

Queering discourses of prostitution, homosexuality, and age of consent: How social media troubles traditional and contemporary constructions of sex work

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Introduction

The popularity of social networking sites and smartphone apps among sexual minority men has contributed to a proliferation of digital spaces in which casual and commercial sex can be arranged (Ashford, 2009; Mowlabocus, 2010). Digital technologies have disrupted many longstanding assumptions about sex work (Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2017). This chapter draws on fifty-five interviews with young men who sold sex ‘incidentally’ through digital platforms to explore how their narratives challenge dominant discourses associated with the ‘age of consent’, ‘homosexuality’ and ‘prostitution’, as constructed by the criminal law in England and Wales (see Morris, 2018).

Alongside an informal survey of 1,473 respondents on Grindr, ‘the largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people’ (Grindr.com/about), this research draws on in-depth interviews that I conducted with 50 gay, bisexual, and queer men aged 18 to 28 who sold sex on social media without advertising or identifying as sex workers. In this chapter, I analyse the narratives of participants through a postmodern theoretical lens to move beyond modernist discourses of deviance, exploitation and pathology, alongside posing critical questions about the role of ‘progressive’, ‘liberal’, or ‘rights-based’ identity politics for sexual minorities (see Adler, 2018; Powell, 2023).

For context, the chapter begins by documenting the socio-legal construction of sexual identity labels from the late nineteenth century through to the early twenty-first century. I suggest that ‘homosexuals’ and ‘prostitutes’ (queer people and sex workers in contemporary language) have been discursively associated, for over a century, with emphasis placed on social identities over sexual behaviours. I go on, however, to suggest that in the digital age these distinctions have become more blurred. Following this, I employ postmodern feminist and queer theory to critique traditional understandings of fixed sexual identities in relation to the criminalisation of sex work.

I use a ‘queer methodology’ (Halberstam, 1998) to explore incidental sex work among young gay, bisexual, and queer men in digital spaces. The narratives of participants are drawn on to explore how ‘amateur’ or ‘casual’ forms of sex work and webcamming were arranged online, how participants made sense of their behaviours and identities, and the relevance of this for debates about criminal law. I conclude by arguing that dominant discourses about sexuality have limited how we conceive of ‘consent’, ‘sex’, and ‘work’, but that social media presents an opportunity to rethink outdated assumptions and regulatory approaches.

Modern histories of sexual identities

Historians of sexuality have pointed to the late-nineteenth century as a significant period during which the criminal law constructed sexual minorities as fixed identity categories, i.e. ‘homosexual’ and ‘prostitute’ (Walkowitz, 1982; Weeks, 1977). By contrast, when the word prostitute first emerged in the sixteenth century, it was used as a verb (*to prostitute*) rather than a noun (*the prostitute*), highlighting an emphasis on temporary behaviours over rigid identities (Augustin, 2007; Grant, 2014). This changed in the Victorian period, when Wardlaw (1842: 14-15) suggested that “a solitary act” was not enough for “designations of *character*”, adding

that, “to justify the designation, there must be the voluntary *repetition of the act*; the giving up of the person to *criminal indulgence*” (original emphasis).

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1977: 43) similarly noted a discursive movement from understandings of sodomy as a “habitual sin” to homosexuality as a “singular nature”, a construction of the “species” by medical, psychological, and legal texts. Drawing together these identities, Rubin (1984: 269) further argued that “most of the laws used to arrest homosexuals and prostitutes come out of the Victorian campaigns against ‘white slavery’. These campaigns produced myriad prohibitions against solicitation, lewd behaviour, loitering for immoral purposes, age offences, and brothels”. Therefore, this chapter’s focus on *discourses of prostitution, homosexuality, and age of consent* reflects the co-construction of sexuality as an identity through the criminal law throughout the modern period.

The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 not only provided a legal defence for coercive sex with any woman labelled ‘a common prostitute’ but introduced the offence of ‘gross indecency’ for sex between men, alongside raising the age of consent (for heterosexuals) from thirteen to sixteen. While the term ‘common prostitute’ was first introduced into law by the Vagrancy Act of 1824, Morris (2018: 31) described how men’s commercial sex was first explicitly criminalised by the Vagrancy Act Amendment Bill of 1898:

Every male person who—

(a) knowingly lives wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution; or

(b) in any public place persistently solicits or importunes for immoral purposes,

shall be deemed a rogue and vagabond within the meaning of the Vagrancy Act, 1824, and may be dealt with accordingly.

Houlbrook (2005: 19) also noted that such laws “introduced the public order offence of ‘persistently importuning for an immoral purpose’, which attempted to suppress queer men’s use of public space for ‘cruising’ and social interaction”. This complements Foucault’s observation that while sodomy had carried the death penalty, it was rarely enforced, but when lighter sentences were introduced (e.g., ‘gross indecency’) arrests and prosecutions rose. As such, this period contributed to an increase in the criminalisation of women selling sex, men selling sex, and men having sex with men in general – with a focus on ‘immorality’ in public spaces which were easier to police.

