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Client Desires and the Price of Seduction:
Exploring the Relationship between Independent Escorts' Marketing and Rates

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Keywords: Sex Work, Internet, Intimacy, Sex Markets, Escorts

Abstract

This paper explores website content and differences in advertised rates among a sample of 839 independent female online escorts operating their own websites in major metropolitan areas in the United States. Statistical analyses of escorts' rates indicate pricing variation across cities in which escorts advertise; the number of cities and websites they advertise on; whether they travel to areas beyond their primary locality to meet clients; their age and stated racial/ethnic/sexual identity; the internet platforms they advertise on; and how they present themselves and their services on their webpages. These relationships between business strategies of independent escorts and their published rates shed light on client preferences and market demand. Our findings provide important new insights into independent online escorts' business strategies and financial tactics, and identify factors impacting perceived market value for escort services. This research supports emerging literature (Berstein, 2006; Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Gezinski, Karandikar, Levitt, & Ghaffarian, 2016; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Pruitt & Krull, 2011; Rivers-Moore, 2012; and Yokota, 2006) indicating that clients of independent online escorts will pay more for particular provider characteristics, dispositions, and services, and they most highly value erotic services that are seductive and mirror the qualities of non-remunerative sexual exchange, often described as the "girlfriend experience."

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Introduction

Academic literature documenting the diversity of global and domestic markets for commercial sexual services increasingly represents the broad diversity of sex workers, clients, and sex markets. Where once the vast majority of attention from academics and law enforcement focused on the small proportion of sex work promoted outdoors, on the street, and in public view, indoor workers and the role of the internet in facilitating their businesses have garnered increasing interest (see Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Castle & Lee, 2008; Cunningham & Kendall, 2010, 2011, 2017; Gezinski, Karandikar, Levitt, & Ghaffarian, 2016; Lucas, 2005; Griffith, Capiola, Balotti, Hart, & Turner, 2016; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Saad, 2008; and Sharp & Earle, 2003). Not only has the internet become a central meeting place for sex workers and their clients, but researchers use the internet as a convenient source for data collection, a tool for participant recruitment, and a subject of study for online communities (See Castle & Lee, 2008; Cunningham & Kendall, 2010, 2011, 2017; Gezinski et al., 2016; Griffith et al., 2016; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Pruitt & Krull, 2010; Saad, 2008; Sharp & Earle, 2003). Despite this, there is still much that is unknown about online sex work generally, and independent online escorts, specifically. At the same time, the visibility and growth of the online erotic services marketplace has made the purveyors of online tools for sex workers (such as web hosts and web directories advertising sexual services), and sex workers themselves, convenient targets for law enforcement and federal abolitionist legislation aimed at disrupting internet-facilitated sex work.

In the late 1990s, the narrative around prostitution shifted as policy makers, in dialogue with anti-sex feminists in academia and the non-profit sector, began framing sex work in the larger context of globalization, migration, and human trafficking. This perspective, embodied in the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (United States Department

of State, 2000) casts girls and women (but rarely boys or men) as highly vulnerable and aims to protect them from forced sexual slavery. Since then, the framing of commercial sex as fundamentally coercive, predatory, and violent has come to dominate activist, legislative, public, and some academic discussions around sex work. These anti-trafficking narratives conflate the diverse array of transactional sex markets and experiences into a singular experience of forced prostitution, thereby reducing all types of escorting, direct sexual services, and prostitution to sexual slavery. Framed as an effort to combat human trafficking for sex, laws such as the *Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017* (AKA: FOSTA-SESTA), passed in 2018, are a symptom of Americans' most recent "sex panic" (Lancaster, 2011). Despite significant research questioning the pervasiveness of sex trafficking among adult sex workers and sex workers' own characterizations of their activities as work, anti-trafficking fervor continues to dominate sex work discourse and prostitution policy debates (Cheng, 2010; Dewey & Kelly, 2011; Hoang, 2011; Kotiswaran, 2011; Parrenas, 2011; Sanders, 2005; Shah, 2014; Showden, 2011; Showden & Majic, 2014; Yu, McCarthy, & Jones, 2018).

In an effort to problematize the reductionism of anti-trafficking discourses and document an under-studied market segment of the expansive global sex industry, we set out to investigate a particular niche: independent female escorts running online businesses using their own websites. To do so, we designed an interdisciplinary, mixed-method study of this segment of sex workers in the United States. We chose to focus on this subset of women working in online sexual commerce because as independent business owners these escorts choose their work, determine their services, control their work conditions, and set their own rates. Given their autonomy and online presence, these relatively privileged escorts occupy a unique stratum in the direct sex market and provide important evidence, experiences, and narratives that are otherwise ignored by

anti-trafficking advocates. There is little known about women in this segment of the market, and even less documentation of their rates, marketing tactics, and the nature of their business relationship with clients. Here, we address this gap in the literature by studying independent female escorts through the lens of *labor*, focusing on their roles as owners, managers, and workers in their own sexual service businesses. Our empirical research examines evidence of entrepreneurship and business practices to understand how the market niche occupied by online independent escorts supports or disrupts longstanding debates between sex *trafficking* and sex *work* models (Lucas, 2005; Jeffreys, 2009; Weitzer, 2007). To do so, we focus on the ways these erotic entrepreneurs market and advertise themselves online; the effect their business decisions have on average hourly rates; and what these strategies indicate about client preferences and market demand.

This paper builds on recent research that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to document internet and technology-driven changes in the U.S. erotic services industry, generally, and to better understand the emergent realm of online escorting, specifically. Cunningham and Kendall's (2010) work constitutes the most extensive study of America's online escorting industry thus far and is based on data mined from over 94,000 sex workers' online ads, as well as a survey of 685 online escorts (p. iii100). Our study focuses on a more exclusive segment of the escorting industry that would not have been fully captured in Cunningham and Kendall's sample. We offer a more focused and in-depth snapshot of how these independent escorts advertise their services online, create brands for themselves, and value their own services. Here, we explore how escorts' advertised rates vary based on where and how they advertise their services to potential clients, and address how these variations add to our understanding of what clients value most in independent internet sexual service providers.

