

Merchandizing sex on the web: gender bias in profiling actors and services

Abstract

This article explores the dynamics of sex commerce on the web that occurs at various websites, from escort, night club, massage parlours, dating, to multifunctional hubs. The analysis includes 149 commercial websites, focusing on three European countries, France, Greece and Slovenia, and analyses written and video/audio material with the purpose to reveal the representational patterns of sex commerce online. The aim is to explore the kinds of texts that are published on these websites and analyse actor's profiles and sex services; we analyse marketing strategies, look at the role of gender and discuss impact of profiling on the agency of sex workers. The analysis shows that websites and online networks tend to represent sexualities as a commercial niche where gender, ethnicity, class intersect in the reproduction of gender stereotyping. We focus to theorize sex work as (gendered) work, similar to, but also different from other work and analyse web representation in this context.

Key words: sex commerce, sex work, web, gender bias, representation

This is a post-print (Version 2) of the article, which was originally published in *Gender, Technology and Development*. 2015. Vol. 19(2) 181–203 by SAGE Publications Ltd. The publisher's version of this article is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0971852415578040>

Suggested citation:

Pajnik, Mojca. 2015. Merchandizing Sex on the Web: Gender Bias in Profiling Actors and Services. *Gender, Technology and Development* 19 (2):181-203. doi: 10.1177/0971852415578040.

Merchandizing sex on the web: gender bias in profiling actors and services

1. Introduction

During the past decades, the web has emerged as a space with diffused possibilities for sex commerce and work that include new practices, such as online dating, cybersex that can be based on user-generated content and interaction. These practices have opened up new opportunities for independent sex workers to engage into the production of sexual scripts and images that often turn against and challenge the dominant power relations and gender norms in the sex industry. In parallel, however, the web has provided new advertising and networking opportunities for actual places of sex commerce, such as brothels, striptease or erotic massage parlours that merchandize sex online to increase revenue. The digitalisation of sex trade and work involves shifts towards new forms of discourse and types of communication, engagement and networking that cannot be captured by those perspectives that disregard the techno-cultural transformations of sexual relations (Blair, 1998). Nonetheless, although, broadly speaking, new media offer possibilities for gender swapping and the construction of fluid identities that transcend gender, ethnic and racial boundaries, the assumption that digitalisation will enable us to do away with physical bodies and gender and racial inequalities has proven to be misleading (Nakamura, 2008). Exploring the web that offers both opportunities for manifestation of agency and also shows hierarchical relationships in online sexualities, in this article we adopt the understanding of prostitution as sex work, highlighting its professional and organizational dimensions. While we theorize sex work in relation to other types of work we at the same time acknowledge specificities of sex work that develop around gender, ethnicity and age, and may reproduce hierarchies at the intersection of these factors.

While extensive literature exists on the historical and socio-political developments and understandings of sex commerce and sex work research analysing its online operation has developed only recently and continues to be limited in scope. The aim of this article is to contribute to the debates about sexualities online by analysing the selling and representational practices of sex work at commercially oriented websites. The relationships between different types of websites, national contexts and forms of sex commerce and work are explored. We start from the hypothesis that online sex commerce and work do not constitute a monolithic set of practices that simply reproduce unequal gender relations offline. Studies of “sex for sale” have pointed out that the term is used to describe a variety of sex related commercial practices, including striptease, dancing, erotic massage, online sex and porn (Weitzer, 2003). Also, the complexities of sex commerce and work are analysed in relation to three European

geographical locations and socio-cultural and legal contexts, those of France, Greece and Slovenia, but also in relation to the transnational environments in which they are produced.

2. Sex work: cross-cutting networks and identities

Feminist scholarship in the last three decades has produced numerous works on prostitution where the debate has largely focused on the controversy between the sex work and the violence paradigm in treating prostitution, discussing also the intersections with trafficking and migration (Author, 2013). In this section we limit the discussion to the recent literature that theorizes sex work as a profession, providing a framework for the below analysis of sex commerce on the web. Several authors (Brewis and Linstead, 2000, 2002; West and Austrin, 2002) have argued for the need to move from the predominant theorizing sex work as an encounter with clients to the career or the professional identity. It has been argued that sex work as work is similar to many organizational structures in many other industries as it requires a wide range of skills and knowledge, from entrepreneurship, financial management, promotion and knowledge of the law (Brewis and Linstead, 2000, p. 168). Organizational patterns are as well shaped by the different strategies that the sex workers adopt, for example on how to manage encounters, how to minimize risk, negotiate with clients and employers, how to subvert restrictions (West and Austrin, 2002, p. 491), how to cope with stigma (Koken, 2012).

Literature (Brewis and Linstead, 2000, 2002; West and Austrin, 2002; Maher et al., 2012) that theorizes sex work from the perspective of work, its organization and professionalization also importantly contributed to the breaking of the predominant framework of victimization and morality that still largely shape discussions about prostitution. In contrast to the literature that focuses on gender and sexuality dimension in sex work – otherwise an important emphasis in analysing sex work – the literature focusing on the work and organization of sex work, on the “privileging work not sex” (Maher et al., 2012) pointed that sex workers do not feel sex work defines them more than other jobs define other workers. Studies (Brewis and Linstead, 2000; O’Neill, 2001; Sanders, 2005) that include sex worker’s own perspectives stress that their narratives most often do not focus on the sexuality dimension but on describing the work and organization aspects of their labor. Also, studies have shown sex workers are reluctant to interpret their lives as dominated by sex work. Largely these studies have shown how sex workers view themselves as active agents in the sex industry and how they adjust their work practices to the changing nature of the sex industry.