Associations between homosexuality and prostitution continued throughout the twentieth century, even as the criminal law began to diverge. Notably, The Wolfenden Report (1957: 80) recommended that homosexual acts “between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offense” – if involving no more than two men over the age of 21 – while a wide range of activities became recognised as ‘homosexual offences’ (Moran, 1995). A decade later, this contributed to the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality through the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. However, as with the introduction of ‘gross indecency’ in 1885, the introduction of ‘homosexual offences’ led to a higher number of arrests for public indecency and crossing age of consent boundaries (Houlbrook, 2005). This meant that “even in the early 1990s, more homosexual offences were prosecuted than had been in the late 1960s” (Cocks, 2006: 1224).

Although Wolfenden (1957: 80) called for the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality, he held that prostitution should remain within the remit of state regulation as it may “offend against public order and decency, expose the ordinary citizen to what is offensive and injurious, or involve the exploitation of others”. Thereafter, a perceived increase in the visibility of street-based sex work led to the Street Offences Act of 1959, which again prompted police crackdowns (O’Neill, 2010). Despite Wolfenden’s ostensibly liberal approach, these events also lend support to Foucault’s (1977: 200) observation that “visibility is a trap”, with greater social and legal recognition correlating with higher levels of policing and intervention.

From the 1960s, identity remained at the foreground of discourses about sexualities, with the visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) people growing globally,

especially after the Stonewall riots of 1969 and subsequent ‘pride’ events happening annually (Morris, 2017). Borrowing from Black civil rights and women’s rights movements, campaign groups such as the Gay Liberation Front depended (at least in part) on the existence of stable identity categories around which activists could organise to demand social and legal change (Bateman 2004).

The early 1970s was also recognised as “the birth of the modern sex worker rights movement” (Grant, 2014: 22), where groups such as the English Collective of Prostitutes united with Black, migrant, and working-class feminists to advocate for equal pay. Both ‘gay rights’ and ‘sex worker rights’ campaigns were, however, hampered by internal divisions over “the primary cause of oppression and the correct strategy for liberation” (Chateauvert, 2014: 23). Further, the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s intensified the discrimination and stigma they experienced through the characterisation of queer people and sex workers as a “source of transmission into the respectable community of heterosexual families” (Scambler, 2007: 1080), contributing to the most homophobic period on record (Clements and Field, 2014). Despite this “culture of hostility”, there was also “a groundswell in queer political activism in response” to the crisis, something which arguably contributed to the highly effective campaigns for equal rights in subsequent decades (Morris, 2017: 1185).

For example, in addition to the equalisation of age of consent (for non-commercial sex) at 16 years in 2001, same-sex couples were granted the right to civil partnerships in 2004 and marriage in 2013, alongside a raft of anti-discrimination legislation and policy (e.g. The Equality Act 2010). These changes in law have been associated with improved public attitudes towards homosexuality (Clements and Field, 2014). Despite such “successes”, the role of identity politics in the construction of sexualities remained contentious and susceptible to backlash. As Waites (2003: 3) noted:

Age of consent laws in the UK have been fiercely contested and (especially in England and Wales) fundamentally reformed in recent years. During the 1990s, equalisation of the “gay age of consent” became a major issue in national politics.

This recurring trend of moral panics and sex panics over LGBTQ+ rights (Vance, 1984; Rubin, 1984) has resurfaced more recently under the guise of trans-exclusionary or “gender critical” movements that adopt biologically essentialist understandings of both sex and sexuality (McLean, 2021), and have even sought to disparage trans people as “groomers” of children. Postmodern feminist and queer perspectives have questioned the validity of linear ‘progress’ narratives associated with rights-based LGBTQ+ identity politics, asking critical questions about what, and who, might be erased by these discourses.

My reason for sketching this brief history of modern sexualities is to show how laws regarding homosexuality, prostitution, and age of consent have been closely interwoven over the past century, while at times becoming separated along fault lines of public/private concern and identity politics. As one participant, Tom said, “If you look through history, it’s like fashion. They’re in, they’re out, they’re accepted, they’re un-accepted, they’re thrown in prison, they’re celebrated”. These themes provide a backdrop to understanding the narratives of the young men who participated in this study. Moving forward, I suggest that their experiences can be understood through a focus on emerging behaviours, rather than identities, in the digital age.

Postmodern perspectives on sex work

Throughout the modern period, debates over the ‘appropriate’ place of gender and sexuality in society were shaped by an expanding range of feminist perspectives. As such, Mowlabocus (2010: 60) argued that any analysis of sex work and queer sex in digital spaces must

“acknowledge the tremendous influence that feminism has had on the formation of critical debates”. Following multiple ‘waves’ of feminism, in the twenty-first century, it has become impossible to discuss feminism in the singular, with many different feminisms – Black, carceral, critical, intersectional, libertarian, neoliberal, queer, sex positive (to name just a few) – in dialogue and/or disagreement with each other (O’Neill, 2010).

