International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation.

Exploring the Narratives of Bicolano Alters: Motivations, Identity Construction, and Resilience in Digital Sex Work

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the lived narratives of Bicolano adult content creators, locally referred to as "alters," focusing on their motivations, identity construction, emotional experiences, and coping strategies within the realm of digital sex work. Utilizing narrative inquiry, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants engaged in adult content creation on platforms such as X formerly Twitter, OnlyFans, and Telegram. The study aimed to understand how socio-economic conditions, cultural context, and digital affordances shape their experiences and self-perceptions. Findings revealed that economic necessity, particularly due to limited employment opportunities in the Bicol region, served as a primary motivator for participants to enter adult content creation. Beyond financial survival, many also expressed a desire for personal autonomy and empowerment. Participants developed distinct digital alter egos, allowing them to negotiate cultural and moral tensions associated with their work. Emotional and psychological challenges were prominent, including fear of exposure, internalized stigma, and social isolation, yet these were met with adaptive coping strategies such as peer support networks, digital boundary-setting, and self-regulation techniques. This study contributes to emerging literature on digital sex work in Southeast Asia by situating the experiences of Bicolano alters within broader theoretical frameworks of labor, identity, and resilience. It highlights the need for culturally sensitive, non-judgmental mental health and legal support systems that acknowledge adult content creation as a form of labor. Ultimately, the findings advocate for a shift in public discourse from moral condemnation to human rights, emphasizing dignity, agency, and inclusion for digital sex workers in the Philippine context.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of subscription-based adult content platforms such as OnlyFans marked a critical shift in how labor, intimacy, and digital entrepreneurship intersected in the evolving platform economy. These platforms enabled individuals, many with no prior experience in the adult industry, to monetize sexually explicit or suggestive content, offering relative autonomy, flexible working conditions, and the promise of substantial income (Hamilton *et al.*, 2022) [10]. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this trend, as economic instability forced many to explore alternative forms of livelihood amid widespread job loss and financial insecurity (Blunt & Wolf, 2020) [2]. Within this context, digital sex work emerged not merely as a survival strategy but also as a space for agency, affective labor, and identity negotiation.

While early understandings of sex work tended to focus on issues of coercion, exploitation, and marginalization, more recent scholarship has emphasized the multifaceted nature of participation in digital sex labor. Online platforms like OnlyFans, JustForFans, and Fansly offer features that allow content creators to manage boundaries with clients, anonymize identities, and determine pricing structures. These platform affordances empower users to exert control over their labor conditions in ways previously unavailable in traditional sex work or even in other gig economy jobs (Hamilton *et al*., 2022) [10]. Such flexibility and autonomy have made digital sex work increasingly appealing to a wide demographic.

Qualitative inquiries into the motivations of digital sex workers reveal a complex interplay of economic, emotional, and social factors. In their study of U.S.-based OnlyFans creators, Hamilton *et al*. (2022) [10] identified not only financial drivers but also deeper psychological motivations such as self-expression, body positivity, creative control, and a desire for emotional connection. These motivations challenge the idea that adult content creators are simply motivated by economic desperation, instead presenting them as active agents negotiating power and autonomy in the digital marketplace.

Psychological research supports this expanded view of adult content work. Lippmann *et al*. (2023) [14] demonstrated that digital sex workers often experience improved sexual self-confidence, increased emotional intelligence, and greater interpersonal awareness through their interactions with clients and online communities. In many cases, creators find validation and a sense of empowerment through their work, even as they simultaneously contend with the psychological toll of maintaining intimacy and authenticity within monetized interactions.

However, digital sex work is not without its burdens. The emotional labor involved in performing intimacy, maintaining parasocial relationships, and managing customer expectations is considerable. Creators must constantly navigate issues of burnout, surveillance, and stigma (Azayem *et al*., 2023) [1]. This form of labor, while offering flexibility, remains precarious, particularly when creators lack access to institutional protections or social support systems.