Researching sex work from the organizational point of view also opened up the understanding of active sexuality. Sex work can emerge as a practice that subverts cultural patterns and limited interpretations of sexuality; it introduces initiative into sexuality, gives a feeling of control over one’s self and empowers women to defy exploitation (O’Neill, 2001). Prostitutes thus become sex workers,

active agents who enter into unequal social relations, subvert sexual norms, determine the conditions of sex transactions and payment terms. Of course, on the other side accounts of many women in prostitution also point to the oppressive side of the business that for some remains the only and not the preferred option in their lives that can offer some level of economic satisfaction.

Important to mention is also that if we consider the intimate part of the work in sex work, the “corporeality” (West and Austrin, 2002, p. 484), then sex work exhibits specificities in the sense that it is gendered work, dependant on age, it is often emotionally demanding, with distinct exit from occupation. Some sex workers have stressed the importance of its temporary nature, pointing to health and psychological reasons for exit (Author, 2008). Also, sex work is frequently left to stigmatization and moral disqualification, or purist imagination which can function to mystify and delegitimize it as work. Thus, together with others (Brewis and Linstead, 2000, 2002; O’Connell Davidson, 1995) we here take over the conceptualization of sex work as work similar to any other type of work and at the same time as being distinct from other work.

While we should not overlook that sex work is indeed gendered and may include exploitation as a result of hierarchical power, it is equally important to acknowledge that “sexuality and gender relations do not exhaust what people do at work” (West and Austrin, 2002, p. 483). Sex work is embedded in complex social networks that shape both self-identity and professional identity which makes it necessary to treat sex work in relation to various local and global nexuses where identities are shaped and occupations transformed. We agree here with those (Brewis and Linstead, 2000, 2002; West and Austrin, 2002) who warn that theorizing sex work should acknowledge that identities are shaped in complex cross-cutting networks which is an observation that moves the debate about prostitution or sex work beyond the victim/winner, prostitute/client frames picturing sex and emotional work as intrinsic to women’s personhood, to open space to discuss organization of the industry and possibilities for construction of careers. Still, from a feminist standpoint, also these cross-cutting networks should be analysed with respect to their gender hierarchies that are reproduced in industries such as sex work largely governed by corporate capital.

3. Impact of the web

Current research points, on the one hand, that internet and new media technologies impacted sexualities negatively in the sense that they contributed further to the exploitation of women’s sexuality. Sex tourism and various electronically supported opportunities for clients, like e-forums, have negative exploitative and violence-related effects on the position of women who are engaged in the sexual industry, and reproduce stereotypical presentations of women sexuality (Hughes, 2003;

Jones, 2001; Holt and Blevins, 2007). Other research emphasizes empowerment of women's agency through online interactions (Veena, 2007; Chow-White, 2006). It is argued that "manufactured identities" (Sanders, 2005) enable sex workers to negotiate their sexuality, their identity, to exercise their agency as well as to earn money by keeping their work a private affair. In addition, recent research challenges the views of "hegemonic masculinity" that exploits women on the internet.. The argument is developed against a too heavy focus in research on only "powerful male businessmen" who exploit women in the sex industry. Such constructions of "hegemonic masculinities" negate the complexity of relations in the sex industry, reproduce male actors in their "naturalized" need of always being "in control" while neglecting the agency of sex workers and the empowering opportunities offered by the web (Garlick, 2010; Uy et al., 2004).

Our approach is different from previous analyses in the sense that it researches sex commerce and work online by recognizing their diffusion. So far, research on sex commerce practices has focused mostly on analysing specific websites like escort websites (Lee-Gonyea et al., 2009), male escort websites (Castle and Lee, 2008), gay and bisexual escorts (Uy et al., 2004), while in our case we are interested to include different sectors of the vibrant sex industry in order to grasp its complexity. In particular, this article aims to explore written and video/audio material published at sexuality-oriented commercial websites in the three states, France, Greece and Slovenia with the purpose to reveal the organizational and representational patterns of sex commerce online. Not precluding the types of websites in advance, we recognize that organization of sex work on the web stem from escort, dating, striptease, to online sex. The aim is to explore the kinds of texts that are published on these various websites, analyse actor's profiles and characteristics both in text and in picture/video, and discuss gender in representation practices that exist in digital environment related to specific national contexts.

Moreover, we want to address questions such as do commercial websites leave any open space for sex workers to communicate among themselves or get in touch with clients directly, or be able to respond to online debates? In other works, how much space does the web offer to sex workers to improve their career, are they able to participate as independent sex workers or are they coerced by the medium itself to enter into stereotypical representation? Our hypothesis is that websites and online networks tend to represent sexualities as a commercial niche ("foreign, exotic and desirable") where ethnicity, class and other personal circumstances intersect in the production of "commercialized sexualities", and where gender stereotyping is reproduced.