During the ‘sex wars’ of the 1970s and 1980s, two influential perspectives emerged which continue to shape debates about commercial sex, pornography, and trafficking, both of which adopted the label ‘radical’ (see Scoular, 2004). Influenced by theorists, such as Dworkin (1987) and Pateman (1988), *radical feminism* framed all commercial sex as the “quintessential expression of patriarchal gender relations” (Weitzer, 2009: 214). This position reflected a gender essentialism which tended to erase men who sold sex, women who bought sex, and those whose gender did not fit the traditional male/female binary. Conversely, influenced by theorists, including Chapkis (1997) and Rubin (1984), *sex radical feminism* sought to challenge essentialist understandings of gender, sex and work.

Adopting a *modernist* perspective, akin to classical Marxism’s economic reductivism (i.e., that all social problems can be reduced to class conflict), radical feminism suggests that all sex work can be reduced to gender conflict (i.e., between men and women). This perspective continues to shape policy debates, principally through advocacy for the ‘Nordic Model’ of sex work criminalisation. First introduced in Sweden in 1999 (followed by Norway, Iceland, Canada, France, Ireland, and Israel), the Nordic Model claims to simultaneously criminalise buying sex and ‘decriminalise’ selling sex (Smith and Mac, 2018). Women involved in selling sex are characterised as victims of men’s sexual violence and referred to as ‘prostituted’, connoting a lack of agency, and thus inability to consent. This neo-abolitionist approach is supported by arguments that selling sex is inherently exploitative and harmful, a form of violence against women and girls.

In the UK context, for example, the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (2019: 45) published a report titled *The Limits of Consent: Prostitution in the UK*, which concluded that “prostitution is a gendered phenomenon, overwhelmingly affecting women, that is intimately and inextricably connected to sexual exploitation, sexual violence, violent crime and other crime”, adding that “prostitution is predicated upon a pecuniary offer in exchange for sexual consent”. In other words, it is argued here that sexual consent cannot be negotiated through, but rather is always negated by, the exchange of money. For example, it stated that:

The Commission agrees that a certain level of indirect coercion is present in most forms of work, but cannot agree that there is an equivalence between consent ‘purchased’ in the labour market and sexual consent ‘purchased’ for the purposes of prostitution... society understands sexual intercourse as an expression of mutual intimacy. It is not ordinarily understood as a human activity undertaken for gain (ibid.: 21).

As this quote evidenced, the moral position that sexual consent cannot be ‘bought’ was based on a majoritarian, normative view of how society ‘commonly’ or ‘ordinarily’ understands sex.

Opposed to the moralising views of anti-sex work campaigns, including radical feminism, Rubin’s model of the ‘charmed circle and outer limits’ provided an influential (queer) conceptual framework for challenging oppressive sexual hierarchies. In her essay, *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, Rubin (1984) described how some sexual behaviours were relegated to the ‘outer limits’ of social acceptability, including commercial, homosexual, and intergenerational sex. These were deemed as morally reprehensible deviations from “normal, natural, healthy” sex (ibid.: 281). Conversely, heterosexual, married, monogamous sex was afforded a privileged status within the ‘charmed circle’ of normative respectability. Challenging this rigid binary of good/bad sex, Rubin (1984) advocated for a shift in perspective towards a more relativist, ‘anthropological understanding’, of sexual differences as benign – much as other cultural differences are far less likely to incite

intense social anxieties or state interventionism. Importantly, this perspective did not dismiss the moral significance of sexual consent. Rather, it held that prostitution, homosexuality and other behaviours within the outer limits could be as nuanced as those within the charmed circle.

Rubin's model was influenced by Foucault, whose writing focused on the 'big picture' of how "erotic desire encompassed a diverse set of practices, strategies, discourses, institutions, and knowledges that were historically contingent and were played out on a dispersed field of power" (Epstein, 1994: 192). Foucault (1977: 152) is recognised as a foundational figure in postmodern and queer theory, arguing that in "Christian societies, sex has been the central object of examination, surveillance, avowal and transformation into discourse". Such discourse framed sex as 'dangerous', 'destructive', and 'inherently sinful', unless sanctioned by adherence to specific social norms (e.g., marriage, reproduction, love) – especially given the historical context in which "law has incorporated the religious attitude that heretical sex is an especially heinous sin that deserves the harshest punishments" (Rubin, 1984: 2080). As such, Rubin's model is consistent with queer theory for challenging dominant discourses (i.e., those informed by majoritarian heteronormativity) and celebrating sexual differences which exist outside of an imagined and idealised 'centre' (Masiero, 2017).

This chapter embraces a postmodern feminism informed by queer theory as providing an important critique of neo-abolitionist, radical feminism, including its focus on what is 'commonly' or 'ordinarily' understood as acceptable by 'society'. By interviewing young men who sold sex and did not view themselves through the predominant discourses of prostitution, this study provides empirical support for Rubin's model, as well as Foucault's critique of identity construction. It shows how casual, commercial, homosexual, intergenerational, and other forms of sex within the 'outer limits' can be understood in more complicated ways.

