



HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Am J Mens Health. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2017 December 28.

THE LOSS OF BOYSTOWN AND TRANSITION TO ONLINE SEX WORK: STRATEGIES AND BARRIERS TO INCREASE SAFETY AMONG MEN SEX WORKERS AND CLIENTS OF MEN

Elena Argento, MPH^{a,b}, Matthew Taylor^c, Jody Jollimore, MPP^c, Chrissy Taylor, BA^a, James Jennex^c, Andrea Krusi, PhD^{a,b}, and Kate Shannon, PhD^{a,b}

^aGender & Sexual Health Initiative, BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, St. Paul's Hospital, Vancouver, Canada

^bUniversity of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

^cHUSTLE, Health Initiative for Men, Vancouver, Canada

Abstract

Men sex workers in Vancouver have largely transitioned from street to online solicitation coinciding with losing “Boystown,” the main outdoor sex work stroll for men. This article explores strategies and barriers to increase safety among men and trans sex workers and clients of men in Vancouver, Canada. Qualitative interviews were conducted (2012–2013) with 61 self-identified men who currently buy and/or sell sex in a community-based research project known as CHAPS (Community Health Assessment of Men Who Purchase and Sell Sex). Drawing on a socioecological framework, thematic analysis of interview transcripts was conducted utilizing ATLAS.ti 7 software among men (39 workers; 8 buyers). Narratives indicate that gentrification and urban planning led to social isolation and loss of social support networks among men in the sex industry. Concurrently, the restructuring of sex work to online increased workers’ safety and control. Narratives reveal how the Internet can provide greater opportunities to negotiate terms of sex work and enhanced screening using webcams, reducing risks of violence, stigma, and police harassment for both workers and clients compared with the street. This study highlights how losing Boystown led to a loss of community and solidarity: key protective measures for sex workers. Online solicitation increased workers’ capacity to screen prospective clients and prevent violence. Recent legal reforms in Canada to further criminalize sex work raise significant concern for human rights and health of individuals in the sex industry, and point to the critical need to include voices of men and trans sex workers and buyers in policy discussions.

Keywords

men sex workers; trans individuals; clients; violence prevention; displacement; criminalization; online sex work

Send correspondence to: Kate Shannon, PhD, MPH, Gender and Sexual Health Initiative, B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, St. Paul's Hospital, 608-1081 Burrard Street, Vancouver, B.C., V6Z 1Y6, Canada, gshi@cfenet.ubc.ca.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

¹Participants may report more than one category for sociodemographics characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

Men who buy and sell sex worldwide are vastly heterogeneous and while they may experience an increasing burden of health and social inequities, the current understanding of various contexts, needs, and risk or protective practices among men sex workers and men sex buyers is very limited (Baral et al., 2015; Beyrer et al., 2012). The sex work industry for men is not a new phenomenon and the demand for men sex workers prevails in many parts of the world (Minichiello, Scott, & Callander, 2015). Men sex workers occupy a unique social position; in general, they offer their services predominantly to other men (including gay and heterosexual men), although many have female partners, may provide services to women, and do not necessarily identify as sex workers or as gay or bisexual (Logan, 2010; Minichiello, Scott, & Callander, 2013). This latter point signifies that men sex workers have been largely excluded from the majority of research that tends to focus on men who have sex with men (MSM), trans women, and women sex workers.

Previous research highlights that the Internet has facilitated a shift away from a paradigm of stigma, discrimination, and marginalization, typically associated with street-based sex work, to one that acknowledges sex work as work within a growing sex work market for men online (Bimbi, 2007; Holt & Blevins, 2007; Parsons, Koken, & Bimbi, 2004). The Internet, a significant driver of social and structural change for many industry sectors across the globe, has had a profound impact on the sex work industry, including for men who buy and/or sell sex (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; MacPhail, Scott, & Minichiello, 2014; Minichiello et al., 2013), and yet little is known about how this affects health and safety for men involved in sex work. Social and technological advancements, with the expansion of online social media platforms, have not only altered the structure and organization of sex work but have also increased the visibility and accessibility of the sex work industry for men (Aggleton & Parker, 2015; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Minichiello et al., 2013). There has been increasing effort by governments, media, and pressure by the prohibitionist movement on economic players to shut down the sex industry online (e.g., RentBoy, Craigslist, major credit card companies), based on assumptions that it facilitates risks and conflation of sex work with trafficking (forced labor) and sexual exploitation despite a lack of evidence. At the same time, others (McLean, 2015; Parsons, Koken, & Bimbi, 2007; The Economist, 2014) have argued that the Internet, now a primary venue for communicating for purposes of sex work, has led to increased control over working conditions for independent sex workers and those working as escorts or through third parties, and has contributed greatly to reduced stigma for men in sex work (Minichiello et al., 2015); however, the expansion of online sex work has also made men sex workers more difficult to quantify and assess (Baral et al., 2015; MacPhail et al., 2014; Mimiaga, Reisner, Tinsley, Mayer, & Safren, 2008).

A growing body of literature highlights the ways in which work environments play a critical role in shaping protections and/or risks for sex workers, including ability to control working conditions, protection from violence, and negotiate safer sex practices. However, this research has almost exclusively been drawn from women sex workers (Shannon et al., 2015), and limited work among clients of women sex workers (Goldenberg et al., 2011). For example, increasing evidence has identified that working in indoor venues and in-call spaces

compared with street locations promotes reduced risks for violence by allowing women sex workers more control over screening prospective clients and negotiating the terms of transactions, such as fees, sexual services, and condom use (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013; Duff et al., 2015; Krüsi et al., 2012). The available literature, based on research conducted primarily in higher income settings (i.e., the United States, Australia), suggests that men sex workers working online differ substantially from their street-based counterparts in terms of their sociostructural risk profiles for violence and unsafe sex (Bimbi, 2007; Leary MCouns & Minichiello, 2007; Logan, 2010; Parsons et al., 2004); however, data on socioenvironmental risks are sparse and the lived experiences of men who buy or sell sex have gone largely undocumented.

