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Intimacy, pleasure and the men who pay for sex

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that the performance of sex work involves both emotion work and emotional labour – the shaping of feelings, as well as their public management (for example, Chapkis, 1997; Sanders, 2004). However, whilst much is known about the feelings and experiences of female sex workers, very little is known about the experiences of their clients – the men who pay for sex. This chapter seeks to make men's voices heard by drawing on a study exploring men's cyber-accounts of paid-for-sex posted on the British internet site www.punternet.com and focuses, specifically, on men's accounts of intimacy and pleasure.

Firstly, the chapter explores men's accounts of intimacy and romance within paid-for-sex showing how patterns of ritualised courtship in commercial sex often echo those found in non-commercial sexual encounters. However, whilst emotional labour plays an important role in sex work, the commodification of pleasure is also important. Secondly, this chapter moves on to examine men's accounts of pleasure in paid-for-sex, showing that just as non-commercial consensual heterosexual is based on the normative assumption of sexual reciprocity, men's accounts of commercial sex also follow these normative expectations.

Researching men who pay for sex

There is a large and increasing body of literature exploring the feelings and experiences of both male, and particularly, female sex workers (for example, see Walkowitz, 1980; Chapkis, 1997; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Sanders, 2005). However, there is comparatively little research on the clients of sex workers. Roberta Perkins (1991) estimates that less than 1 per cent of research on sex work focuses on the men who pay

for sex, and in the United Kingdom (UK), the situation is particularly dismal. The reasons for this are fairly straightforward.

Methodologically, researchers have found it much easier to access sex workers – they can be found on the streets, in parlours and walk-ups, and many sex workers advertise in newspapers, contact magazines, via calling-cards and, most recently, on the internet. Some sex workers may also access outreach, or similar, services and can be approached there. It could be argued, then, that there is a reasonably accessible pool of sex workers from which to sample. The same cannot be said for their clients, for whom the act of paying for sex is likely to be a deeply discrediting activity and one with which they would prefer not to be publicly and openly associated. Indeed, many other researchers have documented their difficulties in trying to include male clients within their research. For example, in their study of street sex work in Glasgow, Neil McKeganey and Marina Barnard (1996) note that men often lied about why they were parked within the red-light district, claiming that they had just stopped to ‘catch up on some paperwork’. They argue: ‘The response was almost always the same, a more or less polite “get lost”’ (p.14). Historically female sex workers have also been perceived as ‘the problem’, not their clients. As such, it is women who have been subject to intense medical intervention, surveillance and regulation (O’Neill, 2001). This has led the female sex worker to become increasingly visible within lay and professional discourses on sex work (Weitzer, 2000) and, thus, also the most researched.

However, there is now a growing body of literature on what Rosie Campbell (1998) calls the ‘invisible men’, or what Elroy Sullivan and William Simon (1998) describe as the ‘unseen patrons of prostitution’. The study on which this chapter is based forms part of this growing body of literature which focuses on men’s accounts of paying for sex. The data are drawn from the British website www.punternet.com: ‘The Online Community for Patrons and Providers of Adult Personal Services in the UK’. The website has existed since January 1999 and is dedicated primarily to the publication of men’s field reports (or reviews) of encounters with female sex workers. However, the site contains other sections, including a message board facility as well as links to women’s own websites. The website predominantly reviews indoor, rather than outdoor – or street

– sex work and, as far as it is possible to determine, reviews relate to consensual adult commercial heterosexual.

At the time of data analysis, which was carried out between 1999 and 2000, www.punternet.com contained 5,067 field reports of 2,661 different sex workers written by 2,554 separate authors. Whilst the majority of authors post just one field report, many publish several, the highest number for any one individual being 46. Similarly whilst the majority of women are reviewed only once, many are reviewed several times, the highest number being 32. We chose to sample the reviews by author and, at random, selected a 10 per cent sample (n=255). Since several of these authors had published more than one field report, one of their reports was randomly selected to be included in the sample. However, at the time of writing (in October 2006), there were 41,952 online field reports written by 40,097 authors. The highest number of posts by any author was 134 and the highest number of posts for an individual woman was 173. According to www.punternet.com this represents a total spend of nearly five million pounds and an average cost, per visit, of £124 (www.punternet.com, 2006, online).

