

Introduction

Economics, Sexuality, and Male Sex Work

In these days of “new media” it can be difficult to spot an interloper. He had appeared at press conferences regularly for several months on daily press credentials and was not a familiar face in the Washington press corps. But that did not necessarily raise suspicions. Washington’s media has its share of transient members. Weak questions to an embattled president, however, have a way of raising eyebrows. The question he asked on January 26, 2005, finally caused members of the press to turn a critical eye on one of their own. Who was this guy? Was he planted by the Administration? As the media began to dig, they found their surface pay dirt: Jeff Gannon, the reporter, was a pseudonym for James Dale Guckert, and the media firm employing him was entirely virtual. Talon News had no actual physical presence and Guckert, the only employee, had no prior professional journalistic experience. That such an inexperienced member of the press was granted access provided fodder for a few days. Further investigation eventually revealed a much more salacious fact: Guckert, in addition to sitting in the White House Press Briefing Room, with its carefully assembled seating chart, was a male sex worker who served an exclusively male clientele. He openly advertised his services online, complete with pictures and descriptions of the services he offered to interested clients. He could be reached by email or phone, both of which he provided on the Internet. Clients praised his work outside of the Press Room. Worth every penny, they said.

Guckert was not the first male sex worker reported by the press to gain access to the halls and people of power. Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) was reprimanded by the House of Representatives in 1990 when it was revealed that his lover, a reported sex worker, was operating as an escort service out of Frank’s Massachusetts home. Lobbyist Craig Spence committed suicide in 1989 after it was revealed that he used political connections to gain

unauthorized access to the White House. He was accused of taking male sex workers on unauthorized tours.

In each of these cases the media response was typical. The newsreels spun with titillating pictures of men who sell sexual services to other men. The clandestine encounters. Deception. Money. Power. Sex. Homosexuality. The mix proves intoxicating, equal parts excitement, titillation, ridicule, and amazement. Men selling sex to other men? Who could think of such a thing?

Male sex work is hidden in plain view. In every instance the evidence of male prostitution has been terribly easy to find. Law enforcement, in fact, has an odd relationship with male sex work. Since most male sex work in the United States now takes place through the Internet, it has received little intrusion from legal authorities as it does not bring the same public nuisances as street prostitution. The lack of law enforcement has allowed male sex work to flourish online. In fact, one prominent website for male escorts host an annual awards show, the Hookies. Men compete regionally in hopes of making the national event, which is held in New York City each spring and covered by mainstream media outlets such as the *Village Voice*. There, male sex workers compete in categories including “Best New Escort” or “Best Fetish Escort” and where the top title is “Escort of the Year.” It is so popular that the *Manhattan Digest* devoted a column to the 2015 awards, reviewing the nominees and giving editorial picks on who should win in selected categories.¹

The website that sponsored the awards, Rentboy.com, was reported to have netted \$10 million in sales revenue from 2010–15. Rentboy, like most male escort websites, is not an intermediary. Rentboy.com earned revenue from escorts, who paid a fee to host their ads on the website. Rentboy.com did not receive a portion of transaction fees from escorts, as a pimp or madam would. The website was decidedly hands off—they do not arrange appointments and made no guarantees for services. In fact, Rentboy did nothing more (or less) than provide a website where clients can browse through advertisements and directly contact the escorts they would like to meet. Escorts paid them for the service and along with advertisement revenue from gay-oriented media, the website netted roughly \$2 million per year.