4. Context, sample and methodology

The analysis focuses to discuss the three country cases, that of France, Greece and Slovenia, capturing different geographical scope, i.e. the western, southern and eastern European country. These show comparable policy regimes, yet with different outcomes for sex workers' agency on the web. The three countries were chosen also because they point to low visibility of sex workers in the public which makes it interesting to compare the possible reallocation of sex commerce on the web. In the three national contexts, in the area of sex commerce and work prostitution is the only activity that is regulated. In contrast, in all three states most forms of sex work are not liable to particular legal policies. The comparison of the three states in the European context rests on the similar legal and policy regimes that produce grey spaces of illegal or semi-legal and precarious employment conditions that sex workers have to conform with. In general, legal regimes and policies in the states analysed are grounded on an inconsistent mixture of moral reasoning, from defending public morality and security of "the people" to the protection of human rights of prostitutes, while sex workers perspectives are more or less ignored.

In Slovenia prostitution was decriminalised in 2003: while selling sexual services is punishable in public places, where it constitutes an offence, the activities of pimping and mediation of prostitution are criminal offenses, while clients are not subject to the law. Apart from private apartments, prostitution is exercised in several night clubs where predominantly migrant women officially employed as artistic dancers work. By issuing working permits for dancers the state directly controls the number of immigrant women working in prostitution. In Greece prostitution is legal, but only inside licensed brothels. The law prohibits the establishment of brothels in close proximity to social institutions, such as churches, schools, hospitals etc., creating in practice a situation where at least in densely populated cities it is almost impossible to establish legal brothels. Complicated and restrictive licensing procedures render most brothels illegal. This form of illegality is largely tolerated by the police, resulting into a proliferation of so called "studios", which are brothels scattered around the Greek cities. The legal framework in France is similar: in 2003 a bill on "passive soliciting" that bans prostitution in public spaces was adopted, while in 2013 a new law introduced the penalisation of clients. While prostitution in public spaces is banned, there are several "hidden" practices through which sex workers are able to work including online escorting, massage, striptease.

The empirical analysis is based on 149 sexuality related commercial websites, focusing on the three countries, where the goal was to build a corpus of the main actors engaged in sex commerce on the web. We have retrieved a list of relevant websites using relevant search terms in French, Greek and Slovenian with the help of the top search engine Google France, Greece and Slovenia. The decision for search terms was done on the basis of literature review and by mirroring the existing debates. The list included search terms related to sex business and organization in general (such as sex commerce, sex industry, selling sex), to types of sex exchange (escort, erotic massage, striptease, table dance, call

girl) and the usual locations (night club, escort agency, massage parlour, sex studio, brothel).¹ After producing a list of websites by use of search terms, websites relevant for our analysis on sex commerce were selected. The selection was followed by a launch of an automatic web exploration process (or crawl) (Diminescu, 2012) starting from the websites of the three cases. By so doing new lists of websites were produced. All-together we selected 149 best ranked websites that allowed us to analyse fragments of the extensive sex market and work online.

We used coding of websites as further analysis and the process of coding was performed in the period from 24 February to 8 March 2012. The websites were divided among the five coders and online data collection sheet was used to record the information from each website. We first explore some general information about the website, such as their location and types. To reflect on the organization of the business we then proceed to analyse the target groups that the websites want to attract where we are interested to analyse gender roles, i.e. if and how gender is presented on sexuality oriented websites in the three states. We then focus to explore characteristics of sex commerce online in written text and in picture and video material where we want to identify the sex work representation and organization on the web. For coding we search within each website, looking at the main position of the site (home) and clicking on the navigation possibilities on the site, and we analysed text and picture from the available material. The data analysis adopted quantitative statistical method using SPSS software. Information on actor's presentations and presentation of sexual services was analysed using content analysis as a method.

5. Sexual web: The diffused market

Defining the geographic location of the website we were looking for the location of actors that manage the website (not for location of the server), and from the sample of 149 websites 52 (35%) websites go to the French case, 44 (30%) to the Slovenian and 41 (28) to the Greek case, while 11 (7%) websites from the sample focusing on the three states were recognized as being related to one of the three countries but having a larger international or Europe wide scope.

After the general exploration of the sex market in the three states online we defined the types of websites according to the predominant type of sex commerce. We were interested to see what kind of sexual exchange exists online and we classified websites according to the predominant pattern of sexual exchange on the individual website. It was outlined in the conceptual part of the article that the sex market is very diffused and vibrant in the sense of the types of sex commerce online, and this was confirmed empirically especially in Greece, but also in France while not so much in Slovenia.

Recognizing that sex commerce does not only represent a narrow niche of, for example, escort or

online sex, we initially defined as much as 12 different categories of websites, and these were later in the process joint into 7 categories: 1) 22.8% of websites are night clubs, 2) 18.8% escort, 3) 14.8% massage parlours, 4) 12.8% dating,² 5) 8.7% multifunctional sexual hubs, 6) 6% shops/advertising while 7) the category “other” included 16.1% of websites.