The field reports are highly structured in that when men post a report they are required to complete an online proforma. This proforma asks for the name of the sex worker, her location, telephone number and/or website address, the price paid, and the length of time spent in her company. Comments are then organised under three headings: ‘her place’, ‘description’ and ‘comments’. Finally, reviewers are asked to indicate whether they would recommend her to others and whether they would visit her again themselves.

The data were analysed iteratively, both manually and with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software, the latter being used primarily for preliminary searching and coding (for a further discussion of this see Earle and Sharp, 2007). Emergent categories and themes were developed and the data were interrogated further using these themes; some of these themes form the basis of the remainder of this chapter. Generally, the data have been reported *verbatim*, and includes original spelling, grammatical or typographical errors. Men’s original user names, as included in www.punternet.com have also been used here.

Why do men pay for sex?

The research on which this chapter is based did not set out to answer the question: why do men pay for sex? So, it may seem rather odd to focus on this at all. However, Martin Monto (2000) suggests that academics, policy makers, researchers and others presume that they already know why men pay for sex, arguing that ‘people tend to assume that the motives of johns are obvious, not worthy of serious exploration’ (p. 76). However, of the little research that has focused on men, much of it has been motivated by the desire to find out and report the reasons why men pay for sex. The Glasgow study carried out by McKeganey and Barnard (1996), for example, reports men’s desire for specific sex acts and the lewd or illicit nature of paid-for sex. Monto’s (1991) US study of men also reports that men often make requests for specific sex acts, particularly fellatio. A telephone survey of Australian men (Louie *et al.*, 1998) found that ‘good sex’ and convenience also motivated men to pay for sex. Another survey carried out in Australia found that men reported how paying for sex offered them sexual relief (Pitts *et al.*, 2004). However, commercial sex is not just about the exchange of sex for money. Other researchers have noted that the majority of men are probably motivated to pay for sex by a range of factors (Chapkis, 1997; Campbell, 1998). The research reported here would support this; explanations are likely to be wide-ranging and there is unlikely to be one clear motive to explain why men pay for sex that applies universally across place and time, and across men of different ages and cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The data suggest that commercial sex involves emotional exchange between client and sex worker as well as the development of relationships based on notions of love, intimacy and romance. The data also suggest that sexual satisfaction is important but that, for many men, this is often framed within the context of both giving and receiving pleasure.

Intimacy, romance and ritualised courtship

Men, intimacy and emotional labour

The concept of ‘intimacy’ has considerable contemporary currency (Giddens, 1992). Intimacy can refer to knowing, loving and closeness between people; emotional, rather

than physical, intimacy. Although 'intimacy' can be used euphemistically in place of sexual intercourse (Jordan, 2004), Jamieson (1998) argues that intimacy can be analysed at different levels. Firstly, intimacy can refer to the acquisition of familiarity. Secondly, it can refer to the possession of detailed personal knowledge. Thirdly, intimacy refers to notions of trust between individuals. Lastly, intimacy can refer to feelings of loving, caring and sharing.

It is now well established that the performance of erotic labour involves the commodification of intimacy and emotion. Drawing on her study of flight attendants, Arlie Hochschild (1983) develops the concepts of emotion work and emotional labour. The concept of emotion work presupposes that individuals are capable of reflecting on and shaping their innermost feelings. Hochschild describes emotion work as the 'act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling ... Note that "emotion work" refers to the effort – the act of trying – and not to the outcome, which may or may not be successful' (1979:561). She describes emotional labour as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value' (Hochschild, 1983:7). In the context of sex work, Maggie O'Neill argues that:

Emotional labour is a central aspect of the working women's relationship with their clients. Emotional energy is directed at minimizing their own feeling worlds at work, and emotional energy is used in and around their interactions with and for clients ... women have to be good at 'gentling' men, at flattering, counselling and consoling the male ego while at the same time providing his ideal fantasy woman, even though he may make her 'feel sick' (O'Neill, 2001:142-3).

