

“Bitch, You Got What You Deserved!”: Violation and Violence in Sex Buyer Reviews of Legal Brothels

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Abstract

In this article, we use feminist critical discourse analysis to examine online brothel reviews (148 reviews and 2,424 reply posts) of sex buyers in the context of debates surrounding harm minimization. Our findings show that sex buyers actively construct and normalize narratives of sexual violation and violence against women in licensed brothels through their language, referencing objectification, unsafe sex practices, and, in more extreme cases, rape to create a sense of community with other punters. Through this analysis, we challenge existing assumptions about harm minimization in systems of prostitution, which are legalized or fully decriminalized.

Keywords

prostitution, punters, sex buyers, harm minimization, feminist critical discourse analysis

In Australia, a number of states and territories have legalized and decriminalized aspects of prostitution with the intention of regulating the sex industry and creating safer conditions for those working in the industry as well as sex buyers. Harm minimization is often a central part of this approach but, so far, the behavior of sex buyers has not played a part in informing these laws. Sex buyers, and their interactions with each other through online “punter” forums, are a fertile area of investigation for researchers on the sex industry. Despite a significant body of feminist literature framing the act of sex buying as fundamentally an act of domination or violence, relatively few studies

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have focused on men's constructions of sexual violation and violence in online brothel review websites, and none has considered the Australian context. We use a feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA; Lazar, 2005) to examine 148 sex buyer reviews and 2,424 reply posts on an Australian online brothel review site. The reviews are taken only from states where brothel prostitution is either legalized (Victoria [VIC] and Queensland [QLD]) or fully decriminalized (New South Wales [NSW]). Our findings show that sex buyers actively construct and normalize narratives of sexual violation and violence against women in licensed brothels through language that frames them as simultaneously powerful and as victimized consumers within the context of the sex buying experience.

Background and Context

There is a growing body of research on men who purchase sexual access to women in systems of prostitution and there are contradictory ideas in the available literature about the role and nature of sex buyers (e.g., Coy, 2016; Farley, Bindel, & Golding, 2009; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Raymond, 2013; Sanders, 2012). Some find that men who purchase sex lack empathy for women in prostitution (Coy, 2016; Farley et al., 2009) and share key characteristics with men who are "at risk of committing sexual aggression" (Farley, Golding, Matthews, Malamuth, & Jarrett, 2017, p. 1). Others suggest that these men are seeking an authentic emotional connection and companionship, rather than just sexual access to women's bodies (Milrod & Weitzer, 2012), and that norms among punters can enforce the use of safer sex (Sanders, 2012). Some of this work has looked specifically at websites where sex buyers or "punters" share their experiences with other sex buyers (e.g., Earle & Sharp, 2007; Gezinski, Karandikar, Levitt, & Ghaffarian, 2016; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Pettinger, 2011; Williams, Lyons, & Ford, 2008). There is, however, still relatively little research looking at narratives of violence in the online reviews of sex buyers and no research to date analyzing online reviews of sex buyers in Australia.

Australia provides a particularly interesting locality for analysis as some jurisdictions within Australia have been considered trailblazers for progressive sex industry legislation. The southern state of VIC, for example, has one of the most established systems of licensed brothel prostitution in the world, with legalization having come into effect in the early 1980s (Sullivan, 2007). The Victorian model was drawn on for the subsequent legislative approaches taken in the Netherlands and Germany (Tyler et al., 2013). QLD, in the north of Australia, has a similar system of licensed escort and brothel prostitution that has been in place since 1999. The state of NSW, located between VIC and QLD, has a system of decriminalization (similar to that found in New Zealand), which came into effect in 1988 (Renshaw, Kim, Fawkes, & Jeffreys, 2015). All these legislative models have relied heavily on the concept of harm minimization as a significant justification.

A harm-minimization approach and associated occupational health and safety (OHS) standards are seen as best practice for prostitution legislation and regulation along the eastern seaboard of Australia. There is still scant acknowledgment by policy

makers in these jurisdictions of criticisms that the harms of prostitution are more fundamental and are linked to broader issues of gender equality and violence against women (Tyler, 2016). Legalization and decriminalization, therefore, are held up, largely unproblematically, as successful approaches. Research on sex buyers, however, has been largely absent from the public discussions and government reviews of legislation governing the sex industry in Australia.

Initially, as part of a wider project on the business ethics of commercial sex, we set out to consider whether and how potential breaches of OHS were described by sex buyers in their contributions to a major Australian sex industry review website. As a result of the initial analysis into ethical consumption in the sex industry (Tyler & Jovanovski, 2018), we found that there were frequent references to practices that could be understood as sexual harassment, coercion, and even sexual violence: from objectifying descriptions of women, to accounts that would meet the legal criteria for rape. This led us to undertake a feminist CDA of the reviews. This analysis, which considers the discussions between sex buyers on themes of objectification, dehumanization, violation, and violence, forms the foundation of this article. We argue that the variety of violations these men describe in their reviews of purchasing sexual access to women in legal brothels reflects a fundamental and, in many cases, desired power imbalance between sex buyers and the women they are reviewing, one that complicates discussions of harm minimization.

Harm Minimization and Sex Industry Legalization in Australia

Broadly speaking, harm minimization is a method by which harmful behavior is reduced, either in terms of prevalence or severity, through a series of short-term, practical strategies (Tsui, 2000; Weatherburn, 2008). Traditionally applied to the issue of drug and alcohol abuse (Cusick, 2006), harm minimization has also been used in several localities to address what are seen to be some of the more serious problems associated with prostitution, such as breaches in workplace safety relating to safe sex practices and curbing men's violence against women (Sullivan, 2007). Rather than seeking to remove harm altogether, harm-minimization perspectives strive to improve conditions that produce harm (Graham, 2014; Rekart, 2005).

