



## Becoming a Client: The Socialization of Novice Buyers of Sexual Services

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### ABSTRACT

Contributing to the growing body of research on the buyers of commercial sex services, this study explores the socialization of novice clients. Drawing on data from a popular Web-based discussion forum, the article identifies the central questions and concerns of individuals who are on the verge of purchasing sex for the first time. A second dimension of the study examines the ways in which more seasoned clients respond to novices who ask for advice in the forum. We find that the veterans' responses, taken together, help to socialize new clients and reflect a set of conduct norms and best practices within this online subculture.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 July 2016  
Accepted 26 October 2016

Research on sex work has focused much more on sex workers than on their clients, but a growing body of research is now examining clients' demographics, motives, and experiences. A recent literature review found that the majority of these studies examined male clients of female street prostitutes, rather than clients of indoor or male sex workers (Wilcox et al. 2009). Clients are challenging to study because they are difficult to identify and access. In many countries, it is illegal to purchase sexual services; and even where it is legal, clients remain stigmatized and largely hidden (Birch 2015; Hammond 2015; Weitzer 2012).

The *General Social Survey* reports that, depending on the year, 14–18% of American men state that they have ever purchased sex, 1–4% within the past year. Similar findings appear in recent *YouGov* polls of American men: 14% in 2015 and 12% in 2016. These polls likely underreport such activity because they ask about one's personal, stigmatized behavior; yet the figures nevertheless show that buying sex is not confined to just a tiny fraction of the population.

The literature indicates that motivations for purchasing sexual services range widely: difficulty finding a partner for a conventional relationship; bolstering self-esteem or masculinity; a desired sexual experience with a person of a certain appearance, cultural background, ethnicity, or sexual orientation; wanting a particular sex act, fulfilling a fantasy, seeking a thrill, or exploring one's sexuality; seeking to exercise control over or abuse another person; and desire for an emotional connection with another person without the obligations involved in a conventional relationship (Weitzer 2009:224–227).

Surveys and in-depth interviews have been used in the past to gather information on clients (Birch 2015; Holzman and Pines 1982; Huschke and Schubotz 2016; Jordan 1997; Monto 2010; Monto and Milrod 2014; Sanders 2008). More recently, clients have been accessed via Web-based discussion sites. Such forums exist around the world and bring clients and (sometimes) sex workers together in an online community with distinctive values, norms, argot, and fraternity (Blevins and Holt 2009; Williams, Lyons, and Ford 2008). Clients review the sex workers they have visited, share information with others in the forum, and discuss a wide variety of issues related to sexual services. Much of this information is publicly available online and offers unique insights into this subculture.

Studies have documented the preferences, attitudes, and reported experiences of clients of Web-based sex workers (typically called “providers”). For example, a study of the British forum PunterNet found, as expected, that clients care most about how providers look, dress, and perform sexually; but the study also revealed that clients sought providers who appear to enjoy their work and are not operating under duress (Millward 2011; cf. Huschke and Schubotz 2016). Similarly, research based on postings on The Erotic Review found that many clients seek mutuality in their interactions with providers (Milrod and Monto 2012; Milrod and Weitzer 2012). Moreover, displays of affection and emotional intimacy—part of what is known as the “girlfriend experience”—are highly sought after (Birch 2015; Holt and Blevins 2007; Holzman and Pines 1982; Huff 2011; Lucas 2005; Milrod and Monto 2012, 2016; Milrod and Weitzer 2012; Pettinger 2011; Plumridge et al. 1997). The rich data drawn from online forums challenges some traditional assumptions about indoor sex workers and their clients and documents some previously hidden interactional dynamics, experiences, and meanings among participants (Blevins and Holt 2009; Milrod and Weitzer 2012; Monto and Milrod 2014).