We see that the sex industry online reflects some peculiarities that differ in the three states. Data show that as much as 58.8% of night club websites are located in Slovenia (45.5% of websites of the Slovene sample or 20 out of total 44), followed by Greece with 23.5%. France shows a prevalence of escort websites, as 46.4% of this kind of websites were identified for the French case, followed by Greece with 25% of escort websites. If France is the country with the lowest percentage of night club websites in the sample then we see that Slovenia is the country with the lowest share of escort websites. More pronounced than escort in the French case are only massage parlours and we detect the high share of 90.9% of this kind of websites in the French case. Of 44 websites in the Slovenian case 12 (27.3%) go to dating websites while the share of these websites if compared to other states is the highest, i.e. 63.2% dating websites go to the Slovenian case where we found that these websites are keen to offer ads and publish posts related to paid sexual encounters. We see that the Greek case offers the greatest variety of sexuality related exchanges online: 58.3% of “other” websites and 77.8% of shops/advertising websites go to the Greek case that also shows a visible presence of night clubs and escorts.

The very typology of websites mirrors what have stated in the introductory part, that sex work should be treated in its diversity, even more so when analysed on the web. The validity of this claim is confirmed by the results of web crawling, a method of web exploration that we have used and that pointed to the interconnectedness of the different websites mentioned. In addition, data on sex work that relate to the specific national contexts confirm the dependence of work and organization on the complex global and local nexuses that include legal situation, perceptions of prostitution in society, local specificities of how sex work is organized, including how it functions together with other informal networks (hotel and taxi services and other business interests related but also detached from the sex industry). The perceptions of nightclub or escort sex work in Slovenia differ from those in France. The differences may be related to the scale of sex work in terms of its reach and economic profitability. French online escort market is part of an international network of escort services, and it is largely headed by English-speaking websites operating transnationally. Unlike French, Slovenian and Greek websites appeal only to a smaller niche market at the national level. The differences among the national markets can thus partly be explained by the level of internationalization of the market on the one, and nationalization on the other hand. If online escort services in France dominate the sex market, the Slovenian clients are more prone in seeking sexual services via websites of night clubs that they also tend to visit offline.

5.1. Gender bias in targeting groups of users

One of the questions that we have posed is related to target groups that commercial sex-oriented websites attract via website presentations and strategies. In particular, we were interested to explore to what an extent websites attract and if there is any bias in attracting different groups of users like men, women, the general public, also the specific minority public of LGBT population. The general public was meant for websites where groups addressed were not specifically gendered and appeared in gender neutral terms, like visitors, single people etc. Recognizing that apart from some exceptions (Uy et al., 2004) research on LGBT sex commerce hardly exists, we wanted to explore further this particular niche in the sex market. Data show that men are apparent as target groups for 82.6% of websites from our sample while women for nearly a half less, 42.3%, while 18.8% go to the general public, and the same share to LGBT (see table 1). Such trend is confirmed if we look at combinations of target groups the websites aim at: men are the sole target group for 59 or 39.6% of websites while women are the sole target group for only 5 or 3.4% of websites.

[insert Table 1 here] Website's target groups

Thus, data show that, generally, websites are more inclined to target men if compared to women; this was the case for all types of websites apart from shops/advertising websites that are, interestingly, seen as the only type that to a greater extent targets women. The percentages (apart from shops/advertising) for women varied from 13.6% to 63.2%, and were much higher for men, i.e. from 73.7% to 96.4%. Gender bias is therefore strongly present and it differs according to the types of websites which confirms that when treated in relation to all other work specificities of sex commerce and work should also be acknowledged.

For example, 27 out of 28 (94.4%) escort websites target men and the share was only 32.1% for women. One of the highest discrepancies is also noted for massage parlours: 86.4% target men and only 13.6% women. 73.5% night club websites target men and 41.2% women, while dating websites show a weaker gender bias: 73.7% versus 63.2% (see table 2). Correspondingly, data show that the bigger the difference, the smallest the share of websites that target the general public. For example, 36.8% of dating websites target the general public and these sites were also recognized as those with the smallest gender gap. Contrary, none of massage parlours and only one escort website target the general public, and these websites are among the types with the biggest gender gap in addressing target groups.

[insert Table 2 here] Target groups by type of website

We also looked at types of services according to target groups that websites attract, and here gender bias was confirmed for all types. All but one website that offers escort as type of service target men (97.9%), and the percentage for men is the lowest (while still extremely high) for table dance (82.6%). Shares for women are much lower: from 37.5% (erotic show) to 21.2% (erotic massage) with the exception of online sex: 64.7% of websites offering this type of service target women which is far the largest share (the share for men is 94.1%). Thus, the websites mostly want to attract men as a target group/customers, and it seems that some services are traditionally pronounced as services women perform for men only (like escort, dance). Interestingly, data show that women appear as a target group more visibly when services are performed online (such as online sex), and, as we have pointed out above, when they are addressed as buyers in shops.

We can conclude from the data that the sex market online shows a visible gender distortion in addressing target groups and services, and that some types of websites, like night clubs and massage parlours show a very strong bias, i.e. a low level of targeting groups in gender neutral terms. This, again, confirms sex work not only appears as any kind of work, but as specific work in the sense that it sustains stereotypization of gender roles on the web.