Historically, men sex workers in Vancouver, Canada, have faced considerable legal and political challenges, particularly during the mid-1970s and 1980s when those soliciting and working in the city's gay West End neighborhood were met with Vancouver's abolitionist residents, business owners, urban planners, and police who strove to expel sex workers from the area (Ross & Sullivan, 2012). Men sex workers continued to be pushed out from newly gentrified neighborhoods in Vancouver. Over the past decade, the main outdoor sex work stroll for men known as "Boystown," was essentially shut down in the years leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympics, in tandem with substantial gentrification of a downtown area now known as Yaletown. Men sex workers have been largely displaced from the streets as local police enforcement efforts were scaled up (Deering et al., 2012; Small, Krusi, Wood, Montaner, & Kerr, 2012). The loss of Boystown due to gentrification and urban planning mirrors earlier efforts to displace visible sex work in the 1970s and 1980s and yet there has been little research to examine how this has changed the structure and organization of the sex industry for men or shift to online sex work.

Given the limited understanding and paucity of available data in Canada on the experiences and voices of men in the sex industry and how various structural factors of urban design, criminalization, and policing shape working conditions for men sex workers and buyers, this article draws on a community-based participatory research project to explore the impact of the loss of Boystown and the transition from the street to online on strategies and barriers to violence prevention and negotiation of safer sex among men sex workers and clients of men in Vancouver, Canada.

METHOD

The CHAPS project (Community Health Assessment of Men Who Purchase and Sell Sex) is a community-based, participatory research project initiated in 2012 by the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS in partnership with HUSTLE (a sex worker/peer-led outreach and support program by and for sex workers) of the Health Initiative for Men (HIM), and collaborations with Boys R Us, PACE (Prostitution Alternatives Counseling and Education) Society and others, in an effort to better understand the sexual health and HIV risk environment of men in the sex industry. The CHAPS study evolved out of substantial long-term community-based collaborations and advisory support of HUSTLE/HIM as part of a larger ongoing qualitative and ethnographic examination of the physical, social, and structural environments shaping sex workers' sexual

health, violence, and access to care. The CHAPS study was funded by a CIHR (Canadian Institutes for Health Research) Community-Based HIV Research Catalyst grant to support the research arm, and MacAIDS to support the service/outreach arm by HUSTLE/HIM.

This analysis draws on data from Phase 1 of the CHAPS study, which included 61 qualitative in-depth interviews with self-identified men (cisgender and trans individuals) in the sex industry, as sex workers and/or sex buyers, conducted between March 2013 and July 2014. Eligibility included being 19 years of age or older, self-identifying as a man, and buying or selling sex within the past year. Analysis for the present study draws primarily on interviews and narratives of men and trans individuals who either sell sex ($n = 39$) and/or buy sex from other men ($n = 8$), regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

The CHAPS interview guide was developed through a participatory process between research (GSHI) and community partners (HUSTLE/HIM) with guidance from Boys R Us, PACE, and others. Given the lack of research and voices of men in the sex industry, the interview guide was exploratory, eliciting narratives to better understand the diversity of men in sex work (e.g., gender and sexual identities/orientation, economic and social motivations for sex work, substance use, positive and negative experiences in the sex industry), work environment (e.g., organization and structure, economic contexts, interactions with police, stigma and discrimination), and how these factors interact with and shape violence, sexual health, and access to sexual health and social support services. The interview guide was piloted with 10 participants, followed by a meeting with HUSTLE/HIM and GSHI team members to review and revise the interview guide.

Sampling

Self-identified men were purposefully sampled for variation in experiences in the sex industry through a range of outreach strategies by HUSTLE and CHAPS to street locations, indoor venues (e.g., bathhouses), and online/Internet outreach efforts (e.g., gay and MSM websites, client reviewer forums) to places where men buy and/or sell sex. Men interested in participating were able to contact the CHAPS team by phone or e-mail and following initial screening for eligibility, were referred to one of the GSHI or HUSTLE/HIM field offices, as preferred by the participant, for informed consent and interview. Interviews were conducted by two trained interviewers: one gender queer interviewer from GSHI (CT) and one gay male interviewer from HIM (JG). Interviews could be conducted anonymously, and men chose an alias for signing the consent. Interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours, with a range of 30 minutes to 2 hours in length. Following informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Participatory Analysis Approach

The research and community partners discussed the content of interviews, emerging themes, and coding framework throughout the data collection and analytic processes. Drawing on a socioecological framework, an initial codebook was developed through a participatory approach by the research and community team members. Based on this codebook, the lead author (EA) and another team member (SA) coded interview transcripts for themes and emergent categories in ATLAS.ti 7 software, generated inductively from the data and

through themes identified with community partners (JG, MT) and related literature. Initially, each coder worked independently on the same transcript and after comparing codes and establishing intercoder reliability, the remaining transcripts were divided equally among the two coders, with continuous checks for intercoder reliability. The initial coding framework was based on key themes (e.g., Boystown and mobility, policing and criminalization, outdoor sex work, online sex work) reflected in the interview guide and participants' accounts, and more conceptually driven substantive codes (e.g., solidarity and social support, childhood trauma) were then applied.

A socioecological framework for conceptualizing health and well-being of sex workers and clients emphasizes that health is an outcome of social, structural, and environmental conditions (Farmer, 1999). In moving beyond individually focused and behavioral understandings of risk and safety, this approach foregrounds the interconnectedness of environmental, social, political, legal, and economic forces, in shaping the health and well-being of individuals. A key element of the present study is the active co-leadership and involvement of community members and partners throughout the research process. Previous work with men sex workers in India underscores the ways in which participatory research grounds the interpretation of epidemiological studies within local understandings and is vital to the production of knowledge and surveillance of epidemics (Lorway & Khan, 2014).

The study holds ethical approval with the Providence Health Care/University of British of Columbia Research Ethics Board and all participants provided informed consent and received an honorarium of CAD\$30 for their time and expertise.