### Novice buyers of sexual services

One study focused on clients who regularly buy sexual services (Milrod and Weitzer 2012) and another examined clients who are seniors (Milrod and Monto 2016), but we know of no research specifically on *novices*. First-time clients are an important sub-group theoretically, because studying them can illuminate the motivations and concerns of individuals who have never entered this stigmatized arena, and how they decide to transition from fantasizing about to engaging in a paid sex encounter. How is it that someone who has never purchased sex decides to do so, and what are the main contingencies or concerns? Of course, some novices act on impulse or opportunity, such as being solicited on the street or in a casino. But many others engage in considerable “research,” deliberation, and planning. An Australian survey of men who had paid for sex found that, for first-time clients, the main motivation was to fill a void left by the ending of a relationship; other reasons were lack of sex with one’s regular partner, shyness, low self-confidence, spontaneity, and viewing paid sex similarly to other services (Birch 2015:105–115). Birch’s study did not examine the decision making these individuals engage in when they consider purchasing sexual services for the first time or the concerns they may have about doing so.

The present study aims to fill this gap by identifying and analyzing a set of key issues faced by novice buyers, coupled with the advice offered by those who respond to them online. Such tutelage is a mechanism both for legitimizing this activity and for socialization in subcultural conduct norms. The study contributes to the tradition of learning theory in deviance, and particularly Daniel Glaser’s (1956) “differential identification” theory, which highlights the ways in which individuals learn values, justifications, and techniques supportive of deviant behavior from remote and anonymous others whose behavior seems acceptable to the actor— rather than via direct, face-to-face interaction *ala* Edwin Sutherland’s (1949) differential association theory. Subcultural tutelage has been documented in a few previous studies of sex workers and their clients (Blevins and Holt 2009; Bryan 1965; Heyl 1977; Milrod and Weitzer 2012), but has not been explored for novice clients at the earliest stage of learning supportive beliefs, norms, and behavioral techniques that can smooth their transition into this deviant world.

### Research methods

The study is based on data from The Erotic Review (TER), which has been described as “the most comprehensive database featuring providers and escorts from all over the world.”<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1998, TER claims more one million members, has 250,000–300,000 unique visitors each day, and hosts as many as 1,400,000 reviews on its site. Those who participate on TER differ from the larger

<sup>1</sup>TER is accessible at <https://www.theeroticreview.com/main.asp>.

population of clients and especially from clients who patronize street-level prostitutes. Research comparing TER participants with profiles of these other client populations found that the former were more likely to be white, married, older, better educated, higher income, and more immersed in a pro-sexwork subculture (Milrod and Monto 2012; Monto and Milrod 2014). While TER participants may not be representative of the larger population of prostitution clients, it would be mistaken to conclude that they are a marginal sub-sector of this market, given the high number of visitors who routinely visit TER and similar client-based Web forums around the world as well as their self-reported involvement in sexual commerce. The poster's male gender is discernable from most postings, but actual or prospective female clients sometimes post on TER as well (e.g., inquiring whether any female providers would see them).

TER offers free membership that gives users partial access to reviews of sex workers and allows them to read and post on public discussion boards; paid VIP membership allows users full access to all of TER's features, including complete reviews, chatrooms, private messaging, and a search function. Regardless of membership, TER considers all postings and information on its website to be public material.

Data were collected from TER's "FAQ for Newbies" discussion board. TER encourages new visitors to use the newbie board to ask questions regarding sexual commerce. TER also asks "more seasoned members" to socialize newbies by posting responses on this discussion board. We examined all threads in TER's newbie discussion board during a four-month period (January 1, 2015–April 30, 2015). Threads were deemed irrelevant if the discussion was initiated by a provider instead of a prospective client or if the discussion pertained to a technical issue.<sup>2</sup> All other threads were considered relevant, resulting in analysis of 283 multiple-post threads. We coded the text of each poster's statements and questions, responses from others, and any subsequent entries by the original poster.<sup>3</sup> An inter-coder reliability test was performed with assistance from a second coder familiar with research on the sex industry. She coded 28 randomly selected threads (10% of all threads), yielding 71% agreement with the authors.

