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The limits of ethical consumption in the sex industry: An analysis of online brothel reviews

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ABSTRACT

This article weighs arguments about individualised ethical consumption practices in the sex industry through an analysis of the narratives of men who buy sexual access to women in legal brothels in the state of Victoria, Australia. In order to consider claims of ethical consumption in the sex industry, a theoretical thematic analysis of 50 online brothel reviews is undertaken, focussing on potential expressions of “care and concern”. We find significant narratives of unprotected sex and questionable sexual consent, and that there is an almost complete lack of care or concern shown for the women described in these reviews. This calls into question the ethical consumption assumption in the legislation, and raises further questions about the applicability of ethical consumption concepts to the sex industry more broadly.

Notions of ethical consumption are increasingly applied to the sex industry. As we argue here, assumptions about ethical consumption are becoming so normalised in the sector that they are even embedded in regulations regarding legalised brothel prostitution in places such as the Australian state of Victoria, which has one of the most established systems of legalised brothel prostitution in the world (Sullivan, 2007). Some feminist critics have argued that assumptions about ethical consumption are unrealistic (Jeffreys, 2009) and that they overlook sex buyers/punters¹ as potential perpetrators of abuse themselves (Raymond, 2013). In order to consider these tensions, we analyse 50 contributions from sex buyers to an online brothel review forum, looking specifically at reviews of legal brothels in Victoria. Our analysis set out to determine dominant themes in the reviews and to consider if any narratives of care and concern – as a required precondition of ethical consumption (Shaw, McMaster, & Newholm, 2016) – were evident in them. We find that descriptions of unprotected sex and issues of questionable consent are significant themes in the reviews, and that sex buyers emphasise their concerns about value for money over concern for the women in the brothels. We also find that some sex buyers describe situations of questionable consent that may, in some instances, constitute sexual assault. This brings into question the validity of ethical consumption approaches to the sex industry and the notion in legalised systems, like Victoria's, that sex buyers are concerned with the

conditions of the women to whom they purchase sexual access in brothels.

Ethical consumption and the sex industry

The concept of ethical consumption practices has gained momentum in both academic and mainstream cultural discourses in the last three decades (Harrison, Newholm, & Shaw, 2005; Yeow, Dean, & Tucker, 2014). The ethical consumer is seen as being “concerned with the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world around them”, and informs their decisions based on “political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social [and/] or other motives” (Harrison et al., 2005, p.4). Ideas about ethical consumption are now frequently visible in popular culture, especially with regard to food and clothing (Barendregt & Jaffe, 2014) but similar themes have been extended to the sex industry.

The language of ethical consumption is increasingly applied to the commercial sex industry; from those within the industry, and the mainstream press, as well as from some within the academy. Recent examples include: advocating for the production of eco-friendly sex toys (MacMillen, 2014; Metzger, 2007), focusing on the “erotic labour” involved in the production of “feminist pornography” (Gold, 2013; Hester, 2015), touting the notion of “ethical brothels” (Miller, 2017),

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¹ The terms “sex buyer” and “punter” are used interchangeably throughout to refer to people who purchase sexual access to those in prostitution. In the forums discussed in the discussion and analysis section, the most common reference is to “punters” but the terms “sex buyer” and “john” are more common elsewhere. We have primarily used “punter”, in reference to the men's own descriptions, interchanged with “sex buyer” for clarity.

and encouraging sex buyers to actively enquire about the financial split between a woman in prostitution and a brothel manager (D'Adamo, 2014). In academic literature, the most prominent application of the ethical consumption paradigm to the sex industry has been through the notion of “ethical pornography” (e.g. Hester, 2015; McKee, Albury, & Lumby, 2008; Scott, 2016). The precise nature of what makes pornography “ethical” to these authors varies, but they include suggestions of amateur or free pornography, a diversity of performers and owners, safe work practices, in terms of both consent and sexual health, and “feminist pornography” (c.f. Whisnant, 2016). In her contribution to *Queer Sex Work*, porn studies scholar Helen Hester (2015) argues that it is not so much the acts that are being filmed in feminist pornography that are subject to ethical consumption claims, but rather, the conditions – both workplace and economic – in which the actors are expected to perform. This focus is consistent with the assumptions in the Victorian *Sex Work Act (1994)* and the associated regulations that we highlight in the main analysis of this article.

Hester explains that “issues of sex work and labour processes remain somewhat of a blind spot” (p. 37) in the wider porn studies literature, and adds that in order to be an ethical consumer of the commercial sex trade, one must “go beyond accepting companies' marketing materials-cum-mission statements” (p. 36) and, instead, ask oneself whether the “ethical” label attached to queer and feminist pornographic films are less “fair trade porn” and more “lip service” (p. 36) by marketing-savvy porn companies. Hester (2015, p. 36), rather optimistically, refers to these individuals as a “new breed of consumer” and suggests that the industry can be transformed through an increased emphasis on improving the workplace conditions of those in it.