RESULTS

Given the focus on the loss of Boystown, analyses for this article were restricted to interviews with 43 men and trans individuals who buy and/or sell sex with other men: 39 sex workers and 8 sex buyers (4 workers currently also buy sex from other men). The sociodemographic characteristics of participants are described in Table 1. The mean age of sex workers was 35 (range = 20–55) and the mean age of clients was 38 (range = 25–56). The mean age reported for first time exchanging sex for money was 19 years (range = 11–37), while the mean age for first time purchasing sex was 29 years (range = 18–50). Nineteen sex workers (49%) and 2 clients (25%) identified as Indigenous (inclusive of First Nations, Metis). The majority of workers (90%; $n = 35$) and clients (75%; $n = 6$) identified as cisgender men followed by two-spirit and trans individuals. The term two-spirit has a fluid, nonbinary meaning among Indigenous people, and may refer to someone who has both feminine and masculine spirits (Fieland, Walters, & Simoni, 2007; Ristock, Zoccole, & Passante, 2010). Trans persons included transgender, transsexual, and otherwise gender nonconforming. Regarding sexual orientation, 44% ($n = 17$) of workers and 75% ($n = 6$) of clients identified as gay, 26% ($n = 10$) and 25% ($n = 2$) as bisexual, and 15% ($n = 6$) and 0% ($n = 0$) as straight. Of the sex worker participants, 51% ($n = 20$) reported their main modes of solicitation to be online and 46% ($n = 18$) outdoors (street or park).¹ Most workers (74%, $n = 29$) reported using crystal meth in Vancouver compared with 38% ($n = 3$) of clients. In terms of housing, 31% ($n = 12$) of workers live in a house or apartment, 26% ($n = 10$) live in

a single room occupancy, 23% (n = 9) in supportive housing, and 21% (n = 8) reported being homeless or in an emergency shelter.

The Gentrification of Boystown and Loss of Community

Participants described the loss of Boystown as a consequence of urban planning and gentrification of the area in the years leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympics. As street-based sex workers were displaced from Boystown, many workers expressed that their social networks and sense of community had been disrupted. Coinciding with this gentrification was a shift to online sex work, which many participants describe as creating heightened competition among workers and social isolation. The narratives suggest that losing the tight-knit community that had been established in Boystown has reduced the level of social support and solidarity among workers. One participant explains the atmosphere on the streets of Vancouver for men sex workers:

This city is quite cold on the streets.... A lot of people might say that they're down with a lot of people but... no one's really down with anybody in this city [When Boystown was open] more groups... hung out together. Like especially on the corners but like, since then you only see people by themselves so, just goes to show. ... About a year after the Olympics like I never went down the stroll again for working. (38-year-old sex worker)

Heightened competition online has forced some workers to consider other avenues for advertising and integrating sex work with more comprehensive services for clients, such as massage. One worker describes his efforts to combat the online competition:

I'm doing freelance... and I'm doing this escort massage thing.... Yeah I've done um I think, ten or eleven videos, independent videos. It was easier to hook in Calgary.... It's very competitive [in Vancouver]. There's two hundred and thirty-four male hookers on Squirt... I need to find some other way though 'cause it's too competitive. Like put an ad in the paper or something like that. (42-year-old sex worker)

Some street-based workers reported that since being displaced from Boystown and the rise of online solicitation they have had a harder time attracting clients and, as a result, are earning less money. The ensuing economic hardship may force workers to offer more services to increase their income, including services that are riskier. For one worker, losing Boystown has made finding clients so difficult that he has started including anal sex in the services he offers—a transition he has made reluctantly in the past year, as it carries a higher risk for HIV and STIs (sexually transmitted infections):

I've been mostly oral. And like it's only been the last year or two that I've done anal. Both ways so.... And I only started doing that because they shut [Boystown] down.... That's why I think I'm cold to males now. Having to do something you don't wanna do is like—I dunno. I never had to do that my whole life. And it's like all of a sudden.... It's not that I'm too old for the industry, if I don't shave, yeah for sure... but with my head shaved I still almost look like the exact same person I was when I was eighteen so I don't really understand why.... Things have slowed down.

It's weird [So you think it's mostly because... Boystown was shut down?] Yeah.
And the Internet. (38-year-old sex worker)

For workers who have not made the transition to the Internet, the challenges on the street are exacerbated by the criminalized environment for sex work in Vancouver, and their safety and well-being are put in jeopardy. Narratives about the shutdown of Boystown were particularly laden with incidences of police violence and harassment. Street-based men sex workers were subjected to extreme experiences of police violence and harassment, especially just prior to or during the 2010 Winter Olympic games. One Indigenous sex worker describes:

The cops down on [Boystown] if they see you they'll pull over right away. Lights on. Like jack your name up. And like what are you doing down here? You're not allowed. You know that. And, even if they don't know you and, I've seen them like, like punch people in their head while they were like handcuffed and fucking—Like they scared me off [Boystown] like big time. That's why [Boystown] ended because we left. Not because—Like they couldn't stop strangers from showing up. ...Because of the cops, and the abuse that they would do... I've had police frickin, take off my shoes, leave me with no jacket and being driven out to Burnaby and being beaten and, having to walk back. At like three o'clock in the morning... They do it a lot. And they just-don't really, care I guess... they think that they can control people because they're VPD. Because they're police and they think they have, all rights to do that because you're this person. No one will care about you. Kind of is the way. (38-year-old sex worker)

Given the vast overrepresentation of Indigenous sex workers in this study, and health and social inequities faced by Indigenous people, this narrative highlights the urgency of including the voices of Indigenous men sex workers in research and policy discussion and the need for Indigenous sex work-led research that includes men sex worker and buyer experiences. Another worker described why his preference is to solicit online, particularly in regard to the heightened risks associated with working on the street. He commented on the amount of time and effort required to work online, which could potentially lead some workers to defer to the street in cases where a quicker turnaround is desired:

The security of doing a car date then [15 years ago] to doing a car date now is basically the same... anything can happen, you know? You get into a car and there's somebody in the back seat, you're fucked, you know? I'd rather do it online or... in a hotel arrangement, at their place [Is there anything you do... to try and be safer... anything you do when you first meet the client in the car?] When I'm meeting people... everything I get out on the table online, right? Right when I have to sit there and, for an hour like, you know, punch a hundred questions and it's like an hour later, you know, 'cause when you're doing that kinda work, time is money, right? (52-year-old sex worker)

Both workers and clients who operate online expressed little concern about the legal aspects of sex work and rarely encountered police officers in any capacity, as both online advertising and purchasing of sex were not criminalized at the time of data collection:

[Any disadvantages to connecting with sex workers online?]