The literature is widely supportive of the idea that sex workers engage in emotional labour. Teela Sanders' (2004a) study of sex workers in Birmingham, UK, for example, highlights how the management of emotion poses a significant and persistent problem for sex workers. Men's reviews of paid-for encounters on www.punternet.com illustrate the successful outcomes of women's emotional labour:

Angie is very chatty and will trust you with info most working girls would not which makes you feel special, family life etc. [Legman]

Afterwards we chatted for a while – nothing contrived. [Daveinascot]

The data indicate that some of the men reviewing for www.punternet.com form long-term relationships with sex workers. For example, *Beardyone* describes a twelve year relationship with sex worker *Alexandra*:

I've been seeing Alexandra for about twelve years (we worked it out the other day) and I have a wonderful time every time I see her. She meets me at the door, usually dressed in a housecoat and nothing else, undone down the front. We have a kiss, then a chat, then into her bedroom with its big double bed. She gives an excellent massage, lovely oral and sex in every position you want. An absolute delight ... [Beardyone]

Other reviews posted on the www.punternet.com site indicate that relationships between sex workers and their clients can range from months to years:

I've been seeing this lady for about 2 years and keep going back. [Lw]

I've been to see Lindsey many times over the years and so this report is an amalgam of all my visits. [Tommo]

Although not all men seem to have, or want, continued ongoing relationships with a sex worker, in spite of this, importance is often placed on a sense of knowing and familiarity. These feelings, Lynn Jamieson (1998) would argue, are implicit to the development of intimacy between two individuals. One client, *Eddie*, writes:

Jacqui is very friendly and makes you feel very relaxed. We chatted for ages and it felt like I had known her for years. [Eddie]

Ritualised courtship and romance

Ken Plummer (1975) suggests that the organisation of sexual life is constructed through categories of sexual meaning. There are a range of categories, he argues, ranging from the utilitarian, the erotic, the romantic and the symbolic. Sexuality can, thus, manifest in symbolic form to provoke feelings of sexiness, highlight gender differences or demonstrate notions of love. Arguably, the romantic symbols of modern ritualised courtship are infused with these symbolic forms.

Writing about non-commercial heterosexual scripts, David Wyatt Seal and Anke Ehrhardt (2003) argue that courtship ‘may be defined as the process or set of behaviours that precedes and elicits sexual behaviour’ (p.295). The typical symbols of non-commercial heterosex in modern western cultures might include candlelight, soft music, good food and champagne, all of these helping to create the setting for romantic courtship. Some of men’s reviews on www.punternet.com would be difficult to distinguish from such imagery, for example *Entranced* writes:

We met, we ate a lovely lasagne (Charise loves Italian food!), we drank wine. We talked. We played some music. We took our time. [Entranced]

According to Wyatt Seal and Ehrhardt (2003), the ‘courtship game’ also commonly includes small talk. Men’s reviews illustrate the way in which commercial sex often follows a courtship script similar to that of non-commercial heterosex:

Anyway, we had some wine and a lengthy chat and then strawberries and cream ... [Rumblingtum]

Men also commonly report being offered a drink of some sort on arrival, sometimes wine or beer, or a cold soft drink, and sometimes tea or coffee. Having a drink is an expected preamble and part of a ritualised system of courtship. As with any exchange, commercial

or otherwise, a drink can be used as a form of relaxation, serving to put an individual at their ease and is an activity typical of real dates (Lever and Dolnick, 2000), as *Okydoky* describes:

We chatted over a few drinks for a while then we went up to her bedroom ...
[Okydoky]

Other reviews on www.punternet.com refer to the use of other romantic props, such as the use of candles or soft music, as *Adrian* and *Alan* both note:

Very friendly and made every attempt to make you feel relaxed from the start. Comfortable bedroom, clean, candles, and soft music. [Adrian]

There was candlelight and soft music was playing. [Alan]

Previous research highlights that indoor sex workers often report receiving gifts. These gifts can include items such as perfume, flowers or champagne which, as Janet Lever and Deanne Dolnick rightly note, are ‘the type of gifts a man might give to a girlfriend or wife’ (2000:94). These symbols of romantic courtship can also be found in men’s reviews on www.punternet.com, for example:

... if you really want to get the best from Peaches a few suggestions. Firstly take some champagne with you when you visit – she drinks little else and it makes her very randy. [Valentine]

However, the use of such romantic symbols is not dissimilar to non-commercial sex in which the ‘bottom line dynamic’ is often one of romantic negotiation in the pursuit and exchange for sex.

