacy.<sup>31</sup>

### ANALYSIS

From the analysis 6 superordinate themes emerged depicting different phenomena which include objectives of maintaining a manufactured identity, effects of maintaining a Manufactured identity, absence of manufactured identity, self-expression/sexual liberty, sense of control in the workplace and sexual autonomy. In this study three subthemes will be discussed: Better control of the inner world, the negative aspects of a manufactured identity and the rewards of a manufactured identity.

#### "Better control of the inner world"

The following extracts highlight how maintaining a manufactured identity can function as a coping mechanism of emotions. *"I like being this person, because this person has far fewer worries, focuses on money and on very simple things like satisfying a man, which is very easy for me. It is a very different person [...] and it positively affects me to get into this mood, in this persona I take on. It is a gateway for me [...] it is not just for the money nor only for men. It's good for me to get out of myself and enter someone else's self for a while."* (Stella)

Stella illustrates the distinct dichotomy between her personal identity and her professional persona and the benefits of the latter. She expresses that there are moments when she enjoys being this alternative person and appreciates the simplicity. This might be indicative of a sense of control and this persona provides a coping mechanism to manage emotions. She further reveals that despite the complexities, she perceives a form of therapeutic value in this persona, perhaps as a mechanism of emotional detachment which describes an altered state of consciousness characterized by a sense of separation from aspects of everyday experience,<sup>17</sup> or an exploration of different aspects of her identity. She highlights the therapeutic element of maintaining this identity, as it serves as a form of escaping from personal worries and stress. Her account underlines the use of a manufactured identity as a personal relief from emotions of the true self.<sup>9</sup> Overall, this extract offers an alternative understanding of the diverse roles that a manufactured identity can play in the context of sex work, from financial gain to a form of catharsis for the self.

*"A stronger character. Also I can handle men more easily. [...] If a*

*boyfriend cheats on me or ignores me, I will say "I don't give a fuck". [...] If you mean not to take things well in your life and to take it more calmly, maybe... yes. But having some money makes things much easier... To put it differently, if one is screwed at work all day and has a problem with plumbing or crashes their car, they will say "everything is going wrong for me". While I say "how much?" (money) and it ends there."* (Jessica)

Jessica reveals that she has developed a stronger character and the ability to handle men more easily through her experiences in sex work. This can be viewed as a form of empowerment and a sense of control, a theory supported by Perkins' concept of empowerment through sex work.<sup>18</sup> Jessica's resilience allows her to better navigate personal relationships with a sense of power, displaying almost a numbness to negative situations, such as a cheating partner. This illustrates a sense of emotional toughness that she has developed through her work. Her ability to disengage emotionally from her work and focus on the practical aspects demonstrates her professional approach and the coping mechanisms developed through her experiences. This "professionalism" aligns with the theory of Phoenix which states that prostitutes perceive themselves as workers,<sup>27</sup> in order to have control over their workplace.<sup>28</sup> This coping mechanism as Abel noted it, appears to be an "effective strategy to manage emotions", [p.1183].<sup>9</sup>

#### **"The negative aspects of a manufactured identity"**

The following extracts provide insight into the complex damaging effects of maintaining a manufactured identity.

*"You want more money, you want more to get out of yourself and do such things, this whole lifestyle is a bit addictive, so you lose your real self [...] you lose friends because they don't really accept this way of life. [...] You lack mental strength to give it elsewhere. [...] Well, I am very mentally tired and have nothing to give to anyone else because I have given everything there. Well, you lose your sexuality a lot, what you like in sex, what sex is"* (Stella)

In this extract, Stella illustrates the potential losses and negative consequences of maintaining a manufactured identity. Stella states that she loses her "true self" and because of money's addictive nature, she finds it hard to resist. This can be supported by the theory of Brewis and Linstead which supports that sex

workers, given the deep emotional and physical intensity of their occupation, might struggle with maintaining emotional distance.<sup>5</sup> As a result, they employ various strategies to maintain a mask or multiple masks, that enable them to earn a living through selling sexual services. She highlights the emotional labour required in her profession, as she describes feeling emotionally drained and worn down by being used as an "object" for clients' desires. Hochschild,<sup>2</sup> along with other researchers like Grandey,<sup>14</sup> has highlighted the connection between emotional labour in the workplace and increased fatigue. Additionally, she mentions the loss of friendships and the energy to engage in activities that she loves, adding another layer to the costs of the dichotomy between her personal and professional life. Her struggle with sexuality and relationships outside of work implies burnout, which is described as a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal competence, resulting from persistent work-related stress.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, she describes a loss of sexuality, expressing that her work persona has distorted her experience of sex.