Literature Review

Escorts' rates vary widely, with the highest reportedly reaching 30 times that of the lowest. For example, Castle and Lee's (2008) content analysis of 76 escorting sites, which included both independent escorts and those working at escort agencies, found rates ranging from \$100 to \$3000 per hour. Cunningham and Kendall (2010) reported the average one-hour rate among escorts with profiles on TER was \$300 between 1998 and 2008 (p. 102). Gezinski and colleagues' (2016) study of sex tourism websites, which advertise packages in which women engage in escort services, reported rates ranging from \$400 for four hours to \$9,640 for a seven-day, six-night package (p. 791). Rivers-Moore's (2012) study of sex tourists in Costa Rica found an average asking rate of \$100 for an (implied) one-hour duration, yet this amount was reportedly negotiable (Rivers-Moore, 2012, p. 857). When comparing the rates and services of U.S. independent providers, U.S. agency providers, and providers on sex tourism sites, the price of escort services in sex tourist destinations (such as the Caribbean and South East Asia) is commensurate with outdoor (street-based) prices in the U.S.. Yet, especially within industrialized urban areas, escort and street-based services are qualitatively different experiences for providers and clients alike (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Lever & Donlick, 2000; Weitzer, 2010, 2012). By statistically analyzing the relationship between providers' rates and their online advertisements and marketed services, we are able to quantify differences within the indoor escort industry that have not been examined in these existing studies.

Griffith and colleagues' (2016) study is the only analysis of online escorts that statistically compares the relationship between posted rates and the content of escort advertisements. They found that both incall and outcall rates were correlated with "waist-to-hip ratios closer to [the cross-cultural ideal of] .07, lower weight, lower BMI, younger age, and

photographs depicting nude displays of breasts and buttocks” (p. 5). They found a mean rate of \$385 per hour for incall sessions and \$427 per hour for outcall (p. 5). These rates were derived from 2,925 escort ads from a single escort directory on which escorts posted a single page profile including photos, stats describing their appearance and age, and a brief biographical description, in June of 2013. Griffith and his colleagues did not specify which platform they used.

In a study of male escorts’ profiles (aimed at male clients) posted on the largest male escorting website in the U.S., Logan (2010) found that rates varied substantially on the basis of the male escorts’ advertised characteristics and sexual behavior. His analysis of 1,932 profiles illustrates that men advertising desirable characteristics and behaviors (i.e., youth, being a top, and being fit or muscular) commanded higher rates compared to others (i.e., being older, advertising as a bottom, and being overly thin or overweight). Additionally, Logan’s study illustrates the potential for testing theories of the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality through analysis of sex worker advertisement data. Although Logan found that variations in characteristics such as race, eye color, height, hair color and body hair did not produce premiums or penalties on an escort’s rates, he did find that the premiums and penalties for sexual behavior (i.e. advertising as a top or bottom, etc.) were either enhanced or muted depending on one’s race. Specifically, black escorts’ sexual behavior premiums for being a top were greater than for escorts of other racial groups, while their penalties for being a bottom were as well. In contrast, the sexual behavior premiums and penalties for Asian men were muted, having no significant premiums nor penalties. Logan (2010) explains this intersectional effect on African American male escorts as reflecting how black men are rewarded for conforming to racial stereotypes of sexual dominance and punished when they violate such expectations. However, Asian and

Hispanic escorts' rates did not conform to that logic. Identical to Koken, Bimbi, and Parsons (2010), Logan (2010) reported an average hourly rate of \$200 in his sample (p. 693).

While existing studies (Koken et al., 2010; Logan, 2010) report that male escorts' rates do not vary by race alone, the same has not been shown for female escorts. Specifically, female African American escorts report lower earnings than their white peers (Cunningham & Kendall, 2017; Koken et al., 2010), as do African American webcam models (Jones, 2015) and exotic dancers (Brooks, 2010). Koken and colleagues' (2010) white female escort informants reported a mode hourly rate of \$500 and a top hourly rate of \$1000, while their African American informants reported a mode hourly rate of \$400 and a top hourly rate of \$500 (Loc. 4250). Unlike male escorts, female escorts' rates also varied widely based on the services they provided, with specialized female escorts advertising services such as BDSM tending towards the lower end of the rate spectrum (\$180-\$300 per hour compared to a mode of \$400-\$500 per hour) (Koken et al. 2010, Loc. 4188).

Brooks (2010) and Jones (2015) each argue that the racial stratification of the sex industry reflects systemic structural racism hidden beneath a colorblind racist neoliberal logic dismissing these inequalities as reflections of client preferences and market valuations of these sexual services. Contrasting Logan's (2010) explanation of erotic value as dependent on conformity to racialized gender stereotypes, Brooks (2010) argues that racialized gender stereotypes of black women as hypersexual, impoverished, and dependent on government assistance inform clients' negative attitudes towards sex workers of color. More specifically, Brooks (2010) reports that male clients in gentlemen's clubs perceive black dancers as undeserving of the higher tips received by white dancers, and that they are more sexually aggressive and entitled in their behaviors towards black dancers, particularly in working class

clubs. Currently, we are unaware of any studies examining racial stereotypes and client preferences for independent online escorts who, unlike exotic dancers and webcam models, are not dependent on platforms or physical businesses and third-party regulators which may exacerbate racial disparities. However, the lower rates of African American escorts found in Cunningham and Kendall's (2017) sample of U.S. escorts suggests that there may be structural barriers to entering this industry niche (Brooks 2010; Jones 2015); it may also reflect diminished erotic capital in this market, thereby reflecting the racial stereotypes described by Brooks (2010).

Cunningham and Kendall's (2017) study, based on survey data from almost 700 escorts drawn from two of the largest online escort directories in the United States—theeroticreview.com (TER) and eros.com (EROS)—is the most comprehensive quantitative study of female escorts to date. They found an average hourly wage of \$325 (hourly rate charged) and weekly earnings of \$1966 (p. 1063-4). For the weeks in which providers worked, those who identified in their survey responses as having a college education reported significantly higher earnings than non-college graduate escorts, while providers' overall weekly earnings differed significantly depending on whether the provider was white (self-classified) or had children (p. 1066). The hourly wages (rates) of their sample did not vary based on whether or not the provider reported being a college graduate but did vary based on the number of years the provider had been in the escorting industry; whether the provider was white; body mass index; BMI squared; length of sessions; and session length squared (p. 1067). Cunningham and Kendall (2017) report that college graduated escorts earn a 15% premium in earned hourly wage when the session length is longer and that they provide 14-17% longer sessions than non-college graduate providers, suggesting this may be due to the value a college education confers in the non-sexual services provided by escorts, particularly in longer sessions (p. 1068). This last

finding speaks to the growing consensus among qualitative studies of escorts and their customers in which clients most highly value those who provide a “girlfriend experience” (GFE) that includes “dating-like” interactions in addition to sexual intimacy.