Girlfriend sex

Whilst intimacy and romance play an important role in paid-for sex, some of the reviews posted on www.punternet.com stand out from the rest. As already discussed elsewhere (Sharp and Earle, 2003; Earle and Sharp, 2007), some of the reviews refer to the phenomenon of 'girlfriend sex'. Girlfriend sex is about 'making love' rather than 'having sex'. As Julia O'Connell Davidson (1995; 1996) points out, sex workers and their clients exist within a normative moral order where particular meanings are ascribed to human sexual interactions. These meanings dictate that 'legitimate' sex is that which occurs between men and women who are 'in love'. Indeed Wyatt Seal and Ehrhardt (2003) highlight how, within narratives of emotional intimacy, men often contrast 'having sex' with 'making love'. As *Entranced!* writes:

*I suppose the best I can say is that it was more like making love than having sex ... the nicest – in every sense – girl I've met for absolutely ages.
[Entranced!]*

Many of the other reviews echo this phenomenon and, in contrast to some of the previously published literature on female sex work (for example, Brewis and Linstead, 2000), men describe experiences of cuddling, kissing and feelings of being loved and cared for within paid-for sex:

I was after a 'girlfriend' experience and Barbie plays this part to perfection, giving lots and lots of love, and attention, and forever asking if you are ok (YES!!) This young lady has it all, looks, personality, brains and a terrific sense of humour an absolute joy to be with. [David Murphy]

*There are lots of cuddles and she actually appears to enjoy the sex ... The well used term 'girlfriend sex' seems to be totally appropriate here. Without being crude, Tiff feels superb whilst 'inside'. I'll be back as soon as possible. I came away feeling great and had to phone her back and tell her.
[Visitor]*

All the way through we had been kissing so this was a real girlfriend experience. I can't wait to see her again what a jewel she is. [SharpShooter]

Girlfriend sex also invokes feelings of exclusivity, or the reluctance to share a sex worker with other clients. For example, *Nealmort* and *Fboc* write:

The only sadness is that after this review I may have to share her with more of you. [Nealmort]

Great girlfriend like sex. We finished up in a heap of very sweaty tangled bodies. She is one sexy lass. Hands off. [Fboc]

It is only in the last 20 years or so that sociologists have paid attention to the concept of 'love'. Love is part of public culture, and it is socially and culturally constructed rather than personal and private. Sheila Jackson (1993) makes the distinction between 'falling in love' and 'being in love', and drawing on Shere Hite's (1988) study, notes that whilst people in long term relationships may not be 'in love', they do say that they 'love' their partners. In his work on intimacy, Anthony Giddens (1992) also draws a distinction between passionate love and romantic love; the former evoking fervour and danger and the latter being something that is normatively desirable. In men's reviews of paid-for sex both are evident. Of course, not all men are concerned with developing emotional intimacy when paying for sex, nor do they all regularly visit the same sex worker. Many do not describe their paid-for encounters within the context of emotion or romance, nor do they refer to the phenomenon of girlfriend sex. Pleasure is also an important emergent theme within men's reviews of paying for sex and this is explored below.

Men, pleasure and normative heterosex

The quick fuck

Some men do want just a 'quick fuck' or 'a good hard shag', as two of the men on www.punternet.com write:

Leonne is a good choice if you want a quick fuck with a nice looking girl. Don't expect intimacy, GFE [girlfriend experience] or a long stay, just a good hard shag. [Nobbin the Nob]

This woman is dynamite! I visited her once at Liasons and was as good if not better this time round. This is not gentle, this is not girlfriend sex, it is frenzied raw physical pleasure. If sex was on at the olympics, this girl would take home gold for the emerald isle ... I left knackered, bow-legged but very very satisfied! [Dv]

On www.punternet.com the vast majority – over 90 per cent – of sexual encounters are reviewed positively and men tell stories that centre on their own physical pleasure. Not surprisingly, then, men's sexual pleasure is central to the experience of paying for sex. Men's accounts often focus on a woman's willingness to please. The phrase 'she is keen to please' can often be found in men's reviews, for example:

she was keen to please and did all that i wanted, even performing again after a rest ... [Robbie]

I watched both girls together for a while then I had Anya whilst Lara sat on her face so that I could kiss those lovely tits of hers ... both ladies are a pleasure to be with and keen to please. [Nig2259]

However, although the data suggest that most paid-for encounters are reviewed positively, for others, a negative sexual experience is usually blamed on the sex worker, as the following extract shows:

Her technique is appalling, spend more time wanking than sucking, won't suck to completion, and struggled to please me at all. [Blowman]

The data suggest that, although intimacy and romance can be important to some men, for others paying for sex is a purely commercial transaction – nothing more – but honesty and good service are vital. The view expressed above also allows men to place their own sexual desires at the fore in a way that may not be possible within consensual non-commercial heterosexual. As Neil McKeganey states: ‘By paying for sex the males felt able to place their own sexual desires at centre stage ...’ (1994:295).

Reciprocal heterosexual

Whilst men’s own sexual pleasure features strongly within men’s reviews, contemporary discourses on normative consensual heterosexual often centre on sexual reciprocity in that definitions of sex ‘are focused on the notion of reciprocity, where sex involves giving (and receiving) pleasure’ (McPhillips, Braun and Gavey, 2001:235). What is unusual, given the previously published literature on sex work, is that the data suggest that such discourses apply equally to commercial, as well as non-commercial, sex. Of course, this is unlikely to be universally true across the whole sex industry and is more likely to apply to indoor, rather than outdoor, sex work (Lever and Dolnick, 2000).

Accounts of non-commercial heterosexual indicate that heterosexual behaviour is highly patterned. Drawing on script theories, some authors suggest a prescribed sequence of events. William Gagnon and John Simon describe this as:

Kissing, tongue kissing, manual and oral caressing of the body, particularly the female breasts, manual and oral contacts with both the female and male genitalia, usually in this sequence, followed by intercourse in a number of positions (Gagnon and Simon, 1987:2).

Men’s reviews of paid-for sex on www.punternet.com show striking similarities with the sexual script outlined above. As Alan’s review indicates:

During the session Racquel kisses (with tongues) and cuddles, she also appears to enjoy receiving oral. Her oral (with) is exceptional and very gentle, she kissed and nibbled my balls then liked and sucked my cock taking

it deep into her mouth. The sex to completion (her on top) was also excellent. [Alan]

Men's reviews highlight that giving pleasure to female sex workers – usually in the form of cunnilingus or masturbation – is important. This could be interpreted either as highly altruistic behaviour, or as an action which maintains and constructs masculine heterosexual identity; the latter view is endorsed here. Indeed, some men purport to be so good that they believe the sex worker should pay them:

... she starts licking my balls and all along my very stiff cock licking the end like a lollipop finally sucking down on me hard she seems to love sucking cock ... now I'm ready to have that wet pussy and is she wet, her legs hook around my neck and do I ram her hard, she is really thrusting me hard now pleading for more maybe she should pay me for the pleasure I am giving her. [Bigjohnuk]

Carol Vance (1984) suggests that men's concern with reciprocity may demarcate a more egalitarian type of sexual standards. However, it is more likely that such gifting is gendered and unequal, as Jackie Gilfoyle Jonathan Wilson and Brian Brown note:

... women are seen as the object who is both 'given away' and 'given to'; while men, on the other hand, are seen as the subject, maintaining their dominance by both being the recipient of the woman and conferring on the object (woman) the gift of pleasure or orgasm (Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown, 1992:218).

There is very limited evidence within the previously published literature on sex work which suggests that women enjoy sex work. Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead, for example, refer to the term 'heaven trade' to describe 'clients whom the worker finds irresistibly attractive' (2000:220). In contrast, other researchers such as Roberta Perkins and Garry Bennett (1985) and Susan Edwards (1993) argue that sex workers have little

job satisfaction and rarely experience any sexual excitement. Men's reviews of paid-for sex would beg to differ.