Rentboy was generous in sharing the spoils from male sex work. In 2015 they announced the Cash4Class Scholarship that would help male sex workers enroll in and complete post-secondary education. Applicants had to provide information on their involvement in sex work and submit evidence of the necessary academic credentials. In addition, the application

required a brief essay, which would describe how the scholarship would help the applicant achieve their career goals outside of sex work. The scholarship competition was to be judged by a star of gay pornography, who himself was not a sex worker. All of this announced publicly on YouTube.²

Despite these public displays – the fact that prices for services were freely visible, specific sexual services were searchable by potential clients, and direct contact information for escorts was available, this receives little public notice. Until it does. Federal authorities finally moved to close Rentboy.com in August of 2015 – more than 15 years after the website first debuted. Indeed, Rentboy had become the subject of a sting carried out by the Department of Homeland Security because it was believed to be promoting prostitution across state and national borders. If this was the case, it had been involved in that business for well over a decade. In fact, Rentboy made no attempt to hide itself or what its business practice was. They were frequently reported on in the mainstream media, maintained a corporate office in Union Square in New York City, filmed their own channel on YouTube where they featured interviews with male sex workers who spoke about their careers, and in the process became the highest-profile online prostitution service in the last decade.

When word of the federal charges first hit, the news media, again, paid special attention to male sex work. The stories were filled with awe that men posted detailed profiles of themselves for others. Particular attention was paid to explicit pictures, detailed descriptions of sexual behaviors, and the fact that escort attributes could be sorted by clients looking for a man of a particular height, build, or sexual proclivity. The media also noted the ingenious business model, where escorts pay to have the website host their ads (which in 2015 on Rentboy.com ranged from \$59.95 to \$299.95 depending on how prominently an escort wanted their advertisement displayed), such that the website was not involved in any specific transactions between escorts and clients. The legal disclaimer noted that men could not use the website to exchange sex for money, but federal prosecutors said this stipulation was openly violated by the website owners and employees. The media had to both acknowledge their ignorance of the practice and simultaneously admit its open availability and popularity among men seeking commercial sex with other men.³ Again, male sex work showed itself to be hidden in plain view.

Even after the demise of the Rentboy.com website, it continued to receive media attention. In late 2016, the gay television network Logo set to debut “Prince Charming,” a television show where gay men competed to

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win the affections of Robert Sepulveda, Jr., an interior designer. Even before the show debuted, however, the media found that Sepulveda, the star of the series, had been an escort, advertising several years earlier on Rentboy.com under the name Vincent Romen. As with Guckert, the media reported on Sepulveda's clients' reviews of his services and posted pictures from his online advertisement. The press also ruminated on why a major television outlet would cast a man with an easy-to-find, online history of prostitution and bill him as one of the most eligible gay bachelors in America.⁴

For the media, such immediate attention and eventual disinterest is par for the course. Once the story stops being news the media must move on to more promising stories. But men are still selling sex to other men. Despite Rentboy's end in operation in August 2015, Rentboy.com is not the only website involved in male sex work, and clients could move to any number of competitors to choose escorts. The escorts who posted advertisements on Rentboy simply migrated elsewhere, if they had not already maintained advertisements on competitor websites. Missing in all of the media accounts of the websites and individual escorts is a basic understanding of male sex work. We know that it is prostitution, but the details of the industry are left to the public's imagination. On the one hand, leaving the public to fill in the blanks adds to the salacious appeal of male prostitution. On the other hand, serious journalists would have precious few sources to turn to give them an accurate account of the industry.

While the media's high-gloss treatment of the inner workings of male sex work may be understandable, the same treatment by social scientists is not. Unlike the media, who place male sex work on the front page for its novelty, scholars have cast male sex work to the lowest realm of academic discourse – obscurity. Less than 10 percent of the scholarship on sex work is concerned with male sex work.⁵ In general, male sex work is difficult to classify since it is presumed that men in the market as sex workers operate in a different manner than female sex workers. One common presumption is that female sex workers are more likely to be exploited in sex work than male sex workers. While male sex workers in the United States are much more likely to be independent owner-operators, this argument neglects the fact that as self-owned firms, male sex workers therefore make independent, presumably economically informed choices that would be quite amenable to economic analysis.