There's always that anonymous factor. Could be a police officer, kinda thing. But it's, I would say, very minimal, at this time. (30-year-old client)

I'm, pretty sure that it's not illegal online. Just based on what I've read but I know they're changing the laws and, I don't know how that's gonna be enforced, so. I don't know if they're allowed to trick you. Like are they able to pretend, that they're like, not a cop, and then, trick you? If I found out if they could do that I would be worried. Other than that I don't see how they would like, bust me, or whatever. It's not like, you know [laughter]. (25-year-old client)

Protective Strategies of Online Sex Work

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the narratives was that the shift from the street to online sex work provides sex workers with greater control over the terms of their work, enhancing safety and the ability to implement protective strategies. All participants noted that sex work for men in Vancouver now predominately takes place online. Many narratives referred to this transition to online solicitation coinciding specifically with the shutdown of the outdoor sex work stroll for men (Boystown) in the past several years. An outcome of this transition is a more centralized and accessible space for the sex industry:

It's mostly on the computer. Like you don't see guys standing on the street unless it's up near the bars... it's not like it used to be back when it was [in Boystown] or, back in the day. It's all online. (29-year-old client)

[What are the advantages of connecting with sex workers online?]

Um, it's a one stop shop, for lack of a better term. It's a central place, where you can just, most, if not all, go. (30-year-old client)

Online workers are able to choose from a wide range of websites and reach a much broader audience of potential clients than on the street. Workers reported that being online makes it easier to connect with buyers and has increased their overall income:

Working online is like a whole new world. It's like boom I got a whole new clientele. I got my clientele, I got money again and it's different, so it was really cool. All the male prostitutes were pretty much moved online. It's all online now. (37-year-old sex worker)

Importantly, narratives indicated that the Internet allows sex workers to negotiate aspects of their work through web chats with prospective clients, prior to doing an inperson date, such as prices/rates, types of services they provide and where they provide them, condom use (which may vary for oral vs. anal sex), and HIV status, eliminating the need to negotiate such terms during the date, and reducing the risk of negative encounters. Soliciting for clients online enables sex workers to create online profiles detailing the terms of their services and the narratives relayed that many buyers also have online profiles; including photographs and detailed information about what type of experience they are looking for. Having the opportunity to screen prospective clients based on their online presence prior to meeting can reduce the risk for violence, particularly if the sex worker wants to refuse the date. One worker explained why working online is safer than when he used to work on the street:

[Do you feel like that working online is better than what you did before with being, you know, on the street?]

It's way safer, like I say you can read the profiles of your clients before you even meet them, you know? And then everything's arranged before you even meet them so when you meet them it's all good, right? You either say nay or yay.... Totally different from like having to get into a car and then if you don't wanna do it and the guy gets violent with you in the car you're fucked, you know? And you can say no online and not worry about bringing retribution of violence right, so. (53-year-old sex worker)

Another worker, who identifies as heterosexual and provides services to men and women (and has purchased sex from women), explained his screening process of potential clients:

I read their email and I just, get a sense. Or I listen to them on the phone or their text and, I just generally get a sense of like, based on their grammar and their spelling and... their being able to describe what they want. Um, you know, like determine whether I wanna work with them or not. You know sometimes I'll have to ask them like, they say oh I'd like to see you for a session. I'm like well, what kind of session were you looking for? I mean, what kind of things are you wanting... based on you know my website and, yeah. (46-year-old sex worker)

One of the ways in which screening has been enhanced with the Internet is with the use of webcams. Webcams can serve as valuable protective screening tools against workplace violence and workers reported meeting clients several times through webcams prior to meeting in person, and felt that this reduced the risk of finding themselves in violent situations:

I do live webcams... it's the most secure way to, run the sex industry is a live webcam, online, eh? 'Cause you know exactly who you're doing before you even get there... you know what I mean, 'cause you meet people online and they can say whoever they are and then when you go to meet them it could be a whole different ball game. So, you know, you don't have to stress out and deal with it, right? (52-year-old sex worker)

The advantages of connecting via the Internet, as compared with bars or the street, emerged throughout the narratives. Clients explained that arranging a date online often establishes clearer terms of the exchange, making it less likely that they would find themselves in a situation where they were not expecting to pay someone for sex:

There's no games [online], I hate the games, you know it's like... so many of these guys they would play games. I get so frustrated of the, you know, making out like they're gonna hook up and when it comes time, hey, you know... please give me a break, don't waste my time 'cause my time's more valuable ... sometimes you don't find out until after you get back to your place and then they start asking for money, like they play you, uh, when you get down to getting naked and having it start and then they'll ask for money and then I'll just say, fuck off, get out or whatever, you know. (56-year-old client)

Clients and workers both reported expanding their contacts and networks by including e-mail and Facebook for arranging dates:

I also have contact with guys on Facebook... I add them as a friend... and then I say well this is what I offer, if you wanna do anything and are you interested and a lot of guys will say yeah. 'Cause they need some money... everybody needs a little bit of extra cash even though I can't afford it but, you pay for what you want if you like that person. (46-year-old client)

Lack of Workplace Protections Online in a Criminalized Industry

While online sex work facilitated significant protective strategies for the majority of participants, the criminalized and stigmatized nature of sex work meant that sex workers had access to few workplace protections in cases where prospective clients may be deceptive about their identity online. A concern among some participants was false online profiles, which make it difficult to trust clients and increase the risk of unwanted encounters (e.g. intoxication) and potentially violent dates. One young sex worker indicated that he preferred to have an outdoor stroll where he could better assess his clients:

Well now that it's all online it seems to be you don't know—what the person is. You don't know if they're high.... They don't, describe themselves properly. You don't see pictures of them sometimes. You don't know how safe this person is. You don't know if they smell bad or something like that. And that's how we—That's why street work was so much better, 'cause you're able to say no. (20-year-old sex worker)

Another worker explained that although he prefers working online due to the freedom and flexibility working from home provides, and that when working via the Internet “*no one can see where [you're]going or anything, like if you're home alone or something like that*” (42-year-old sex worker). In the context of criminalization, the loss of community solidarity and lack of access to workplace safety standards has the potential to reduce opportunities for workers to look after one another, and may limit their contact with both each other and sex work services.