6. Textual analysis: Strategies of actor profiling

We next looked at the actor profiling at websites, i.e. what is the information on actors/service providers and how it is shaped. Analysis shows that 36.9% of websites publish data on actors in forms of menus where audiences can experiment and choose actors, while 32.9% of websites publish information on actors in more general terms, not using specific menu tools. Menu forms appear as direct marketing strategies that seem not to differentiate between sex and other markets; strategies resemble to those used in other sectors like food, furniture etc. which is in congruence with the approach that treats sex work together with other types of work (Brewis and Linstead, 2000).

Actor profiling in menu forms is mostly used by escort (29.1%), dating (25.5%) and “other” (21.8%) websites. Similarly, among the types of services offered dating (65.6%) and escort (61.7%) publish actor’s profiles in menu forms. Also, 47.1% of online sex as type of service uses actor’s presentations in menu forms and 30.4% of table/lap dance as a type of service. We can assume from this and other above presented data that these three types of websites if compared to other types are, as sexual markets, more dependent on the web than some others and that they consequently explore the web in various market-oriented terms to a greater extent than others, for example, night clubs. This is

confirmed by previous research that points to a kind of “conservativeness” of online presence of night clubs, prevalent in the Slovenian case, if compared to other niches in the sex industry (Author, 2008).

More than a half of websites (81 of 149 or 54.4%) publish actor’s characteristics such as age, ethnicity etc. (see table 3).³ Actors in the cases presented below are all women; our sample of websites hardly included men actors as service providers, and the sex market, especially in Greece and Slovenia has proven to be visibly oriented to serve men as clients (cf. Author et al., 2013). Most frequently information on age (47.7%), bodily (41.6%) and personal characteristics (28.2%) is available. When profiles give information on ethnicity, different ethnicities are stressed, such as Asian, Arab, white, black, Latino and their various combinations. Also, when profiles provide information on nationality different, usually very specific is mentioned like Czech, Slovakian, Moldavian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Slovenian, Russian, Greek, Moroccan etc. or is expressed in more general terms like Eastern European, Asian. Of other characteristics mentioned actor’s name was most common, while some other information was also provided, such as marital status, education, sexual preferences, hobbies, zodiac signs.

[insert Table 3 here] Actor’s characteristic

Majority of websites publish profiles of actors and/or provide information on actor’s characteristics, in general terms or in forms of profiles. As confirmed by statistical data, it is very common that profiles include statistics on the physical description (height, weight, chest size, breast size, waist etc.), also body-related characteristics, such as colour of hair, eyes, presence of tattoo etc. Information on country of birth, ethnicity or race may also be provided and is sometimes visibly stressed, appearing alongside with the photograph.

The profiles below that appeared at escort and forum websites in Slovenian and Greek sample show examples of such straightforward presentations focusing on short facts, often combined with information on the kinds of services that are “on offer” and with contact information.

SL, escort

Name: EscortX
 Gender: Female
 Hair color: Black
 Hair Style: Long
 Age: 25
 Height: 5'5" (164 cm)
 Weight: 110 lbs (50 kg)
 Bust: 32B (81 cm)
 Waist: 26" (66 cm)
 Hips: 34" (86 cm)

GR, escort

Location: Greece, Athens
 Age: 26
 Nationality: Greek
 Body hair: Shaved/Waxed
 Height: 6ft (183cm)
 Weight: 11st 7lbs (73kg)
 Eye colour: Green
 Hair colour: Dark brown
 Tattoos: No
 Orientation: Gay

SL, forum

Name: Anamarija
 Age: 35
 Location: Ljubljana - Šiška
 Height / Weight / Tits: 165cm / 74kg / 5
 Hair: Blond, long
 Pubic hairs: Tidy
 Tatoo: No
 Piercing: No
 Country of origin: Slovenia

Body: Thin
Ethnicity: Caucasian
Specialty: Straight, masseuse,
girlfriend, dominatrix,
submissive, bisexual, couple
Available to: Men, women,
couples
Availability: Outcall

Smoke: No
Drink: Sometimes
Availability: Outcalls only

Ethnic group: White
Smoker: No
Drug problems: No
Affiliation: Independent

Other profiles, that, however, do not appear as frequently as the types above, retain the format of providing clear-cut information but are somewhat more personalized and publish information on the actor's general and specifically sexual likes and dislikes, hobbies and interests. Also, some profiles of this type understand personal information as intriguing sexual invitation as shown in the section "about me" in the example of the profile at call girls and night club websites below.

SL, escort

Age: 24
Status: Single
Education: Still studying
Height: 160 cm
Weight: 48 kg
Hair color: Black
Eye color: Brown
Interests: animals, especially
dogs, travel, fitness, running,
skiing
What I like: men who know
how to deal with a woman, sea,
mountains, adrenalin in all
possible forms
What I do not like: cunning,
contempt, violence

GR, call girl

Sex: Female
Age: 22 years
Country: Romania
Skin color: White
Hair color: Brunette, long
Eyes: Brown
Bust size: 3
Height: 167 cm
Weight: 55 kg
Smoker: No
Availability: Incall, Outcall
Languages spoken: English
About me: A naughty brunette
girl that can make you explore
all the secret paths of
sensuality in such ways that
will remain unforgettable!

SL, night club

Name: Ruby
Nationality: Dominican
republic
Age: 22
Height: 161 cm
Language: Spanish, a little
English
Personality: sparkles in the
eyes, I only wait to get on you
...