Furthermore, by highlighting how sex work can be a form of sex, like any other, this study blurs boundaries between casual and commercial sex, and challenges simplistic slogans used by both 'sides' of debates over decriminalisation, whether one takes the view that 'sex work is work' or that it is 'inherently exploitative'. In so doing, this chapter moves beyond binary views of sex work. Rather, forms of sex work which I have characterised as 'incidental' are analysed as a form of sex, with varying degrees of (non)consent, (dis)comfort, and (dis)pleasure. In the following section, I outline the methods used to explore non-professional forms of sex work among men in digital spaces.

A digital, queer methodology

Digital technology and social media have become important tools for researchers seeking to find diverse and hidden populations, including those who have been neglected by traditional recruitment strategies (Morris, 2017; Stewart, 2018; Tyler, 2015). Adopting Halberstam's (1998: 13) definition of queer methodology as "a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies", this study used digital methods of data collection – alongside archival, psychological, and visual methods – to explore a completely hidden group of young men who had sold sex online in a casual, occasional, incidental manner.

Shaped by postmodern feminist and queer perspectives, as described above, this study was based on the epistemological premise that no interpretation of social reality can be fully 'objective'. Rather, qualitative methods provide an empirical basis for understanding how social reality is experienced by research participants. Postmodern theorists have similarly critiqued conventional methods for reinforcing a 'liberal-rationalist' defense of medical, political, and social structures through narrow definitions and discourses (Foucault, 1977).

Therefore, the analytical framework adopted by this chapter is anti-essentialist, seeking to "counter characterisations of people, practices, institutions and other social phenomena as having fixed identities which deterministically produce fixed, uniform outcomes" (Sayer,

1997: 454). As illustrated by the narratives of interview participants, this rejection of gender/sex/sexuality essentialism and fixed identity categories is consistent with how many of the young men in this study described themselves.

Providing the first empirical study of what I called ‘incidental sex work’ (Morris, 2018), this study drew on qualitative interviews with 50 gay, bisexual, and queer young men. Interviews included the use of a ‘sexual orientation form’ to explore sexual fluidity and photo-elicitation procedures to explore self-perception and representation on social media platforms. Additionally, a survey of 1,473 users of the geolocation app Grindr, aged between 18 and 28 years, demonstrated that casual forms of sex work among men was a more common practice than previously thought (if thought about at all). This informal survey was an unintended outcome of adopting a digital recruitment strategy which involved sending the following message to 3,000 Grindr profiles in many of the most densely populated urban areas in England and Wales:

Hey. Have you ever been offered money for sex online, and said yes? I’m a social researcher looking for people to interview (anonymously) about their experiences. Would you be interested in taking part?

To protect their anonymity, the names of all participants have been changed. Among the 1,473 survey respondents, 14.6% (n=215) said that they had been paid for sex at least once, of whom 2.3% (n=34) engaged in ‘professional’ sex work such as escorting or pornography, while 8.2% (n = 121) engaged in ‘incidental’ sex work or webcamming. A further 4.1% (n=60) said “yes” in response to the initial message but did not respond to follow-up questions.

These results suggested that significant numbers of young men are selling sex online without advertising or identifying themselves as sex workers. Among the 121 research participants who had performed incidental sex work, 44 agreed to be interviewed in person, while a further 4 participants were drawn from personal social networks (e.g., by sharing the call for participants on Facebook and Twitter), and 2 participants had participated in previous research projects (Morris, 2017). The interviews took place between May 2015 and April 2016, in major cities across England and Wales including Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Cardiff, Coventry, Durham, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Portsmouth, Southampton, Sunderland, and Swansea. I later conducted longitudinal interviews with 5 participants, between October 2022 and January 2023, to explore the role of new platforms such as OnlyFans and update the study.

Before the interviews, participants were asked to indicate their ‘current understanding’, ‘future understanding’ and ‘ideal understanding’ of themselves using a nine-point sexual orientation scale ranging from ‘exclusively heterosexual’ to ‘exclusively homosexual’, fostering discussions about sexual identity and fluidity (or the lack thereof). Sometimes rejecting the limitations of the form altogether, 2 participants identified as ‘queer’, 7 as ‘bisexual leaning gay’, 10 as ‘mostly gay’, 13 as ‘gay’, and 18 as ‘exclusively gay’. Concerning race, 2 participants identified as Asian, 5 as Black, 5 as Mixed, and 38 as White British, while in relation to socio-economic backgrounds, 24 participants identified as middle-class and 26 as working-class.

These class self-identifications were supported by follow-up questions about participants’ secondary school type and parental occupation. However, many saw their class identities as shifting over time due to university attendance or moving into professional careers: 4 participants were further education students; 15 undergraduate students; 6 postgraduate students (including 3 medical students); 2 practicing doctors; 2 other healthcare professionals; 1 primary school teacher; 4 retail sector employees; 6 bar and restaurant employees; 7 other

service sector employees; and 2 unemployed. Half the sample were still enrolled in full-time education, with a further 12 being university graduates.

