



Sex buyers' attitudes: A study of Toronto's online "Escort Review Board"

Rock Leung,* and Mikhaela Gray-Beerman*

ABSTRACT

Many recognize that people who buy sexual services create a demand for services that can lead to exploitation and harms to individuals and communities involved, but little research in the Canadian context has been published to understand these buyers. The present research sought to understand the attitudes of people who buy sex towards people who provide sex services by analyzing comments posted by Toronto Escort Review Board members between April 1 and October 31, 2021. A set of 15 comments were randomly selected for each of 6 searchable characteristics: "young" (age), "spinner" (body type), "ebony" (race), "trans" (gender), "submissive" (disposition), and "greek" (activity). This research reveals an attitude of consumerism in people who buy sex that leverages online communities 1) to select almost any type of person for a sexual experience and 2) get the support of fellow members to help them pursue a desired sexual experience. However, analyzed comments also suggest that members who buy sex generally ignore, consciously or unconsciously, possible exploitation or the impact on the welfare of the individual in the short and long term. Ongoing collaborations between Canadian law makers, the criminal justice system, and health and education sectors are needed to reduce the demand in sex services. This research shows there is much more work to do to confront the consumeristic views of people who provide sex services held by people who buy sex and combat online cultures that promote the exploitation of others.

Key Words Prostitution; sex buyer; commercial sex industry; internet; sexual exploitation; consumer; online community.

INTRODUCTION

Social equity and preventing exploitation are crucial for the well-being of communities and individuals. To tackle exploitation in human trafficking, Canada and other nations have adopted the legally-binding Palermo Protocol, which includes the article to "adopt or strengthen legislative or other measures, such as educational, social, or cultural measures... to discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation of persons, especially women and children, that leads to trafficking [in people]" (Article 9(5), emphasis added). Many recognize that people who buy sexual services create the demand for these services and are the economic driving force of human trafficking and the broader sex industry (OSCE, 2021). Thus, research is needed to understand this group (e.g., their attitudes and motivations) in order to help our health-care, education, human services, and criminal justice sectors reduce the demand for sex services that leads to exploitation and harms to the individuals and communities involved.

There is a growing body of research that aims to understand people who buy sex and their impact on the sex industry. For example, while, as a group, people who buy sex can be diverse

(Joseph & Black, 2012; Monto & Milrod, 2014), research has shown that their attitudes differ from those of non-sex buyers in various ways, such as: more likely to report being unhappy, thinking about sex and participating in the sex industry more frequently, more likely to report sexual aggression, and having less empathy for women in the industry (Farley et al., 2017; Monto & McRee, 2005). These studies have focused mainly on comparing sex buyers with the national sample through surveys and interviews (Durchslag & Goswami, 2008; Farley et al., 2017; Hammond & van Hooff, 2020; Hunt, 2013; Joseph & Black, 2012; Monto & McRee, 2005; Monto & Milrod, 2014) and analyzing posted comments on online review boards (Alves & Cavalhieri, 2021; Bounds et al., 2017, 2020; Jovanovski & Tyler, 2018).

Much of the research on understanding people who buy sex services has come from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, but little research from Canada has been published. One of the few peer-reviewed Canadian studies examined the self-reported propensity to violence among surveyed men in the Greater Vancouver Area who bought sex (Lowman & Atchison, 2006).

Therefore, the present research aims to examine the attitudes of Canadians who buy sex, as represented in the online

Correspondence to: Rock Leung, 101-2580 Matheson Blvd E, Mississauga, ON L4W 4J1, BC V5M 2S4, Canada. **E-mail:** rockleung@gmail.com

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comments left by members of the Toronto Escort Review Board. This research defines “people who provide sex services” as those who offer a sexual experience for money, either voluntarily or under coercion, threat, or force. Please note that content in the following sections are sexually explicit and may trigger some readers.

METHODS

The goal of the present research was to examine the attitudes of people who buy sex towards people who provide sex services through the random selection and content analysis of comments left by Toronto Escort Review Board (hereinafter, “TERB”) members. Specifically, these comments were retrieved from TERB’s “Toronto (GTA) Ontario > Escort @ Massage Reviews” forum, where members who buy sex post reviews, discuss their experiences, and ask for recommendations. Viewable by anyone who creates a TERB account, these comments can reveal what people who buy sex think about those who provide sex services by how they speak about these individuals. Analyzing online comments, a frequently-used research method, can reveal freely-expressed attitudes and opinions that might be harder to uncover in more controlled interviews and surveys. While many studies have sought to study people who buy sex by recruiting arrested offenders, online forums allow access to the views of a broader set of

people, who can express their views anonymously without fearing negative consequences while being in a program.