Oooh! Pleasure and the female orgasm

The majority of positive reviews on www.punternet.com highlight the way in which men believe that they give pleasure to sex workers. *Delboy* and *Fireblade* describe their experiences of this:

More kissing was followed by me going down on her which she seemed to enjoy ... [DelBoy]

Not wishing to disclose too many personal details – but suffice to say Paula's speciality is her 'A' level, where I believe she passed with honours, and as I've already said I'm a 'bum' man, and so this was a great experience. An added bonus was that Paula seemed to really enjoy that part too. [Fireblade]

Andre Béjin (1986) has written about the 'orgasmic imperative', arguing that it is a pervasive feature of modern heterosex. That is, orgasm is now seen as the 'normal' and 'natural' outcome of sexual experience. According to Paula Nicholson (1993), this imperative has come to symbolise sexual competence, and has been (re)produced in sexological, therapeutic and feminist discourses. The orgasmic imperative is also evident in everyday talk, for example as Tavella argues, 'Men have become very concerned about this lately, always asking 'Did you? Did you come?' (Tavella, 1992:2). However, as Celia Roberts et al., argue, central to this is not women's pleasure per se but that: 'Giving women an orgasm is a demonstration of the man's sexual capacities and skill' (1995, p.526).

In www.punternet.com men's accounts of giving pleasure in paid-for sex are dominated by discussion of the female orgasm, as the following extract indicates:

Her pussy tasted sweet, and I could tell she was enjoying herself, as I licked her hand came down to spread her lips and tease her clit, her moans got louder and she tensed up, I tasted her juices as she reached her climax, her fingers had gone white whilst gripping the bed as she came. [Slappy]

In fact, men spend proportionately more time writing about women's pleasure than they do writing about their own experiences of orgasm, which is often just described as 'the inevitable', and left at that.

Men's reviews of sexual pleasure are generally consistent with what is known about this within a non-commercial context; that is, whilst women frequently report faking orgasm, the majority of men do not believe that the women they have sex with do (Holland *et al.*, 1998; Roberts *et al.*, 1995). However, considerable attention is given within men's reviews to establishing the genuineness of women's orgasm. This issue is often discussed in detail with men providing a full account of how and why they believe a genuine orgasm has taken place. According to the data, seemingly verifiable signs include plentiful lubrication and pleasure noises. For example:

... she started to ride my (covered) cock she just went wild. I am sure she came from the noises she was making. [Sj]

I must have spent a good 10 mins down there. She made all the right noises and I think she definitely orgasmed. [Bob]

Of course, one only has to recall the now famous scene in the film *When Harry Met Sally* in which, in a busy Manhattan diner, Sally loudly proves her point that men cannot tell when women are faking an orgasm! Indeed, previous research highlights that sex workers commonly fake orgasm for their clients' benefit. For example, Charlotte, a London sex worker, states; 'The men really want to believe that you fancy them. They love it when you make a lot of noise. They really kid themselves that you're enjoying it' (in Salvadori, 1997:120).

Faking orgasm generates anxiety for both men and women (Roberts *et al.*, 1995) in that commercial sex is not only about men's pleasure but about men giving pleasure to women. However, just as non-commercial heterosex centres on notions of reciprocity so, too, does commercial sex. When men pay for sex they are also paying for a sexual performance – real or otherwise – in which their sexual prowess is affirmed through the sex workers own pleasure. As Paula Nicolson and Jennifer Burr note, the orgasmic imperative ensures that women are responsible for ensuring that men experience themselves as good lovers and 'if the woman fails to enjoy sex, then she is somehow to blame, because if she were not, it would suggest male sexual inadequacy' (2003:1737).

Bringing men in: concluding thoughts

The internet has offered men who pay for sex an opportunity to create a social world in which paying for sex is no longer the activity of the lone, deviant male, but part of a collective, normative social and moral order. Websites such as www.punternet.com also offer men the opportunity to communicate, exchange ideas and engage with one another, and with sex workers. Such websites also provide academics, researchers and other interested parties, a window into the world of men who pay for sex – a window which has only ever partially been opened.

Excluding men from research on sex work has served to perpetuate the myth that the 'problems' of the sex industry can, yet again, be blamed on women, serving to (re)focus attention on female sex workers as the subjects of discussion, regulation and surveillance. Excluding men also buys into the illusion that the men who pay for sex are either bad, mad, or sad and, perpetuates the idea that 'we' know what 'they' want and, therefore, should not bother to find out. Although raising many challenges (for example, see Earle and Sharp, 2007) using the internet to research paid-for sex has presented researchers with an exciting opportunity to bring men into analyses of sex work.

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