The notion of ethical consumption practices in street, brothel or escort prostitution, has received somewhat less attention, although groups from within the sex industry have, at times, dealt with questions of what ethical consumption in the sex trade might look like. For instance, Kate D'Adamo, a community organiser from the New York branch of the Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP-NYC), argues that ethical consumption in the commercial sex industry is a progressive step forward for both sex buyers and for those working in the industry. She states that “being an ethical consumer, in the end, is about being an advocate and doing it with your wallet instead of a megaphone... we should all be making efforts to create a space which supports the lives of those whose labor you access, or at the very least to not make it worse” (D'Adamo, 2014, n.p). In defining how sex buyers should become ethical consumers, D'Adamo states that:

[T]he first step in being an ethical consumer is defining what that actually means for you, and realising that just because something is labelled “ethical” and “progressive”, it may not reflect what you define as either. (D'Adamo, 2014, n.p).

Applying this idea to prostitution, she specifies that asking about “the split between what a dungeon gets versus what the Domme gets” is one such example of ethical consumption in the sex trade; one where the consumer of the sexual service actively enquires about the earnings of the person in prostitution and, by association, expresses concern about their rights and well-being. Some sex industry businesses have also used an appeal to ethical consumption practices in their marketing. Legal brothels in Victoria, for example, sometimes mention the benefits of purchasing sexual access through a licensed brothel as an issue of improved safety for both the sex buyer and those working in the brothel.²

However, feminist critics have been sceptical about the potential for ethical consumption practices in the sex industry. The research of Coy, Horvath, and Kelly (2007), for instance, which surveyed sex buyers in London, found that men did not report being deterred from purchasing

sexual access by the possibility that the women involved were trafficked. Raymond (2013) has also criticised programs targeting sex buyers through “ethical johns” campaigns. Her analysis focuses on examples of “safer sex” campaigns in India and Switzerland, and of anti-trafficking campaigns Germany and the Netherlands. None of which, Raymond points out, have been shown to increase safer-sex practices or the reporting of potentially trafficked women. Indeed, she argues that the very existence of these campaigns is a normalising force emphasising 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.

Raymond (2013) highlights one campaign in the Netherlands, for example, where Crimestoppers warned punters about women in prostitution with “little responsiveness to the client” and “encouraged buyers to report abuse”, although 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’ who don't meet their standards of a ‘good fuck’” and adds that “male prostitution users are more likely to report unresponsive women to their pimps rather than to the police” (p. 57). As our analysis shows, online reviews from sex buyers can provide useful data to consider the narratives around ethical consumption in the sex industry.

It is imperative to note that, although there are a variety of debates about the usefulness of ethical consumption as a potential way to create real change more generally (e.g. Carrigan & Attalla, 2011; Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010, 2014; Divinney, Auger, & Eckhardt, 2010), underpinning any possibility of the existence of ethical consumption must be a notion of care and/or concern (Shaw et al., 2016). That is, as a pre-condition for any ethical consumption practices, there must be some level of care and/or concern expressed – on the part of the consumer – to begin with. As Shaw et al. (2016: 256) argue: “for an effective ethical consumption, mental dispositions (or benevolence) need to translate into practice (beneficence)” and that “there can be care without commitment but not commitment without care.” It is this foundational requirement for ethical consumption that we return to in our analysis, posing the central question: are narratives of care and concern evident in these online brothel reviews?

Online brothel reviews and the “punter”

At the heart of discussing ethical consumption in the sex industry is the behaviour of “sex buyers” or “punters”, that is, those who purchase “sexual services” in the commercial sex industry. In keeping with the commercial sex industry generally, brothel prostitution is heavily gendered. Men constitute the vast majority of punters and women constitute a substantial majority of those providing “sexual services”. In Australia, it is estimated that more than 94% of sex buyers are men³ and that the “primary service provided by the industry is heterosexual sex provided to male clients” (IBISWorld, 2015, p.14). Therefore, understanding more about the men who buy “sexual services”, and what motivates their ethical (or unethical) behaviours, is an important place to begin investigating ethical consumption.

Research on punters and their attitudes, behaviours, and impact upon people in prostitution is mixed. Some sources argue that they contribute negatively to the lives of women in prostitution (Williams, Lyons, & Ford, 2008), or are likely to view women in prostitution as “dirty” and “inferior” (Coy et al., 2007). Others take a more sympathetic or positive view of the relationship between sex buyers and women in prostitution (e.g. Milrod & Weitzer, 2012). As we show in the following section, the assumptions embedded in the Victorian

² For example, see the website for Club Hallam, a legal brothel in Melbourne: <http://clubhallam.com.au/why-use-legal-brothels/> (accessed 1/11/2016)

³ The remaining 6% in this study includes both women and couples. Therefore, women alone make up less than 6% of consumers in the Australian context.

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