Reduced Stigma Online

When compared with the street, the advantages of online sex work were pronounced throughout the narratives, including the role of the Internet in reducing stigma for both men sex workers and clients. The rise of the Internet has transformed sex work from a largely stigmatized activity to one that represents a more normalized form of work. A client describes his perception that stigma and the risk of violence are diminished online, as compared with the street:

[Why do you chose to look online rather than other places?]

Because if I try to do it on the street that'd be scary as hell and, I'm not up for that... I think you're probably gonna get, picked up by the police or something. And it probably makes you seem like a criminal. It just seems so illicit. Online just seems more in line with our normal everyday world. Because, it's just like going online and finding another service... like we've all read stories where someone

goes to apply for a job on Craigslist or buy a couch, or something and they've been, in a bad situation ... I don't think it's any more dangerous. (25-year-old client)

It emerged from the narratives that the privacy and anonymity provided by the Internet significantly reduces the level of stigma typically attached to street-based sex work. One worker who primarily solicits outdoors explained that he would attract more clients if he went online, because he believes that many men who buy sex are "kinda in the closet gay ... and don't want anyone to know what they're doing" (24-year-old sex worker). Concerns over stigma and discrimination against people who participate in the sex industry were reiterated throughout the narratives, and many participants indicated that they were uncomfortable identifying themselves as being involved in sex work offline. For those who also experience discrimination based on their gender identity or sexual orientation, the Internet offers a more desirable avenue for sex work. One sex worker described his preference to use e-mail rather than giving out his phone number to clients, to avoid the risk of one of his friends finding out about his work and to maintain his image as a "good boy":

I prefer e-mail. [laughter] I don't like giving my phone number out very often.... Because, a lot of my friends pick up my phone... like they use it to play on Facebook, Candy Crush, whatever... and at least my e-mail I have is, nobody really sees anything... I'm a good little boy from a small town ... so. The innocent one. (35-year-old sex worker)

The narratives corroborate the notion that street-based sex work is more stigmatized, and that in general both workers and clients view online solicitation as more desirable:

I just think it's dirtier [on the street]. Or it's more um... it's just not as—it's just better online. I just don't know how to say it.... It's just—on the street it just has this—For me it has some kind of stigma. I just think of it as being very—Why would you be on the street if you could be online? You would rather be online. (25-year-old client)

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the lived experiences of men and trans sex workers and buyers in Vancouver, Canada, and provides critical empirical evidence for the ways in which gentrification and displacement of street-based sex work has led to loss of community and solidarity, while at the same time, the move to online has promoted better working conditions, including increased violence prevention and safety. The narratives describe the sociostructural context of sex work for men and trans persons in Vancouver, particularly shaped by the loss of Boystown and increased police presence on the streets. The loss of Boystown and move to online led to heightened competition for some, in the context of a criminalized and stigmatized industry. For the majority of workers and buyers, online solicitation facilitated improved working conditions, including enhanced protective strategies and reduced risk of violence, stigma, and police harassment for both sex workers and clients as compared with street.

The interviews with men and trans sex workers and buyers expand on the literature documenting historical displacement of sex workers from Vancouver's West End

neighborhood (Ross, 2010; Ross & Sullivan, 2012), and provide important insights into the ways in which men in the sex work industry have experienced opposition from residents, urban planners, and police in the context of the gentrification of Boystown. The current study describes the displacement of visible sex work through elevated violence and harassment from police on the streets, exploiting the vulnerabilities of men sex workers and impeding their ability to protect against unsafe sexual transactions.

This study and narratives among men and trans persons in the sex work industry in Canada echo findings from earlier research in the United States describing the ways in which the expansion of online sex work has many advantages for men sex workers and clients. The Internet offers a less conspicuous and less stigmatizing environment with lower risk of violence, stigma, arrest and overall increased level of safety for both workers and clients (Aggleton & Parker, 2015; Koken, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2009; MacPhail et al., 2014; Minichiello et al., 2013). Workers soliciting online may have more opportunities to identify violent perpetrators posing as clients by reporting their experiences in online forums and the Internet facilitates sharing of safer sex information and a wider dissemination of these messages to both men sex workers and clients (MacPhail et al., 2014; Minichiello et al., 2013; Parsons et al., 2004). The majority of the narratives describe the benefits of operating online, highlighting the ability to screen prospective clients and negotiate transactions up front (e.g., fees, types of sexual services, condom use). For some men, the criminalized and stigmatized nature of sex work meant that sex workers had access to few workplace protections in cases of fake online profiles. The literature has demonstrated that men sex workers working online differ substantially from those working on the street; research suggests that street-based men sex workers tend to be less educated, younger, more likely to identify as heterosexual, have higher rates of drug use, lower rates of HIV/STI testing, and may engage in riskier sexual behaviors with their clients (Bimbi, 2007; Leary MCouns & Minichiello, 2007; Logan, 2010; Minichiello et al., 2013; Parsons et al., 2004). Men sex workers who work online have reported that they earn more money and have fewer concerns about law enforcement (Parsons et al., 2004). Similarly, clients of Internet-based men sex workers tend to have higher socioeconomic status and lower rates of drug use and dependence (Minichiello et al., 2013).