The obscurity of male sex work as an area of academic interest stems from many sources. First, male sex work does not fit easily into the gendered lines guiding the vast majority of sex work scholarship. Statements claiming

prostitution is the commodification of women's bodies or inherently exploitative ring hollow when both buyers and sellers are men. Male sex work lacks the dynamic of explicit control of women by men, either as brokers or as clients. Second, male sex work invites unpleasant discussions of homosexual sex as opposed to sexuality. Even among the enlightened, serious academic discourse on the particulars of homosexual sex is disquieting and therefore discouraged. Also, the work on male sex work is more concerned with the possibility of disease epidemics more common among men who have sex with men as opposed to a full understanding of the market. Third, most scholarship uses male sex work as a means to an end, furthering developments in queer, masculinity, feminist, and other humanistic theories. The idea of male sex work has received far more attention than empirical analysis as a market. We know much less about what male sex work *is* as opposed to what it *represents*. While theoretical work is an indispensable part of our knowledge of the phenomenon, it has not yielded the rich empirical knowledge about male sex work that would move the scholarship to new areas of inquiry.

Male sex work *is* a market. There are buyers, sellers, supply, demand, prices, and transactions. The main contribution of this book is to treat male sex work as the market it is and use that market feature to its fullest advantage. Perhaps the most surprising fact about this market is how well developed it is in the United States. Unlike female sex workers, male sex workers advertise publicly on the Internet. They display pictures of themselves, describe the services they provide, post their contact information, and list the price of their services. For one interested in the market aspects of male sex work, such information is invaluable. Until now, this information has not been exploited by social scientists looking for comprehensive information about this market.

The market for male escort services is large, with estimated annual revenues in excess of \$1 billion in the United States, which implies millions of transactions per year.⁶ Unlike their female counterparts, the majority of male sex workers work independently and online. There are few intermediaries in the male sex trade in the United States.⁷ Male sex workers are independent owner-operators whose fees are not shared with others and who compete with one another for clients. Even the most expensive advertisement fee is recouped with one or two hourly appointments. This is in stark contrast to female sex work, where fees for services are usually set by and shared with pimps or madams. These intermediaries can disrupt the market by rationing services, raising prices, and increasing transaction costs. Despite the interesting market features of male sex work,

which make it easier to apply the basic principles of supply and demand, this market is seldom studied by economists.⁸

Our empirical knowledge of the market is remarkably thin, given its size and complexity. There are studies exploring the experiences of small groups of sex workers, including some recent studies of male sex workers who advertise online. These studies shed light on individual motivations to enter the market and the reasons for participating in the industry, but they have not been able to describe the market in general. Many of the most basic questions one would ask about male sex work are inherently about the *market* for male sex work. How many male sex workers are there (*how large is this market*)? Where are they located (*what is the scope of this market*)? What are their ages and races (*what are the characteristics of the supply of male sex workers*)? Who are the clients (*where does the demand come from*)? How much money do male sex workers earn, and do sex workers earn more for some services than others (*what is the profit function*)? Answers to our most basic questions require comprehensive evidence about the market for male sex work.

This book provides an answer to those questions about the basics of the market for male sex work. For the first time, the breadth of the online market is used to answer many of the most pressing questions about what the male sex work market is and how it operates. This book concentrates on the online market, and there are undeniable tradeoffs in focusing on the online market. For example, this book says little about either men with temporary attachments to male sex work or men who participate in survival sex. The focus here is on men involved in sex work as a professional occupation. The disadvantage is that we cannot discuss the most vulnerable men involved in male sex work. The advantages are that we concentrate on those engaged with sex work as a profession and discuss the majority of male sex work in the United States in a rigorous way.

To set the landscape, the first chapter gives a brief history of male sex work, focusing on the class distinctions that have been regularly observed between clients and sex workers. Male sex work has been regulated in a different way than female sex work. This gives rise to several unique features for the practice that remain to this day. For example, male sex workers do not use pimps, madams, or other intermediaries as female sex workers often do. Also, male sex workers are better integrated into gay male society. Some have argued that they are a sexual archetype among gay men. Gay novels, film, and other aspects of gay culture prominently feature male sex workers.