Between the 1970s and 1990s, there were major reforms to sex industry policy across several Australian states and territories and these reforms were fuelled, at least in part, by harm-minimization perspectives. Some states and territories adopted policies that approached prostitution as a form of work and, thus, made it subject to labor laws and OHS standards. Other jurisdictions within Australia, however, continue to rely on older legislation that criminalizes aspects of the sex industry, usually under notions of public nuisance or deviance (Renshaw et al., 2015). In this analysis, we are concerned with those states—NSW, QLD, and VIC—that have introduced either legalization or decriminalization based on associated notions of harm minimization. The stated rationale for the legalization of certain sectors of the sex industry, such as brothel prostitution in states such as VIC and QLD, was to reduce crimes associated with prostitution by adopting licensing and OHS policies to protect both “employees”

and “clients” (Renshaw et al., 2015; Sullivan, 2007). The logical extension of these moves can be seen in the case of VIC, where all responsibility for brothel regulation now falls under the purview of the Department of Consumer Affairs (Pickering, Maher, & Gerard, 2009).

The rationale in continuing with a decriminalized approach in the state of NSW has been made on similar harm-minimization grounds, particularly regarding health outcomes for people in systems of prostitution. A recent parliamentary inquiry into the regulation of brothels in NSW, for example, included testimony from local and Commonwealth police about trafficking, coercion, and widespread drug use in the industry. The state government, in its formal reply to the inquiry, states that,

The Government is committed to ensuring that brothels in NSW [New South Wales] are appropriately regulated to ensure the protection of sex worker health and safety, public health, and public amenity. The decriminalisation of the sex work industry in NSW has achieved positive health results and outreach. The NSW Government, like the Select Committee, continues to support decriminalisation as the best way of protecting sex workers and maintaining a more transparent sex work industry. (Government of NSW, 2016, p. 2)

The health and well-being of women in brothel prostitution, therefore, is given as a central factor for the support of both legalized and decriminalized systems in Australia. In addition, it is worth noting that, in the relevant legislation for QLD and VIC, both prostituted persons and sex buyers are responsible for practicing “safer sex” and either or both parties can be fined for breaches of safer sex practices. Indeed, in the QLD legislation penalties are associated with a sex buyer even asking for “sexual intercourse or oral sex without a prophylactic being used” (Prostitution Act, 1999, 77A-3b). In the Victorian legislation, there is an assumption that sex buyers will report to police women whom they suspect have been trafficked (Sex Work Act, 1994, 60A). That is, there is an assumption in these legislative approaches that sex buyers themselves can be made part of a harm-minimization approach. Set within overarching systems of legalization or decriminalization, this model of harm minimization is founded on an understanding that harm is an additional problem of prostitution rather than an embedded one. It is taken that legislation can limit a variety of harms that are seen as external additions to prostitution, such as trafficking, physical violence, organized crime, and unsafe sex. This differs fundamentally from the position of feminist critics, as discussed below, which posits that there are harms embedded in prostitution itself.

Critiques of Harm Minimization

An alternative perspective on harm, one that is most often employed by (radical) feminist abolitionists and researchers, is that the greatest risk to prostituted persons is violence and sexual coercion at the hands of mostly male sex buyers (e.g., Farley, 2004; Jeffreys, 1997; Raymond, 2013; Sullivan, 2007). Rather than framing prostitution as a job such as any other, feminist abolitionists conceptualize prostitution as harm itself.

As feminist psychologist Melissa Farley (2004) explains in her article on the failures of legalization and full decriminalization in reducing harm,

Support for legalisation [and full decriminalisation] comes from many who believe that legalisation will decrease the harm of prostitution, like a bandage on a wound. People are genuinely confused about how to address what they intuitively understand to be the harm of prostitution. They ask, “wouldn’t it be at least a bit better if it were legalised? Wouldn’t there be less stigma, and wouldn’t prostitutes somehow be protected?” (p. 1090)

Farley (2004) argues that although such questions are often well-meaning, they fail to take into account that prostitution is an institutionalized, systemic form of male violence committed primarily against the most vulnerable girls and women worldwide. By discussing harm in terms of OHS factors alone, researchers fail to acknowledge the reality of prostitution as an exploitative practice that reflects male violence and systems of gender inequality (Farley, 2004; Raymond, 2013; Sullivan, 2007; Sullivan & Jeffreys, 2002).

Similarly, Erin Graham (2014), in her PhD thesis on harm-reduction approaches to prostitution in Canada, argues that a harm-minimization framework depoliticizes and undermines efforts to address violence against women in the sex industry and men’s violence against women more broadly. She also notes that harm-reduction models, which invoke a sense of freedom based on choices within the status quo, are well aligned with neoliberal policies, which seek, at best, only limited intervention in markets. This is in sharp contrast to movements seeking more radical forms of social change that focus on changing the material conditions in which choices are made (Graham, 2014). That is, harm-minimization policies, by their very nature, will not seek to question the underlying social, political, and economic circumstances that cause, or at least create, the conditions for harm in the first place.

Janice Raymond, too, has criticized attempts at harm reduction within legalized systems of prostitution, particularly around notions of education and awareness campaigns for sex buyers in reference to antitrafficking and safer sex (Raymond, 2013). Raymond argues that the very existence of such campaigns is a normalizing force emphasizing men’s right to buy sexual access to women (as long as it occurs under specific conditions) and that it is a flawed assumption that ethical attitudes can exist within the overall framework of sexual and economic inequality that she outlines as the foundation of systems of prostitution. She highlights one campaign, for instance, in the Netherlands, where Crimestoppers warned punters about women in prostitution with “little responsiveness to the client” and “encouraged buyers to report abuse,” although Raymond wryly notes “presumably not their own” (p. 57). She also notes that online sex buyer forums give the impression that such campaigns will have little, if any, use, given that men use these platforms to “complain about ‘unenthusiastic bitches’” and adds that “male prostitution users are more likely to report unresponsive women to their pimps rather than to the police” (p. 57). As the next section explains, online reviews from sex buyers can provide useful data to consider the narratives around violation and violence in the context of legalized/decriminalized systems based on harm-minimization ideals.

Why Look at Sex Buyers?

One way that feminist researchers have sought to reposition notions of harm in prostitution is by focusing on the demand for sexual practices, which is generated by (mostly male) sex buyers. In the Australian context, it is estimated that 94% of sex buyers are men and that the “primary service provided by the industry is heterosexual sex provided to male clients” (IBISWorld, 2015, p. 14). Traditionally, punters have been an underresearched part of the sex industry and, as Farley and colleagues (2009) note, “there is a need for research that offers additional information on those who have been described as ‘the invisible subjects of the sex industry’” (p. 6).

One of the ways that researchers have begun analyzing men’s accounts of purchasing sexual access to women is by studying sex industry review websites (Earle & Sharp, 2007; Gezinski et al., 2016; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Pettinger, 2011; Williams et al., 2008). This has made research on sex buyers, an often hard-to-reach group, considerably easier (Milrod & Weitzer, 2012). Punter reviews are also a fertile area of research because they focus on the factors driving demand for the industry. As Lynne Pettinger (2011) explains, “a customer’s embodied presence and interaction with service providers impacts profoundly on organisations, market exchanges and work” (p. 223). Pettinger’s work shows that sex buyers were more likely to return positive reviews if women were able to successfully hide or perform in a way that disguised the sex acts as a “market transaction.” Others have considered the way in which punter forums reinforce certain ideas about heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and fraternity (Williams et al., 2008); the way that sex buyers disclose preferences for intercourse without a condom (Adriaenssens & Hendrickx, 2012); the way in which sex buyers use online spaces to solicit (Holt & Blevins, 2007; Holt, Blevins, & Kuhns, 2008); and how they engage in “emotional management” when they buy sex (Milrod & Weitzer, 2012).

In these analyses of online reviews, there is still relatively little emphasis on the way in which men contributing to these sites talk about violation and violence against women, and indeed, on the way their violations of women fall along a continuum of sexual violence (Coy & Benedet, 2012; Kelly, 1988, 2015). As we noted earlier, one feature that struck us in analyzing this data set through a very different prism of ethical consumption was how blasé many contributors to the forum were in their discussions involving accounts of violation and violence. As we explain in the “Discussion and Analysis” section, the objectification of women, the acknowledged violation of their boundaries, and even descriptions of overt violence were almost never met with shock or sanction in the posts from other punters. Rather, the language punters used, and the experiences they described, were almost always “rationalise[d] [through] their use of women in prostitution as a legitimate market exchange” (Tyler, 2011, p. 34) and, as such, exerted power over women by expecting them to feign enthusiasm on the grounds of “customer service.” We argue that these complicated narratives reflect the multiple ways that punters create a culture of violence and violence in the language of their reviews; narratives that normalize, rather than minimize, notions of harm toward women.

Data Collection and Method

The data analyzed here are from the “Invisible Men” project hosted online by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA).¹ There are several Invisible Men projects around the world² and most seek to highlight the role of male sex buyers by republishing online reviews men have written about women in prostitution. Similarly, the CATWA website provides a snapshot of publicly available reviews from a prominent Australian brothel and escort review website. The CATWA Invisible Men project includes 148 reviews (and 2,424 associated reply posts—usually of one or two lines) of legal brothels from Australian states (NSW, QLD, and VIC) where brothels are either legalized and licensed, or decriminalized. The reviews were collected in March 2016³ and 50 reviews from each state were taken from “the five brothels with the most recent posts” and then the 10 “posts with the most replies for each of the five brothels” (CATWA, 2016). During the analysis, it was noted that two reviews were marked as “missing” from the NSW set; this left 148 reviews in total to be analyzed.

In addition to analyzing the publicly available Invisible Men data on the CATWA website, we visited the original review site⁴ to determine the authenticity of the reviews hosted by CATWA. The review site itself is user run and moderated, and is devoted to reviews of specific services offered by people in various forms of prostitution throughout Australia. The site has a similar structure to other user-generated review forums for consumers (something like a *TripAdvisor* for brothels), but rather than the brothel itself being reviewed, the reviews are set up to be a commentary on an individual (in this sense, it is more like *Rate My Professor*). A full review generally includes answers to a template with specific questions about the ethnicity and appearance of the person in prostitution (in our sample, always a woman) and then a more free-form review of the punter’s experience. In the context of this punter site, reviews are primarily aimed at assisting other sex buyers in receiving value for money, with a focus on factors such as appearance (of the person in prostitution), environment (of the brothel), quality of the “service” (e.g., what sexual acts were performed or not, level of enthusiasm), price, and whether they would return or not. Although the data in this study are comprised only of reviews of legal brothels, reviews of illegal establishments (especially massage parlors) are also present in other categories of the original review website, and there are sections that are inaccessible to the public where only long-time, verified members can share information. The analysis was carried out on the CATWA-hosted reviews because they were easier to access while working from university-facilitated information technology services, which routinely block sex industry content, and to enable collating and analysis of the text in an open office environment without sex industry advertising or related images (which the original review site integrates) being introduced into the workspace.

We should note that although all reviewers already use pseudonyms, we have removed the website user names and references to the working names of women in prostitution wherever possible. Where any names remain, they have been altered to ensure anonymity, in line with suggestions set out by Pettinger (2011). In instances

where quotes from the reviews are provided, the text has been copied “as is” and often includes spelling and grammatical errors. It is also important to add that these reviews should not be read as objective accounts but rather as a particular version of events with the intended audience of other punters. Research analyzing the content of online sex industry reviews, therefore,

[C]aptures stories that are explicitly constructed as interventions in the market by customer[s]. The stories reveal something of men’s experiences in prostitution desire to speak of this to other men and therefore indicate how male customers participate in producing the field of commercial sex. (Pettinger, 2011, p. 230)

That is, the excerpts analyzed in the following sections are accounts of how punters want to be seen by other punters. They tell us something not only about the ways interactions with the women in brothels take place—from a sex buyer’s perspective—but also about the framing of that interaction among a community of sex buyers, and their accepted norms.

Feminist CDA (see Lazar, 2005) was used to examine the 148 punter planet reviews and 2,424 reply posts from three Australian states: VIC (50 reviews and 923 reply posts), NSW (48 reviews and 828 reply posts), and QLD (50 reviews and 673 reply posts). An extension of a traditional CDA, feminist CDA was developed as a form of qualitative inquiry that acknowledges gender as a site in which power relations reside (Lazar, 2005). It focuses on showing the existence of particular narratives, rather than on quantifying their frequency (Lazar, 2005). Using the same focus on ideological structures and power relations that are inherent in CDA research, feminist CDA uses systems of male dominance as the focal point of analysis. It also examines the various ways in which discourses enact and perpetuate harmful gender norms and promote inequalities between men and women. In particular, our analysis focuses on instances of violation and sexual violence against women described in the reviews, and we consider how this raises issues for harm-minimization approaches to the sex industry.

Discussion and Analysis

The following analysis demonstrates that sex buyers discursively construct and normalize narratives of violation in their reviews of women in legal brothels. Specifically, punters normalize and (re)produce multiple narratives of harm that can be traced along a continuum of male sexual violence, ranging from sexual objectification and harassment, violating safe sex practices, the blurring of consent, physical and sexual coercion against women, and, in the most extreme cases, rape. In some instances, sex buyers expressed that violation and harassment of women made the “service” more enjoyable. As we explain in conclusion, an expectation or interest in violation from sex buyers does pose a challenge to existing assumptions about harm minimization in jurisdictions where prostitution is legalized and licensed, or decriminalized.

Sexual Objectification

There is a notable, overt objectification of the women reviewed in the online forum and this forms the greater background to the reviews by punters. Indeed, the existence of the reviews themselves can be seen as objectification to some degree, but many reviews are particularly explicit in the way that women are reduced to their sexual body parts or functions (Moradi & Yu-Ping, 2008), or directly compared with objects. As John Stoltenberg argues, it is important that we see these acts of objectification as part of a continuum of male violence and as an enactment of men's power over women:

There is a perceptible sense in which every act of sexual objectifying occurs on a continuum of dehumanization that promises male violence at its far end. The depersonalisation that begins in sexual objectification is what makes violence possible; for once you have made a person out to be a thing, you can do anything you want. (Stoltenberg, 2000, p. 48)

Therefore, one of the ways that punters present narratives of domination, violation, and sexual violence in their brothel reviews is through the sexual objectification of women.

One of the forms this objectification takes is through the ways that men depicted women working in brothels by describing them as objects and framing them in derogatory and dehumanizing ways:

I knew this one was a jizzgargler so I thought I'd add to the collection. Fucked *it* in the arse, fucked *its* mouth then gave *it* something warm to taste. (May 2012; VIC, emphasis added)

Jemma is very moreish. All holes are available and I have found over the past 15 years fucking her that satisfaction is always guaranteed. (February 2014; VIC)

I have noticed a couple of reviews of Ayumi over the last few months. She seemed to be a good punt with all holes thrown in. (November 2012; NSW)

In many of the reviews, punters discursively frame women working in brothels as sexualized body parts rather than human beings, reducing them to a series of "holes" to be penetrated or simply dehumanizing them by referring to them as "it." In these examples, the function of referring to women as "holes" is not recognized by men as an act of objectification and domination but, rather, is used as a way to legitimize their rights as "consumers" (e.g., "satisfaction is always guaranteed," "a good punt"). In other examples, women are directly compared with objects in ways that emphasize more overtly violent motivations.

In the following example, one punter attempts to reassure another sex buyer, after he expresses discomfort about going to brothels, by comparing women in brothels with toilets:

The way I see it is, we all have cravings at certain times in our lives whereby we would liked fulfilled, and this type service is the most convenient because you pay to not have the troubles which an affair can bring you. *My perspective is, if you need to go to the toilet, it is convenient when there is a public toilet around, but certainly by no means do I want to cherish or take this toilet home with me.* And you are quite right that this is not a healthy thing we do, not morally nor acceptable in some minds. But hey, that's what makes it exciting and fun!! [*sic*]. (August 2013; QLD, emphasis added)

Comparing women in brothels with “public toilet[s],” in this excerpt, serves the discursive function of explicitly delineating punter (subject) from woman (object). Here, unlike the previous excerpts, the punter is shown believing that his conduct is “not a healthy thing [to] do” or “morally . . . acceptable” but, nevertheless, he frames punting as a positive experience by comparing women with toilets. The inequality between punter and woman, as evidenced in excerpts that reference objectification, is further shown to actively promote and normalize a climate ripe for the acceptance of other forms of violation and violence in the reviews analyzed.

Violating Safe Sex Practices or Pressurized Sex

Another way that men discursively construct and normalize the violation of women in the brothels is by constructing and promoting a culture of unsafe sex. Their descriptions of the normalcy of unsafe sex practices also suggest a culture where women may feel pressured to accept unsafe sex practices to earn money or not be rated badly for poor service. The language men use to frame and normalize unsafe sexual practices contradicts the assumed level of mutuality that underpins much of the harm-minimization literature. Moreover, the excerpts suggest the normalization of harm, rather than the minimization of harm.

One of the ways men (re)produce a culture of unsafe sex within the forum is through the discussion of “extras,” a term used to describe sex acts that violate the OHS regulations of decriminalized brothels or the legal requirements of safe sex in legalized brothels. These acts include penetrative vaginal, anal, or oral sex without a condom or dental dam. In the following excerpts, punters frame unsafe sex practices that place women at increased risk as an expected and normal part of the sex-buying experience and, furthermore, as part of the punting culture:

Elissa was an absolutely cute as a button girl with a bubbly go get ‘em attitude. I asked for CIM and she agreed. (Note on Wall had prices for extras. CIM=\$20 COF=\$50 and I forgot the last one. (October 2015; NSW)

Good work. She's always done BBBJ as far as I know (as do most ladies at A H, seems something of an in house tacit agreement that most will put it on the table for free), but when I'd seen her (up until about mid 2013) she never really wanted CIM and definitely never wanted to swallow. You've done well getting either. (January 2015; NSW)

The frequent use of acronyms that reference unprotected sex in these reviews, such as CIM (Come in Mouth) and BBBJ (Bareback Blow Job), points to the normalization of,

and camaraderie behind, rule breaking between punters in their sex buying experiences. Narratives that promote violating the safety and boundaries of women are presented as an achievement for men, and legitimized in terms of a woman's perceived attitude or the culture of brothel management and their complicity to unsafe sex practices. In the first excerpt, the rhetorical function of emphasizing the woman's "bubbly go get 'em" attitude reinforces the idea that violating a woman's safety or personal boundaries is acceptable as long as there is some pretense that it is enjoyed or well received. Indeed, the importance of changing the woman's attitude if she is unwilling to perform unprotected sex acts is made clear in the second excerpt, where one punter congratulates another for being able to convince a woman to break the rules and engage in CIM. These excerpts emphasize how requests for unsafe sex practices, which actively place women at greater harm of contracting sexually transmitted infections and diseases (Adriaenssens & Hendrickx, 2012), are discursively framed by sex buyers as an expected, and even favored, part of purchasing sexual access to women in brothels.

Examples where punters reported women being happy or enthusiastic about unsafe sex practices stand in stark contrast to those where women were described as asserting boundaries, requesting the use of condoms or dental dams, or showing signs that they were uncomfortable. In these instances, punters tended to rate the "service," and the woman, negatively. This also reinforced expectations of control:

Kicked things off with DFK, moved to bed, and sensing my moves she pulls out a dam which was a bit of a mood killer. Told her that she can put it away as I'm not keen on licking rubber. She then offered to take it off for an extra \$50. This, to me, was shocking. I absolutely hate it when someone talks money during the act. I mean, why couldn't she tell me about it when I asked her about DATY during the intro??? (January 2015; QLD)

I asked for BJ and she gets out what looks like a wet wipe to clean junior. At this point Im thinking WTFi just showered and im generally pretty clean anyway so this is just going a bit overboard. She then gets more tissues to dry junior off before she starts. I can say she has a pretty good technique but there is a lot of fake moaning and Im already thinking this session wont be pleasant. Worried i might not be the mood for too much longer I CIM. And now what I think is the worse part of the sessions comes she runs to the sink and spends a good 10 mins spitting and washing her mouth and making loud horrible regurgitating sounds as she was trying to spit and clean her mouth . . . Overall bad punt and would not go back. I hope people find my review useful. (September 2011; NSW)

[S]tarted with a bbbj ok but not spectacular tgen sex in a few positions thought good to finish with oral but goes down with condom on wtf. I gave up decided to end and count my money good bye. (March 2014; VIC)

In the excerpts above, punters frame unsafe sex practices as both an expected part of the sexual encounter and as a feature of the brothel experience that women are expected to be comfortable with and acquiesce to. When women are reported as showing signs that they are uncomfortable about unprotected sex, or require more payment to perform it, punters construct the experience in negative terms. Discursively, sex buyers

position unsafe sex as an expected part of the sexual “service” and for women to acquiesce to these demands without complaint or any sign of concern for their own health and well-being. When men claim that they are reminded that women are not enjoying the experience and giving an adequate “service,” they discursively frame themselves as victims of the encounter, or as disgruntled “customers.” Despite positioning themselves as victims in these discourses, however, punters still reveal their assumed power over women by “warning” other punters about their bad experiences and reinforcing the idea that they are entitled to unprotected sex acts.

The breaching of safer sex practices—practices that are required by law in QLD and VIC, but are only recommended in OHS guidelines in NSW (Edler, n.d.)—can in itself be seen as a form of violation, as it exposes the women in these brothels to greater physical risk. These instances can also, potentially, be considered forms of pressurized sex, where women “decided not to say no to sex but felt pressured to consent” (Kelly, 1988, p. 82). Again, it is possible that all the instances described in the reviews could conceivably fall into this category, where there is pressure to consent (e.g., for financial reasons) underpinning the formally given consent for the purchase of sexual access (Coy & Benedet, 2012). Within these interactions, however, there is also specific pressure to consent to unsafe sexual practices that are constructed by many of the punters as a basic expectation. From the first description, there also appears to be pressure to consent to unsafe sexual practices in some brothels through the advertising of price lists for various sex acts without a condom.

This finding is in sharp contrast to those who have argued that online forums, where men share reviews such as this, actually promote safe sex practices. Teela Sanders notes, for example, a response from a sex buyer to a Home Office consultation in the United Kingdom in 2004, which claimed that

The internet has transformed part of the paid sex industry. There are websites with message boards where punters can exchange information. These message boards have an educative function, and among other things do set benchmarks. To give examples: Any mention of unprotected sex (bareback) will be met with a barrage of both criticism and informed argument. (quoted in Sanders, 2012, p. 74)

Sanders takes this point further to suggest that such examples indicate “the strength of the virtual community to positively influence the real-life sexual interactions between sex workers and clients” (Sanders, 2012, p. 74).

It is possible that these message boards perform an educative function for the punters who use them but, in our data, the reinforcement of the norm within punters’ discussions is more about how to find, or even encourage, *unsafe* sex practices. Given the other descriptions of objectification and violation, it is not surprising to find that the increased risk to women is not a major concern in the forums analyzed here. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a narrative about positively influencing the paid sexual interactions in the brothels would take hold among punters on the forum given the overall context of objectification and the expectation that unprotected sex acts be provided enthusiastically.

Blurred Consent and Physical Distress

The issue of violation is more stark in encounters described by punters as involving blurred consent and physical distress. Even when the men contribute reviews where women, according to their own accounts, show clear signs that they do not want to be touched or engage in sexual behavior, the punters do not recognize this as a violation, but instead tend to present the interaction as poor “service.” Embedded in these reviews is also a narrative of women’s comfort and consent to certain sex acts as being unimportant or disregarded, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

Looking at her body on the bed it was like she was dead . . . literally. Never seen someone lie so still before. There was NOTHING THERE! Haha. (January 2013; VIC)

Got to the point where I actually felt bad about even touching her as it didn’t look like she wanted me to, and this is why I left in the middle of the booking . . . it was a total waste of time and money. (August 2014; QLD)

She did not want me touching her not even her boobs. . . . Even When I was kissing her neck she turn the other way. Here is the worse part, she was asking me to touch myself and get myself hard. I was thinking to myself “why the hell am I paying you for if I am suppose to do all that?” . . . I did not show my displeasure but did let the reception know when I left. (June 2012; NSW)

NO eye contact, No sounds . . . Felt OK but was expecting more, told her to lie down. Nice smooth pussy, small tight girl, she restricted my depth by having her legs together the whole time, bitch was asking me to come like 2 minutes in. . . . Complete starfish and not interested. Because of her attitude so far I was mentally turned off. . . . Through out the fucking, she was completely silent. . . . So I fucked her a little harder and blew. (December 2012; VIC)

Rather than describing the reactions (or lack of reactions) of these women as a potential indication that something was wrong, one punter laughs and two others describe their dissatisfaction and irritation. Women being silent, or showing that they do not wish to be touched, are presented as reasons that the service was poor, that is, was a waste of money or worth complaining to management. These instances are presented as problems for the experience of the punters. There is seemingly little reflection about how paying for sexual access to a woman who, in a punter’s own account, does not want to be touched, might contribute to some form of harm or violation of the woman. There is also no discussion among punters of the possibility that these women might be in prostitution by force or trafficking.⁵ The final excerpt shows how the annoyance described by punters about women’s lack of enthusiasm can quickly move into more overtly abusive behavior. The last reviewer states that he “fucked her a little harder,” precisely because she was “completely silent.” Rather than complaining to management, he presents the narrative of a woman deserving to be subjected to “harder” sex because she has not met his expectations of good service. Reviews such as these

emphasize that, discursively, men assert their power over women by normalizing unwanted sex acts through the rhetoric of customer service, questioning “what the hell [they’re] paying for” and emphasizing the “total waste of time and money” the encounter brought them. The lack of reflection about the woman’s disinterest is either laughed at or ignored. Similar themes reappear in reviews that describe more overt forms of sexual violence.

Overt Forms of Violation and Violence

The continuation of violating practices flows through to narratives of more overt sexual coercion and rape. The questions around blurred consent in the above examples follow through to these more explicit accounts where women are described as being in pain, where punters describe feeling as though they are involved in rape, and where men explicitly, and sometimes emphatically, describe having continued to touch or penetrate women after they are told to stop. The normalization of violence against women was also expressed by punters through narratives of implicit and explicit sexual coercion and rape. Men’s violent and violating sexual practices were depicted as something women should expect as part of working in a brothel. When men describe the women as objecting to violent or painful sexual practices, this is often characterized as unprofessional on the part of the woman and/or deserving of a report to brothel management. In the language used to express these themes, it is often made clear that the punter providing the review was aware (or has subsequently become aware) that violation was taking place. However, there is still little, if any, concern shown for the women described.

This is emphasized in the reviews when punters not only show a general lack of concern for women’s well-being but, in some cases, also report feeling pleased they inflicted pain on them. In the following review, one Victorian punter states that,

I chose Angela who said she is 26 years old. My experience is a bit different, but I agree, she is very rude and I wouldn’t go back there again. The positive: She licked really well—licked my balls, bottom of penis, she kissed me quite a few times and ran her tongue along my body. Her blowjob was very good and almost made me cum. I told her to stop and then we start fucking. When I changed to doggy style, I was at only 20 mins into my 30 mins that I paid \$110 for, she goes “Quick! Please cum now!” This put me off and she kept saying it, which made it harder for me to cum. Anyway, after I came, she complained that my dick is “too big” and that she was in pain. Well, even though I was understanding and said I’m sorry if I hurt you, inside me I was like “bitch, you got what you deserved!” Overall, it started off great, but her attitude right at the end destroyed it for me. I agree, stay clear of Angela, the rude little bitch. (January 2015; VIC)

The aggressive use of language in this review, such as the repeated references to the woman being a “bitch,” reflects the objectifying and often violent culture that these punters normalize and reinforce throughout their reflections of the sex-buying experience in online forums. References to the woman’s pain in this particular review are represented as both important and unimportant simultaneously. Her pain is important,

in that the contributor seems happy that pain was inflicted and it is framed as revenge for her not performing in a way he deems acceptable. Yet, it is also unimportant to him in that her pain is normalized as part of the job, and emphasized where he states that she should not have expressed her pain because it constituted a “bad attitude” on her part and “destroy[ed]” the sex-buying experience for him. This narrative of male sexual pleasure overriding the importance of women’s physical safety was a consistent feature of the punter discourses examined. This narrative is often followed by men discursively positioning themselves as victims of the unpleasant and often unreciprocated sexual encounter, a rhetorical device that punters use to downplay their own role in the violation.

Indeed, some men express anger at women who are described as objecting to their sexual advances, despite speculating that they may have had an experience of rape or violence, previously. As one punter explains,

I suggest doggy, and this is where it turned completely to shit she prevents I go to guide myself in and a loud NO!! I’m like what? she says move your hands I said sorry and moved them she guides me in then I figure a hand full of arse while in doggy and again no so I moved my hand to her thighs NO!!!! so I put my hands on her back by now I’m soft and frankly starting to panic thinking I might be raping this girl so I pull out politely say I can’t do it and put on my clothes and leave after 20 minutes while in the car park I actually throw up (one of my closest female friends is a rape victim and I want nothing to do with causing that shit). I was actually shaken up pretty bad by the whole experience . . . as I say she might have had shit affecting her or she might have just not liked me either way if that’s how she does business she is in the wrong business . . . I have removed the line about wanting to punch her because it was inflammatory and didn’t assist the review and was more or less there because by the time I got to that point I had fired myself up a bit over the whole ordeal. (June 2014; QLD)

In this excerpt, the sex buyer not only shows a general lack of concern about the incident that has just taken place but also reports initially expressing anger at the woman for bringing her discomfort to his attention. He mentions having expressed a desire to “punch” the woman and proclaims that she is “in the wrong business” if she does not want to engage in sexual behavior. At no point during the review does he express any concern for the woman, even when he states that he is aware that he “might be raping [her].” Indeed, fellow punters commenting under the thread also show little regard for the well-being of the woman, failing to express any concern about her or even identifying that an unwanted sexual encounter had just taken place, constructing an overarching narrative about women in prostitution that positions their distress as unimportant and reproduces narratives of power and control among men. Instead, punters detach from the violence they are responsible for inflicting and reframe the review as a positive contribution to the online community, by potentially preventing others from this “poor service”:

I understand it’s hard to write a negative review, so thank you for warning us. (June 2014; QLD)

I can't imagine how hard that must have been to write, and then finally hit the post button. You have my admiration. (June 2014; QLD)

Mate I sometimes meet rape victims so I get a little of an idea how you must have felt. I don't think there is anything in your description that warrants it to be a rape of any kind she just might have got a scare previously and was being cautious. Now to the other issue of 20 minutes for \$400 I would have gone back and requested a refund of the dosh or at least half as it was her attitude that halted the show. When you pay her for her services she is there to provide that service and if there is something she doesn't like she should have told you in polite tones and even explained what she found comfortable. You sound like a guy who considers the ladies needs as well as your own BUT it is a two way street. IMHO of course. (June 2014; QLD)

In the first two excerpts, both punters express more concern for the reviewer than the woman and assist their fellow punter in avoiding personal responsibility through the rhetoric of "service." Moreover, their primary concern is their own punting experiences ("thank you for warning us") and delivering praise to their fellow punter for warning them ("you have my admiration"). In addition to avoiding responsibility through the narrative of "customer service," some punters also referred to the woman's attitude as a way to deflect from their own violent behavior. One punter, for example, suggests that the woman should have expressed her discomfort "in polite tones" and that, because of her "attitude," the affected punter should "request a refund of the dosh or at least half as it was her attitude that halted the show." This indicates that the financial component of the sexual encounter is believed to entitle the punter to some level of violation and, more specifically, that some punters are aware that their sexual advances are unwanted, but that they will receive support from the online punting community if they feel uncomfortable about it. In this sense, online punting communities can be seen to shield sex buyers from taking responsibility for the harms of prostitution by using narratives of "customer service" and complaining about women's "attitudes."

When dissatisfied with the service, some sex buyers report more overtly violating the boundaries of the women in these brothels, and their narratives tend to subsequently blame the women themselves for this outcome. As one punter explains,

First attempt to kiss her was rejected, first warning of a bad punt looming, no kissing allowed . . . she positioned her self to make it hard to reach, legs clamped I tried to opened a few times she resisted . . . I asked to start with doggie, she didn't want, told me it was difficult position I insisted, she made it so awkward, bending her back, pushing her pussy down it was hard to get access, I asked her to put her back straight and had down, pushing down by hand it felt like I was raping her, which I cant do .I briefly got in, had few pumps but couldn't continue, we swapped to mish, it was bit better still not very enjoyable, suddenly she pulled my cock out in panic and saying you came, as soon as I was out started cuming into the condom and she saw it but she was paranoid touching her pussy, wiping my cock, smelling, telling me I came earlier which didn't happen, she quickly jumped in shower and washed herself a good 5 min . . . I left so frustrated couldn't go to

sleep, needed a good root before, thinking about some alternatives while driving home [*sic*]. (October 2013; VIC)

In this review, the punter shows an awareness that the woman did not feel comfortable engaging in sexual activity with him, using language that shows her “awkward” and “difficult” posturing. Despite this, however, his narrative shows both persistence and a sense of entitlement over the woman’s body, and reinforces the idea that women’s concern over their own health and well-being dramatically decreases the satisfaction of the experience. His description of the woman as “paranoid” and “quickly jumping” in the shower, coupled with his version of events leading up to this, give the impression that the woman was exhibiting some signs of distress and that this is an important element of the review. Indeed, the sex buyer says “it *felt like* I was raping her” (emphasis added). His own description of what has taken place could qualify as rape under the relevant Victorian laws, where a person can be considered to have committed rape if “they sexually penetrate you without your consent . . . while being aware that you are consenting or might not be consenting” (Victorian Legal Aid, 2016, n.p.). It is certainly possible to interpret this punter’s review describing a situation in which the woman “might not be consenting.” His problem with the interaction, however, is that it left him “frustrated” and “need[ing] a good root” and seeking another brothel on the way home. The punters’ own discursive positioning of himself in relation to the incident is simultaneously the victim and the dissatisfied customer. That is, he acknowledges no part in the violence inflicted on the woman, but rather reframes himself as a victim of her “poor service.” This narrative of victimhood is further reinforced in other reviews of a similarly violent nature.