These tensions are particularly heightened in cultural settings where conservative norms around sexuality, family honor, and religious morality prevail. In Southeast Asia, and specifically in the Philippines, strong Catholic influences permeate social expectations, often resulting in public condemnation of sexual deviance or non-conformity. Filipino digital sex workers, including content creators, are often subjected to intense moral scrutiny from both online and offline communities.

The Bicol Region in the Philippines, where this study was situated, reflects a unique sociocultural context. Known for its devout Catholicism, closely-knit family structures, and limited economic opportunities, Bicol provides a challenging landscape for individuals engaging in stigmatized forms of labor such as adult content creation. In this environment, Bicolano alters, a term referring to local adult content creators must constantly negotiate between financial survival and cultural expectations.

To analyze how Bicolano alters navigate these tensions, this study applied the Narrative Identity Theory of Dan McAdams (2001). According to this theory, individuals construct internalized life stories that integrate past experiences,

present circumstances, and future aspirations to form a coherent sense of self. These personal narratives serve not only as a means of self-understanding but also to morally justify one's actions and navigate social roles (McAdams & McLean, 2013) [16].
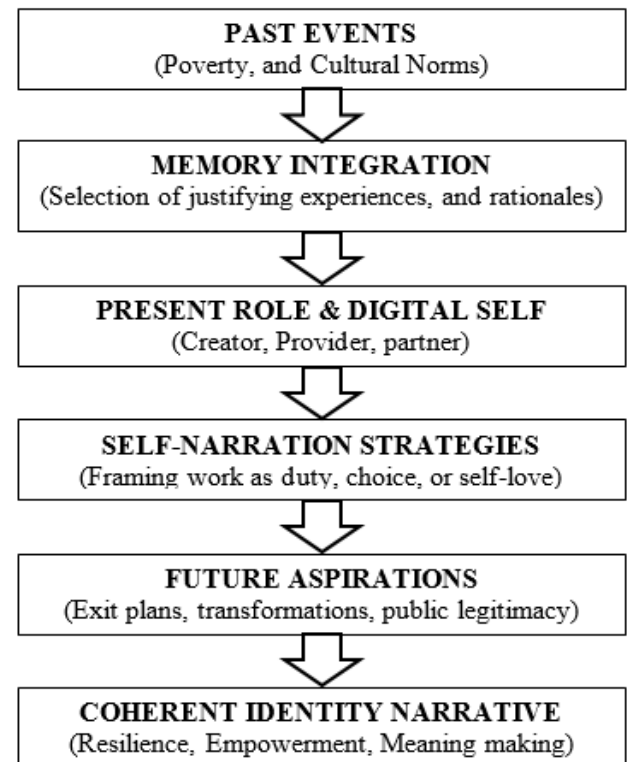

Fig 1: Narrative Identity Theory Applied to Bicolano Alters

Narrative Identity Theory emphasizes that identity is not static but dynamic and evolving. As people encounter new experiences and social feedback, they continually revise and refine their self-narratives. In the context of adult content creation, narrative identity becomes a powerful tool through which individuals reconcile their actions with internal values and societal norms. These stories help them manage cognitive dissonance, construct meaning, and maintain a sense of dignity.

The Bicolano alters who participated in this study engaged in narrative negotiation in various ways. Some adopted scripts of resilience and sacrifice, framing their work as a response to poverty, unemployment, or familial obligation. Others constructed narratives of liberation and empowerment, positioning themselves as agents of sexual autonomy and financial independence. In both cases, storytelling functioned as a psychological survival mechanism and a form of self-legitimization.

Importantly, these narratives were not created in a vacuum. They were shaped by the social, cultural, and technological contexts in which the creators operated. Offline, participants contended with Catholic guilt, family dynamics, and community surveillance. Online, they engaged with supportive audiences, algorithmic visibility, and the risks of digital exposure. These dual environments complicated the construction of coherent identity narratives.

