

THE HUSTLER'S HUSTLE: SEXUAL BEHAVIOR, S.T.I.s, AND THE MALE SEX WORK MARKET

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Male prostitutes are a sizable portion of the sex worker labor force in the United States (Freidman 2003). Unlike their female counterparts, male sex workers work independently—there is nearly no pimping nor male brothels in the male sex trade (Itiel 1998).¹ The independent-operator feature of the market allows for greater mobility up and down the hierarchy of the male sex worker labor force. In the hierarchy of male prostitution offered by Luckenbill (1986), the male escort is the most esteemed: he does not work the streets, takes clients by appointment, and is usually better paid than his street counterpart. While the street prostitute is paid by the piece rate, the male escort is a contract employee with greater control over the terms of his work and the services he provides.

Male sex work in the United States has been quick to adapt to changes in technology. Where male escorts used to congregate in “escort bars” and place ads in gay-related newspapers, the male escort market now largely takes place online. Indeed, although female prostitution has recently begun to appear online in internet forums such as Craigslist (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006, Lambert 2007), male escorts have had access to large and profitable websites exclusively devoted to the male sex trade for well over ten years (Friedman 2003).² The standard operating procedure for the sites, and through them the online male escort market, is straightforward—escorts pay a monthly fee to post their ads, which include pictures, a physical description, their rate for services (quoted by the hour), as well as contact information

¹ This was not always the case historically. In the past, male hustling usually took the form of transvestite sex work, and male brothels were not uncommon (Chauncey 1994). Dorais (2005) shows that in other cultures male brothels have survived. Although the transsexual and transvestite sex market continues, the contemporary stereotype of hustling is a post war phenomena, and Friedman (2003) shows that spatially street male sex workers and transsexual sex workers do not work in the same locations in the post war US. Our own analysis revealed that more than 75% of the male escorts we found affiliated with the few existing male escort agencies also advertised independently (charging different rates and with different contact information than the agency).

² The best known sites for male escorts have each existed since 1998. Websites devoted exclusively to reviews of male escorts have existed at least as long.

such as a telephone number and/or e-mail address. All escorts pay the same fee to list their advertisements, and escorts have complete control over the type and amount of information conveyed in their advertisements. With the sites, clients contact escorts directly and arrange for appointments either at the home of the escort (an “incall”) or at the residence/hotel of the client (an “outcall”).

Naturally, research on STIs (especially HIV) have noted the unique social and epidemiological position of male sex workers. Male sex workers have long been assumed to be a vector of transmission of STIs. Part of this lies in the fact that male sex workers serve multiple markets—gay-identified men, heterosexually-identified men, as well as their own private sexual partners. This implies that male sex workers may interact with groups of men that are unlikely to interact with each other, and therefore can act as a conduit between various groups. Previous research has stressed the need to educate male sex workers and also documents, through ethnographic techniques, the ways in which male sex workers can inform their clients about safe sex practices.

Furthermore, the market for male sex work presents unique challenges for clients and escorts to communicate with one another about safer sex practices. Because the market does not use intermediaries, clients and escorts negotiate directly. This is advantageous for researchers, because it gives us the opportunity to see how male escorts price their services conditional on the information that they provide to their clients about their sexual behavior and health. We can also see how pricing is related to other characteristics such as race. But the open question remains: how does the market for male sex services value sexual behavior and practices?

We assemble a unique and rich dataset from the largest male escort website in the United States, which arguably contains the universe of male escorts who advertise online, to empirically investigate this issue. We gather information on every male escort on the site, his demographics, hourly rate, and detailed information about his ad. We have information not only on the number of pictures in each ad, but also the quality of the pictures in terms of what parts of the escort the pictures show. These ads also contain two measures of reputation, survey responses (similar to feedback on ebay.com) and detailed text reviews.

Empirically, we take a market-based, economics approach to the issue. Using hedonic regression, we estimate the value of sexual behavior, safer sex, and personal characteristics such as race in the market for male sex work. We exploit a large and unique dataset on male sex workers to see if the price of male sex work is related to male sex workers sexual behavior (top, bottom, or versatile), advertised safety, and race. Further, we interact these measures to investigate how sexual behavior, advertised safety, and race jointly influence the price of male sex services.

We find that male escorts who advertise safe sex charge higher prices for their services. We also find that male escorts who advertise themselves as “tops” receive a sizable premium for their services as well. Men who are “bottoms” receive a substantial penalty for their services. Racial characteristics also play a role, but the interactions are most interesting. Black “tops” command a substantial premium, while black “bottoms” command a substantial penalty. Similar interactions for whites do not significantly alter pricing. White escorts who advertise themselves as “safer sex” practitioners command higher rates, but the same is not true for black escorts.

Our paper makes several contributions. First, we provide a novel approach to research on sexual behavior by looking at the market for sex services. Additionally, we exploit the unique nature of this market to estimate the value of sexual behaviors. Second, our work expands the scope of the existing scholarship in the economics of sex work and sex work research in general both by considering the male side of the market and by considering sex work that is not street- or brothel-based (Browne and Minichiello 1996, Weitzer 2005, Arunachalam and Shah 2008). To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study of a large sample of systematically gathered data on male escorts who advertise online. Indeed, male sex workers are difficult to conceptualize in the current economic theories of prostitution (Edlund and Korn 2002), and remain under-researched in sociological and public health research, especially quantitative work. Third, we also overcome a sizable number of the problems of sample selection in previous studies of male sex workers since we sample the universe of men who advertise online using our site. The traditional problems with survey bias and response bias are not preset here

since we use the same source that clients and escorts use to communicate with each other—the largest, most comprehensive and geographically diverse website for male escort work in the United States.

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