The present study corroborates recent literature suggesting that new technologies have expedited the emergence of increasingly connected men sex worker communities worldwide who play a critical role in improving their own health, by challenging stigma and discrimination, increasing autonomy, and sharing experiences and knowledge, all of which are facilitated by the Internet (Baral et al., 2015; Trapence et al., 2012). As evidenced in the narratives, online sex work can significantly enhance safety (e.g., via the use of webcams and negotiation of terms of transaction prior to meeting). Websites, such as the Erotic Review Board (which has been estimated to have between 500,000 and 1 million visitors per month), allow sex workers to review clients and share information to prevent personal risks and harms (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011). The appeal of online sex work extends beyond physical safety to financial benefits: Men sex workers working online report more financial benefits as well as eliminating the need to pay out to third parties (MacPhail et al., 2014; Mclean, 2015; Parsons et al., 2004). This study provides further evidence for the ways in

which online sex work empowers men sex workers financially and in terms of choice and safety (Parsons et al., 2007).

While the size and geographical distribution of men sex worker populations (both offline and online) is largely undetermined, it has been estimated that 93% of independent female sex workers are located online (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011). Escorting websites represent a significant proportion of today's sex industry and men selling sex online represent the largest cohort of men sex workers (Minichiello et al., 2013). A growing body of research in recent years has witnessed a growth in the number of men sex workers who work online and a reduction in those working on the street (Bimbi, 2007; Lee-Gonyea, Castle, & Gonyea, 2009; Parsons et al., 2004). The narratives in this study add to the existing literature, suggesting that the Internet has expanded sex workers' ability to be more selective with choice of clients and provides clients with the opportunity to offer money for sex to men online as well as in non-sex work chat rooms, online platforms, or "hookup" websites (Bimbi, 2007).

New sex work legislation in Canada, known as the "Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act" (C-36/PCEPA; implemented in December 2014), criminalizes the buying and advertising of sex for the first time in Canadian history, including in online venues (Government of Canada Department of Justice, 2015), and has serious implications for the health and safety of men sex workers in Vancouver, the majority of who have transitioned to online advertisement and solicitation. The new Canadian legislation now targets sex buyers and online third parties, known as demand criminalization (modelled after Norwegian and Swedish laws). The legislation has been highly criticized by community, research and legal experts and inadequately conflates sex workers with women victims of violence, and fails to acknowledge gender diversity of men or trans persons who sell sex (Government of Canada Department of Justice, 2015). Given the importance of online sex work in preventing violence and enhancing safer sex strategies, as described in the sex worker and buyer narratives, the new legislation threatens to prevent men and trans sex workers from self-advertising online, thus removing critical safety mechanisms for screening prospective clients and preventing violence, and potentially deters service providers from extending their reach to online spaces. The recent raid of Rentboy (The U.S. Department of Justice Attorney's Office, 2015), a large U.S.-based escort website, foreshadows policing strategies to follow the legal reforms in Canada, and demand criminalization further perpetuates the risks and harms associated with criminalized sex work environments.

This exploratory study begins to delineate the intersections of an array of structural inequalities faced by some men and trans sex workers—such as criminalization and stigma—and the ways in which structural inequalities shape poor working conditions and risks of violence for sex workers (Farmer, 1999; Shannon et al., 2015). A disproportionate number of Indigenous men and trans sex workers in the study described experiencing extreme forms of violence and harassment from police; these men face vulnerabilities compounded by the multigenerational effects of colonialization, racism, and poverty. Policies and programs to protect sex workers must be centred on the the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous sex workers. Multifarious risk factors at the physical, social, and structural levels may prevent some workers from transitioning to the online market and potentiate risks and

negative health outcomes for those working on the street. More than half of men sex workers and clients in this study report soliciting or buying sex online, and almost equally on the street, indicating that the risks associated with street-based sex work are relevant to many of those who participate in the sex work industry for men and trans persons in Vancouver, despite it having largely transitioned online. This is especially relevant in the context of new sex work legislation discussions in Canada and potential repeal of new PCEPA laws.

Perhaps the most significant barrier to health and safety for men in the sex work industry is stigma. Research findings in Latin America highlight the role of stigma and discrimination in creating barriers to health services (Galea et al., 2011). The present study elucidates the ways in which increased privacy and anonymity online may reduce stigma; however, Internet-based men sex workers still report work-related stigma, as well as social isolation as key concerns (Koken, Bimbi, Parsons, & Halkitis, 2004; MacPhail et al., 2014; Mclean, 2015). While it has yet to be seen how new Canadian sex work legislation criminalizing clients and advertising of sexual services will affect the health and safety of men in the sex work industry, anecdotal experiences by community partners (HUSTLE/HiM) have seen sexual health promotion and sex work-led outreach shut down online due to recent legal changes (PCEPA).

Usurping formalized criminalized laws targeting sex work, the Internet, and the shift from the street to online sex work has thus far facilitated an industry run more by self-regulation among men sex workers and clients, with online review boards and men sex workers acting as sex educators (MacPhail et al., 2014; Parsons et al., 2004). As lessons from Netreach of HUSTLE (a by and for sex work project) the Internet, with its broad reach to wider sociodemographic populations, represents an important vehicle for distributing information and awareness of sexual health to men in the sex industry (Holt & Blevins, 2007; Lee-Gonyea et al., 2009; Minichiello et al., 2013). As such, research, health and support services must aim to work with community to better understand online platforms for sex work and how to best integrate sexual health education and services that meet the needs of online sex workers. Social media and other online platforms offer critical spaces for community building and sharing of information among sex workers, and significant potential to improve health and safety through social solidarity and collectivization, as well as sexual health education. However, the opportunities to respond to the unique and diverse needs of men and trans persons in the sex work industry, particularly operating online, may be severely hindered by criminal policies and legal reforms towards end-demand approaches to sex work both in Canada and globally.

This study has several limitations that should be considered. Participants were recruited in Vancouver through HUSTLE-led outreach to street and off-street venues (e.g., online, bars), hook-up apps and online advertisements on hook up sites and this study may not be generalizable to other men and trans sex worker and client populations. Due to potential self-selection bias and given the prevalence of stigma and discrimination around sex work for men and trans persons, this study may underrepresent clients and sex workers working in more hidden, informal venues, such as private homes and hotels. Interviews facilitated discussions around sensitive topics—such as sexuality and violence—which may introduce potential for social desirability and reporting biases. However, interviews were conducted in

safe and comfortable spaces by trained experiential community interviewers and the community-based, participatory nature of the study reduces the likelihood of these forms of biases.