Through the lens of Narrative Identity Theory, this study uncovered the adaptive strategies Bicolano alters used to navigate moral ambiguity. Participants continuously restructured their narratives in response to shifting

circumstances, evolving self-concepts, and external pressures. Their stories were complex, often containing contradictions, yet ultimately aimed at preserving psychological coherence and relational belonging.

This theoretical framework also illuminated the intersectionality of identity. Factors such as gender, age, class, and sexual orientation influenced how participants narrated their experiences. For instance, female creators were more likely to invoke themes of maternal sacrifice and caregiving, while LGBTQ+ participants emphasized visibility, pride, and resistance against social marginalization. These variations highlighted the role of intersecting identities in shaping narrative identity work.

The study also contributed to the broader literature on platform labor and digital economies. As the gig economy continues to expand, more individuals are engaging in forms of work that blur the boundaries between public and private, labor and leisure, body and brand. Digital sex work, situated at this intersection, offers critical insights into how people navigate precarity, intimacy, and selfhood in increasingly mediated environments.

Moreover, the findings underscored the need for culturally sensitive frameworks that acknowledge the moral and emotional complexities of digital labor. While Western literature often celebrates individualism and empowerment, such narratives may not fully capture the lived experiences of creators operating in collectivist and morally conservative cultures like the Philippines. This study offered an alternative lens, rooted in empathy, nuance, and respect for local values. The research methodology prioritized ethical engagement, confidentiality, and participant agency. In-depth interviews allowed participants to share their stories in their own words, emphasizing subjectivity and context. Data were analyzed thematically and interpreted through the Narrative Identity lens to ensure alignment with participants' lived realities.

By centering the voices of Bicolano alters, this study filled an important gap in sex work research and platform studies. It shed light on a marginalized population whose narratives are often silenced or misunderstood. In doing so, it provided a richer understanding of how adult content creators in non-Western settings construct meaning, manage stigma, and perform identity in the digital age.

1.1 Statement of the Problem
Despite the growing relevance of digital sex work in the Philippine context, particularly in economically marginalized regions like Bicol, limited research had been conducted to explore how adult content creators make meaning of their experiences. Previous studies had often overlooked the psychological, emotional, and narrative strategies that creators deploy to navigate cultural stigma and social exclusion. This study thus aimed to address this gap and explore how did Bicolano adult content creators construct, negotiate, and narrate their identities, motivations, and lived experiences in relation to their engagement in selling adult content online?

Through this inquiry, the study illuminated the nuanced realities of Bicolano alters, challenging dominant narratives of deviance and instead highlighting resilience, meaning-making, and moral negotiation in the digital age.

1.2 Research Objectives
This study explored and sought to understand the personal narratives, motivations, and identity constructions of Bicolano adult content creators in the context of digital sex work. Specifically, it attained the following objectives:

- To examine the socio-economic and personal motivations that drive Bicolano alters to engage in online adult content creation.
- To analyze how Bicolano alters construct and narrate their identities through their digital work in relation to cultural, familial, and religious expectations.
- To identify the perceived psychological, emotional, and social impacts of selling adult content online among Bicolano alters.
- To explore the coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies employed by Bicolano alters in navigating social stigma and digital visibility.

2. Method
This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry research design. Narrative inquiry was selected due to its strength in capturing the personal, complex, and emotionally layered experiences of individuals, particularly those in marginalized or stigmatized communities. It allowed for an in-depth examination of the stories of Bicolano adult content creators referred to as "alters", to explore how they make meaning of their digital sex work within the sociocultural milieu of the Bicol Region. As noted by Connelly and Clandinin (2012) [7], narrative inquiry emphasizes temporality, sociality, and place, which are critical in exploring identity constructions over time.

This design enabled the researchers to understand not just the motivations behind content creation, but also the subjective experiences of navigating digital labor, stigma, and empowerment. The study foregrounded the lived realities of participants, honoring their voice, agency, and the evolving structure of their identity narratives. This methodological orientation aligns with the work of Chase (2008), who argued that narrative research brings forward the stories people live by and allows them to reflect on their personal transformations.