There is international consensus that the most valued service provided by sex workers is what clients and providers refer to as a “girlfriend experience,” or GFE. Bernstein (2007) identified the girlfriend experience provided by call girls in the pre/early days of the internet as a form of “bounded authenticity” in which escorts mimic intimate services typical of real, non-remunerative sexual relationships (p. 6). These include activities like engaging in meaningful conversation; active listening; self-disclosure; consuming entertainment; dining with the client; engaging in erotic acts typical of authentic, unpaid sexual relations, such as kissing and receiving cunnilingus; and behaving as though the provider is sincerely interested in, desirous of, and enjoying her time with the client, both during and outside of sex (see also Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Gezinski et al., 2016; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Pruitt & Krull, 2011; Rivers-Moore, 2012; and Yokota, 2006). Carbonero and Garrero (2018), in their study of escorts and street-based workers in Spain, illustrate the girlfriend experience’s ties to intimacy and authenticity, highlighting ways in which escorts portray themselves as more like non-sex workers, including through their clothing, cultural capital, ethnic identity and nationality, and by performing ‘enjoyment’ throughout the sexual and non-sexual portions of encounters with clients. They argue that while these performances are highly valued by clients, they are not attempted by street-based sex workers. Studies of sex tourism have also highlighted the girlfriend experience as highly valued among sex tourists who seek the quality of intimacy sold by escorts in developed nations at a cost more comparable to hiring outdoor sex workers (Gezinski et al. 2016; Rivers-Moore 2012; Yokota 2006). Milrod and Monto (2012) likewise highlight “clock

watching,” rushed encounters, and disinterested or mercenary demeanors as the most undesirable behaviors of sex workers. These attitudes and behaviors shatter the illusion of non-remunerative, bounded intimacy. This growing body of research indicates the girlfriend experience, and escorts displaying GFE qualities, is highly valued and in-demand by clients. By extension, those findings suggest that clients are willing to pay a higher premium for services that most closely mimic non-remunerative intimate relations.

Our research expands on current literature by asking two questions. First, *how does independent online escorts’ online marketing—specifically their presentation of self, business decisions, and the services they offer—relate to their average hourly rates?* And second, *what do the relationships between website content, business strategies, and rates indicate about the preferences and demand from this escort market niche’s clientele?*

Method

To address our research questions, we engaged in community-based participatory action research (Fals-Borda, 2001) to empower rather than marginalize or objectify our research subjects. Instead of outsiders studying a marginalized group, we actively engaged current and former sex workers, and their allies, at each step of our data gathering and analysis.¹ We employed a mixed-methods approach to triangulate our data and augment reliability and validity in this study. According to Cresswell (2015), mixed methods focus “...on collecting, analyzing,

¹ The corresponding author was inspired to undertake our broader “Erotic Entrepreneurs” research project after attending the “business track” sessions at a Desiree Alliance conference. Desiree Alliance is a U.S. based sex worker rights and advocacy organization. At the conference, workers, activists, and scholars presented on topics from safety, to filing taxes, to tips on how to “talk dirty.” Subsequently, the lead and corresponding authors attended and presented some preliminary findings at another Desiree Alliance conference in 2016 where we received useful insights and overwhelmingly positive feedback and support for the project’s aims. We have also involved current and former escorts in the data gathering and data analysis processes, and their contributions to this study are extensive, substantive, and have made this research stronger.

and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies...[this] provides a better understanding of research problems than other approaches alone” (p.5).

We began by creating an original dataset of female escorts operating their own professional websites and advertising in at least one of the top ten largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Miami, Atlanta, and Boston) plus Las Vegas, notoriously known as “Sin City” and the symbolic center of the U.S. sex industry, across a 6-month period beginning in late fall 2014. We drew a sample of 1730 women from the two main online escort review sites (TER and AdultFax), six prominent escort directories (EROS, Slixa, Red Paramour, Verified Playmates, VIP Room Service, and Open Adult Director), and the first twenty pages of Google search results for independent escorts in each city in our sample (i.e. by searching “New York Independent Escort”).² To ensure that our sample included only independent escorts, we excluded those not using their own personal web domain, those affiliated with an escort agency, or escorts utilizing a sub-domain on a template site (such as ‘sally.naughty&sexy.com’ or ‘lisa.asianescort.com’).

In 2015, we revisited the entire sample of websites and added providers’ rates, when available, to each case in our database. This resulted in a second database of 839 cases, a subset of the original sample of 1730. The attrition reflects some shuttered websites and many sites without posted rates. To establish an average hourly rate, we collected the lowest 30-minute, 60-minute, 90-minute, 2-hour, 3-hour, 4-hour, and 6-hour rate from each site. Many providers listed different rates for incall and outcall options, for various levels of service such as GFE (Girlfriend

² The cut-off of 20 result pages was based on our understanding that user traffic greatly diminishes after the first page of results and becomes nearly negligible by the tenth page (Baye, Santos, & Wildenbeest, 2015), which we then doubled just to be conservative.

Experience) and PSE (Porn Star Experience)³, or for add-on services such as anal sex, or photo or video sessions. To generate a single statistic by which every case could be compared, we recorded only the lowest rates offered that still constituted erotic escort services (excluding massage or dinner-only service packages). This means that our rates findings likely err on the low side of actual escort rates. We then established the hourly rate for each session length listed above (by dividing the fee by the duration) and averaged these hourly rates together to establish an average hourly rate. Establishing an average hourly rate was necessary for comparing the maximum number of cases because providers' posted rates on their websites vary in the length of sessions they offer, with many having minimum session lengths longer than one hour.