Using a semi-structured interview structure allowed participants to “discuss their experiences of sex work within a relatively open framework” (Connell and Hart, 2003: 12), alongside opportunities to explore how they interpreted their sexual identities in more complicated ways. All interviews were conducted in person, in semi-public settings such as quiet coffee shops and bars, or common areas within participants’ accommodation.

That said, given the discussion of sensitive topics, all participants were given the opportunity to meet in a fully private space. Although not the focus of the interviews, experiences of illegal activities (mainly related to drug use and sexual consent) were raised by several participants. Information on support services was offered to all relevant participants. Ethical guidelines set out by the British Sociological Association (BSA) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on undertaking sociological research were adhered to, including the provision of information sheets and gathering signed consent forms – see Morris (2018) for a more detailed description of the methods used.

In the following three sections I provide a summary of the participants’ responses to questions about how they arranged to sell sex online, how they framed their experiences in terms of behaviour rather than identity, alongside issues surrounding the age of consent and criminal law for making sense of gay, bisexual and queer young men’s experiences of selling sex. I show how each of these themes counters or problematises the modern historical model of sexual identity construction outlined at the start of this chapter.

Selling sex on social media

Several social media platforms were used by participants to arrange the 358 sexual encounters they described being paid for. This included apps and sites for sexual minority men such as Gaydar, Hornet, LadsLads, Recon, Scruff and Squirt, alongside general-purpose platforms such as Craigslist, Gumtree, Facebook and WhatsApp. Grindr was the most popular platform for arranging encounters, as described by 43 of the 50 participants, with 35 using this app exclusively. In this section, I describe how casual forms of sex work were arranged online.

For example, Mike said, “Without Grindr, I would never have been in a situation to have been paid for it”, and Paul said, “He approached me first, on Grindr. I think his initial message was, ‘Looking to pay’, and it went from there”. Sometimes conversations which began on Grindr migrated onto other platforms. As Trevor said, “Originally, we started speaking on Grindr, and then it moved onto WhatsApp”, and Tim noted that it was “Just casual conversation [on Grindr] without the premise of being paid, then I added him on Facebook and we arranged to meet”. The diversity of digital platforms used to arrange incidental sex work, alongside the ability to move fluidly from one app or site to another, demonstrated the inherent difficulty of regulating sexuality online (Jones, 2020).

Given that Grindr is a highly visual platform, including the ‘grid’ of public profile pictures on display (Bonner-Thompson, 2017), sharing photographs was also an important aspect of arranging the encounters. For example, Daniel said, “He messaged me on Grindr, looking for sex, and said he would pay. At first, I was like, ‘No, that’s rude’, but then he showed me his pictures and we agreed the price” and Mark said, “It was just a normal Grindr chat until he sent me his body pic, and I said, ‘OK, that’s hot, I want you’, then he said, ‘Do you want to get paid?’ So, I did it”. And Josh said, “If someone asks me for that, I always ask if they’ve got pictures, because if you’re offering me something, I want to see what you’re offering. I want to see the goods, before I buy”.

Features of Grindr such as ‘Send Photo’ and ‘Send Location’ allowed participants to determine whether they wanted to meet those propositioning them for sex discreetly. Describing how he used visual media differently on some sites, including Fitlads and Manhunt,

Brandon said, “It’s not like Grindr, so I had a more provocative picture up. It was very sexual, and, at the time, it was almost like I craved the attention, because I had a really good body at the time”.

From the photo-elicitation procedures used during the interviews, over half of the participants considered themselves ‘attractive’ or ‘good looking’, suggesting they had more ‘erotic capital’ (Hakim, 2010) than those who approached them initially. As such, incidental sex work could be viewed as a consenting and negotiated exchange of erotic capital for economic capital (Morris, 2018).

Alongside *direct* forms of incidental sex work, including being paid for masturbatory, oral and anal sex, 10 of the 50 participants described performing webcam shows for money – something which Sagar et al. (2015) have characterised as *indirect* sex work. Among those who were paid for webcamming or ‘camming’, the most popular platform described was Cam4, alongside several of the same sites and apps described above such as Squirt. Jones (2020: 1) has noted that camming “is a genre of indirect sex work, in which cam models sell interactive computer-mediated sex online [and] monetizes human desires for sex, intimacy, and pleasure”.

General-purpose platforms for streaming video content, such as Skype and Facetime, were also mentioned. For example, Ben said, “I used to do a webcam show on Cam4, where fans would pay to watch me. That was when I was 19, because I lived alone, but I only accepted payment for it three or four times”. Rick said, “It was a few years ago. Mainly foreplay, just masturbating, I guess, not much else. It was on Cam4”. And Simon said, “There’s a site called Chaturbate, where you can get paid for it, and I’ve done that”. Describing how he “stumbled across” webcamming, Ethan said, “I’ve done plenty of solo shows, and a few shows with a friend on Cam4. I found it when I was looking for porn, enjoyed what I was watching, then realised that I could broadcast myself quite easily”. Similarly, Blake said, “I did it on and off for three years. Sometimes I just signed into Skype and thought, ‘If I’m going to have a wank, I may as well make some money’, which I did”. From my informal survey of 1,473 people on Grindr, more had been paid to perform webcam shows than had been paid to perform in professional pornography, illustrating the growing size of this ‘amateur’ market (Jones, 2020).