Narrative inquiry was particularly relevant in situating the participants' personal accounts within broader historical, cultural, and economic contexts. The Bicol Region, with its deeply religious communities and limited economic opportunities, presented a backdrop against which participants negotiated the meaning of their work. This approach provided thick description and theoretical richness in capturing the multiplicity of factors shaping identity in digital sex work (Riessman, 2008) [21].

2.1 Participants
The participants consisted of eight (8) self-identified Bicolano adult content creators who had engaged in digital sex work for a minimum of six months. Recruitment was done through purposive and snowball sampling, suitable for reaching hidden or vulnerable populations (Patton, 2002) [19]. Initial participants were contacted through adult content-related communities on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), OnlyFans, and Telegram. Further participants were identified via peer referrals, ensuring trust and openness in the interview process.

Participants were chosen to represent diverse profiles in terms of age, gender identity or sexual orientation, socio-economic background, and platform usage. They ranged in age from early 20s to mid-30s, including males, females,

bisexuals, gays, and other LGBTQ+ individuals. All originated from or lived in the Bicol Region. The diversity allowed for the exploration of multiple perspectives on identity formation, stigma, and coping strategies within a shared cultural context.

Inclusion criteria mandated that participants be active in digital sex work, can speak and understand in either English or Filipino, and willing to engage in reflective online interviews. These criteria ensured the ability of participants to express their narratives in a coherent and emotionally insightful manner. The recruitment strategy and inclusion parameters were designed to generate rich, varied, and authentic data (Mediana, Funa, and Dio, 2025) [18].

2.2 Instrument
The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed using principles from McAdams' (1995) Narrative Identity Theory. The guide featured open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed life narratives, personal transformations, and identity constructions in relation to adult content creation. Sample questions included: "What led you to start creating adult content?"; "How do you describe yourself now compared to before entering this work?"; and "How do your cultural or familial beliefs influence your view of your work?"

The semi-structured format balanced structure with flexibility. It allowed the researcher to probe deeper into key themes while also adapting to the unique directions taken by each participant. This method supported the development of rich, story-like responses rather than fragmented answers, thereby capturing the emotional texture of the participants' lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) [22].

Before full deployment, the guide was pilot tested with two non-Bicolano adult content creators to assess clarity, sensitivity, and emotional resonance. Feedback led to the refinement of question wording and sequencing, ensuring ethical appropriateness and narrative depth. The final version of the guide was used as a dynamic and responsive instrument in facilitating storytelling.

2.3 Data Gathering Procedures
Interviews were conducted remotely through encrypted communication platforms such as Telegram, Signal, and Facebook Messenger, depending on the preferences and security concerns of the participants. Remote interviews ensured geographical reach and protected participant anonymity—especially critical given the topic's sensitivity and potential social risks. Sessions were conducted in English, Filipino, or a combination thereof, depending on participant comfort.

Each session lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Verbal or written informed consent was obtained prior to recording the interviews. Audio recordings were securely stored and transcribed verbatim. The researcher also maintained a reflexive journal, recording observations such as tone of voice, pauses, and emotional cues—contextual details that added interpretive value to the transcripts (Finlay, 2002).

Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and identifying details such as location, specific usernames, and platform handles were omitted or generalized. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and approve or amend quotations before they were finalized for analysis. This process known as member checking was vital in affirming the co-construction of meaning and enhancing the

study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [13].

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures
Data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The first phase involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and reflective notes. Initial codes were generated inductively based on meaningful expressions and repeated concepts related to identity, stigma, agency, and emotional labor.

In the second phase, codes were sorted into broader thematic categories. Themes such as "moral negotiation," "financial empowerment," "digital selfhood," and "family concealment" began to emerge. These themes were interpreted through the theoretical lens of Narrative Identity Theory, which explores how individuals create internalized life stories that give unity and purpose to their experiences (McAdams & Pals, 2006).