This research also aims to further our understanding of the attitudes of people who buy sex by focusing on a set of identifiable characteristics of people who provide sex services that can be searched online (e.g., using the TERB search tool). After reviewing past research and scanning TERB comments to identify commonly used terms, six terms associated with different types of identifiable characteristics were chosen (see Table I for definitions): “young” (age), “spinner” (body type), “ebony” (race), “trans” (gender), “submissive” (disposition), and “greek” (activity). For each term, the TERB’s search engine was then used to find comments related to that term within a set date range (April 1 to October 31, 2021).

From these search results, a total of 90 comments (15/term) by TERB members were randomly selected for screening and content analysis. Comments were screened to ensure that only comments deemed to have been made by prospective or actual people who buy sex (i.e., not someone advertising their services) were selected. Comments that did not contain the member’s thoughts or feelings about a person (or people) who provides sex were also screened out. If a comment was screened out, another comment was randomly chosen.

The TERB members who posted the analyzed comments generally appeared to be men (although this could not be

TABLE I Searchable characteristics of people who provide sex services, definitions according to TERB Community, research importance, and number of search results between April 1 and October 31, 2021

Characteristic Type	Search Term	Definition	Research Importance	Number of Search Results
Age	“young”	Young persons involved in the sex industry, often those under the age of 25, usually under the age of 20	Research in the United States found a strong desire to select for “young” people who provide sex services (e.g., Bounds et al., 2020). Are attitudes similar in Canada?	1010
Body type	“spinner”	Petite woman, the suggestion being that a petite woman could “spin” on the anatomy of a man during penetrative intercourse	Very little research has looked at attitudes towards body types, such as spinner.	628
Race	“ebony”	Persons of African-Canadian/American heritage, particularly persons of dark or black skin	A few studies have looked at selection on race (e.g., Bounds et al., 2017; Durchslag & Goswami, 2008) but more is needed.	185
Gender	“trans”	A transgender person	Little published research exists examining the attitudes of people who buy sex to transgender people who provide sex.	35
Disposition	“submissive”	Submits to a dominant person	It is a common theme in contemporary Internet pornography.	178
Activity	“greek”	Anal sex	Anal sex is widely regarded as a “high-risk sexual behaviour” due the significantly greater risk to the non-penetrating participant of contracting a sexually transmitted infection. This term was chosen to examine the attitudes of people who buy sex towards persons providing sex services who expressly do or do not engage in more high-risk sexual services.	396

Note: TERB Community definitions taken from PHNINE, (24 February 2006), “Abbreviations and Terms,” Forums > General Area > The Lounge. <https://terb.cc/xenforo/threads/abbreviations-and-terms.110329/>

TERB = Toronto Escort Review Board.

verified), based on their member usernames (e.g., “King”, “dude”), as well as references to their own body parts and the services they sought.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed various attitudes related to each of the six characteristics and attitudes that apply more broadly. This research also uncovers TERB members' attitudes towards people who provide sex services, as well as towards other members.

Strong interest in “young” people and expectation of higher rates

Of the six search terms used, “young” yielded the greatest number of results. Almost all comments (13/15) indicate an interest in “young” or “young-looking” people who provide sex services. Only one comment associated “young” with inexperienced, which the poster disliked.

The comments queried for this data set reveal a higher fee for services from a younger person. For example: “if she is good looking and young then the price is merited... More money doesn't mean more services, that's just the price of admission to enter a young hot girl's booty.” and “Overall Impressions: Nice cute, super young looking... her prices were hyperlinked at an external website, which listed her as a ‘diamond’ rate of \$300/hr, which is well above ordinary rates of \$120–\$140/hr.” These comments reveal an economic interest in “young” people from people who buy sex and thus a higher demand for them in the sex industry.

Higher expectations and ratings of “spinner” physical traits

The majority (12/15) of the comments related to the “spinner” body type revealed a heightened evaluation of the bodies of people who provide sex services. For example: “Pictures are 100% accurate. Long hair all the way down to almost the hip. Body is very lean and toned, not a spinner but no extra fat anywhere; smooth flat belly. BB's are natural, stats are spot on.” Further, these comments expressed an expectation that a person with the “spinner” body type would possess certain features or be proportioned in specific ways. For example: “Body is petite but the [breasts] don't match her well in my opinion, she should have got a size smaller for her build.”