In reviewing the postings, content was coded as follows: communication; screening; location and scheduling; money; privacy and secrecy; safety and scams; health practices; law enforcement; and sex and attraction. Some content contained overlapping or multiple codes; we organize our presentation of the findings around the most prominent code, bearing in mind that some quotations mention more than one issue.

Also examined are comments from those who responded to newbies' questions. Many of the same individuals responded to many of the posts, and the official Board Monitor quips that these frequent responders are his "highly unpaid assistants." In addition to offering specific advice, these seasoned users frequently advise newbies to consult TER's Self-Help Guide. The guide states that it contains "answers to the majority of questions that have been raised regarding the hobby and TER."

In the following sections, we organize newbies' coded postings into a set of themes—recurrent understandings, questions, and concerns. Representative quotations are provided to illustrate each theme, followed by the main types of advice responders offered for each thematic concern.

## Findings

### Communication

Proper communication with sex providers is extremely important—the topic of 104 threads. While newbies appeared to understand that they should not discuss money or specific sex acts with providers online, they nevertheless asked the discussion board how to determine which services

<sup>2</sup>Examples of excluded postings include questions about one's password, how to submit reviews of providers to TER, and other issues related to TER itself.

<sup>3</sup>We use neutral terms for those who buy and sell sexual services: "clients" and "providers." Clients are referred to as "newbies" when they initiated a thread on the FAQ for Newbies discussion board and/or self-identified as newbies in their posts, and as "responders" when they replied to such postings.

are included in providers' rates. In response, they were instructed in a certain *argot* to be used in conversing with sex workers. For example, they learned to call sex workers "providers," learned the meanings of euphemisms (e.g., a "party," "donations," the "hobby"), and learned definitions of acronyms such as GFE, PSE, and YMMV.<sup>4</sup>

Newbies inquired about their initial communication with a provider, such as what to say and how best to contact them. Regarding subsequent contact, newbies asked how to interpret confusing behavior (e.g., why a provider did not respond at all, stopped communicating with them, referred them to another provider, and how many times they should contact a nonresponder). Examples of communication queries follow:

When do you discuss donation rates with a provider? I understand that rates based on time can be on a provider's site or talked about at pretty much any point, but what if you want to do something extra that costs more, when do the details of that get hashed out?

I've read here that you should go with the provider's preference, but what if there's just an email and a phone number. What's your go to? Call? Text? Email? And when contacting, do you stay vague? e.g. "I wanted to check your availability for Friday," or can you get into the specifics? ... Am I simply over-thinking things?

I haven't done anything remotely suspicious or said anything wrong or inappropriate. This one provider I'm trying to contact, [at] an agency, I have contacted her 3 times over the course of the entire day and no response. She asked for my info, I gave it to her, and now nothing back. Is this a common practice? Agency/provider suddenly doesn't want your service? Or am I missing something?

Responders were generally understanding of the challenges associated with communicating with providers. They told newbies that they should never ask providers about rates for sexual services; doing so will either end the communication or present risks if the "provider" is actually an undercover police officer. Instead, responders suggested that newbies consult advertisements, provider websites, or TER reviews, or to simply "take one for the team" by seeing a provider without fee-for-service information in advance. They also told newbies to use providers' advertisements, websites, or TER reviews to determine a provider's communication rules and to follow the instructions exactly. Regarding *argot*, responders urged newbies to consult the "Definitions, Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Terms" section of TER's Self-Help Guide.

### Screening

Screening is a major issue, raised in 90 threads. Newbies learned of the need to be screened prior to an appointment, which usually includes references from other providers, but struggled with a conundrum: they have yet to see a provider from whom to request a reference. How can one overcome this hurdle? References can remain a problem even after a novice has visited a provider for the first time, particularly if the provider was low- to middle-tier:

I am just wondering what kinds of references will they consider as legit? Do my references have to be high-end [sex workers]? I have a few references who posted on Backpage and they also have good reviews on TER. But they don't have a personal website or a personal e-mail listed on their page... . Would such be considered as ok for ladies? ... Do I have to see [a provider] multiple times before I can get their referrals?