The third phase involved reviewing, defining, and naming themes to ensure coherence and analytic depth. A narrative matrix was developed to trace the evolution of identity and meaning making across participant stories. Final narratives were not reduced to themes alone but were preserved as coherent, story-based accounts that revealed both structure and transformation. This analytical process emphasized the storytelling nature of the data, staying true to the narrative inquiry approach (Riessman, 2008) [21].

2.5 Ethical Considerations
The study prioritized ethical rigor in all stages of the research process, especially given the vulnerability of the participant group and the sensitive nature of the topic. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, with clear explanations of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Anonymity was ensured through the assignment of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. All digital files, including audio recordings and transcripts, were stored in encrypted, password-protected folders. The data were accessible only to the principal researcher, and no real names, images, or precise locations were collected.

To safeguard participants' well-being, interviews were conducted in a nonjudgmental and supportive tone. Participants were reminded they could skip any question or stop the interview at any point. After each session, they were provided with a list of mental health and counseling resources. Careful attention was given to culturally sensitive language and ethical storytelling to avoid further stigmatization and honor the dignity of the participants (Israel & Hay, 2006).

3. Results
The presentation of results in this study is structured around the central research objectives and themes that emerged through thematic narrative analysis. Data were derived from rich, first-person accounts of Bicolano adult content creators who participated in the research. The themes represent the participants' experiences, interpretations, and identity work as they navigate the sociocultural, psychological, and digital landscapes of adult content creation. Verbatim excerpts in Tagalog and Bicol languages are included to preserve the authenticity of the participants' voices and enhance the

contextual integrity of the findings.

3.1. Socio-Economic and Personal Motivations for Adult Content Creation
3.1.1. Economic Survival and Opportunity
Economic need emerged as a primary motivation for most participants. Many spoke of the limited employment opportunities in their hometowns, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent shared, *"Walang matinong trabaho dito sa amin. Kahit college graduate ka, wala kang makuhang trabaho na maayos,"* expressing frustration that there are no decent jobs in their area and that even college graduates struggle to find suitable work. Another added, *"Nagka-pandemya, wala na akong source of income. Pinilit ko talaga 'to para lang may maipakain sa pamilya ko,"* saying that when the pandemic hit, they lost their source of income and felt compelled to enter this line of work just to feed their family. Participants underscored how adult content creation served as an immediate and accessible alternative for income generation in times of economic hardship.

3.1.2 Autonomy and Personal Empowerment
In addition to financial incentives, participants expressed a desire for autonomy and self-empowerment. Several indicated that their digital work gave them a sense of control not found in conventional employment. One participant shared, *"Ako ang nag-seset ng boundaries ko. Di tulad sa ibang trabaho na sunod ka lang nang sunod,"* emphasizing that they set their own boundaries, unlike in other jobs where they constantly must follow orders. Another reflected, *"Ngayon ko lang naramdaman 'yung hawak ko sarili ko,"* describing how it was only through this work that they finally felt a sense of control over themselves. For these alters, adult content creation provided not only financial relief but also a platform for reclaiming agency over their time, body, and labor.

3.2. Identity Construction and Cultural Negotiation
3.2.1. Digital Selfhood and Alter Egos
Participants emphasized a distinct divide between their online personas and everyday selves. Adopting alter egos served both as a form of protection and performance. One noted, *"Iba ang nakikita nila sa OnlyFans, pero sa tunay na buhay, tahimik ako, mahiyain,"* explaining that what people see on OnlyFans is different—while online they appear bold, in real life they are quiet and reserved. Another explained, *"Si 'AlterMika' ay malakas ang loob, pero ako sa personal, hindi ko kayang magsalita sa harap ng maraming tao,"* highlighting that while their alter ego appears fearless, their real self cannot even speak in front of a crowd. Crafting these digital identities enabled participants to remain visible in their work while safeguarding their personal lives and maintaining anonymity offline.