Members often created rating systems in their “reviews” to evaluate a specific person providing sex services to share this information with other members. For example: “[S] is short, her body is actually really tight/toned. Face wise, again looks are subjective, I'd rate her GND-GND+ [Girl Next Door],” and “Overall, I liked [M] and enjoyed the session... Some numbers which I find helps add a bit more to the review: Face: 7/10 Body: 7/10 Service: 8/10 Attitude: 8.5/10.” The numeric ratings of “face” and “body,” as well as the service provided, show an attitude commodifying the bodies of the people who provide sex services, where they are seen as products.

Eroticization of “ebony”

Almost all (13/15) of the “ebony”-related comments reflected an expressed preference by the poster for Black people who provide sex services. For example: “[C] is an ebony beauty with a fit curvy body. She has a smile that lights up with deep

soft eyes and a hint of mischief. A pretty face and luscious lips,” and “[C] seems like she would fit my ebony cravings.” While such comments expressed a selection based on race, they did not reveal further reasons.

Novelty of buying services from “trans” people

Some (7/15) of the “trans”-related comments revealed a deliberate selection for transgender. For example: “Blonde fake b--bs trans girl for me and my girl to play with for her birthday. Any help would be great,” and “I've been watching trans porn but only enjoy watching a [transgender individual] f**k another girl, the hottest was [A] and [G] f*****g a trans.” These comments suggest a selection for transgender individuals out of a desire for a novel sexual experience.

Fear of an unexpected encounter with a “trans” person

Some (5/15) of the other “trans”-related comments highlighted that some people who buy sex are afraid of accidentally encountering a transgender individual who presents as female. One member posted:

A terrible paranoia of mine... is that the “chick” turns out to be a dude ... Call it paranoia, fair enough. I don't mean to offend anyone. No disrespect to people who choose to do whatever with their body and preferences and so forth but, I do believe in life HONESTY is the best policy. So, here's the question: how can you be sure if “she” is truly a she? And, how many of these “girls” advertising on LL [“LeoList”] do you think used to be dudes at some point?

Many members asked for clarification from others about whether a particular individual providing sex services was transgender or not. For example: “I would guess 80% that she is trans... I learned on here [TERB] the signs to look for,” and “The word ‘GURL’ she uses makes her a little suspect. It's usually used by trans.”

Comments also reveal that members would feel deceived if they believed that they were engaging sexually with a biological female and later discovered that the person was actually a transgender female. For example: “Informed consent is informed consent. There are no exceptions. I think we all have the right to choose who we are with sexually. Not disclosing, especially in advertisement, is deceptive IMO [in my opinion] and can lead to dangerous situations (I do NOT condone violence, it is just a reality),” and “There was a while back one post-op TS [post-operative transexual person] on LL listed under female escorts which is not only terribly dishonest but may be asking for trouble too from someone finding out after the fact.” These comments suggest that the perceived deception could be expected to lead to a risk of violence toward the transgender individual.

“Submissive” seen as permission for aggression

Nearly all (14/15) of the “submissive”-related comments were related to members looking for a particular sexual experience. Some members associated “submissive” with a receptiveness to aggression. For example: “She seemed to enjoy being submissive ... showed her who was the boss lol,” and “[B] is super tight. I needed lots of lube to assist. But once you are in, she can take a pounding, and she loves it...” Similarly, members

used “submissiveness” to find people with a non-objecting, “agreeable” personality. For example, “IMO, [B] has a very pleasant GND face and a modest, easygoing personality. She was submissive and agreeable, soft-spoken and sincere, with just enough smiling enthusiasm to say ‘it’s on.’”

Other members associated “submissiveness” with a lack of enthusiasm for the sexual encounter, which they would avoid. For example: “I was under the impression from past reviews [O] was more of a dominant rather than submissive partner. I have her booked, I just don’t want to be disappointed with a non-enthusiastic person.”

Pursuing a desired sexual experience

Comments across multiple search terms show members’ desire for a specific experience that made them feel good about themselves. For example, some members expressed a preference for “spinner” (i.e., petite) women because of the contrast in body sizes, which might make them feel better about their bodies. For example: “BTW her hands are small, so it makes junior look big,” and “I’m 6ft and it was like watching one of those hentai ogres ravishing a pixie.” As another example, members used the term “submissive” to help find a person with a non-objecting and agreeable disposition or to avoid someone who lacked enthusiasm with the sexual encounter, which would negatively impact the experience.