CONCLUSION

This study provides the voices and lived experiences of men and trans sex workers and buyers in Vancouver, and describes the ways in which the transition from the street to the Internet has shaped the organization and structure of sex work. The loss of Boystown, due to gentrification and urban planning, has led to social isolation of men sex workers and buyers and a loss of community and solidarity: key protective measures for sex workers. At the same time, the move to the Internet and restructuring of sex work for men to online solicitation has increased workers' capacity to screen clients, enhancing their ability to prevent violence and increasing safety in the workplace. Given the heterogeneity of men and trans persons who participate in the sex work industry—and more specifically, of those utilizing the Internet for buying or selling sex—there is a critical need to investigate local environments and increase social support and online resources for both workers and clients. Recent legal reforms in Canada to further criminalize sex work (PCEPA) raise significant concern for safety and health of individuals in the sex industry, and point to the critical need to include voices of men and trans sex workers and buyers in policy discussions.

Acknowledgments

We thank all those who contributed their time and expertise to this project, particularly participants, community advisory board members and partner agencies. We wish to acknowledge Wayne Robert, HUSTLE and HIM teams, Solanna Anderson, Krista Butler, Peter Vann, and Sarah Allan, for their research and administrative support.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research arm was supported by a CIHR Catalyst Grant and partially through National Institutes of Health (R01DA033147) and the service/outreach arm was supported by MacAIDS. KS is partially supported by a Canada Research Chair in Global Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS and Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research Scholar Award. AK is supported by CIHR and MSFHR. EA is supported by a CIHR Doctoral Award.

References

- Aggleton, P., Parker, R. Men who sell sex: Global perspectives. New York, NY: Routledge; 2015.
- Ashford C. Male sex work and the Internet effect: Time to re-evaluate the criminal law? *Journal of Criminal Law*. 2009; 73:258–280.
- Bacon O, Lum P, Hahn J, Evans J, Davidson P, Moss A, Page-Shafer K. Commercial sex work and risk of HIV infection among young drug-injecting men who have sex with men in San Francisco. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. 2006; 33:228–234. [PubMed: 16565643]
- Baral SD, Friedman MR, Geibel S, Rebe K, Bozhinov B, Diouf D, Cáceres CF. Male sex workers: Practices, contexts, and vulnerabilities for HIV acquisition and transmission. *Lancet*. 2015; 385:260–273. [PubMed: 25059939]
- Beyrer C, Baral SD, van Griensven F, Goodreau SM, Chariyalertsak S, Wirtz AL, Brookmeyer R. Global epidemiology of HIV infection in men who have sex with men. *Lancet*. 2012; 380:367–377. [PubMed: 22819660]
- Bimbi D. Male prostitution: Pathology, paradigms and progress in research. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 2007; 53:7–35. [PubMed: 18019068]

- Bruckert C, Hannem S. Rethinking the prostitution debates: Transcending structural stigma in systemic responses to sex work. *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*. 2013; 28:43–63.
- Cunningham S, Kendall TD. Prostitution 2.0: The changing face of sex work. *Journal of Urban Economics*. 2011; 69:273–287.
- Deering KN, Chettiar J, Chan K, Taylor M, Montaner JS, Shannon K. Sex work and the public health impacts of the 2010 Olympic Games. *Sexually Transmitted Infections*. 2012; 88:301–303. [PubMed: 22436199]
- Duff P, Shoveller J, Dobrer S, Ogilvie G, Montaner J, Chettiar J, Shannon K. The relationship between social, policy and physical venue features and social cohesion on condom use for pregnancy prevention among sex workers: A safer indoor work environment scale. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. 2015; 69:666–672. [PubMed: 25678713]
- Farmer, P. *Infections and inequalities: The modern plagues*. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1999.
- Fieland, K., Walters, K., Simoni, J. Determinants of health among two-spirit American Indians and Alaska Natives. In: Meyer, I., Northridge, M., editors. *The health of sexual minorities*. New York, NY: Springer; 2007. p. 268-300.
- Galea JT, Kinsler JJ, Salazar X, Lee SJ, Giron M, Sayles JN, Cunningham WE. Acceptability of pre-exposure prophylaxis as an HIV prevention strategy: Barriers and facilitators to pre-exposure prophylaxis uptake among at-risk Peruvian populations. *International Journal of STD & AIDS*. 2011; 22:256–262. [PubMed: 21571973]
- Goldenberg SM, Strathdee SA, Gallardo M, Nguyen L, Lozada R, Semple SJ, Patterson TL. How important are venue-based HIV risks among male clients of female sex workers? A mixed methods analysis of the risk environment in nightlife venues in Tijuana, Mexico. *Health & Place*. 2011; 17:748–756. [PubMed: 21396875]
- Government of Canada Department of Justice. Technical paper: Bill C-36, Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/other-autre/protect/p1.html>
- Holt TJ, Blevins KR. Examining sex work from the client’s perspective: Assessing johns using on-line data. *Deviant Behavior*. 2007; 28:333–354.
- Koken, J., Bimbi, D., Parsons, J. Male and female escorts: A comparative analysis. In: Weitzer, R., editor. *Sex for sale*. New York, NY: Routledge; 2009. p. 205-232.
- Koken JA, Bimbi DS, Parsons JT, Halkitis PN. The experience of stigma in the lives of male Internet escorts. *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*. 2004; 16(1):13–32.
- Krüsi A, Chettiar J, Ridgway A, Abbott J, Strathdee SA, Shannon K. Negotiating safety and sexual risk reduction with clients in unsanctioned safer indoor sex work environments: A qualitative study. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2012; 102:1154–1159. [PubMed: 22571708]
- Leary MCouns D, Minichiello V. Exploring the interpersonal relationships in street-based male sex work: Results from an Australian qualitative study. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 2007; 53:75–110. [PubMed: 18019070]
- Lee-Gonyea JA, Castle T, Gonyea NE. Laid to order: Male escorts advertising on the Internet. *Deviant Behavior*. 2009; 30:321–348.
- Liu S, Detels R. Recreational drug use: An emerging concern among venue-based male sex workers in China. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. 2012; 39:251–252. [PubMed: 22421689]
- Logan TD. Personal characteristics, sexual behaviors, and male sex work: A quantitative approach. *American Sociological Review*. 2010; 75:679–704.
- Lorway R, Khan S. Reassembling epidemiology: Mapping, monitoring and making-up people in the context of HIV prevention in India. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2014; 112:51–62. [PubMed: 24797356]
- MacPhail C, Scott J, Minichiello V. Technology, normalisation and male sex work. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2014; 17:483–495.
- McLean A. “You can do it from your sofa”: The increasing popularity of the internet as a working site among male sex workers in Melbourne. *Journal of Sociology*. 2015; 51:887–902.