One alternative to screening by a provider is use of a verification service, such as P411, RS2K, RS-AVS, and Date-Check.<sup>5</sup> For a fee, these services do background checks and then approve the

<sup>4</sup>GFE ("girlfriend experience") means that a provider will offer an experience similar to a conventional romantic relationship, including cuddling, kissing, conversation, and emotional intimacy. PSE ("porn star experience") means that a provider will exhibit certain stereotyped pornographic behavior, such as talking dirty and displaying a willingness to please her partner. YMMV ("your mileage may vary") means that one client's experience with and evaluation of a provider may differ from another's.

<sup>5</sup>These sites run screening services for people involved in the sex industry or offer a private network to members. P411, for instance, verifies client members through employment or references, and verifies providers themselves as legitimate, over the age of 18, and having a good reputation in the community. Providers are asked to provide prompt feedback on any P411-certified clients who contact them.

client if everything checks out. Another option is for a provider to “white-list” a good client on TER, a quasi-reference that can be viewed by other providers. Verification services and white-listing thus offer additional screening options for providers and clients.

Novices expressed concerns about the type of information required by verification services; what the services do with the information; and how confidentiality is ensured. They were particularly averse to providing full names and photos and they worried about screeners contacting them at work. Moreover, what if they were unemployed, self-employed, or out of town when an inquiry was made at their workplace? Other concerns included how to discretely pay for verification services and whether police can infiltrate them. Screening thus overlaps with privacy:

I don't have a problem providing my information about work. But what is the process of verifying this? Because if it's something where they will go to an online service and verify identity that's fine, but if they're actually going to call my workplace and say “hey, I'm an escort and employee xxx (no pun intended) wants to bang me, is he a good guy for your company?”... . I know that would not happen (extreme example) but you get the point... . Gotta handle this with care.

Newbies also voiced anxiety about inordinate delays in being approved, failing a screening process, and being “blacklisted” by a verification service or a provider. On the other hand, some expressed alarm if there seemed to be a *lack* of screening—if providers did not explicitly state that they screen, did not request references, or screened too quickly.

Responders recognized that screening poses a challenge for newbies. They explained that some providers insist on references from other providers, while others accept verification services, and that the latter will work with novices to facilitate the process. They also noted there are some “newbie-friendly” providers (identifiable on TER reviews) who will see them without references. But they were adamant about avoiding a provider who does not screen at all. Insufficient screening appears to violate an emergent norm in this online world. In cases of nonresponsive providers or those who cease communication during the verification process, newbies were told to wait several days, send a polite follow-up inquiry, and cease contact if there is still no response. They encouraged patience and noted that the referral process becomes easier as one sees more providers. And they stated that blacklisting was not common.

### **Location and scheduling**

Locational and scheduling issues were addressed in 42 threads. Some noted that no providers worked in their home town, and asked the board for advice. Others asked about the recommended meeting place: “incalls” take place at the provider’s location and “outcalls” at a hotel or the client’s residence. Few newbies mentioned incall situations. Instead, they asked whether to invite a provider to their home, how nice a hotel should be, and how to be discreet at a hotel to avoid attracting attention from the staff. Other questions inquired about appointments during business trips and traveling to other countries specifically for the purpose of obtaining sexual services, known as sex tourism.

Closely related to the issue of location, newbies inquired about appropriate etiquette in scheduling appointments. Can they book on short notice (e.g., the same day)? What does an “overnight” date include? How can they schedule an appointment in a destination they are traveling to? What if a provider schedules an appointment but fails to confirm it afterward, or cancels without giving an explanation?

Responders indicated that newbies tend to overthink locational and scheduling issues and believed that both could be fairly easily addressed. Those who complained that no providers worked in their area were told to drive to the nearest city or to invite the provider to visit them. Responders acknowledged that schedule changes and cancellations do occur and told newbies to be flexible or simply move on to another provider. They were also told to book at least an hour-long appointment for their first session, because “you are new and nervous... . Half an hour ... and you may not be able to calm down and perform. You'll miss out on enjoying your time with her ... and you didn't get a chance to talk, etc.”