Since their first interviews in 2016-2017, when I did follow-up interviews in 2022-2023, 2 participants described how they had made significant amounts of money and transitioned to using the platform OnlyFans, which emerged in 2016. For example, Trevor said that, alongside “doing shifts” at bars and pubs, “I’d started making quite a lot of money on OnlyFans, so I was like, I don’t need a proper job” and Robin said, “I have a full-time office job that pays me reasonably well, alongside that I make porn that I sell on OnlyFans. It’s mostly a side-gig that goes up and down in terms of how much money it makes”. Both characterised their additional incomes from this platform as being helpful while living in expensive cities, where they had stopped engaging in direct forms of sex work.

Asked to describe the ‘differences’ between their paid and unpaid sexual encounters, participants tended to frame direct and indirect commercial sex as comparable with direct and indirect casual sex. For example, in his first interview, Robin said, “Lots of the free sex I have is very similar, so I suppose it wasn’t that different”. Luke said, “No, it was kind of like a general hook-up”, and Tim said, “Was it any different? The conclusion I’ve reached is no, it wasn’t radically different. Now, I’ve had better sex, but I’ve had much, much worse sex, too”.

While 27 of the 50 participants saw ‘little’ or ‘no’ difference between their experiences of casual and commercial sex, 3 participants said that they had enjoyed their paid encounters more than usual, including Richard who shared, “With regular hook-ups, it tends to be more rough, but with him, he was really soft, gentle, he was pretty nice as well, caring, I had a good time”, and Nick said, “It was probably the best sex I’ve ever had”.

Responses were similar regarding live-streaming sexual video content, where among the 40 participants who had not been paid for webcamming, 22 had used the same sites as those

described above for free (i.e., Cam4, Chaturbate, Squirt, Skype). For example, contrasted with his more recent experiences on OnlyFans, Robin had previously said, “I’ve never managed to make any money from it, so I’ve just been wanking off for my own entertainment. I’d always wear a mask or something, so I couldn’t be identified”. The main concern participants described about webcamming was the possibility of digital surveillance. This included considerations of the unauthorised sharing of images and experiencing stigma for having a ‘reputation’ (see Sanders et al., 2017).

Sexual behaviours over social identities

The use of social media to arrange encounters, share images, and stream videos complements other recent research highlighting the significance of the internet for changing contemporary understandings of sex work (Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2017). By comparison with ‘professional’ sex workers, the participants in this study did not identify with labels such as ‘escort’, ‘prostitute’, ‘rent boy’, or ‘sex worker’. The most common reason for not identifying with such labels was because their encounters lacked ‘regularity’, with 19 of the 50 participants selling sex just once. In this section, I explore how participants characterised their sex work practices as an occasional behaviour rather than an identity.

For example, Adrian said, “Because it was a one-time thing, I wouldn’t put myself under any label”, and Matt said, “No, I wouldn’t identify with any of the labels, because it was an isolated incident or two”. Similarly, Dan said, “If you only do it once, to try it out, I don’t think that really defines you” and Rhys said, “I don’t consider it prostitution if it’s a one-time thing”. Several participants suggested that selling sex was something that ‘just happened’ during their ordinary use of apps such as Grindr, indicating a lack of planning or forethought (see above).

Another reason that participants did not identify with conventional labels was because their behaviours were not viewed as ‘professional’ enough to ‘count’ as *work*. This further supports the emphasis of my analysis on the *sex* aspects of incidental sex work. For example, Tom said, “I did it once, and I’m not doing it now. It wasn’t really sex ‘work’. I mean, I guess it was, in that I got paid, but I wouldn’t identify with those labels”. Peter said, “I think those terms apply to somebody who does it regularly, as a career choice, rather than incidentally”. Alex, moreover, said:

Incidental sex worker is a term you could use. But, as I don’t see this as a regular part of my life, I don’t see any need to give it a name. Just like you wouldn’t really give a name to somebody who did people’s nails every now and again, or if you did people’s hair every now and again, you wouldn’t call yourself an incidental hairdresser. It’s just a thing that you do.

Other participants noted that they had not advertised as selling sex online, such as Trevor who said, “I’ve never tried to advertise it, I’ve never put a pound sign in my profile, or whatever”. And Dean said, “I wouldn’t advertise on those websites. I wouldn’t say, ‘I have sex for money’ anywhere like that”. Going into more detail, Josh said:

I don’t identify with the word prostitute, because to me that is something different. Prostitution is solicitation, and I never solicit, I don’t have adverts, I don’t actively message people saying, ‘C’mon, I’ve got a special offer’ ... I’ve never written it on my Grindr profile, or had the cues that are there.