*"Once you stop thinking about what the client looks like, their age, or anything else that bothers you, it becomes a routine. [...] Stopping caring about appearance etc. can't be taught or tricked, it just happens after a while, like you would go to any other job and say I will earn my wage, so here you say in the evening or in the morning I will have that much (money) ... so let's go."* (Jessica)

Jessica explains how she has become desensitized to clients' appearances and other factors that used to bother her. It seems that she is engaging in emotional labour or deep acting, a distance technique that is frequently used by prostitutes, in order to maintain and protect their self of identity.<sup>2,6,4</sup> This distancing technique according to her, doesn't seem to feel like a burden, instead, she might initially feel discomfort while engaging with her clients but she rationalizes her actions by viewing it as a means of earning money. As Jessica explained, this technique can't be taught but she perceives it as something that comes with work experience, comparing it to other forms of employment, thus exhibiting a sense of high professionalism. This phenomenon highlights the fact that when approaching sex work like any other career, professionalism and a sense of honour are



exhibited.<sup>9</sup> She, therefore, normalizes the process of dissociating, distancing herself from her body and desensitizing herself from the discomforting aspects of the job, transforming them into non-harmful actions. In doing so, she redefines prostitution as “not sex but work” [p.10].<sup>27</sup>

### “The rewards of a manufactured identity”

This theme captures the rewards and the positive effects that the manufactured work identity offers.

*“Look, first of all, the money. It's very important, it's a lot of money, you don't make it in other jobs. Secondly, it definitely offers me... it covers my insecurities, I get validation, I get attention, things that I lack. And the fact that I see myself as this girl who doesn't care about anything and does this job and is okay, it gives me strength. I feel like I don't need anyone else, I feel like I can manage everything on my own. Since I can manage this.”* (Stella)

Stella describes the positive effects of sex work and her work persona as well. She places first the financial benefits before moving on to higher-level needs. She then reveals that work offers her the validation and attention that she is seeking to cover possible insecurities. This can be supported by studies indicating an increase in satisfaction and self-esteem among call girls who have worked in prostitution.<sup>21,22</sup> It seems that her work persona, which is a self-sufficient and autonomous individual who has the ability to manage everything on their own, reinforces her sense of empowerment in her true self. She derives the strength to “manage everything” since she can cope with work struggles, that appear to be very heavy in order for her to perceive them as an achievement. In a study conducted by Brewis and Linstead,<sup>5</sup> it was discovered that some sex workers perceive their profession as a chance to build skills and experience a sense of personal agency, ultimately enhancing their self-esteem. Similarly, Sanders<sup>4</sup> investigated the topic, revealing that certain sex workers exploit their occupations to leverage their sexuality, leading to a sense of empowerment and control.

*“I don't know why [...] but I really like to provoke others. To provoke them and not let them do anything. Also, there are people who will make you feel like a goddess in there. Alright, a bit of music, feeling sexy on your own because you're a woman, and a bit of them (clients), when they behave correctly, when they don't*

*behave correctly... Generally, if there's a good mood on both sides, I can have a very good evening.”* (Eleni)

Eleni enjoys provoking and exercising control over others which seems to be significant for her work experience. When she receives attention and validation from her clients, she gains a positive self-regard. In the past, studies have revealed that sex workers were often satisfied with their work, because of the appraisal from the clients which offers a positive self-image and empowerment.<sup>20</sup> The control and the boundaries as mentioned above could be explained by Perkin's theory,<sup>18</sup> which supports that sex work is empowering for women that choose this profession. He also supports that female prostitution represents a unique social context where women hold greater power over sexual encounters compared to any other situation involving both genders. Perkins believes that since prostitutes can establish boundaries in their work, attain financial independence, and gain insight into genuine male sexuality, they significantly deviate from the prevalent feminist notion of prostitutes as the ultimate embodiment of female subjugation. This extract, therefore, offers valuable insight into how sex work can be perceived as empowering, through setting boundaries in interpersonal interactions.

### DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to unravel the personal experiences and perceptions of female sex workers, regarding their identity. In the first subtheme, Abel's theory<sup>9</sup> was reflected in the participants' accounts, illustrating how this persona provides empowerment through financial gain and an escape from negative emotions and everyday life situations. It's interesting to note, that one participant expressed that “entering someone else's self for a while”, functions as a coping mechanism that benefits her well-being, almost as a form of catharsis and escape. While the other participant appeared to give more value to the financial aspect of her work, she also demonstrated how this benefit made her “stronger” in coping with negative situations in her daily life. The next subtheme highlights the potential harm that the existence of a manufactured identity can cause. One participant described the process of emotional labour, a common characteristic of work,<sup>14</sup> and the exhaustion that it creates, as well as burnout and the loss of the true self.<sup>5</sup> Emotional

labour was also evident in a participant's account, though she did not express any negative effects on herself. Instead, she displayed a high degree of professionalism. It appears that financial gain serves as a powerful motivator for her to surpass the challenging aspects of work. That appeared to be achieved by normalizing the dissociation process while comparing the existence of this phenomenon in other professions.<sup>27,9</sup> This difference between the participants, regarding emotional labour requests a deeper understanding of the correlation between emotional labour and the power of money, in the context of sex work. The last subtheme explored the positive effects of having a manufactured identity. Two participants revealed that self-satisfaction and self-esteem are increased, whether it is due to receiving attention from clients, possessing power and autonomy in an environment where they can express their sexuality, benefiting financially, or gaining better knowledge of males' nature.<sup>21,18,20,4,22</sup> The participants' narratives revealed that their work identity, which is empowered and autonomous, enhances their true selves outside of their workplace. Moreover, it should be noted that one participant had a sense of accomplishment of the fact that she can handle and surpass work struggles. This constitutes an example of Brewis and Linstead's<sup>5</sup> theory, that sex workers often consider their work as an opportunity to learn skills. These findings enrich our knowledge regarding the benefits of a manufactured identity and the adult industry itself thus setting the scene for future research.

## CONCLUSION

This research provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex experiences and identity perceptions of Greek female sex workers, potentially serving as a foundation for future research and practical applications aimed at promoting their well-being. Five semi structured interviews were conducted via online platforms with five female consensual sex workers. The analytic approach which was employed was IPA which provides an understanding to the subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals ascribe to their experiences, thereby facilitating a detailed and thorough examination of the phenomena being investigated.<sup>30</sup> The findings suggest that a manufactured identity may serve many purposes and not just as a protection strategy,

such as an opportunity for self-expression. The above findings could challenge common societal interpretations of sex workers as victims. It would be interesting to further investigate the self-expression aspect of sex work, which appears to be a growing phenomenon. By exploring the various ways in which female sex workers form and perceive their identities, and acknowledging the difficulties associated with maintaining a manufactured identity, a foundation for improved interventions that support the well-being of sex workers will be enhanced. Last but not least, by examining individuals who express the need to explore their sexuality and creativity through sex work, may provide insights for both the scientific community and the general public and would contribute to the reduction of social stigma and violence against sex workers.

Regarding the limitations of the study, the small number of participants and the recruitment method should be taken under consideration. The participants were invited to participate through their professional networks, online forums and advertisements which is not considered a total valid method of recruitment but since the sampling itself is a challenge, this was the only way to secure the required sample. In addition, the small number of participants could limit the ability to generalise any of the findings although this does not constitute an objective of a qualitative research. Future research could also include a more diverse sample such as non consensual sex workers.

## Ethics

This study followed the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines and the guidelines of the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct. Confidentiality was achieved through anonymity, storing data securely and restricting access to the information. Participants were able to withdraw without repercussions at any moment, as participation was entirely voluntary. Each participant signed a consent form and the University of Derby provided ethical clearance for this research. Participants were aware of the research's objectives and their ability to withdraw from the study at any time up to two weeks after the completion of the interview.



**Conflicts of Interest**

All authors declare that there is no conflict of interest on anyone's behalf.

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