Responders cautioned against seeing providers in one's home if they have a significant other or have not seen the provider several times, establishing a level of trust. Regarding hotels, they were told to book a room in at least a three-star hotel or nice motel. Lower-end motels usually have outdoor doors, making visitors visible to others, including police. Yet, they also suggested that some upscale hotels present their own problems: those with open atriums again make room doors too visible and many high-end hotels require keycards to access elevators. Responders advised newbies to use common sense, behave nonchalantly, and try to blend in with the hotel clientele to avoid any suspicion from management.

## Money

Money was mentioned in 71 threads. Although newbies learned never to discuss money with providers online, they also wrestled with ways to evade this cardinal rule. What if the provider's rates are not listed anywhere (on a website, advertisement, review forum)? How does one discern whether a service is included in the hourly rate or inquire about rates for unlisted services? Can a client negotiate lower rates? Some also tried to understand the providers' reasoning for certain rates, such as different prices for incall and outcall appointments and for incremental amounts of time. Several also wondered whether providers offer special rates for nonsexual activities, such as dining with a client.

There were numerous logistical questions about money. Worried about theft, newbies asked about providers who require deposits. They also asked how to avoid tricks, such as renegeing on an agreed service and "upselling," where the provider tries to extract more money beyond the agreed rate by charging extra for petty things, like removing under-garments. Other questions ranged from the mundane (etiquette for giving providers the envelope that contains money, denominations preferred) to serious concerns about withdrawing sizeable amounts of cash, which might attract attention from a spouse or one's bank. Similarly, they wondered if there might be potential problems if they bought or used gift cards, credit cards, money orders, and online payment services.

Tipping was a surprisingly frequent topic: if providers should be tipped, when to tip, and how much to tip. And what about gifts? Should one bring a gift, and what kinds of gifts are preferred? Regarding gifting via providers' "wish lists" on their websites or on Amazon.com, posters worried that such purchases might remain visible for a period of time and be discovered by a significant other. The following postings illustrate some of the money-related questions:

Money—how do you do it? That's the most complicated thing right now. I have no separate bank account, no separation of finances. I make 100% of the money, so it's impossible to hide. I'll get cash now and then and am storing it away, but then I worry, will I have enough for a provider?

I've seen a few forum posts that talk about how folks are able to negotiate rates with the providers. I thought most providers say no negotiations (on their websites). Also, how would you do it since you can't really talk about money via email/text/etc. or even in person (for fear of LE)? ... Or is this just a pipe dream for most people, and only regulars can get lower prices?

What is proper tipping etiquette? Guys, do you always tip your provider or only if the service was off the charts [and] if so, how much? Lady's, how often do clients tip and how much?

Providers take offense if a client tries to negotiate lower rates, and responders told newbies to avoid this. Demands for an advance deposit are regarded as scams, unless clients are scheduling overnight or multihour appointments or visits that require providers to travel. Seeing only well-reviewed providers will reduce the likelihood of a rip-off, and "upsellers" are rare because they quickly get shamed in discussion boards or by negative reviews on TER. Tips are typically not expected, but can be offered for exceptional service. Responders suggested that the best tips are gifts (wine, candles, or items from a wish list) or the "tip" of booking another appointment with the same provider.

## Privacy and secrecy

Providers' advertisements often emphasize that they are committed to clients' privacy and safety, frequently using the word "discreet." Mentioned in 45 threads, novices' confidentiality concerns revolve around two related issues: anxieties about the security of their personal information and the need to keep their liaisons secret.

Most novices are fearful that their deviance might become known to others. Few expressed outright guilt about "cheating," but they certainly worried about their liaisons being discovered by their spouses, especially when they have shared bank accounts. Likewise, many posters stressed a need to hide their activities from work colleagues, for fear of ruining their reputations or jeopardizing their careers. For example:

How does verifying work info help you determine that someone is who they say they are? Also why do they need my name? Why can't I give an alias? I'm kinda nervous that my work will know what's going on and reputation is gonna be ruined. What does a provider do when they get your work info?

With respect to the privacy of information given to providers and verification services as well as concealing activity from family members, many newbies asked about sharing e-mail addresses and phone numbers; use of prepaid or "burner" phones and phone applications; whether to use prepaid credit cards, gift cards, money orders, online payment systems, and so on; and excuses to make if a spouse learns about a secret device.

Responders agreed that confidentiality and security are paramount, but they assured newbies that personal information is necessary to minimize risks to providers and that verification services can be relied on as secure. Exploring options was also recommended: if newbies do not wish to provide a particular piece of information, such as their employment, they may be able to substitute another type of information.

## Safety and scams

Scams and safety were explored in 48 threads. When newbies discussed safety, they were mostly concerned with their own safety, not that of providers. Robbery and assault were among the fears:

I am worried about being robbed or being scammed, so try to limit any potential loss... . What amount of cash do people bring to the party?

My one qualm is that she didn't ask for any references—not that I have a problem in principle with this, but I just don't want to get robbed/beaten in my hotel room.

Trying to figure out if the provider is safe to see. I would like to know that other mongers [i.e., clients] recently visited her and were neither arrested nor attacked with a broomstick.

Providers can easily conceal their criminal history... . The rap sheets in some cases extend from prostitution to assault to drug convictions... . When are we going to demand equal honesty from the providers for the safety of TER users?

Various potential scams were discussed, including some mentioned earlier in the article, such as requiring advance deposits, advertisements with fake photos, or other deceptions.

To avoid both risky encounters and scams, responders again gave the standard advice: fully research providers and see only well-reviewed ones.

## Health practices

Health concerns appeared less frequently in the narrative data (13 threads). Newbies asked about the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs)—especially from kissing, cunnilingus, and unprotected fellatio. Overwhelmingly, they feared *contracting* STIs, rather than transmitting them to

providers: “I’m new to this hobby... . Have any of you contracted a STD [sexually transmitted disease] from a provider (when using protection). Is this a real risk?” Several asked how providers protect themselves and what they do if they have an STI:

How do they protect themselves (and those they entertain) from contracting STDs, especially if they have a high volume of reviews and, hence, clients? I know there is always a risk, but how does it get minimized?

Condoms were frequently mentioned: whether the client should bring his own; what types are best (“I am trying to find the perfect condom”); and how to discuss condom use with a provider.

Responders appeared somewhat dismissive of health concerns, noting that all sexual activities pose some risks. They recommended avoiding unprotected vaginal or oral sex and advised using condoms and dental dams. Novices were also told to consult the Centers for Disease Control for information regarding the risks of various sexual practices, as well as TER’s Self-Help Guide, which has links to sexual-health websites.

### **Law enforcement**

In places where prostitution is illegal, a major fear is discovery by the police. Such fears may be especially salient for first-time clients, who do not know whether their concealment tactics will succeed. In the present study, concerns specifically about law enforcement (LE) were raised in 34 threads (this number may be a function of the fact that TER draws posters from various nations, including some where prostitution is decriminalized—hence, LE not being salient for those posters). Newbies feared arrest, incarceration, and public exposure:

We all know that a provider can be a cop undercover. To avoid being busted, how should you interact with a first time provider? What are you supposed to do or not do before diving into her pussy?

I finally found a provider that I’m “willing” to take a chance on... . I’m scared as shit because I never did this before and I don’t want to go to jail... . Starting to shake just talking about it.