The visual and textual ‘cues’ referred to by Josh and other participants have been described elsewhere as a way for sex workers to advertise services on social media platforms (see Sanders et al., 2017). These narratives not only call into question the ubiquity of sexual identity

labels, as applied to people who have sold sex since the late-nineteenth century (see above), they also challenge the (modernist) discourse of sex worker rights, which emphasises the *work* aspects of sex work.

The final reason participants distanced themselves from conventional labels was because ‘regular’ or ‘professional’ sex work seemed to be a highly stigmatised identity. Participants particularly sought to avoid the terms ‘rent boy’ and ‘prostitute’. For example, Harry said, “No, I’m not a prostitute, or a whore, or a rent boy, they all just sound so low”. Peter said, “I think ‘rent boy’ definitely has a lot of connotations ... Same with ‘prostitute’. Incidentally being paid for sex, I don’t come from the same category”. Others said that they “took issue” with the notion of being “for rent” as it implied being viewed or treated as a vacant property.

Stigmatising stereotypes about prostitution also encouraged participants to distance themselves from categorical identity labels. Describing how his sexual behaviours “wouldn’t be the first port of call” when considering the label sex worker, Scott said, “You think of people working on the street corner, the red-light district. You think of webcam shows, rent boy websites, stuff like that. You don’t think of a 19-year-old boy on Grindr meeting two people for £20 and £50”.

Illustrating how such stereotypes many have been internalised negatively, Scott added, ‘I don’t want to be constantly judging myself, essentially, for something that lasted half-an-hour’. And Nate said, “Even though it’s called ‘the oldest profession’, there’s a massive stigma attached to it, in society. So, knowing that people would judge you makes you judge yourself, to a certain degree”. Marcus, moreover, said, “When you’re younger, you look at it with the law, the way it is, and you look at it as wrong”. The criminal law’s parallel construction of prostitution and homosexuality also appeared to shape these responses, as did questions about consent, exploitation, and age offences. Furthermore, these narratives of self-stigmatising support Foucault’s suggestion that we internalise social and sexual norms.

Age of consent and the criminal law

Given that most of the sexual encounters documented in this study were arranged between adults in private (or digital) spaces, without advertising, existing prohibitions on public sex, solicitation, and crossing age-of-consent boundaries had little relevance for making sense of participants’ narratives. Even so, 39 of the 50 participants incorrectly thought that all sex work was illegal in England and Wales, sometimes referencing the Nordic Model. In this section, I explore how participants (mis)understood the current legal framework around sex work.

For example, Paul said, “As far as I’m aware, it criminalises the buyer ... It’s not illegal to sell sex, but it’s illegal to buy sex”. Rick said, “It’s illegal to pay for sex, or to exploit someone, like pimping ... I know it wasn’t illegal on my part, at all, but I don’t know if it’s illegal to pay for sex, or if it’s enforced”. Illustrating how participants were apathetic towards the regulatory ability of the criminal law, Freddy said, “I knew I wouldn’t be caught or anything, I didn’t care about the legality”. And Greg said, “It’s not something I ever really thought about. You know, he was friendly, he was polite, he was amicable ... I didn’t really see it as ‘prostitute and client’ sort of thing”. Furthermore, Connor said:

The bad thing is, I’m a law student, so I should know, but I’m not very aware and I don’t really care. I have no idea, but I think it’s illegal to be paid for sex. I know it’s illegal to pay someone for having sex, but you can always blur the lines a bit.

The main reason participants ‘didn’t care’ about the law was because it was perceived as being unenforceable, comparable to other ‘criminal’ behaviours which tend to go unnoticed. For example, Tim said, “When I torrent a film, I’m breaking several copyright laws. I know it’s bad, but the way I see it, much like copyright law, it’s a bit of a silly law”, and Ethan said,

“How are the police going to know what you do in private, anyway?” Given that the internet has created so many private spaces for incidental transactions to be arranged, attempts to regulate such behaviours seemed either ‘pointless’ or ‘impossible’ to most of the study participants.

The inconsistency of the law around age of sexual consent was also highlighted by several participants, given that 27 of the 50 participants had their first sexual encounters under sixteen, while 13 participants first sold sex under eighteen. For example, Josh said, “I’d been on Grindr, which I obviously shouldn’t have been on, because I was seventeen at the time, but I feel like there are a lot of people younger than eighteen who are on [Grindr]”. And Jacob said, “He was about thirty-five, at the time. I was fourteen, at the time. I think he knew how old I was. But he played blind. He played ignorance, and we had sex for free the first time”. Expressing concerns about the law’s effect on the older man, whom he was having both paid and unpaid sex with, Jacob added:

He could have lost his job, sex offenders register, paedophilia, all that stuff, and that did cross my mind at one point, but that’s a very evil thing to do to a person. That’s literally taking everything they’ve worked their whole life for and crushing it in the palm of your hand.