Comparing average hourly rates also gave us the advantage of taking into account the common practice of discounting longer sessions. Ultimately, this strategy results in an underestimation of the rates actually being charged since it fails to account for the additional profits generated by add-ons and upselling. These are extra services (e.g. special sex acts or fetishes) or additional experiences (like adding dinner, a movie, a drink, or a sleepover) that escorts may provide for an additional fee, above and beyond their base rate. Given that the modal session is one hour in length for most online escorts (Cunningham & Kendall, 2017), providers in our sample are likely to be earning more per hour with clients than the average hourly rate estimates, but this average hourly rate establishes a minimum baseline for the sake of comparison and analysis.

The second method we employed was an extensive visual and textual content analysis of escort websites. Drawing a random subsample of websites ($n = 50$) from the overall database (N

³ A Porn Star Experience (PSE) often involves an additional fee and generally consists of a session in which the client may engage in activities seen in pornography that might not normally be permissible in a session with an escort. For one of our informants, spanking during sex was one activity exclusive to PSE packages, though the boundaries may vary and details are generally not provided on escorts' websites.

= 1730) we conducted an in-depth qualitative and quantitative content analysis of escort website content. We chose the sites using a random number generator in approximate proportion to their geographic distribution among the 11 cities searched (New York: 11, LA: 8, DC: 5, Atlanta: 3, Las Vegas: 6, Dallas: 3, Houston: 1, Philadelphia: 2, Boston: 3, Miami: 4, Chicago: 4). This was not a perfect replication since many sites were present in more than one searched city, but this method assured, given the relatively small size of the subsample, that all the sites were not exclusively from the largest metro areas. In 2015 and 2016, we manually mined each website for relevant data using an online Qualtrics form containing 171 variables created to assess the strategic business practices, marketing, and entrepreneurship strategies or characteristics of these independent online escorts. Some variables were closed-ended and quantifiable, while others were open-ended and descriptive; we also included screenshots of photos from our sample of websites. After exporting our content analysis data into MAXQDA, we coded the extracted text using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Preliminary codes were developed by two coders who identified sub-themes (such as “hobbies”) within the broader categories in which website text was collected (such as “personalizing information”). If the content of a sub-code was sufficiently diverse, we created further sub-codes to denote themes (such as “travel” as a sub-theme of “hobbies”). To achieve this, the two preliminary coders independently coded the same subset of websites and then discussed, defined and combined their codes into a single set; a third coder was added and the single set of codes was applied, achieving an intercoder reliability of .80. The three coders then divided and coded the text and photos of the 50 sites in the sample. This process resulted in 481 additional coding categories, plus 1263 codes describing every adjective used in the text of all 50 websites.

Our third and final method included a series of in-depth, open-ended interviews with thirteen independent online escorts operating their own escort websites. We did this to help contextualize and interpret findings from both the original dataset and the in-depth visual and textual content analysis of websites. Interviewees were recruited through emails to those in our dataset of 1730 women, as well as through snowball sampling and referrals provided by these interviewees. Current and former sex workers who collaborated as research team members or community-based allies also made some referrals to independent escorts with their own websites working in one of the major metropolitan areas in our sample. We conducted phone interviews using the audio-only option on GoToMeeting.com, recorded, and then thematically coded in MAXQDA. Our semi-structured questionnaire covered themes such as: how the escorts made decisions about setting their rates, designing their website, what they find most difficult and satisfying about their work, how they established their escorting businesses and changed them over time, general business strategies and specific tactics they use to be successful as online escorts, their concerns about escorting, plans for the future, and the like. We draw on our interview data here only for the purpose of assisting in the interpretation of our quantitative data.

We focus on a subset of our data to address our research questions: *What is the relationship between independent escorts' online marketing, business strategies, and their average hourly rates? And, what do these relationships indicate about client preferences and market demand?* First, we use the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests to explore relationships between rates and the other variables in the 839 cases from our dataset of websites with posted rates in 11 metropolitan areas. Second, we apply the Mann-Whitney U test to discern relationships between rates and other visual and textual content on the 41 websites (out of our subsample of 50) containing pricing data. We applied Mann-Whitney U tests and Kruskal-Wallis

tests rather than t-tests because our subsamples were not normally distributed. Finally, in the discussion we integrate feedback and insights from our interviews to contextualize and interpret our data.

To examine variations in average hourly rates within our dataset of 839 independent online escorts, we ran Mann-Whitney U tests comparing average hourly rates based on escorts' geographic location (operationalized as the ten largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas [MSAs], plus Las Vegas), geographic mobility (the number of MSAs an escort markets herself in and whether she travels domestically or internationally for clients), the individual's identity and physical appearance (such as age, race/ethnicity, and whether they advertise as trans), and by methods of advertising and communication (which platforms they have advertisements or profiles on, the number of online directories they advertise in, which social media platforms they use, and whether they list a phone number on their ads, profiles, or website).

By conducting an in-depth textual and visual content analyses on a random selection of 50 websites from our larger database, 41 of which contained information about the escort's rates, we were able to examine far more variables reflecting escorts' presentation of self and business/marketing strategies as related to their rates. Due to our relatively small sample size, of the 178 variables from our content analysis, ten demonstrated significant differences in average hourly rates using the Mann-Whitney U test. The ten significant variables are: offering full service sex; describing oneself as "busty"; describing travel as their hobby; providing process details about what clients should expect; having 1+ topless photos; 1+ elegant/formal photos; advertising that they provide a Girlfriend Experience (GFE); describing their GFE as authentic; and describing their GFE as enthusiastic or seductive. When conducting the same Mann-Whitney U tests on the 178 content analysis variables, eight of the ten variables that significantly differed

by hourly rate also significantly differed based on their two-hour session rates (offering full service sex; describing oneself as busy; providing clients info about what to expect; having 1+ elegant photos; offering the GFE; describing your GFE as authentic; describing your GFE as enthusiastic or seductive). One additional variable (offering the porn star experience, or PSE) was significant with the two-hour rate but not the average hourly rate. We compared two-hour session rates rather than one-hour session rates because only 36 of the 41 sites listed rates for one-hour. Hourly rates for two-hour sessions differ from average hourly rates in that average hourly rates reflect discounting of longer session lengths.