Fear of LE occurs at stages well before a face-to-face meeting with a provider: while researching them, communicating with them, and undergoing screening and verification. Novices asked about ways to determine if someone was legit and if TER reviews were reliable. Several asked about the effectiveness of “LE checks”: in-person tests that allow clients and providers to prove to each other that they are not LE agents.<sup>6</sup> Newbies also inquired about loopholes to avoid arrest—such as hiring a provider for a massage or modeling session, arranging a nonsexual liaison, and insisting that the liaison involved two consenting adults and was something other than prostitution (cf. Holt, Blevins, and Kuhns 2014). More than one poster wondered if defining the encounter as pornography instead of prostitution would offer protection: “From what I heard, paying someone to suck your dink and fuck you, while you record them, is not illegal. Is this true? Wouldn’t everyone just bring their cellphone to record the encounter and escape LEO?” This poster appears oblivious to the provider’s need for anonymity, which would be blown by such recording. And one responder flatly stated that this “porn not prostitution” notion “has been tried and failed.”

A previous study documented risk-reduction practices among participants in TER’s “Legal Corner” discussion board (Stalans and Finn 2016). In the present study, posters similarly recommended covert communication, seeing only well-reviewed providers, using a trusted verification service, avoiding providers who advertise on Backpage.com, and using “common sense” to avoid situations vulnerable to LE infiltration. Outcall appointments were considered somewhat less risky because the clients have some control over the environment compared to incall, where they are on the provider’s turf. Responders did not believe that “LE checks” were usually effective and that it was rare for someone to escape a police sting operation.

<sup>6</sup>LE checks can occur during the first in-person encounter. Examples include a client exposing himself, a client touching a provider’s breasts, and a provider touching a client’s genitals. Such checks are not guaranteed to prevent an arrest, as jurisdictions differ in what they allow officers to do in such situations.

## Sex and attraction

Sex was discussed in 68 threads and ranged the gamut. Some posters, for example, asked if and how they should reveal that they are a virgin. As noted earlier in the article, newbies learned that they should not discuss sex acts and their prices with providers online, but they nevertheless ask how to determine which services are included within a provider's "menu" (which typically contains euphemisms) and the cost of services not included on a menu. This seemed of particular concern for individuals interested in role-playing and fetishes. One poster wrote, "I have this fantasy of Wonder Woman... I was wondering if it's weird to ask a provider to dress up as Wonder Woman for a session?" Fetish services are rarely advertised by mainstream escorts. One review of 237 escort advertisements found that only 4.6% of them mentioned fetishes (Pruitt and Krull 2011). Even fewer mentioned role playing, kissing, S&M, anal sex, and bondage. Other studies show that these kinds of services are not only rarely advertised by escorts but also rarely engaged in, with the exception of kissing (Cunningham and Kendall 2010; Lever and Dolnick 2010); such practices are the specialty of niche markets.

While many questions centered on whether providers engaged in desired sex acts, newbies also, as expected, stressed the importance of finding someone they consider physically attractive or their "type" (cf. Holt and Blevins 2007; Millward 2011). For some, appearance was just as important as services and personality, and they know exactly what they are looking for in physical features. One long thread responded to a poster who asked the board for advice if the provider is discovered to be unattractive in person, "If I bolt, do I get flamed on P411? Blackballed? Can I give her half the money and leave like a gentleman? How do you guys handle a situation like this?" Responses varied from those who put a premium on appearance ("she better look like a model or a hot girl, that's why you pay her") and advised the poster to leave if she was not attractive or if her photos were old or fake (one responder said he had indeed left in a similar situation) to others who said "stay and see what happens" and "you may be pleasantly surprised." Another responder advised newbies to ask providers "how recent are your photos?"

Some posters also considered it important for the provider to be attracted to *them*. They wondered about potential turnoffs, such as a client's poor hygiene or grooming. They also asked whether providers might be bothered if the client discussed his spouse, was shorter than the provider, had a certain penis size, or might have difficulty performing. These anxieties about how the provider might perceive them show a degree of sensitivity regarding the *provider's* comfort level and enjoyment, rather than being solely focused on their own needs. Concern for providers has been documented in some other studies of clients (Huschke and Schubotz 2016; Milrod and Monto 2012; Milrod and Weitzer 2012; Sanders 2008).