Since men who desire sex with men (the client base) are relatively few in number, male sex workers need to advertise their services more openly

than female prostitutes. There are not enough clients to form street markets in most cities. Male sex workers therefore use gay-oriented media to reach their clients. While the information once presented in the gay newspaper classifieds (which included separate sections for callboys) is much more limited than what is provided today, this historical pattern is the paradigm that still guides the market. The market has been national since at least the early 1970s – nationally distributed classified advertisements have been used to solicit clients for more than forty years.

After reviewing the history, I move to a brief description of the data sources used to analyze the market and answer the basic questions we would ask about any market. The data described in the first chapter form the backbone of the analysis that follows through the rest of the book. The newspaper advertisements of the past have given way to the national websites of the present. I detail the various sources that one can use to analyze the market. In general, there are two types of information: online advertisements and client reviews. Both are distinct sources of information, but contain important pieces of overlap that allow us to confirm trends observed in one data source by looking for evidence of those same trends in the other. I describe the sources available for each type of information and show why I concentrate on the specific online sources I use. The advertisement and client reviews I use in this book come from the largest and most popular sources for male sex workers – I show that they represent the market better than other available sources.

The first chapter also gives answers to the most basic economic questions. *How many male sex workers are advertising online?* A few thousand. *What is their age, ethnic, and racial composition?* They are quite diverse. Male sex workers are of every race and ethnic origin and range in advertised age from 18 years old to men in their 60s. The average man advertising is nearly 30 years old – this is not a market of very young men. *What is the average price of sex worker services?* An hour of an escort's time will cost you more than \$200.00, on average. (Readers less interested in the history of sex work and the description of the data can skip this chapter.)

The rest of Part I consists of chapters that economically analyze the market for male sex work in the United States. This market, however, is illegal. That poses a very interesting question – given that the market is illegal (irrespective of the taboos regarding male homosexuality), how can it function so well? It is not as if clients can be assured that they will always get what they want. There are no means to ensure services advertised will actually be offered. Even more, this market does not use pimps, madams, or other intermediaries or brokers that would negotiate transactions and

could act to regulate and enforce quality standards. Also, unlike female sex work, in male sex work the client is at relatively greater risk of being violated by an escort. A search online will quickly yield news stories documenting how some clients have been assaulted or even murdered when they hired the wrong escort.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the market for male sex work is rife with asymmetric information (the sex worker knows whether he is a thief, but the client does not), and this would appear to be an insurmountable problem (the client has no recourse if he is victimized, and should be disinclined to hire an escort). Yet, the market exists and functions – how does this happen? The problem for male sex work is that there is no formal enforcement of contracts. I show how clients of male sex workers informally police the market in a way that makes signaling, where the escort provides a specific type of information to establish that he is a “good guy,” credible. Using the institutional knowledge embedded in client reviews of male escort services, I identify the specific signal male sex workers use to communicate quality to their clients: face pictures. I find that there is a substantial return to the signal in this market. Sex workers who post pictures of their faces earn substantially more than other sex workers, and they earn more because they have provided a credible signal to their clients that they are the “good guys” in the profession. The face picture is like posting a bond, a credit report, or a detailed vehicle history – it makes the client feel better about the transaction about to take place. This market functions remarkably well as a result, despite its illegal and stigmatized status.

Knowledge of some features of the market masks considerable variations at the local level in both the number of sex workers and the price of male escort services. It also obscures a fundamental aspect of any free market – competition. Chapter 3 considers more sophisticated questions about male sex workers. In particular, it looks at location patterns and how travel and location are related to market forces. Male sex workers have always been traveling salesmen, to a degree. They serve a variety of markets and travel at the expense of their clients, but they also travel at their own expense, setting up shop in specific locations for short periods of time to generate new business.

This feature of the market raises a number of questions. Where are male sex workers located? Where do they travel? Are their location and travel patterns related to gay male location patterns or the competition a sex worker faces in his home location? Does the price of male sex work service vary by location, as the prices of other services do? How far do sex workers

travel when they travel, and what cities are popular destinations? I find that many of the travel patterns are consistent with basic theories of market competition – male sex worker location and travel are driven by competition between sex workers for clients.