Finally, we used the ten significant variables that emerged from our 41 cases to estimate the rates of the remaining 9 cases. To do so, we averaged the hourly rate for the presence or absence of each of the 10 variables and applied that rate to each of the 9 “rates not advertised” cases based on the presence or absence of those 10 variables on each site.⁴ When Mann-Whitney *U* tests were rerun with the addition of these estimated rates for the 9 websites, all but one of the 10 variables remained significant (describing travel as a hobby) and two additional significant variables were identified (offering a romantic GFE; describing one’s ethnicity). In the following section we present the results of these analyses.

Results

For our sample of 839 independent online escorts with posted rates on their own websites, the mean average hourly rate (AHR) was \$420 (*Mdn* = \$377, *Min.* = \$100, *Max.* = \$1389). The mean average hourly rate for the 41 cases on which we performed content analysis

⁴ For example, those who advertised a GFE had an average hourly rate of \$400 when their average hourly rates were averaged together, and those who didn’t had an average of \$300; providers with topless photos had an average hourly rate of \$500, and those without had a rate of \$400; if only these two variables were used rather than 9, a provider who had topless photos but didn’t provide a GFE would have an estimated hourly rate of \$450 ($500+400/2$).

was \$398 (*Mdn* = \$375, *Min.* = \$168, *Max.* = \$1056), an insignificant difference. From the sample of 839 providers with posted rates, those advertising in New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas had significantly higher average hourly rates than those who did not, when compared using Mann-Whitney *U* tests. Those with a presence in Philadelphia, Atlanta, Dallas and Houston had significantly lower average hourly rates than those who did not, and those marketing themselves in Miami, Chicago, Washington DC and Boston did not differ significantly from those who were not advertising there, on the basis of average hourly rates (See Table 1).

Indicators of geographic mobility suggest that those providers who are more mobile, advertise in multiple cities, or say that they tour or travel domestically or internationally in their ads or on their website, have significantly higher average hourly rates than those who do not (see Table 2). Only 24 escorts from our sample of 839 advertised in 3 or more of our 11 metropolitan areas, but their average hourly rate was approximately \$150 an hour more than those advertising in two metro areas and \$227 more than escorts marketing themselves in a single city. The mean rates of escorts who indicated traveling domestically to meet clients had median AHRs \$43 greater than those who did not (*Mdn* = 404, *U* = 65436, *p* = .001, *r* = -.20), while the median of rates posted by those traveling internationally was \$248 greater than those who did not (*Mdn* = \$623, *U* = 7971, *p* = .001, *r* = -.18) These results indicate that escort rates are geographically variable and that escorts whose websites indicate higher levels of geographic mobility have higher rates than those who do not. Our interviewees note that this is likely at least partially explained by having to cover the increased costs associated with creating and purchasing multiple ads in multiple cities, arranging housing, and paying for the cost of travel. It makes

good business sense for traveling escorts to charge more in order to recoup their costs and still earn a profit.

Our data show that advertising strategies matter. We found significant differences in average hourly rates charged by escorts based on both the number and the types of online platforms on which they advertise. There is not a direct relationship between the number of sites escorts advertised on and rates. However, that may be due to small sample sizes among those with ads on five or more platforms (see Table 3). Since having a profile or ad on some platforms was not associated with higher rates (Slix, Open Adult Directory, Verified Playmates, and Adultfax), and providers with profiles on The Erotic Review had significantly lower rates than those who did not, this may account for why the number of platforms on which an escort advertises is not a direct correlation with higher posted hourly rates. Providers advertising on certain other platforms did have higher average hourly rates, including those advertising on EROS, Preferred411, VIP Room Service, Red Paramour, and those who listed their own Twitter handles on their websites (see Table 4). Escorts who listed their phone number ($n = 571$, $Mdn = \$362$) had significantly lower rates than those who did not ($n = 268$, $Mdn = \$428$, $U = 55727$, $p = .001$, $r = -.22$).

How providers advertised themselves was often as significant as where they advertised. Escorts' average hourly rates differed significantly on the basis of age, according to a Kruskal-Wallis test (See Table 5 and Appendix 1). Over 50% of our sample advertised themselves as between the ages of 21 and 30, while 79% of the sample claimed to be between the ages of 21 and 40. When divided by age, providers describing themselves as between the ages of 26 and 30 years old had the highest rates (AHR $M = \$466$), with 31-35 year-olds and 21-25 year-olds charging the second and third highest rates, respectively. Providers who did not reveal their age

posted average hourly rates ($n = 57$, AHR $M = \$419$) closer to those of prime age providers (21-35 years-old) than to mature providers (50+ years-old).

Providers' average hourly rates also differed significantly on the basis of self-described racial, ethnic and gender characterizations. Overall, when providers were grouped into five categories based on their self-described racial or ethnic identities (Asian, Black/African American, Latina/Hispanic, White/Caucasian, and Mixed/Other) average hourly rates differed significantly (see Table 6). These groupings were associated with significant differences in average hourly rates in Las Vegas, New York City, and Dallas. The providers grouped under the category "Mixed/Other" were either self-described as multiracial, listed an ethnicity not captured by the other four categories (Native American, Middle Eastern, East Indian, etc.) or did not self-describe their race or ethnicity and their racial/ethnic identity could not otherwise be clearly discerned by the coders. The average hourly rates of trans providers were lower than that of any racial category ($n = 29$, $Mdn = \$300$), and significantly lower than non-trans providers' rates ($U = 6444$, $p = .001$, $r = -.14$). Among trans providers African Americans charged the lowest rates ($n = 4$, AHR $M = \$205$). Providers claiming European ancestry had significantly higher average hourly rates than those who did not ($n = 72$, $Mdn = \$454$, $U = 21773$, $p = .003$, $r = -.10$).

Key differences in escorts' marketing and website content were associated with advertised average hourly rates (Table 7). Escort sites advertising a "girlfriend experience," containing one or more topless photos, showing photos of the provider in formal attire, or which emphasize the escort's ethnic background (Table 7) were associated with significantly higher posted rates. Providers who described themselves as offering a girlfriend experience not only tended to have higher rates than those who did not, but specific ways of elaborating this point—such as references to romance, authenticity or seduction—increased this difference. On the other

hand, explicitly offering specific sexual services, describing oneself as “busty,” giving the details of one’s booking and meeting process in a “What to Expect” section of their website, as well as describing travel as a hobby, and having photos showing tattoos were all associated with lower average hourly rates (see Table 8). The small proportion of variables that were significant for the content analysis subsample was likely due to the small sample size. However, the concentration of significant codes related to providing a girlfriend experience suggests this finding is particularly robust.