The youngest example of someone selling sex in this study was Jacob, who said that he enjoyed the sex less the second time because “it felt less emotional”. However, none of the participants who engaged in underage commercial sex framed their experiences in terms of ‘abuse’, ‘exploitation’, or ‘statutory rape’. This may relate to how queer subculture understands intergenerational sexual and romantic relationships differently from ‘common’ or ‘ordinary’ heteronormative morality. Given that most participants were having casual sex aged between thirteen and fifteen anyway, laws which treated paid sexual encounters differently may have seemed “pointless”, as several participants expressed.

Participants shared similar narratives about webcamming under eighteen, defined by UK law as producing and disseminating child pornography. For example, Amir said, “By that age, I had been having quite a lot of sex that was underage anyway ... I wasn’t going to blackmail them or call the police or anything, so the underage thing doesn’t really bother me”. By comparison, expressing retrospective concerns about the men watching his webcam shows, Blake said, “When I was 15, I joined a website called Cam4. Yeah, it’s weird right? I started performing, obviously way underage ... You don’t realise it at the time, but it’s paedophilia isn’t it? Then guys started paying me through PayPal”.

As in the above, participants framed the law as being ‘irrelevant’, such as Ethan who said, “I’m not sure if I can be arrested for what I’ve done. If I can, then I think that’s ridiculous”. Linking ‘laws around exploitation’ (i.e. the Nordic Model) with sex work stigma (see above), Will said, “There’s less stigma now, with people who do sex work as cam models ... Obviously, if you’re a cam worker it’s less oppressive than other stuff”. When I caught up with Will, he had stopped doing any form of sex work, saying “I know that it’s very lucrative, but I don’t think that I could do either [direct or indirect sex work] anymore”.

Drawing on research with professional webcam performers, Stuart (2016) argued that without an “easily identifiable victim, and an above-board financial operation, the world of webcamming has confounded lawmakers and anti-sex work campaigners alike”. The narratives of participants in this study further demonstrated that dominant discourses about age of consent, and sexual exploitation more broadly, cannot be understood as universally damaging. Concomitantly, any generalisations about sex work as ‘inherent’ fail to consider the diversity of people’s experiences or the limitations of criminal law interventionism as a blunt instrument.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how discourses of consent, homosexuality, and prostitution have been closely associated since the late nineteenth century until the early twenty-first century. Such discourses have narrowed how we conceive of queer sex and sex work, reinforcing a reductive binary between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sexualities (Rubin, 1984).

Drawing on postmodern feminist and queer theory, it is possible to move beyond such limitations (Scoular, 2004), to explore how casual and commercial sex involve varying degrees of *pleasure and danger* – the title of Vance’s 1984 edited collection where Rubin’s model of the ‘charmed circle’ was first published. The narratives of young men who agree to sell sex in digital spaces do not align with any dominant discourses (Morris, 2018).

Arranging to sell sex in digital spaces without advertising means that legal discourses of solicitation and public impropriety do not apply. Selling sex only once, twice, or a handful of times means that rights-based discourses of repetitive labour do not apply. As young men and boys, feminist discourses of either violence against women and girls, or gendered workplace discrimination, do not apply. Because their behaviours were not ‘regular’ or ‘professional’ enough, none of the currently available labels to characterise commercial sex seemed appropriate to the participants. Even when having sex below the age of 16, or selling sex below the age of 18, discourses of abuse, coercion, or lack of consent were almost entirely absent from their narratives.

Given that no current or historical (meta)narratives which characterise sex work seem to apply to incidental sex work, this chapter proposes an anti-essentialist framing. One suggestion is that such behaviours can be understood as an exchange of erotic capital for economic capital – comparable with many other ‘exchanges’ which are not traditionally understood as ‘labour’ (Hakim 2010). Another suggestion is that incidental sex work blurs the boundaries between casual and commercial sex, given that participants did not describe major differences between their paid and unpaid sexual experiences, other than the exchange of money, emotional connection with, and ages of the older men who paid them.

On the one hand, these ways of describing sex work challenge radical feminist framings of coercion, exploitation, and gender, because incidental sex work occurs between men and boys (rather than women and girls) who describe themselves as consenting. On the other hand, their rejection of identity labels presents a challenge for liberal, rights-based identity politics which tends to frame sex work as a form of labour like any other, because it was characterised as a form of sex – sometimes enjoyable, sometimes unenjoyable – like any other.

Concerning the criminal law, digital platforms from Grindr to OnlyFans have increased the visibility and diversity of sexual practices, including those which may not be recognised as sex work at all. Arguably the behaviours of participants in this study occurred in semi-private spaces which were beyond state regulation. Sex work research has undergone a *digital turn* to explore the expanding role of internet technologies for direct and indirect forms of commercial sex among men, women, and non-binary people (of diverse abilities, ages, ethnicities, genders and sexualities). Incidental sex work, thereby, offers a clear example of why longstanding academic, activist, and legal discourses cannot capture the full story.

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