- Mimiaga MJ, Reisner SL, Tinsley JP, Mayer KH, Safren SA. Street workers and internet escorts: Contextual and psychosocial factors surrounding HIV risk behavior among men who engage in sex work with other men. *Journal of Urban Health*. 2008; 86:54–66. [PubMed: 18780186]
- Minichiello V, Scott J, Callander D. New pleasures and old dangers: Reinventing male sex work. *Journal of Sex Research*. 2013; 50:263–275. [PubMed: 23480072]
- Minichiello V, Scott J, Callander D. A new public health context to understand male sex work. *BMC Public Health*. 2015; 15:282. [PubMed: 25879716]
- Parsons J, Koken J, Bimbi D. The use of the Internet by gay and bisexual male escorts: Sex workers as sex educators. *AIDS Care*. 2004; 16:1021–1035. [PubMed: 15511734]
- Parsons J, Koken J, Bimbi D. Looking beyond HIV: Eliciting individual and community needs of male Internet escorts. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 2007; 53:219–240. [PubMed: 18019076]
- Ristock, J., Zoccole, A., Passante, L. Aboriginal twospirit and LGBTQ migration, mobility and health research project: Final report. 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.2spirits.com/PDFFolder/MMHReport.pdf>
- Ross B. Sex and (evacuation from) the city: The moral and legal regulation of sex workers in Vancouver's West End, 1975–1985. *Sexualities*. 2010; 13:197–218.
- Ross B, Sullivan R. Tracing lines of horizontal hostility: How sex workers and gay activists battled for space, voice, and belonging in Vancouver, 1975–1985. *Sexualities*. 2012; 15:604–621.
- Shannon K, Strathdee SA, Goldenberg SM, Duff P, Mwangi P, Rusakova M, Boily MC. Global epidemiology of HIV among female sex workers: Influence of structural determinants. *Lancet*. 2015; 385:55–71. [PubMed: 25059947]
- Small W, Krusi A, Wood E, Montaner J, Kerr T. Street-level policing in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada, during the 2010 Winter Olympics. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2012; 23:128–133. [PubMed: 21885271]
- The Economist. More bang for your buck: How technology is liberating the world's oldest profession. 2014 Aug 9. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21611074-how-new-technology-shaking-up-oldest-business-more-bang-your-buck>
- Trapence G, Collins C, Avrett S, Carr R, Sanchez H, Ayala G, Baral SD. From personal survival to public health: Community leadership by men who have sex with men in the response to HIV. *Lancet*. 2012; 380:400–410. [PubMed: 22819662]
- The U.S. Department of Justice Attorney's Office. Largest online male escort service raided. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/largest-online-maleescort-service-raided>

TABLE 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of men sex workers and men who buy sex from men in the CHAPS project

Characteristic	Buyer (M) N=8*	Worker N=39**	Total N=43
Buys & Sells	-	-	4 (9%)
Age: <i>mean, range</i>	38, 28–56	35, 20–55	39, 20–74
Age first sex exchange for \$	N/A	19, 11–37	19, 11–37
Age first purchase sex	29, 18–50	N/A	29, 18–50
<i>Ethnicity</i> [†]			
White	6 (75%)	19 (46%)	22 (51%)
Indigenous	2 (25%)	19 (49%)	20 (47%)
Other visible minority	1 (13%)	6 (15%)	6 (14%)
<i>Gender Identity</i> [†]			
Cisgender	6 (75%)	35 (90%)	38 (88%)
Two-spirit	1 (13%)	7 (18%)	8 (19%)
Trans	2 (25%)	4 (10%)	5 (12%)
<i>Sexual Orientation</i> [†]			
Gay/Queer	6 (75%)	17 (44%)	21 (49%)
Bisexual	2 (25%)	10 (26%)	10 (23%)
Straight	0 (0%)	6 (15%)	6 (14%)
No label/Other	0 (0%)	5 (13%)	5 (12%)
<i>Mode of solicitation</i> [†]			
Online	n/a	20 (51%)	n/a
Street/Park	n/a	18 (46%)	n/a
Regulars/word of mouth	n/a	11 (28%)	n/a
Bars	n/a	5 (13%)	n/a
Bathhouses	n/a	3 (8%)	n/a
<i>Mode of buying</i> [†]			
Online	6 (75%)	n/a	n/a
Newspaper	2 (25%)	n/a	n/a
Street	1 (13%)	n/a	n/a
Bars	1 (13%)	n/a	n/a
<i>Substance use</i> [†]			
Crystal meth	3 (38%)	29 (74%)	31 (72%)
Crack	2 (25%)	14 (36%)	16 (37%)
<i>Type of accommodation</i>			
House/apartment	3 (38%)	12 (31%)	12 (28%)
Supportive housing	5 (63%)	9 (23%)	13 (30%)
SRO	0 (0%)	10 (26%)	10 (23%)

Characteristic	Buyer (M) N=8*	Worker N=39**	Total N=43
Homeless/Emergency shelter	0 (0%)	8 (21%)	8 (19%)

* one client buys from both women and men

** 4 workers have women clients

† note: count is not exclusive, participants may report more than one category

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript