

## Exploring Audience Engagement and Critical Narrative Intervention With the *Celling Sex* Film

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Young women who trade sex experience high rates of stigma that exacerbate existing health inequities. The products of participatory visual methodologies show promising potential for challenging stigma. In total, 15 young women who trade sex created individual brief videos to share their experiences. Following a participatory analysis, the videos were edited into one composite movie to highlight key messages. Eight facilitated screenings (cohosted by participant filmmakers and research team members) were organized with diverse community and health organizations. Audiences were led through a series of interactive writing, drawing, viewing, and discussion activities. Sessions were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and inductively analyzed to assess the impacts of the film on audiences. Audience reactions were categorized into four overarching themes to describe main impacts: consciousness-raising, commitments to practice and organizational change, effectiveness of the approach, and limitations. Audience responses demonstrated that facilitated screenings can challenge harmful stereotypes and help viewers consider pathways to enact positive change in their personal and professional lives. However, changing deep-rooted patterns of stigma takes time, dedication, and accountability.

**Keywords:** participatory visual methodologies; audience/audiencing; critical audience engagement; cellphilms; stigma; trading sex; pedagogical impacts; social change

Sugaring is a transactional practice wherein material goods are exchanged for dates. Seeking Arrangements (2020) estimates that there are nearly 1 million women in Canada engaged in finding “mutually beneficial” relationships on their platform. Despite the relative ubiquity of the practice, trading can elevate numerous physical, social, and mental health risks (Kendrick et al., 2021).

The *Celling Sex* community-based participatory research project worked with 15 racially diverse cis and queer self-identified young women (aged 19–25 years) to document their trading experiences and harm reduction practices (MacEntee et al., 2021). Participants each created individual cellphilms, or brief films made on cellular devices, in response to prompts (see MacEntee et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017). Following a participatory analysis process, a short composite film was edited together from participants’ individual stories to highlight key project themes (MacEntee et al., 2021). Composite films are made through weaving samples of participant-generated media together with captions, titles, and voiceovers, to create a cohesive storyline (Mitchell, 2011). This article positions the *Celling Sex* composite as a critical narrative intervention and describes the pedagogical impacts of its screening with eight different audiences.

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**Authors’ Note:** We would like to thank the entire *Celling Sex* team, including Mesha, April, Friesa, Crystal, Daisy, Sophia, Halimo, Erica, Ciann, and all the amazing organizations that welcomed us. This project is funded by the Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Address correspondence to Sarah Flicker, Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, York University, 109 HNES, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada; email: flicker@yorku.ca.

### Health Promotion Practice

December 2021 Vol. 22, Suppl 2 33S–43S

DOI: 10.1177/15248399211040492

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## ► MEDIA, MEANING MAKING, AND METHODOLOGIES

Social knowledge is influenced by mainstream media. Hollywood representations can affect consumers' sense of identity and self (Hall, 1997; Mahtani, 2001). Women who trade sex are regularly portrayed as carriers of the disease (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2009), social plagues (Strega et al., 2014), criminals lacking in morality who transgress norms, and/or as victims needing to be saved (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2009; Janzen et al., 2013). Strega et al.'s (2014) review of sex worker depictions in Canadian media found that binary oppositions of "us" and "them" emerge through dominant portrayals of women as "vermin-victim" (p. 10). These narratives embed themselves into the social subconscious. As Stuart Hall (1995) argues, these become "the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (p. 8). These stigmatized narratives can impede the health and well-being of women who trade.

There is a wealth of literature that documents the stigma—both real and perceived—that sex workers experience from health and service providers in Canada (Benoit et al., 2018; Lazarus et al., 2012; Sanders & Campbell, 2007) and its detrimental effects (Socias et al., 2016). Conscious or unconscious bias can affect the decisions and treatment offered by providers (Blair et al., 2011; FitzGerald & Hurst, 2017).

In contrast, there is a paucity of literature that speaks directly to the stigma and its health implications on young people who trade. It is well documented that young women encounter conflicting messages about sexual conformity and deviance (De Ridder, 2019; Dobson, 2014). In popular culture, desired gender and sexual norms are catapulted onto young women. Among those who do not conform, these portrayals contribute to internalized shame without providing information on how to stay sexually healthy (Holland et al., 2020; Hust et al., 2008). Moreover, those who do not fit hegemonic tropes (e.g., trans, sexually diverse, Black, Indigenous, and other young women of color), experience added layers of objectification and racism that are exacerbated through processes of colonialism, capitalism, and Euro-Western patriarchy (de Finney, 2015; Flanders et al., 2017; Matthews, 2018). Together, these systems directly influence health outcomes (Benard, 2016; Bourassa et al., 2004). For *Celling Sex* participants, stigma (perceived or actualized) was a significant barrier to accessing support (Kendrick et al., 2021).

Inspired by the work of Fiske (1992) and others (Livingstone & Das, 2013; Rose, 2001) on "audiencing" (or the study of audience interpretation, reception, and resultant social effects), we explored the impact of sharing

the stories of young women who trade with diverse audiences. Participant-generated media shows promise in challenging dominant narratives (Burgess, 2006; Flicker et al., 2017; Packard, 2008) and as educative tools (Cammaraota & Fine, 2008; Flicker et al., 2018). Consequently, there is increased interest in documenting the "impact of showing" (MacEntee & Mandrona, 2015; Mitchell, 2015). While the products of participatory visual methods show potential as teaching and learning tools, there is a paucity of research that explores their pedagogical impact. We take up Mitchell et al.'s (2017) framework for critical audience engagement that encourages researchers to reflect on how materials are shared, with whom, and what happens, to explore the pedagogical work of disseminating participatory visual works.

## ► METHOD

### *Recruitment, Interviews, and Cellphilm*

*Celling Sex* was born out of a partnership between York University, Wilfrid Laurier University, Planned Parenthood Toronto, and Black Creek Community Health Centre. The ethics protocol was approved by both universities. Digital and paper fliers were posted at health, education, and social service agencies across Toronto.

In total, 15 young people with personal experience trading sex participated. Seven identified as Black or mixed, two as Asian, one as South Asian, one as Pakistani, and another as Columbian.<sup>1</sup> Two identified themselves as White and one person as "non-White." They were all between the ages of 19 to 25 years, identified as female or nonbinary, and had varying levels of trading experience. They use a wide range of terminology to describe their relationships, including sugaring, escorting, finessing, selling nudes, or being in a "strange" or "hypergamous" relationship.

Each met individually with a member of the research team to complete a semistructured confidential interview and create a brief (2–5 minute) cellphilm inspired by the prompt: "What do you want other people to know about trading?" They were offered \$20/hour as an honorarium. Participants employed a range of techniques to maintain anonymity in their cellphilms, including relying on drawings and handwritten signs and/or shielding their faces. Further details of the cellphilm method and its outcomes are discussed elsewhere (MacEntee et al., 2021).

### *Creation of the "Celling Sex" Composite Film*

Ten out of the 15 filmmakers attended a group screening and analysis meeting. The DEPICT method, a participatory analysis approach, was followed to



**FIGURE 1** Stills From the Celling Sex Film. (a) *Top left*: When the participant was looking to confide in her cousins she was met with the response, “You are such a slut, such a hoe. How could you be selling sex for material like that? Do you not have any self-respect? Do you not have any shame? What is wrong with you? Has the Western culture completely changed you?” *Top right*: One of the judgmental remarks that a participant received from her therapist. (b) *Bottom left*: “For every \$500 date I would spend hours searching through profiles on Seeking Arrangement or messaging weirdly needy guys.” *Bottom right*: Advice to other people who trade, or who might consider trading.

collaboratively identify cross-cutting themes (Flicker & Nixon, 2014). Participants were given film summary handouts with space to jot down up to three key themes per video. They subsequently used sticky notes to collaboratively organize thematic clusters (MacEntee et al., 2021). Participants suggested stitching stories together to create a composite film to highlight these themes. The five participants who could not attend (due to scheduling conflicts and/or confidentiality concerns) met with MacEntee one-on-one.

We reconvened for a private screening of the rough cut, edited by MacEntee, to solicit further feedback. Suggestions were incorporated into the final Celling Sex film, which was endorsed at a third team meeting. Those who were featured, but unable to attend, were sent a

digital copy for approval. Consent to share the film was granted by participants.

The 17-minute Celling Sex film (see Figure 1a and b for stills) showcases the diverse motivations and experiences of participants. Viewers are offered insight into how to set up and negotiate dates while navigating physical, social, and emotional risks. The film ends with a plea to listen to young women who trade. Its eclectic aesthetic reflects the diverse visual choices made by the participants.

### **Screenings and Studying Audience Response**

Participants identified the following priority audiences for their films: health and social service providers

**TABLE 1**  
**Constellation of Screenings**

<i>Audience</i>	<i>No. of Attendees (Audience Members)</i>
1. Young parents' screening	9 <sup>a</sup>
2. Underhoused youth	6
3. Sex shop customers	4 <sup>b</sup>
4. HIV youth support group	5
5. Peer health volunteers	10 <sup>c</sup>
6. LGBTQ+ community center	9
7. Staff from a multiservice agency	7
8. Professional sex workers	8

NOTE. LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.

<sup>a</sup>The young parents' screening was not audio recorded.

<sup>b</sup>Fifteen people registered online; however, this did not translate into attendees.

<sup>c</sup>This group was broken into two. Both conversations were recorded; however, one recording file was corrupted resulting in one transcribed discussion.

(including trainees), youth who are (or considering) trading, and “the general public.” A new ethical protocol was approved to study screenings. With specific audiences identified, Kendrick and a research assistant cross-referenced a spreadsheet containing the organizations, service providers, and student associations who assisted with the initial recruitment for *Celling Sex*. MacEntee and Flicker reached out to university colleagues who taught in health, social work, and education programs and inquired about hosting screenings in their classes. In total, 30 organizations and 10 professors were contacted.

Over the course of 4 months, we held 16 screenings and reached 150+ people. However, because some of these screenings happened before/after our official data collection window (including those that transpired in university classrooms) and not everyone who attended consented, here we report on eight community screenings with 58 consenting participants (see Table 1). These include screenings held on location with drop-in groups for sex workers, young parents, underhoused youth, and HIV+ youth, as well as one with health and social service providers and one with peer health volunteers. Additionally, two public screening events were organized, one at a local sex shop and the other at an LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community center.

The goal of the screenings was to challenge stigma related to transactional sex. Each screening was cofacilitated by at least one member of the academic research team and one participant. Six cellfilm makers were

actively involved in screening events. They increasingly took on leadership roles such as conducting presentations and securing screening opportunities.

Screenings were between 60 and 90 minutes in duration (see Figure 2). After introducing the project, written consent was sought from audience members to participate in evaluation activities and record discussions. Audience members were given a blank index card and asked to share their demographic information on one side and their initial ideas or definitions of trading on the other (see Figure 3). The composite film was then screened. Brochures that highlighted key themes and discussion questions were distributed. Audience members were then given a few minutes to quietly write down their initial responses.

A facilitated discussion followed. In some cases, all audience members gave their consent to be audio recorded. In others, we broke into smaller groups for discussion so that only consenting responses were recorded. Audio recordings were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo for inductive coding and thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After each screening, facilitators held a collective debrief. Copious field notes were taken by Kendrick to account for dynamics in the room that shaped the screenings that could not be captured by the audio recorder as well as the debrief discussions.

## ► FINDINGS

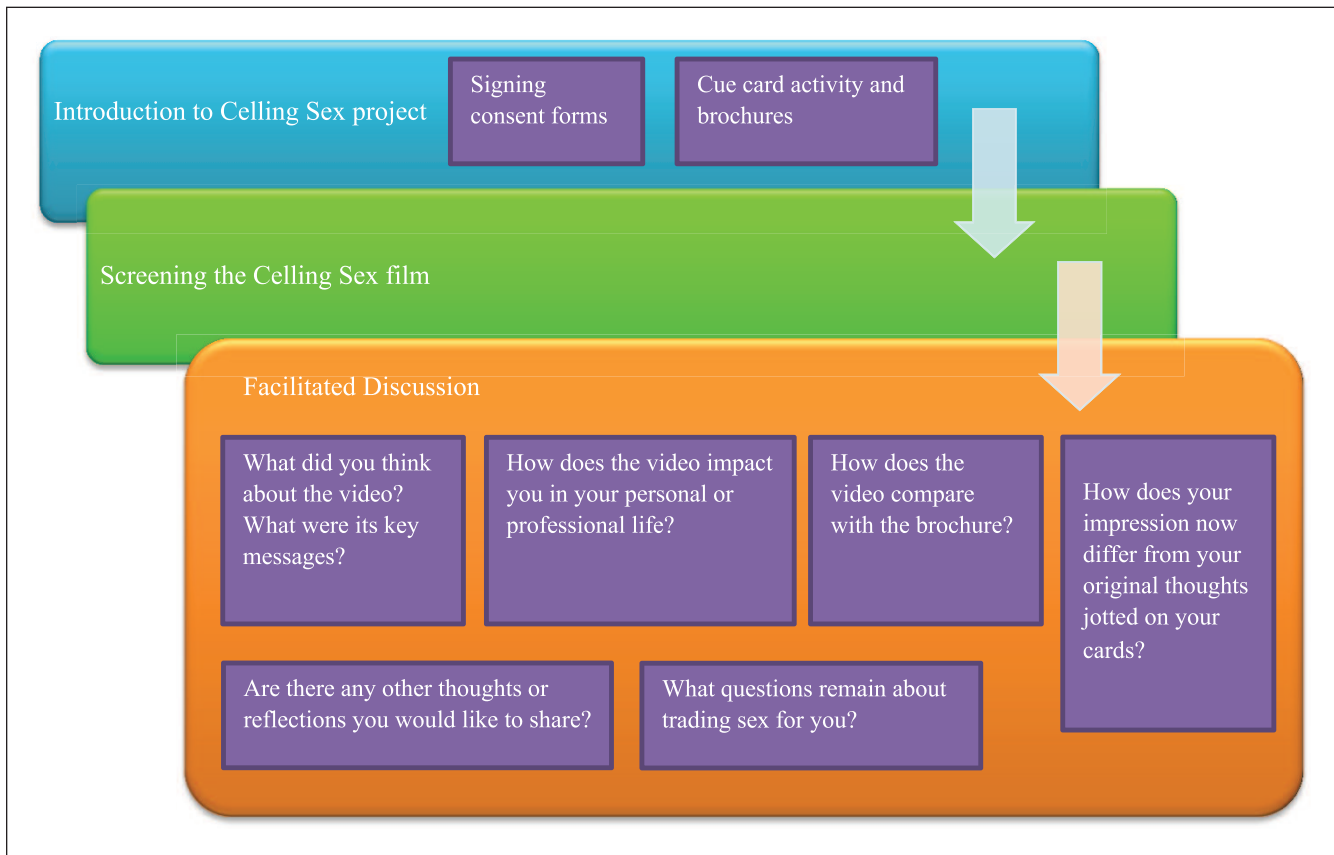
Audiences were diverse in social makeup. Based on returned demographic information, 69% of audience members identified as women, 6% as nonbinary, and 25% as men. Black and White women were well represented, at 32% and 32%, respectively. South Asian, Asian, Latina, Mixed, and Middle Eastern people made up the remaining 36%. Audiences' ages ranged from 15 to 59 years. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout. Inductive and iterative analyses of the transcribed data revealed four key themes: consciousness raising, commitments to practice and organizational change, effectiveness of the approach, and limitations.

### *Consciousness Raising*

Audiences commented on how the screening catalyzed critical reflection about (a) relationships in their lives and the transferability of harm reduction practices and (b) confronting preconceived notions.

*Relationships in Their Lives and the Transferability of Harm Reduction Practices.* At six of the screenings, 18





**FIGURE 2 Anatomy of a Screening**

audience members described how the film helped them appreciate a fuller spectrum of transactional behavior that may be present in various relationships. Evan from the HIV+ youth support group shared,

We’ve all done things that we don’t like to do for money. My mind goes to those jobs that I hated—like I felt like I was selling myself . . . But because it was a legit job and I could file it in my taxes, society think[s] that there’s nothing wrong with it.

Jayden, from the same group, felt that the film “hit close to home. ’Cause for me I kinda questioned everything that I do. Like what kind of relationships, I have.”

At the peer health, HIV+ support group, and underhoused youth screenings, seven audience members found the harm reduction practices—some of which include screening their dates, utilizing safety apps on their phones, and meeting in public spaces—employed by women who trade to be relatable to their own online dating experiences. Ramona, who attended the underhoused youth

screening, reflected that “navigating the dating world—like everyone is right now—Seeking Arrangement or Tinder, doesn’t matter . . . the risks are exactly the same . . .” Some audience members remarked that they were able to make connections to their own lives because the film centered the voices of the young women with trading experience. Luca remarked that “trading sex is very much a part of the gay community. [For example,] dating someone older because I know I’ll go nice restaurants or get invited to a nice party” though at the same time he noted, “there is still a lot of stigma” in being able to discuss trading sex openly. Viewers felt the film humanized people who trade helping them make connections to their own lives.

*Confronting Preconceived Notions.* The Celling Sex film disrupted some audience members’ understandings of transactional sex and the young women who engage in these practices. The film pushed some viewers to reflect on cultural definitions and dimensions to trading. At the LGBTQ community center, Bahisa said, “[In Pakistan] wealthier families are sought out to give



**FIGURE 3** Audience Index Cards Describing a Selection of Definitions of Transactional Sex

the girl or bride a better life. . . . There’s some very, very transactional elements around those kinds of marriages actually.” At the underhoused youth screening, Cedella reflected, “I come from a Caribbean background, if I [trade sex], they’re gonna look at me as no good. . . . But I came to North America and [now] I see things differently.” She continued to ruminate on the double standard around the acceptability of men exchanging sex (e.g., “rent-a-dread”) in Jamaican culture. These reflections contextualize trading as a practice that happens in nuanced ways across cultural and geographic contexts. They also counter the notion (as described by a participant in the film) that trading sex is a result of moral corruption stemming from exposure to Western culture (see Figure 1a).

The film also challenged stereotypes of women who trade as uneducated or incompetent. Leilani, a peer health volunteer, felt that the film “normalis[ed] this type of work,” where “the young women used [strategies] in terms of thinking about this in respect to their larger life plans.” Alison at the public screening and Olivia, a staff member at the multiservice agency, were both surprised to see that young women in the film used spreadsheets and budgeting tools (see Figure 1b). On

reflection, Alison felt that the film was “a good tool to disrupt our own preconceived conceptions.”

At four screenings, the topic of agency—or lack thereof, as in the case of sex trafficking—was actively discussed by 13 audience members. Audiences debated ideas of (dis)empowerment. For example, at the LGBTQ community center, Dev assumed strippers (and by extension other women who sell sex) do not like their work and are exploited. Yvette responded by saying, “under a capitalist system, if you are doing sex work voluntarily, and you’re doing it because you have to make a living—I don’t think its necessarily different from doing any other job because you have to make a living.” During a public screening, Bahisa similarly ruminated that “these stigmas aren’t just around sex workers—I notice anyone that isn’t fitting into this capitalistic mold—displaced people, . . . trans folks” are subject to marginalizing discourses. Audience members challenged each other to think more deeply about structure and agency binaries, as they sought to disrupt stigmatizing narratives.

*Commitments to Service and Organizational Change.* The *Celling Sex* film highlighted the challenges that young women experience when trying to access

health supports. At six screenings, 14 service providers were present. Generally, they were initially shocked by the judgmental treatment that the young women described encountering. Janelle from the multiservice agency commented, “In this day and age there is still this stigma and victim blaming . . . it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

These types of realizations, with prompting from discussion questions, moved audiences to discuss their roles in creating shame-free spaces for people who trade. Service provider power and responsibility were acknowledged. Evan, an HIV+ youth support group facilitator, felt that

the issue isn't what people choose or choose not to do with their body—the issue is how we societally are structured to not treat that with respect. And like, it's my job to do what I can to help change that system.

Others wrestled more with the question of how they can provide nonjudgmental services to young people who trade. Sonya, a staff member at the multiservice agency, explained that safe spaces

are much easier said than done . . . people try to be non-judgemental, and compassionate, and all those good words, but when you're dealing with people whose realities are outside of your own, it is much harder to be able to understand what puts people in those positions.

Peer volunteers noted that another layer of complexity was the lack of time doctors have available for each patient. This systemic issue limits the ability of providers to forge trusting relationships with patients.

Practical strategies for change were shared. All 10 peer health volunteers stressed the importance of practicing self-reflexivity, including becoming aware of the judgments they hold and focusing on reducing those judgments. Some considered organizing more educational events for staff to build a regular practice of engaging with stigmatized topics. Madelyn reflected on shifting her delivery of youth programming to focus more broadly on online dating—“so those in the space who have the experience can get the info . . . that keeps them safer.” Overwhelmingly, participants articulated that the screening helped them to reflect more deeply on their roles, and the capacity they have in affecting change in their personal and organizational practices.

### ***Effectiveness of the Approach***

At five screenings, 16 audience members commented on the visual content in the cellfilms and how participants used different mediums—writing, drawing, speaking, and role-playing—to articulate their messages. These representational strategies showed viewers the breadth of possible applications of the cellfilm method. For example, Lucca at the HIV+ youth group was impressed by the diversity of tactics employed to maintain confidentiality: “I think there are some parallels there with the different levels to which we disclose our [HIV] status and the different mediums that we might tell our stories through.”

Brochures (see Figure 4) were another tool utilized to disseminate project findings. Several audience members across screenings felt that the brochures should be widely distributed as they were effective at communicating important information (especially for people who could not attend the screenings). As Alison, who attended the public screening commented, “they can be left around, and someone can pick it up and there [isn't] a lot of material out there for folks who trade sex that are young people from a harm reduction lens.” In contrast, the video “helps to break down stigma. . . . And [you realize] these folks are real . . . people with complex lives’, and you can't get that in a brochure.” The two resources were seen as complementary.

### ***Limitations***

Positive feedback was not universal. Participants showcased in the film were all young women. Most were students and “newer” to trading. Many did not identify as sex workers. For reasons of safety, confidentiality, and brevity, most of the young women's backstories, class, racial, and social identities were not fully contextualized in the composite. Consequently, some audience members felt that the film privileged particular perspectives. The question of why young men were not featured was raised repeatedly. This query usually sparked important conversations about the gendered nature of trading.

Professional sex workers' critiques tended to center on how the film represented a sanitized or middle-class view of trading. Based on their life experience, Noa felt that the film contributed to a “a romanticism of [trading] . . . having children, having a family wasn't really represented. I support my kids through sex work, which is a whole other stigma.” Daryn shared similar frustrations: “there's various types of individuals who sell sex and they weren't covered there, the reality is there is a lot more violence.” Both Daryn and Noa felt that the film did not encapsulate their experiences.

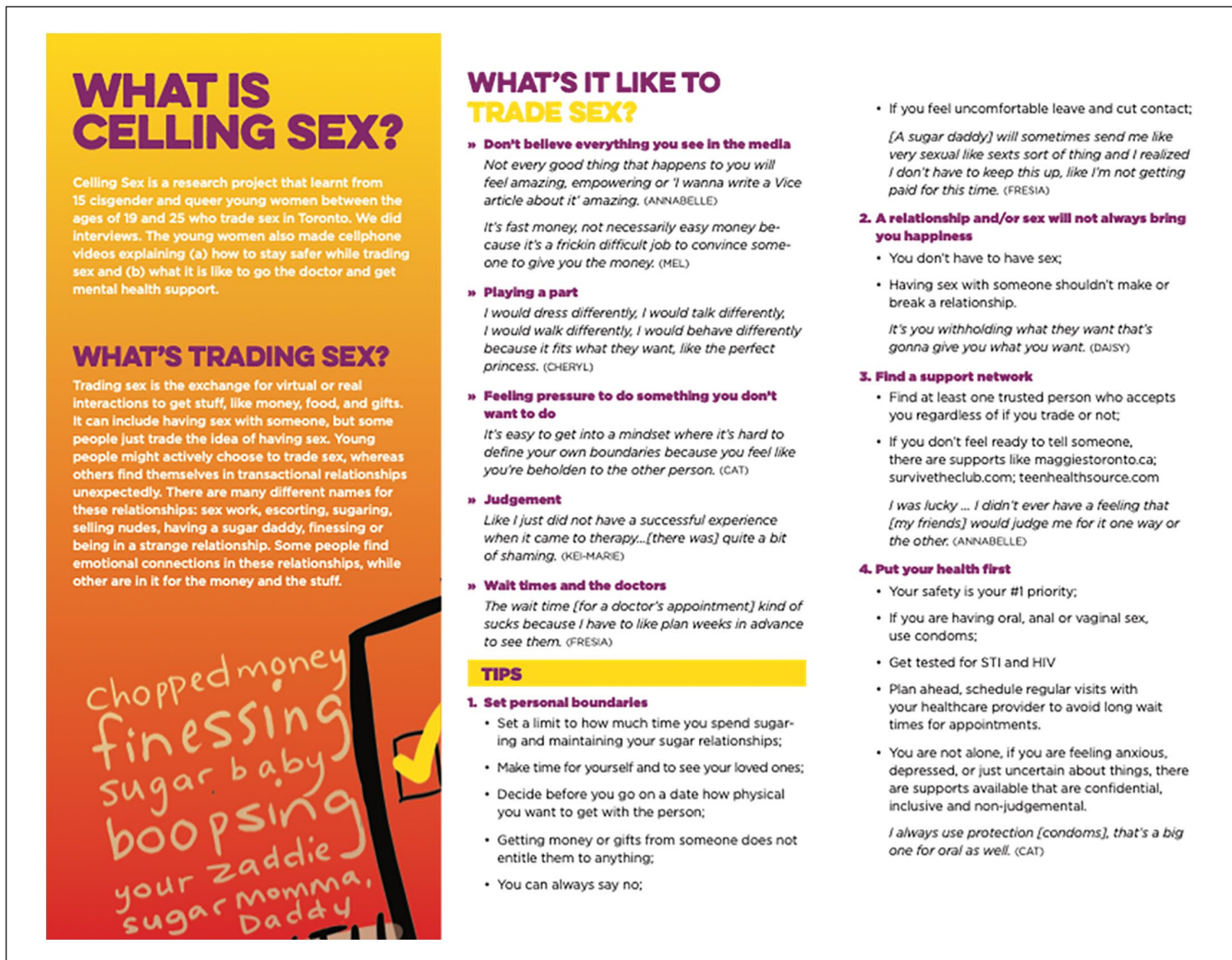


FIGURE 4 Inside of the Youth Brochure Distributed at Screenings

Carter, another sex worker, was judgmental about the practice of trading sex for luxury items (rather than subsistence): “It’s all about the . . . nice clothing, the shoes, or this phone, everything. . . . They’re willing to lower themselves and degrade themselves for materialistic goods.” Similarly, Michaela noted that poverty and inadequate social support were key factors in her decision to begin trading. While some women in the Celling Sex project chose trading in response to difficult financial realities, this was not a major theme in their cellphlms. Consequently, it did not feature prominently in the composite film.

At the conclusion of another screening, a staff member made a derogatory joke about sexualized labor. This was particularly disheartening after screening a film about challenging stigma. This sort of response demonstrates

that, perhaps, the film—either through its composition, aesthetic, or general messaging—did not resonate for all.

### Implications for Practice

*Cellphlms and Reimagining the “Other”.* The screenings were moderately effective at disrupting dominant narratives of young women who trade. Our successful mobilization of the composite film as an educative tool to challenge stigma echoes the findings of other projects that have shared the products of participatory visual methods for similar purposes (Bresler, 2006; Flicker et al., 2018; Francis & Hemson, 2006). In contrast to “othering” dominant representations in the media (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2009; Strega et al., 2014), our screenings humanized young women who trade in



agentic ways. Through showcasing the compilation of participants' stories alongside individual and group reflection activities, we adapted Mitchell et al.'s (2017) critical audience framework. We found taking a reflexive lens and making note of how the viewing unfolded, to be critical in the audience engagement process (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Many audience members with limited knowledge of transactional sex were able to realize the artificiality of perceived divisions between themselves and women who trade. The space of dialogue and learning was not limited, however, to audiences but extended to its producers as well. For our team of cellfilm makers and academics, screenings became a place to reflect on the process of knowledge production, agency, and how these evolving insights could inform our consecutive community engagements (Mitchell, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2017).

The screenings presented "new categories of connection, new visions of what our relationships can be with one another," and a new way of connecting across social identities (Collins, 1993, p. 27). These are crucial first steps to acknowledging power, uncovering commonalities, and building empathy (Wiley & Bikmen, 2012). The pedagogical work of sharing participatory visual methods holds potential for viewers to reassess what they know to be true—of themselves and others. Composite films can be a powerful tool to initiate a meaningful discussion that centers on multiple (sometimes conflicting) viewpoints.

*Key Considerations for Doing Critical Narrative Intervention.* Our process was designed to interrupt presumptions. The composite film could not do the work alone. Prefilm activities invited audience members to independently interrogate preconceptions. Postfilm discussion stimulated conversation in a supportive group environment. Brochures helped contextualize the video and encourage self-reflection. The impact of screenings as a whole—activities, film, discussion, brochure—synergistically led to conversations about change by challenging narratives on multiple fronts. For researchers interested in using a critical narrative intervention, these sorts of curated low-budget events are feasible.

Nevertheless, careful planning and human resources are required to mobilize cellfilms effectively. Reflecting on potential audiences and how to represent the project, making room for moments of discomfort, and holding cautious optimism for sparking change, are all part of the process. For our audience selection, we focused on returning to the spaces and places that assisted us with *Celling Sex* recruitment. In retrospect, other audiences, such as representatives from media organizations

or community governmental leaders, would have been optimal in rounding out Mitchell et al.'s (2017) framework of change by engaging policy makers. Other critical narrative intervention researchers may wish to pursue audiences who have access to different kinds of power. Tailoring policy briefs for these stakeholders could be worth exploring.

The screening with professional sex workers raised important questions about how to represent and narrate diverse experiences. Some of the choices made in filming, editing, and screening may have inadvertently created barriers to solidarity possibilities. While it is impossible for one film to represent all viewpoints, further care could be taken to creatively attend to these challenges. As Mitchell et al. (2017) discuss, community engagement in audience work is not a picturesque process with full consensus. The areas of tension and disagreement are invitations for the collective to listen and think together to better represent the needs and concerns of a wider circle of people.

We asked audiences to bear witness by committing themselves to deeper learning and understanding (Giroux, 2012) and to step outside of their own complacency (Fine, 2006). Service providers' stigmatizing assumptions can affect the quality of service provided to sex workers (Benoit et al., 2018; Lazarus et al., 2012; Socías et al., 2016). Those who occupy privileged positions of power may not approach visual media with an open and curious mind; this was evident at the screening where a service provider made the rude joke. To create lasting change, deep, meaningful, ongoing, and accountable engagements with service providers, and the systems where they are trained and employed may be necessary. Critical narrative interventions can be one way to begin these conversations.

### **Study Limitations**


Our study had several limitations. First, the reach of our screenings was limited to one time, in-person events. *Celling Sex* filmmakers did not consent to having their work shared online. This limited the potential reach of the composite film. Second, audiences were each small, self-selected groups, who represented particular positions. Third, because team members (including filmmakers) were present at all debrief sessions, it is possible that audience members were predisposed to provide more positive reviews and feedback.

### **► CONCLUSION**

*Celling Sex* filmmakers spoke back to dominant stereotypes and successfully challenged many audiences

to reassess their preconceived notions of trading. These findings demonstrate the potential of leveraging the products of participatory visual methods through carefully curated events to facilitate critical community conversations about social change.

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### Note

1. For the purposes of this article, we use the umbrella terms *trading sex* and *transactional sex*. Because many Celling Sex participants did not identify their relationships as sex work, taking the transactional/trading lens allowed for the inclusion of people who may not have seen themselves otherwise represented. We maintain audience members' use of different terminology during the screenings.

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