In addition to these factors, the length of sessions offered is also associated with providers’ rates. While many escorts report that an hour is their most common session length (Cunningham & Kendall 2010, p.102) many providers (93 in our sample of 839) do not offer session lengths shorter than 90 minutes. These non-hourly providers charged significantly higher rates on average than their hourly counterparts (non-hourly providers’ AHR: *Mdn* = \$500; Hourly providers: *Mdn* = \$371; *U* = 22662, *p* = .001, *r* = -.19). In the discussion section we draw on interview data to contextualize these finding and those above within the existing literature and offer further interpretation based on their meanings and implications based on our interview data and past empirical work.

Discussion

Examining escorts’ advertised rates has several advantages and disadvantages compared to self-reported weekly earnings, as used in Cunningham and Kendall’s (2017) analysis. Without adjusting for hours worked, weekly earnings can obscure important information about work and labor conditions. While providers who charge higher rates may also earn more, in our interviews with independent female escorts, interviewees asserted they would have much greater earnings if they reduced their minimum session length to an hour, which would enable them to tap into the

large market for one-hour sessions. However, as we report below, this option is associated with charging lower rates and working more hours. Our escort interviewees assert that offering a one-hour rate increases the volume of their business and thus their overall profits, even if they are receiving less per session. A possible explanation for the lower rates among hourly escorts is that if the one-hour market is larger, the greater competition may be driving down rates. With no further information about why escorts set their rates the way they do, interpreting rates data by itself would be extremely difficult. Rates data does give us some indication of what clients might be willing to pay the most for, which earnings data cannot tell us without knowing the providers' rates, the number of clients she sees, and the time she spends with her clients. Another advantage of examining rates over earnings is that due to their self-reported nature, earnings are subject to more bias and inaccuracy, whereas rates posted on providers' websites are actually what escorts use to promote their services and attract business.

When comparing providers based on their advertised rates alone, we cannot be certain that the rate they are posting is the same rate that they are charging customers in-person, nor that they charge all clients the same rate for the same time-frame or services. Our interviews indicate, for example, that providers occasionally give discounts to favored regular clients, such as allowing them to pay an earlier lower rate, even after the escort raises her rates for new customers. Similarly, posted rates may well fluctuate, so the cross-sectional nature of our data may obscure seasonal or strategic business decisions about differential rates. We cannot assume that the advertised rate is successfully attracting the desired type or number of customers, particularly if an escort is new to the job or newly working independently with her own website. Nonetheless, this is less likely the case for our sample since we waited 6 months to collect the posted rates we used from providers' websites in our larger database. During that gap, providers

who were not earning sufficient income from their present rate structure had time to alter their rates, or their entire websites and personas if necessary, suggesting that those remaining active six months later had likely settled on rate structures more sufficient for their needs. Although there are presumably cases of providers pricing themselves out of the market, several of our interviewees reported that when they raised their rates to reduce demand, demand increased initially until they finally raised their rates high enough to achieve a reduction in inquiries. Therefore, although we cannot assume that higher rates indicate higher earnings, we are confident that these providers are at least somewhat seasoned and likely intentionally moderating their business at their posted rates. Based on this, and a fundamental supply/demand model, we argue that the qualities escorts market on their websites that are associated with higher or lower rates likely reflect escorts' perceptions of client desires and demand for services.

Marketing Escort Services

Strategic marketing is fundamental to independent escorts' success. Interview data indicates that where and how much providers advertise impacts the type of clients they attract and is reflected in their rates. Generally, the more platforms a provider advertised on the higher her rates were, which may in part reflect her increased overhead costs from advertising expenses as well as her access to a larger market through those ads. Providers advertising on TER had lower rates than those who did not advertise there, and providers with ads on EROS had higher rates. At the time of our data collection, TER was considered a key resource for getting started in the business because it was one of the largest databases of escorts and was free for escorts to access, although provider profiles on TER were created only by a client posting a review about them first (not by the provider herself). Some new providers would actively encourage clients to write them a review or solicit hobbyists (members of the escort review subculture) in order to

obtain their first review to help them quickly promote themselves and build a clientele base (Milrod & Monto, 2012). However, many more experienced escorts reject TER and insist on a no-review policy so that their clients do not post intimate details of their sessions for public consumption.⁵ It appears that no-review providers, if they are synonymous with providers without profiles on TER, tend to have higher rates than their reviewed colleagues. This may, in part, reflect no-review escorts being more established and having a sufficiently strong client base to survive without online client reviews. Interviews and published accounts from escort authors suggest that, on average, providers increase their rates over time because they tend to initially underestimate their market value (Brooks, 2009). Thus, no-review providers' higher rates may reflect their greater experience rather than clients' undervaluation of escorts with reviews. Providers who advertise on EROS have higher rates, and this may be at least partly attributed to the fact that EROS charges higher prices for ads on their site relative to the competition. EROS is the digital equivalent of a glossy fashion magazine, with an upscale aesthetic, compared to the newspaper classifieds, bare-bones look of backpage.com advertisements, and EROS explicitly markets their brand to wealthier clients.

Providers with accounts on the popular microblogging site, Twitter, linked to their website or ads had significantly higher rates than those who did not. Many independent escorts use social media, blogs, and newsletters to maintain connections and interaction with their clients, as well as to attract new clients by displaying their photos and persona through content creation. Given the additional time providers need to invest in running effective social media campaigns, it is to be expected that they would hope to earn higher rates for their efforts.

Interacting with clients through social media may also contribute to creating escort personalities

⁵ At the time of this writing, theeroticreview.com no longer contains or allows reviews of U.S. escorts, in response to the shifted legal operating environment post-FOSTA.

that are more specialized and in-demand, such as a girlfriend experience, which requires that providers engage in forms of intimacy and emotional labor typically associated with non-commercial sexual relationships and to make themselves relatable and personable to their clients (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018). To this end, tweeting and blogging may have the effect of perceived genuine self-disclosure, and thereby increase intimacy in a form resembling non-remunerative relationships. Providers use social media to post photos, advertise tour dates, upload videos, share links to articles of interest to them (or to their clients) and generally maintain a space for efficient social interaction with clients (and other providers) outside of sessions. Some escorts have thousands of followers and may attract clients through the celebrity-like status they can create, similar to cam-girls or porn stars (Abbot, 2000).