3.2.2. Negotiating Cultural and Religious Values
The tension between participants' digital work and their religious or cultural values was palpable. Many grappled with guilt and internal conflict. One participant admitted, *"Tuwing nagdadasal ako, humihingi ako ng tawad…pero ginagawa ko pa rin kasi kailangan,"* sharing that whenever they pray, they ask for forgiveness—yet continue because it is a necessity. Another expressed, *"Alam kong mali ito sa mata ng Diyos, pero sa mata ng isang ina, tama ito para sa anak kong*

nagugutom," acknowledging that while the work may be wrong in the eyes of God, it feels justified through the eyes of a mother trying to feed a hungry child. This emotional and moral negotiation reveals a deeper struggle to balance survival with spiritual and cultural expectations.

3.3. Emotional, Psychological, and Social Impacts
3.3.1: Emotional Vulnerability and Mental Health Struggles
Many participants shared feelings of emotional fatigue and persistent anxiety linked to their involvement in adult content creation. The looming threat of exposure, judgment, or blackmail created a constant state of worry. One participant revealed, *"May anxiety ako palagi…baka may makakilala sa akin o may mag-leak ng videos ko,"* expressing a constant sense of fear that someone might recognize them or leak their videos. Another confided, *"Nakaka-depress 'pag wala kang makausap na nakakaintindi,"* describing how isolating it feels when there's no one to talk to who truly understands. These accounts highlight the psychological toll and emotional vulnerability that often accompany their digital labor.

3.3.2. Limited Social Support and Stigma
Stigmatization from family and peers emerged as another recurring theme. Several participants recounted experiences of being excluded or losing close relationships. One alter shared, *"Nalaman ng barkada ko… hindi na sila nakikipag-usap sa akin"* — *"My friends found out… they stopped talking to me."* Others spoke of a profound sense of social alienation. *"Parang wala kang kwenta sa mata ng ibang tao kapag nalaman nilang gumagawa ka ng ganitong content"* — *"You feel worthless in other people's eyes once they find out you do this kind of content."* The emotional burden of these reactions deepened participants' sense of isolation and reinforced the stigma surrounding their work. the participants from traditional support systems.

3.4. Coping Strategies and Adaptive Mechanisms
3.4.1. Peer Support and Online Communities
Many alters found solace in the virtual companionship of others engaged in similar work. One participant shared, *"Mas okay kausap 'yung kapwa alter, kasi pareho kayo ng pinagdadaanan,"* saying that it's easier to talk to fellow alters because they're going through the same things. Telegram groups and private forums served not only as emotional support systems but also as safe spaces for exchanging knowledge, sharing experiences, and fostering a sense of solidarity.

3.4.2. Boundary Management and Anonymity Practices
To mitigate risk and exposure, participants employed stringent privacy controls. One noted, *"Hindi ko pinapakita mukha ko, tapos naka-block sa akin ang mga taga-Bicol,"* explaining that they don't show their face and have blocked people from Bicol. These digital boundaries helped participants manage their dual identities and shield their offline lives from potential social repercussions.

4. Discussions
This section interprets the research findings in relation to existing academic literature and theoretical frameworks. Each theme is situated within the broader context of digital sex work, identity studies, and cultural discourse. The

implications of these findings highlight both the structural constraints and agency-driven responses of Bicolano alters navigating a stigmatized yet increasingly prevalent digital labor economy.

4.1 Socio-Economic and Personal Motivations for Adult Content Creation

The finding that economic necessity was a primary motivator for Bicolano alters mirrors global research on sex work and digital labor. Sanders *et al.* (2016) [23] emphasized that individuals from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds often resort to sex work due to exclusion from traditional employment sectors. In rural and provincial regions like Bicol, where job scarcity and underemployment are common, digital adult content creation becomes a pragmatic alternative. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this economic urgency, with many participants citing job loss or wage instability as the catalyst for entering the platform economy.

Moreover, the accessibility and relative anonymity of platforms such as OnlyFans or Twitter spaces have democratized income opportunities for users outside of urban centers. As Blunt and Wolf (2020) [2] argue, these platforms provide a decentralized space where workers can bypass traditional gatekeepers in the sex industry. For Bicolano alters, digital sex work offered a financially viable path with fewer upfront barriers, enabling immediate income with limited resources. This shift reflects a broader trend toward the gigification of sex work and the increasing normalization of digital content as labor.

Beyond economic survival, a strong desire for personal empowerment and control over one's labor was evident. Jones (2020) highlighted how many adult content creators view their work not through a lens of victimhood but through entrepreneurship. The participants in this study echoed this narrative, expressing satisfaction in setting their own rules and schedules—elements often lacking in mainstream jobs. For these alters, content creation was not only a financial strategy but also a statement of agency, especially for those who had previously experienced rigid or exploitative working conditions.

The implications of these findings are twofold: first, they point to the urgent need for sustainable employment options in rural regions to prevent economic coercion into stigmatized labor; second, they challenge dominant narratives that frame digital sex work solely as exploitative. Recognizing the agency of adult content creators is crucial in crafting inclusive labor policies that respect autonomy while offering social protections.

4.2 Identity Construction and Cultural Negotiation

The development of digital alter egos among participants reflects a deeply intentional process of identity formation and boundary-setting. McAdams and McLean's (2013) [16] Narrative Identity Theory posit that individuals build self-coherence by crafting personal stories. Bicolano alters used pseudonyms, stylized content, and selective self-presentation to construct an idealized digital persona that differed significantly from their offline selves. This duality enabled participants to perform confidence, sexual agency, and charisma—traits that many admitted they struggled to embody in real life.

Such identity plays also served a protective function. By maintaining a clear distinction between "AlterMika" and their private self, participants could emotionally compartmentalize their work. Ravn *et al.* (2019) noted that for many sex workers, this kind of performative split is not dissonant but rather therapeutic, helping them process moral or emotional conflicts that arise from their line of work. For Bicolano alters, this strategic duality allowed them to maintain emotional stability while engaging in socially taboo labor.

Cultural and religious tensions were a recurring thread in the narratives, with participants often citing guilt, confession, and prayer as part of their routine. Lutnick (2016) describes how sex workers frequently construct parallel moral systems to manage internal dissonance. This study supports that claim: while participants acknowledged religious teachings against sex work, they simultaneously justified their choices as necessary acts of survival or parental responsibility. This balancing act illustrates a uniquely Filipino synthesis of spiritual accountability and pragmatic ethics.

The implications here are significant for public discourse and policy. Recognizing that identity negotiation is both an emotional and cultural process necessitates more empathetic and less moralistic interventions. Efforts to support digital content creators must consider the socio-religious frameworks in which these individuals operate, promoting mental health literacy, cultural sensitivity, and safe spaces for expression.

4.3 Emotional, Psychological, and Social Impacts

The mental health challenges reported by participants are consistent with existing literature on digital sex work. Van der Meulen *et al.* (2013) documented how anxiety, burnout, and emotional isolation are prevalent among online sex workers, particularly those lacking offline support systems. In this study, fear of exposure and doxing contributed to chronic anxiety. One participant's statement, "May anxiety ako palagi," reflects the psychological precarity of operating in a space where one's digital labor could unravel their offline life.

Stigma, both perceived and enacted, exacerbated these emotional burdens. Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma explains how individuals labeled as deviant internalize social rejection, leading to diminished self-worth and strained relationships. Participants described being disowned, excluded from peer circles, or seen as morally inferior, which heightened their sense of alienation. These findings emphasize the interconnectedness of digital labor, mental health, and social ostracism.

Mental health services, however, remain inaccessible or culturally unwelcoming. As Jones (2020) notes, adult content creators are often reluctant to seek therapy due to fears of moral judgment or breach of confidentiality. This was echoed by several participants who preferred informal peer support over professional help. The lack of trained mental health professionals who understand the unique challenges of digital sex workers is a critical service gap.