Another description of an interaction that could be seen to constitute rape, in a formal legal sense, is similar in that the reviewer expresses anger with the woman for providing poor service:

[She] did not manage a smile the entire booking . . . very cold personality came across no fondling or sucking of her breasts were allowed . . . she said they were too sensitive . . . after a few minutes the buzzer goes off and she says, u have to stop NOW i said we have 10 minutes to go she said, u have to stop NOW. so after a few more ahrd thrusts i manage to come boy, did i get out of there quick after i came overall a very cold, mechanical, star fish experience [she] gives the strong impression she def. does not enjoy what she is doing and a smile wouldnt kill her she is hot, knows it and her service—or lack thereof, is very poor WIR—def NOT [*sic*]. (emphasis added; December 2012)

Here, the sex buyer states he continued to penetrate the woman after she told him to stop and, again, the actions described meet the definition of rape in VIC, where a person has committed rape if “after sexual penetration they do not withdraw after becoming aware that you are not consenting or might not be consenting” (Victorian Legal Aid, 2016, n.p.). In his own account, the woman told him to stop twice (and his use of capitalization for “NOW” likely indicates this was emphatic) but he continues with “a few more hard [ahrd] thrusts.” It is important to note that both accounts of rape in our

analysis came from VIC, a state which was one of the first in the world to legalize brothel prostitution and is, arguably, the home of harm-minimization approaches.

As this “Discussion and Analysis” section shows, men construct, reinforce, and normalize a culture of sexual violence against women in their online interactions with other sex buyers. These narratives of sexual violation and violence range from asserting power over women through the sexual objectification of their bodies, to the normalization of pressurized (e.g., through acronyms referring to unsafe sex) and more explicit forms of sexual violence, such as rape. Despite being aware of the violations and violence they are inflicting on women, and in some instances even emphasizing it, punters created an online culture where their status as sex buyers took precedence over the perceived discomfort of women, contributing to a culture of harm normalization rather than harm minimization. If sexual violation and violence as described by punters in the reviews analyzed overlap and cannot be discussed separately, then the idea of harm minimization is itself problematic in creating a false sense that the most overtly violent harms are not fundamentally connected to those that are more common or maybe perceived as less severe.

Limitations

There are two significant limitations with the data analyzed here that should be taken into consideration. The first is that the men writing these reviews are not necessarily representative of all sex buyers. Given that they know about, and are choosing to contribute to, an online brothel review forum, it is likely that they have purchased sexual access to women in the sex industry more than once, and the tone of many of the reviews suggest they are regular punters. There is no available data on the Australian industry to suggest what percentage of men purchasing sexual access to women do so frequently. However, the IBISWorld (2015) industry report on “brothel keeping and sex worker services in Australia” does suggest that many men who purchase “sexual services” are likely to be committed to doing so. Given that there has been increasing competition from non-sex industry services facilitating casual sex (e.g., Tinder, Ashley Maddison, Adult Matchmaker), it is assumed that men continuing to pay for sexual access to women in brothels know and prefer this particular kind of commercial sex.

The second limitation, as discussed earlier, is that these reviews are written for an audience of other sex buyers. On one hand, this can make them a particularly rich source of data as there is no risk that responses have been skewed by researcher questions, for example. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that these are the versions of paid sex that these punters want to represent to their fellow sex buyers. Although many seem to indicate their contributions are to assist other punters in finding value for money, they might also wish to exaggerate or underplay particular aspects of their interactions in brothels to other reviewers. The reviews, therefore, cannot be accepted as wholly objective accounts of the instances in which these men purchase sexual access to women, but they do tell us something about the framing of these instances among a community of sex buyers, and their accepted norms. We have tried to emphasize this throughout the analysis.

Conclusion

The sex buyer reviews analyzed in this article reflect narratives of sexual violation and violence across legalized (VIC and QLD) and decriminalized (NSW) systems of prostitution that challenge notions of harm minimization. Our analysis reveals that sex buyers both discursively produce and normalize a culture of harm and sexual violence against women in their online reviews, referring to women as body parts or objects (e.g., “public toilets”) and intimating both pressurized and overt forms of sexual violence against women. We suggest that these examples of harm reflect a continuum of men’s sexual violation and violence in Australian brothel reviews, which is considered by punters to be an expected and “normal” part of the punting culture. That is, despite the assumption that harm minimization is inherent in systems of prostitution, that are either legalized or fully decriminalized, our findings show that sex buyers actively produce and reinforce multiple and interlinking narratives of harm toward women, and that these narratives normalize various forms of violation (e.g., objectification and unsafe sex) and abuse (e.g., coercion and rape).

Our article makes three significant contributions to the study of online sex buyer forums. First, it provides an analysis of online discourses of sexual violation and violence against women in prostitution from an Australian context and emphasizes the potential limitations of legalized and decriminalized systems of prostitution in reference to harm-minimization approaches. Second, in centering our analysis on sex buyer reviews, we focus on the importance of studying the narratives of sexual perpetrators for the online culture of violation and violence they foster, and not only the experiences of women who have survived sexual violence. Finally, we contribute to the literature that discusses the institution of prostitution as a form of men’s violence against women by considering how sexual violence *within* prostitution might be understood, and how this understanding challenges standard ideas about harm minimization. By complicating notions of harm as a unitary construct, and acknowledging that harms tend to overlap within a prostitution context, we call into question the appropriateness of harm-minimization approaches in legalized and decriminalized systems in terms of protecting women, and place an emphasis on the male sex buyers who produce and normalize these discourses of harm.

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Notes

1. The data are publicly available at the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA) website, but in addition to this, we sought explicit permission from the organization to analyze their data and to alert them to our analysis.

2. For example, the Invisible Men Project, United Kingdom (available from <http://the-invisible-men.tumblr.com/contact>), and the Invisible Men Project, Canada (available from <http://prostitutionresearch.com/2014/08/04/the-invisible-men-project/>)
3. Personal correspondence with CATWA.
4. In line with previously published research on sex industry review websites (Holt & Blevins, 2007), we have chosen not to provide the name of the original site in this article.
5. There is evidence of trafficking to Australia for sexual exploitation (McKenzie & Beck, 2011). Some legislation, for example, in Victoria makes note of this and assumes that punters will report instances of suspected trafficking. We discuss the limitations of this approach under legal brothels in Tyler and Jovanovski (2018).

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