Unlike advertising one's Twitter handle, listing one's phone number on their site or online profile is associated with having significantly lower rates than those who did not. A number of providers explain on their websites that although they provide their phone number to coordinate on the day of the session in case of last-minute issues, they prefer to coordinate other arrangements through email. Many providers refrain from posting their phone number on their website to avoid time wasters who might harass them or lure them into long, unpaid conversation, and avoid business calls at inopportune times. The greatest benefit of posting one's phone number publicly is to make oneself accessible to clients who prefer booking by phone over email. We suspect that providers charging the highest rates generally have clients capable of using email or filling out a form on their website, and are likely receiving sufficient client interest to allow them to be more selective in their choice of clients. Two common independent escort strategies to reduce client inquiries are to limit access by not posting a phone number and raising rates. This is explained by Amanda Brooks (2009) in her handbook for independent

internet escorts. Brooks states that she removed her phone number from her ads when she wanted to reduce the number of client requests she received, lending support to our hypothesis that along with raising rates and minimum appointment length, not posting one's phone number is a strategy for reducing request volume.

Geographic Location & Mobility

As Table 1 illustrates, rates varied widely by geographic location. Counterintuitively, the greater the supply (number of providers) in an area, the higher the rates were. This is indicative of client demand for independent escorts exceeding provider supply in some metropolitan areas. Apart from Cunningham and Kendall (2010), who compared rates of high-risk behavior by geographic region and found all types of these behaviors to be higher among escorts primarily doing business in southern states (p. iii104), no other studies have compared rates across geographic location in the United States and our findings clearly show variation across metropolitan areas.

Providers who travel outside of their home area to increase their market size had significantly higher rates than providers who did not. We measured this type of geographic mobility in two ways: whether the provider stated on their website that they travel or tour to meet clients, and by how many cities their ads appeared in of the 11 we searched. The higher rates charged by traveling and touring providers should not be solely attributed to their ability to access larger markets, as they also have higher overhead costs to cover. As one interviewee informed us, touring can be treacherous as the higher overhead of travel, hotel rooms and additional advertising requires that they see a higher volume of clients to compensate. This is not the case if the provider is flown out by a generous client who brings the escort to his area by covering her airfare and hotel room, in addition to her rate for the time he spends with her, but

such travel is likely irregular and comes with its own costs and time commitment. Also, if the provider lacks other regular clients in that area, she may feel tempted to invest in additional advertising or stay extra days and pay for more hotel nights in a gambit to maximize her opportunity. Because of the regional variations in rates and the additional overhead costs of touring, a minority of providers post separate touring rates for each location they visit to optimize their earnings at each location.

Escort Demographics

Our data on independent escorts' age and race/ethnicity confirm trends in the literature indicating higher rates among young providers than older providers, and white providers than black providers (Cunningham & Kendall, 2017; Griffith et al., 2016; Koken et al., 2010). However, our data also complicate those findings. Within this escorting niche, providers are utilizing strategies to maximize their appeal even when marketing seemingly fixed aspects of their identities (and hence, brands) such as age and ethnicity. In the case of age, while providers claiming to be less than 36 years old had substantially higher rates than those claiming to be older, providers who did not advertise their age were able to achieve rates on par with prime age (21-35-years-old) providers despite presumably being of an age that might narrow their market size, were they unable to mask it. Race/ethnicity are also somewhat manipulatable in online ads. Our findings differ somewhat from those of Cunningham and Kendall (2017) in that only Black/African American providers (whether partially or solely identifying as such) had lower rates in our sample than other racial and ethnic groups. Notably, the racial/ethnic group with the highest earnings was not white providers (AHR $M = \$423$), but multiracial providers (AHR $M = \$470$).

Not only do providers who describe themselves as multiracial tend to charge significantly higher rates than mono-racial providers, they are also overrepresented among independent online escorts in our sample. When the percentage of our sample identifying as multiracial (6%) is compared to the percentage of the population of these 11 Metropolitan Statistical Areas according to census data (2%), multiracial providers are three times as common among independent escorts than in the populations where they work. In contrast, black/African American providers were under represented by nearly 40%, while white providers were overrepresented by 33%, and Asian and Latina providers were underrepresented by only about 20% (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Griffith and his colleagues (2016) also found biracial providers to be highly over represented (10% of their sample). The overrepresentation of multiracial providers and their significantly higher rates suggest that multiracial identities constitute a highly valued niche within the escorting market and, as a result, providers are more prone to emphasize their real or performed racial and ethnic background to capitalize on its value to clients. Conversely, the underrepresentation and lower rates of African American providers may be a reflection of less market demand and a devaluation of their racial and ethnic identities by clients. This may discourage African American women from entering this industry niche, particularly if they lack economic, social, cultural, or erotic capital that they perceive as necessary to thrive in this segment of the sex industry. African American women are, however, over represented among street workers (Lever & Dolnick, 2000) and so it may be that socio-economic factors are pushing African American women into less lucrative segments of the sex industry. These explanations are not mutually exclusive. African American sex workers' overrepresentation among street-based workers may be a detriment to African American providers' attempts to brand themselves as independent escorts, or the same socio-economic

factors pushing some African Americans into outdoor sex work may be forcing African American indoor providers to accept lower rates as a reflection of racially coded client demand.

One African American escort we interviewed reported that clients state that her rates were “too high for a black girl.” She lamented that white providers can easily find niches in the market, such as those for providers with numerous tattoos, but black escorts cannot. Our data supports this provider’s assertion that African American independent escorts earn less, on average, than their differently racially coded colleagues, and that tattoos narrow one’s market niche for all providers. Escorts with visible tattoos in their photos had significantly lower rates than those who did not, suggesting less demand from men willing to pay high-end rates for tattooed providers. Amanda Brooks (2006) also comments on this subject, pointing out that her having tattoos was one reason she stayed a “middle tier” escort at an hourly rate of around \$400, rather than trying to be a more “high-end” and exclusive provider. Recent studies suggest tattooed individuals are generally perceived more negatively than non-tattooed individuals, despite tattoos having become increasingly common in recent years (Broussard & Harton, 2018; DeMello, 2000; Thompson, 2015).