Male sex workers respond to the market incentives to travel. Although the home location of male sex workers is not strongly related to gay location, male sex workers travel to locations with high demand for male sex work services. This affects overall market prices because sex workers who travel charge higher prices than those that do not. These links between cities are not just related to travel, but to prices as well. The links between cities form a network of cities that are key for male sex work. Overall, this shows that the market is quite well developed and mature. Sex workers respond to market forces of demand, and prices in the market are affected by the demand-driven, competition-based travel of male sex workers.

The second section of the book (Part II) moves beyond traditional economic analysis and considers the ways social constructions of gender and sexuality influence how this market functions. This part of the book has a different focus: to see how the application of gender and sexuality theory alters the conclusions we draw from a traditional, neoclassical economic approach to this market. I apply the theoretical work in gender, sexuality, and masculinity, and integrate them into an economic analysis. The result is a hypothesis-driven, scientific approach to male sex work that is informed by economic and social theory.

The mutual exclusivity of the previous work creates a false barrier that inhibits our ability to empirically investigate how market function is mitigated by social, gender, and sexual norms. I do not argue that all analysis of male sex work can proceed in this fashion, but empirical analysis can be enhanced by this integration. In a sex work market, theoretical assertions are transformed into hypotheses about how social processes impact the economic function of the market. While scholars of masculinity and sexuality assert that many of the central tenets of sex work (desire, power, erotic capital, sexual hierarchies, and the like) cannot be measured empirically, they also make explicitly quantitative statements about gendered relations, social constructions, and performance. For example, if some men are more desired than others, we should see that difference reflected in a commercial sex market. Desire would undeniably be related to demand in a sexual market. Are these theoretical predictions consistent with the way the market operates?

The application of social theory involves assumptions about relationships between variables, hypotheses about the size and direction of effects,

and descriptions of potential mechanisms that are not orthogonal to economic analysis. If the evidence does not support the hypotheses, then the theories should be reformulated or, perhaps, rejected. If the goal of theory is to enhance our understanding of underlying social, economic, and historical processes relating to the construction and function of gender and sexuality in human societies, formal testing of the predictions of these models in male sex work serves a useful purpose. This integrated approach helps to resolve a tension in the theoretical approach to gender and sexuality. In this section of the book I adopt an explicit quantitative approach to the issues, a novel advance in a literature that usually relies on qualitative empirical evidence.

In applying this social-economic integrated approach, I make two specific theoretical advances in the study of masculinity and sexuality. First, I combine the relational, performance, and intersectional approaches to masculinity and sexuality. While each has been used on its own to describe gendered relations in sex work, they are rarely used in concert. In the market for sex work that I study, they are inherently linked – masculinity is not only in the interactions that men have with each other in this market, it is also performed due to the fact that the interactions are based upon sex work, the construction of erotic personas, and cultural cues about sex and masculinity among gay men. The audience (clients) conditions the ways that gender and sexuality are performed and presented by sex workers, which itself can influence who interacts with whom and why. Furthermore, each type of relation and performance is distinct, yielding specific predictions about who performs what, and when. By using these theories in concert, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding not only about sex work, but also and more generally, how these theoretical concepts can and do interact.

The thrust of this integrated approach is that men in this market rely on relations through class, race, and *within-gender* gendered relations to help them achieve their desired masculinity. Masculinity in this market is not about men and women but about men and other men. When sexuality is added to the mix there is an additional wrinkle: The classed, raced, and within-gendered relations also *define* the masculinity that is desired. The market and social theory interact – desire (which may be socially constructed) is demand, and performance (the social interpretation of types) is supply.

The traditional tools of economic analysis are not useful here because socially constructed desire is beyond neoclassical economic theory. To the economist, such preferences reflect “primitive” demand that we need not