While some clients are primarily interested in sexual satisfaction, it was not unusual for newbies to mention that they also sought an emotional connection with a provider. Studies cited earlier in the article show that many regular or seasoned clients, like many escorts themselves, put a premium on nonsexual intimacy, companionship, and emotional bonding. On the RedParamour.com website, for example, many escorts advertise a skill set that includes "deep intimacy," "intellectual stimulation," "sense of humor," "romance," "affection," and "chemistry." Our data reveal that many newbies are looking precisely for these qualities.

Regarding sexual services, responders again told newbies to consult advertisements, websites, or TER reviews to determine what is available, and to wait until their session to make specific requests. This advice may not be satisfactory to those who want to know what is available in advance. Newbies were also told to discuss fetishes or unusual requests after repeat appointments, when rapport has been established.

General advice was offered as well: avoid being overly controlling during the session; relax and enjoy the experience; do not search for the "perfect" provider either physically or otherwise, but instead visit sex workers who you find generally attractive and have good reviews. Responders indicated that the latter are experienced, nonjudgmental, and will likely offer a great experience, whereas the "ideal" is often a disappointment or an illusion. Experienced clients often favor performance, personality, or an emotional connection over physical appearance (Holzman and Pines 1982; Milrod and Weitzer 2012).

## Conclusion

The classic formulation of learning theory by Sutherland (1949) and Glaser (1956) centered on interpersonal transmission of beliefs, values, and justifications supportive of deviant behavior as well as the practical techniques for engaging in deviance. When novices interact with seasoned clients, we found that the lion's share of their discourse centered on the latter: the *proper and safest techniques* for interacting with sex workers online and in person and for minimizing the risk of discovery by others. Although the discourse also conveyed values and beliefs supportive of buying sexual services, what stands out in the data are the ways in which novices were taught specific procedures for interacting with providers as well as risk-reduction methods—norms that are especially important for individuals who are just beginning to navigate the stigmatized world of prostitution.

Our data confirm findings of previous studies regarding the existence of a distinct ethos and normative order in Internet-facilitated sexual services. Indeed, both prior studies and the current one reveal a unique online *subculture* of clients, composed of values and beliefs that justify sexual commerce and where members are socialized in proper etiquette when interacting with sex workers. In the current study, the advice responders give to novices routinely drew from a subcultural toolkit of conduct norms and best practices.

One of the main challenges facing clients is the taboo against explicitly communicating with providers about sexual services in places where solicitation is illegal. They also wrestle with ways to protect privacy, maximize safety, and avoid detection by family members, friends, and colleagues. Our data indicate that this cluster of concerns causes apprehension, discomfort, frustration, or confusion for novices. Responders consistently instructed newbies to “research,” utilize TER's resources, and learn as much as possible before initiating a paid sex encounter. They believe that these efforts will help novices navigate different options, minimize risks, increase confidence, and enhance their overall experience. Responders often attempted to console novices by informing them that confusion or concerns were natural but will decrease with greater experience. Newbies seemed generally accepting and appreciative of the advice responders offered, even as they sometimes expressed ongoing anxieties.

Future research might address not only novices' concerns but also their motivations for buying sexual services—especially why they choose to do so, given the multiple risks. The literature identifies a wide variety of motives for purchasing sexual services (Weitzer 2009), but the studies on which this roster is based do not draw specifically on first-time clients, whose interests may differ somewhat from the larger population of clients. For example, it is possible that novices are somewhat less likely to be motivated by an interest in having an ongoing, affective “girlfriend experience” than seasoned clients, or more interested than the latter in bolstering their sense of masculinity or filling a sexual void after the end of a conventional relationship. Seasoned clients may be more likely to view their involvement as an enduring “hobby” and to normalize their activity unequivocally. More research on the motivations of novice clients will help to illuminate the decision-making process of individuals on the verge of crossing the line from conventional to deviant behavior, and will contribute to further understanding of the logic behind the demand for commercial sexual services.

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