Another type of biographical sketches includes a more personal touch to satisfy a men gaze, with direct invitations from women sex actors. These sketches start with the women's introduction that combines some bodily characteristics with more personal information, and they include invitations of the customers, presented in different forms.

FR, massage parlour

I'm 24 years old. I'm average size, 1m70. I have brown hair, pale skin and green blue eyes. I have a beautiful chest, 95D, generous and very strong, despite its size. I love my breasts. I find them elegant and sublimely sexy. I love my tiny pink nipples. I have very small buttocks. I can easily fit into a size 36 panties or a very narrow mini-string set.

GR, escort

Hello gentlemen, I'm a sexy girl, 24 years old, sweet and enjoyable person to spend time with. I have a good sense of humour and looking for gentleman who want spend a nice time and enjoy my company. I hope we can have a great time together. I guarantee you will have the best time in your life with me! No sms please! 150 eur/1 hour.

The data presented show how self-identity is used on the web as a blunt market strategy through which professional identities are also created. This confirms the blurring of the private/public, self-identity/professional identity in online sex work (Brewis and Linstead, 2000, 2002). The fact that various websites share identical structures such as menus and search forms, especially in the case of user profiles points to a tentative observation that these forms tend to limit self-presentation. The very repetition of the same or similar categories of texts (age, bodily characteristics, etc.) making up the profiles produce “menu-determined identities”, beyond what Lisa Nakamura calls “menu-driven identities” (Author et al., 2013).

6.1. Strategies of sexual service profiling

We have shown above that various websites promote different types of sexual services. We found that presentations of services also differ according to the type of websites. Night clubs often advertise socializing/drinking and dinning with girls, striptease, table/lap dance, like: “Our dancers are performing full striptease dance and nothing stays hidden!”; “The program offers fifteen dancers from the Caribbean islands that entertain you till down”; “We have the best Ukrainian strippers” (SL). To eliminate competition descriptions in superlatives are quite common: “Find the most sexy and beautiful pole dancers and the most handsome dancers from all over the world are here!! And they offer a unique live strip show.... The most sexy club is unique from every aspect. The greatest erotic show, with the most impressive stage, the best music sound and above all, the best service and very good prices.” (GR)

Description of services of escort websites focus on presentation of women in text and picture: “busty, curvy, blonde, brunette, all are available” (SL). It is common for this type of websites to use marketing strategies that focus on claiming their services are “best of all”: “Every day a new girl on Athens best escort guide”; “of all the call girls in Athens, our site searches out only the most talented and beautiful. Our site also clearly labels the kind of girls you can choose from, so that the escort girl you choose is just right for you” (GR). Similar approach is used also in recruitment efforts: “We’re looking to recruit attractive and professional models to join our elite escort agency. We are a professional and well run

agency with good backing ... we have some of the best clients, so if you are pretty, fun, good figure, sexy and naughty we would love to hear from you.” (GR)

A common approach to promote erotic massage services is to emphasize the know-how of the sexy masseuse:

SL, massage parlour

Are you looking for a top level exclusive erotic massage, a combination of classic and sensual techniques, offered by an attractive, kind, fit and elegant young lady, a mesmerizing beauty with sensual gentle touches, an experienced masseuse that knows exactly what you need for utter relaxation of your body and spirit? This is the right place for you.

FR, massage parlour

What is my job of an erotic masseuse? It is simple. I move on a person to him a very sensual massage. I love doing it, nudity, physical contact excites me in 90% of the cases. I often show lots of imagination to reach my goals. Sometimes there is little physical attention, sometimes I have to go into the psychology of my subject, find his fantasies, and marry and become the image of the girl he wants me to be. In most cases it is sufficient to uncover my chest and chew my lip emitting a small gasp to get everything I want.

Dating websites differ in their operation: while some function as moderated web spaces where individuals publish own presentations, others function as agencies offering catalogues, and some target specific sexual communities, like transsexual: “This community is specially meant for transsexuals, shemales, transvestites, crossdressers, ladyboys – transgender people and their admirers. Our transgender community includes section of shemale escorts – service for gentleman who desire a company of a transsexual, transgender dating ads section, section of advertisements for people who are looking for transsexual girlfriend or love”. Descriptions from individuals differ and they usually appear in forms of personal invitations: “If you’re a lady above 40 and wants to have good time with a nice guy, call me and for small compensation I make you enjoy like you’re in heaven. Discretion reassured. For ladies only.” (SL)

These data point to the inadequacy of the simplified approach to sex work that only discusses worker/client sexual encounter. They stress very much the diffused nature of sex work which requires more nuanced approaches to understanding sex work. Also, they point to distinct and diversified, i.e. from more personalized to standardized market strategies to attract clients and increase business. On the one hand the profiling of sexual services reproduces standardized and somewhat reduced identities of sex workers. Still, we can argue, on the other hand, that the web is used as a market site to increase

business by way of selling what is believed to sell best, i.e. inviting and exoticized description of sexual services.

6.2. Analysis of visual material: prevalence of women actors and their body close ups

Our research included analysis of visual materials, namely picture and video. We explored to what an extent actors are presented in visual material and if the presentations show differences according to gender. Also, we wanted to find out other features such as whether visual presentations consider anonymization. The vast majority of 85.2% of websites presents actors in visual material. The appearance of women actors is more frequent as they appear in 83.9% of websites while men actors appear in 30.9% of cases. We see here the opposite trend if compared with the above analysed data on target groups: while, on the one hand, the share of websites that target men is twice as big if compared to the share of websites that target women, on the other hand, a trend is reversed when we discuss presentation of actors in pictures that predominately portrait women actors. Thus, the analysis points out that the sexual commercial web visibly wants to attract men as customers, and consequently it advertises women and their services for predominantly men clientele which again supports the thesis that sex work needs to be treated in its dimension of gender differences.

In addition, data show that only 20.1% of websites used actor's presentation with face anonymized. It is common for the websites to promise anonymity and confidentiality to the clients (men) while we see that (women) providers of services are rarely anonymized online. Contrary to the high share of actor's presentation in visual material we see that the appearance of users/customers is low as only 18.8% of websites present users in visual materials. Men users' presentation is a bit higher: 18.1% men and 16.1% women users are presented, and 3.4% are presented with face anonymized.

Also, we analysed ways of actors' presentations in visual material (see table 4). We see that body is visibly presented in visual materials of as much as 74.5% of websites that present actors and that the share of pictures where the face is pronounced is lower, i.e. 54.4%. Half-naked and bathing suit presentation of actors both amount to the high share of 65.1% of websites and porn-like pose to the high share of 62.4% while the share of dressed actors is much lower (26.2%). We see that individual presentation of actors is much more frequent than group presentation and also, we see visible shares of actors presented in ethnic diversity and racialized.⁴

[insert Table 4 here] Ways of actor's presentations

Women's gazes can be inviting, serious or even aggressive, each intimating the type of sexual performance they would be providing but also the type of woman they are. The women, naked or in

scanty underwear, assume several different sexually provocative and raunchy poses lying, sitting or standing, that flaunt the breasts and buttocks. Representations of women's bodies are central in the photographs; body images in the context of online marketing of sexual services can be seen to function not only as objects of sexual provocation/desire but also as "objective" sexual information; you can see in advance what you will get (Author et al. 2013).

7. Discussion and conclusion

While there are studies that indicate that in some sectors, mainly escorting and porn, new media have opened avenues for sex workers to work independently of the control networks that previously regulated their lives (Uy, 2004; Veena, 2007; Chow-White, 2006; Gatrell, 2010), and recent research also points to complex and multi-directional sexual power on the internet (Brickell, 2012) we have shown that there are also many forms of exploitation and distorted representation of sex workers that arise from new media. Our analysis of the commercial sexual web has revealed the peculiarities of the selling strategies that are not particularly attentive to the agency of sex workers but are mostly oriented to provide opportunities and a forum for businessmen, and clients of sexual services. In principle, the web has opened new opportunities for manifestations of agency of sex workers while trends of commercialization of the sexual web, as we have shown, have also worked against this same agency.

Analysis of the commercial web shows that clients can select a sex worker according to a wide range of criteria. What is more, building up a distinct online community gives them opportunity to exercise "extraordinary power" in relation to women sex workers (O'Connell Davidson, 2001) and shape sex work market by their own interests. On the one hand we could argue that such conclusions contribute to the reproduction of linear understandings of masculinity. On the other hand, our analysis also shows that women are still commodified as sex goods available to be consumed by men, who choose from the offers on the menu which can have the effect of diminishing sex worker's professionalism and agency. Clients maintain rich records on a high number of women who do not have the possibility to object client's ratings and reports. Women sex workers who meet the forum users' standards of women sexuality and beauty, while providing the widest range of sex practices for the least possible pay are "awarded" with best marks and are the most popular. On the other hand, women sex workers, who do not fulfil clients' expectations, receive warning reports and lowest ratings. Even in these cases it remains dubious to what an extent they can access these – the analyses of websites in the Greek and the Slovenian case show that most often ads of women sex workers are advertised by middlemen who also appear as a contact person for clients which all points to a limited agency of sex workers. These data should also be interpreted in relation to political, economic, social and cultural proximities of the countries analysed, and we could argue, for the Greek and the Slovenian case, that the web here

reflects strong patterns of “traditionalism” of these societies, despite internationalization and digitalization of sex work.

Our French case that has the most internationalized market among the three countries shows that the web serves as a space for sex workers to advertise their own work. Still, reflecting the national context and policy, that shows a prevalence of escort websites revealed that even on platforms designed for independent escorts, sex workers have to adapt to global patterns of presentation. Even though we identified quite diverse online sex markets in all three countries, each of them has one or more online authorities (such as forums or sex work advertising platforms) which sets the standards sex workers have to adapt to. This makes them powerful players in the sex industry. Our analysis showed that sex workers – regardless if they work independently or not – hardly have the possibility to take part in the online discussions, to challenge the above analysed patterns of selling and representation that sustain visible gender bias.

On the other hand, our research confirmed the complexity of sex work organizing on the web that reflects complexity of networks and identities that shape this work. A widening array of jobs in the digital sex industry contributed to the increased complexity of the intermeshing of private and public identities of sex workers. The data show how self-identity is used on the web as a market strategy through which professional identities are created. A visible pattern is also that market strategies offer more or less standardized identities that appear in forms of menus that are on the offer where sex market does not differ from other markets. We can thus conclude that the web can on the one hand have positive impact on the careers of sex workers while it functions, on the other hand as a medium reinforcing stereotypical pictures of sex work and especially of women sex workers.

References

- Blair, C. (1998). “Netsex: empowerment through discourse.” In B. Ebo (Ed.), *Cybergetto or cybertopia? Race, class and gender on the Internet* (pp. 205–217). Westport: Praeger.
- Brewis, J. & Linstead, S. (2000). ‘The worst thing is the screwing’ (2): Context and career in sex work. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 7(3), 168–180.
- Brewis, J. & Linstead, S. (2002). Managing the sex industry. *Culture and Organization*, 8(4), 307–326.
- Brickell, C. (2012). Sexuality, Power and the Sociology of the Internet. *Current Sociology*, 60(1), 28–44.

- Castle, T. & Lee, J. (2008). Ordering sex in cyberspace: A content analysis of escort websites. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(1), 107–121.
- Chow-White, P. (2006). Race, gender and sex on the net: Semantic networks of selling and storytelling sex tourism. *Media, Culture and Society*, 28(6), 883–905.
- Diminescu, D. (Ed.). (2012). *e-Diasporas Atlas: Exploration and cartography of diasporas in digital networks*. Paris: Éditions de la FMSH.
- Garlick, S. (2010). Taking control of sex: Hegemonic masculinity, technology, and internet pornography. *Men and Masculinities*, 12(5), 597–614.
- Gatrell, C. (2010). Who rules the game? An investigation of sex-work, gender, agency and the body. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 25(3), 208–226.
- Holt, T. J. & Blevins, K. R. (2007). Examining sex work from the client's perspective: Assessing Johns using online. *Deviant Behavior*, 28(4), 333–354.
- Hughes, D. M. (2003). Prostitution online. *Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2(3–4), 115–132.
- Jeffreys, S. (2003). Sex tourism: Do women do it too? *Leisure Studies*, 22, July, 223–238.
- Koken, J. A. (2012). Independent female escort's strategies for coping with sex work related stigma. *Sexuality & Culture*, 16, 209–229.
- Maher, J., Pickering, S. & Gerard, A. (2012). Privileging work not sex: Flexibility and employment in the sexual service industry. *The Sociological Review*, 60(4), 654–675.
- Nakamura, L. 2008. *Digitizing race: Visual cultures of the internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Uy, J. M., Parsons, J. T., Bimbi, D. S., Koken, J. A. & Halkitis, P. N. (2004). Gay and bisexual male escorts who advertise on the internet: Understanding reasons for and effects of involvement in commercial sex. *International Journal of Men's Health*, 3(1), 11–26.

O'Connell Davidson, J. (1995). The anatomy of 'free choice' prostitution. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 2(1), 1–10.

O'Connell Davidson, J. (2001). The sex tourist, the expatriate, his ex-wife and her 'other': The politics of loss, difference and desire. *Sexualities*, 4, 5–24.

O'Neill, M. (2001). *Prostitution and feminism: Towards a politics of feeling*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Author (2008).

Author (2013).

Author et al. (2013).

Sanders, T. (2005). 'It's just acting': Sex workers' strategies for capitalizing on sexuality. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 12(4), 319–342.

Veena, N. (2007). Revisiting the prostitution debate in the technology age: Women who use the internet for sex work in Bangkok. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 11(1), 97–107.

Weitzer, R. (2003). "Why we need more research on sex work." In R. Weitzer (Ed.) *Sex for sale: Prostitution, pornography, and the sex industry* (pp. 1–13). New York: Routledge.

West, J. & Austrin, T. (2002). From work as sex to sex as work: Networks, 'others' and occupations in the analysis of work, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 9(5), 482–503.

Notes

¹ These key words cover the dispersed sex market where escort stands for services related to escorting the clients, keeping company, and may also include sexual encounters, sex studios and brothels that (in Greece from our sample) refer to the ordinary perceptions of brothels where a variety of sexual services are performed. Night clubs/bars refer to spaces where usually various artistic programs are on offer and where clients meet sex workers also for further private arrangements.

² Search terms that we have used displayed some dating websites that appear as sites for advertising various sexual services and are as such one part of the vibrant online sex commerce.

³ With personality characteristics we recorded remarks such as nice, "likes men", "likes sex", humble, dominant etc.; with bodily characteristics we recorded information on height, weight, breasts, genitalia etc., and with health we were interested to see whether profiles include health related information, for example the fact that the

person is HIV tested etc. Majority of websites that contain actor's profiles are escort (34.6%), followed by massage parlours (22.2%) and dating websites (18.5%).

⁴ Exploring presentation of actors in ethnic diversity, we verified whether different ethnicity is present.

Racialized means that the actors are purposefully presented in a way that their "race" is stressed (often "races" are contrasted). With individual and /or group we looked for singularity/plurality of actors in visual material, with face / body we look if portraits and/or body are present and with porn-like presentations we looked for to material that explicitly (close-ups) portraits intimate parts of the body.