Helping and looking for help from other members

Comments show members’ appreciation for the help they give each other through information and advice. For example: “Hey guys, this is my first time to book with an SP [Service Provider] and I really would love to know your thoughts and your recommendations on who to choose,” and “Thanks for all the suggestions.” As another example, when some people who provide sex services advertised requiring an additional fee for “greek” (i.e., anal sex) or did not advertise that they offer “greek,” some members expressed appreciation for learning about ways around it. For example: “Didn’t know Greek was offered. Thx for the review and intel.” These comments reveal that members appreciate the community’s support in better finding their desired sexual experience.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research support the growing body of literature studying the demand side of the sex industry, specifically the attitudes of people who buy sex towards people who provide sex services.

Different attitudes towards people providing sex services and other members

This study and other research reveal that review board members generally view people providing sex services as products in a vast marketplace that caters to consumers (Bounds et al., 2017). Members appear to enjoy and exercise a virtually unlimited power of choice. In this case, they regard many aspects of a person’s identity (e.g., age, body type, race, gender) as sexualized or sexualize-able (Alves & Cavallieri, 2021; Bounds et al., 2020; Jovanovski & Tyler, 2018). They also look for specific experiences, such as opportunities to be aggressive (Bounds et al., 2020; Durchslag & Goswami, 2008; Farley et al., 2017) or novel encounters. Rates are affected by

demand and supply. Like other marketplace-related platforms, online review boards give people who buy sex greater consumer power to easily search for desired characteristics and exchange information to buy a specific experience.

In contrast, members appear to view other members as fellow consumers in a supportive community (Bounds et al., 2017). This research revealed appreciative attitudes of members towards each other.

Consumerism that ignores harms

Research shows that TERB and other such online forums help people who buy sex increase their consumer power. These forums equip them with more information and support to get more value for their money and protect their consumer rights and safety (e.g., fear of undesired encounters).

While this attitude of consumerism is prevalent in this age where the Internet supports multitudes of product and service reviews, analyzed comments suggest that TERB members who buy sex generally ignore, consciously or unconsciously, possible exploitation or the impact on the welfare of the individual in the short and long term. Comments reveal that these members tend to focus on meeting their desires, with little empathy expressed for the person providing sex services (Alves & Cavallieri, 2021; Farley et al., 2017). Many members would like people providing sex services to show that they enjoy the experience, even if fabricated (Alves & Cavallieri, 2021; Hammond & van Hooff, 2020; Jovanovski & Tyler, 2018). These findings complement other research that has found that people who buy sex often ignore the exploitation of vulnerable women (Bounds et al., 2017, 2020; Hunt, 2013) and pressure them for unsafe practices (Alves & Cavallieri, 2021).

This research also found that the TERB online forum, like other such forums, has reinforced cultures where views (e.g., on transphobia, aggression towards people providing sex services) are normalized (Alves & Cavallieri, 2021; Bounds et al., 2017; Jovanovski & Tyler, 2018). While the comments do not represent the views of all buyers or community members, they arguably come from the more vocal and expressive members, who have a greater influence on normalizing attitudes and views of the community.

Further research is still needed to better understand the demand side of the sex industry, such as the experience of people in racialized and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities who provide sex services, awareness by people who buy sex of human trafficking, and intersectional marginalization. There are many initiatives in public education, policing, and the criminal justice system to reduce demand, and more research is also needed to identify the most effective approaches and best practices, especially in a Canadian context.

This research offers insight as Canada continues to grapple with the difficulty of regulating an industry that has, for decades, vexed our nation’s policymakers and public alike. While there is an active debate about whether providing commercial sex is work, the power imbalance, the recruiting of marginalized people, and the documented negative multi-faceted impacts on many individuals while in the industry and after, suggest that the sex industry is exploitative in nature. Ongoing collaborations between Canadian law makers, the criminal justice system, and health and education sectors is needed to reduce the demand in sex services. This research

shows that there is much more work to do: i) to confront the consumeristic views of people who buy sex regarding people who provide sex services, and ii) to combat online cultures that promote the exploitation of others.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to contribute to the body of information available on the Canadian sex industry by examining the attitudes of people who buy sex towards people who provide sex services. It reveals an attitude of consumerism in people who buy sex that leverages the online tools and communities 1) to select almost any type of person for a sexual experience, and 2) to get the support of fellow members to help them pursue a desired sexual experience. Laws and policies, as well as public education in communities on all aspects of the sex industry, are needed to reduce the power imbalances and pervasive exploitation of vulnerable people within the sex industry in Canada, increasing their safety and well-being.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Defend Dignity, Mississauga, ON, Canada.

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