These findings call for inclusive, trauma-informed mental health interventions that are sensitive to the socio-cultural positioning of sex workers. Community-based programs that foster peer-led counseling and digital safety workshops could address both the emotional and practical dimensions of their needs. Furthermore, destigmatization campaigns within healthcare settings can enhance service accessibility and reduce psychological barriers to care.

4.4 Coping Strategies and Adaptive Mechanisms

Faced with psychological and social stressors, Bicolano alters demonstrated resourcefulness in building support systems and risk-mitigation strategies. Peer networks served as vital emotional lifelines, echoing the findings of Campbell (2017) [4] that solidarity among sex workers reduces isolation and fosters resilience. Through Telegram groups and encrypted forums, participants shared coping tips, reassured each other, and collectively processed trauma. These spaces functioned as decentralized therapeutic communities that circumvented institutional judgment.

Anonymity and boundary management were crucial adaptive techniques. As described by Smith and Attwood (2013) [24], digital sex workers often exercise careful control over their online visibility to avoid real-life repercussions. This study affirmed those findings: participants used tactics such as facial obfuscation, geo-blocking, and alias creation to maintain their privacy. These actions were not only tactical but deeply psychological providing a sense of control and reducing anxiety.

Importantly, these coping mechanisms were self-taught, indicating a significant gap in formal education or institutional support. The ingenuity displayed by participants in managing risk underscores the need for digital literacy programs that include privacy training, content security, and emotional regulation tailored to the unique context of adult content creators.

The implication is clear: while peer-based coping strategies are effective, they should be complemented by formalized, culturally competent interventions. Policymakers and advocacy groups must recognize digital sex work as a form of labor with specific occupational hazards and provide tools to manage them safely. Enhancing the digital resilience of marginalized content creators through targeted education and legal protections is essential for fostering a safer online ecosystem.

Overall, this study illuminates the layered and dynamic narratives of Bicolano alters, revealing how they construct meaning, manage contradictions, and assert agency amid structural constraints. Their experiences echo global patterns in digital sex work while bearing distinct cultural and religious nuances unique to the Bicol region. These insights highlight the need for culturally grounded, compassionate, and inclusive dialogues around digital labor and sex work in the Philippines.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the lived narratives of Bicolano adult content creators, shedding light on their motivations, identity negotiations, emotional experiences, and coping strategies within the context of digital sex work. Grounded in narrative inquiry, the findings reveal a multifaceted interplay of socio-economic necessity, personal empowerment, cultural conflict, and adaptive resilience. Participants navigated their roles as digital sex workers with both vulnerability and agency, crafting identities that allowed them to survive economically while managing the psychological and social costs of stigma.

The research contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital sex work functions as both a survival strategy and a site of meaning-making, particularly in marginalized, religious, and economically challenged regions like Bicol. By centering the voices of Bicolano alters, the study underscores the need to move beyond one-dimensional moral or legal

discourses. It advocates for nuanced, culturally sensitive, and rights-based approaches that recognize digital sex work as legitimate labor deserving of protection, support, and dignity.

6. Recommendations

Considering the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, there is an urgent need for mental health services that are inclusive, non-judgmental, and responsive to the unique realities of adult content creators. Training programs for counselors, social workers, and healthcare providers must incorporate modules on digital sex work, destigmatization, and trauma-informed care. Support hotlines or online therapy platforms should also offer anonymous services tailored to digital laborers.

Second, government agencies and NGOs should consider developing digital literacy and safety programs specifically for sex workers. These programs could include training on data protection, risk management, and content control strategies. Simultaneously, peer support networks should be strengthened and recognized as vital sources of community care, perhaps through safe community hubs, online forums, or institutional partnerships. Ultimately, policies addressing digital sex work in the Philippines must be human-centered, balancing protection with autonomy and grounded in the lived experiences of those most affected.

7. Acknowledgement

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