Overall, marketing certain variations of race/ethnicity appears to be an asset to escorts’ brands. For example, providers who emphasized having a European heritage, whether in part or whole, had significantly higher rates than those who did not. Within our content analysis of escorts’ personal web pages, providers who discussed their ethnicity on their websites had significantly higher rates than those who did not. These descriptions tended to be within sections devoted to personalizing the provider by sharing details about her background, interests and hobbies. If escorts describing themselves as multi-racial command the highest rates due to high

market demand, this may indicate a fetishization of the exotic, clients' desire for intimacy with someone who is uniquely racially-ethnically coded and who may provide a unique experience.

Not all personas used by escorts on their websites were associated with higher rates. Describing travel or sightseeing as one's hobby or interest was associated with significantly lower rates. Perhaps clients see listing travel as a hobby as a tactless attempt to encourage them to hire these providers for travel dates, or that this is a signal that the escort lacks cultural capital when this interest is stated too directly and crudely, suggesting unfamiliarity with these experiences (Bernstein, 2007; Bourdieu, 1986; Korgan, Nelson, Izzo, & Besson, 2016). Another characteristic associated with lower rates was describing oneself as "busty." Only two cases in our content analysis used this term to describe themselves and their mean average hourly rate was \$191. We suspect that these providers' use of this term was a reflection of their larger body type rather than their breast size, as rates did not vary significantly by breast size within our analysis. Both the Cunningham and Kendall (2017) and Griffith and company's (2016) studies found low BMIs to be correlated with higher rates. One of these providers was also a "mature provider," meaning of advanced age for an escort (over 50). This also likely contributed to their relatively low rates.

Posted rates suggest that trans providers hold the least valued niche within the online independent escort market. Many trans providers advertise their status by adding the initials TS after their names in ads and profiles within directories. Trans providers had an average hourly rate of \$302 compared to \$424 for non-trans providers. Black and African American trans providers had the lowest rates among trans escorts ($n = 4$, AHR $M = 205$), suggesting intersectionality, such that sex workers' marginalized statuses amplify one another. Among self-reported trans escorts, in our sample, whites had the highest rates, followed by Latinas, Asians,

and then African Americans. This pattern suggests that while trans escorts have a narrower and devalued market niche compared to their non-trans counterparts, racial and ethnic identities can likewise be an asset or a liability that broadens or restricts one's market appeal and average hourly rates.

The Girlfriend Experience and Valuations of Escort Service Types

Despite the consensus among qualitative sex work researchers that there is high client demand for sex workers who provide a "girlfriend experience," no quantitative studies have addressed this question. The significantly higher rates of escorts who advertise themselves as providing a girlfriend experience suggests that clients do highly value escort services that resemble non-remunerative intimate relationships by emphasizing aspects of non-commercial sex, such as romance, enthusiasm for the client, and seduction, qualities not descriptive of paid sex with street-based or other sex-only workers (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018). Half of our content analysis sample marketed a girlfriend experience to their clients by explicitly using the term GFE or by describing their services in ways characteristic of GFE providers, such as by suggesting that clients take them on date-like outings. Providers who distinguish themselves by claiming to provide an "authentic" girlfriend experience (i.e. "real GFE," "true GFE," "authentic GFE"), describe their sessions as romantic, exclaim their enthusiastic desire for their clients, or announce their intention to seduce their clients within the bounds of a paid session, advertised higher rates than those even nominally offering a girlfriend experience (see Table 7). Such differences suggest that GFE's vary in their perceived quality and they likely involve more than simply providing those sexual services clients are denied by street-based and other instrumental sex workers, such as kissing (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Lever & Dolnick, 2000).

Cunningham and Kendall (2017) suggest that in longer sessions where college educated escorts were found to charge higher rates, their educational backgrounds would be a greater asset. We found limited support for this suggestion. Of the 41 providers in our content analysis sample who did not offer sessions shorter than 90 minutes, providers with at least a 4-year degree were slightly less likely to offer hourly sessions (percentage of providers with a BA who offer a one-hour rate: 80%) compared to those who claimed not to have a college education or did not reference their educational attainment (88%). Most providers who offer a girlfriend experience referenced having some degree of higher education (56%) and most providers who claimed to have a bachelor's degree or more offered a girlfriend experience (78%). Since most clients with the financial capability to pay for escorts charging in excess of \$400 per hour are likely to have a college degree, and Milrod and Monto (2012) found that most hobbyists (clients of escorts who participate in online forums for escort clients) had at least a bachelor's degree (41.1% had graduate degrees, 38% had bachelor's degrees), it would not be surprising if clients seeking escorts who provide GFE preferred college educated providers. This likely reflects the market value of social and cultural capital (Bernstein, 2007; Bourdieu, 1986; Korgan et al., 2016), and the emotional and sexual labors required when providing GFE services.

We found rates significantly varied among providers by other aspects of their services as indicated in their websites. Those who describe what to expect on their websites, explicitly advertise full service sex, or offer a porn star experience (PSE) have lower rates. A possible explanation for low rates among providers describing the details of the meeting process may be that such providers are taking on many new and perhaps inexperienced clients because of their low rates and thus find it more necessary to describe this process, whereas providers with higher rates, who have lower volumes of clients and more regular clients, may be less likely to have to

explain details that experienced clients are likely to know. Likewise, providers stating explicitly that they offer full service sex may also be catering to clients new to escorting who are unsure whether escorts who do not explicitly state that they will have sex with their clients offer vaginal sex or not. Thus, they may seek out those being more explicit about what's for sale. We presume that first time clients are likely to gravitate to less expensive providers since they may be unsure of whether the experience will be worth spending two to ten times more for what is ostensibly presumed to be the same service. As for providers of the porn star experience, because we based our analysis on the lowest session rate offered for each time duration, upselling an experience based on hardcore porn may not be uncommon but is not captured in our calculations. It is also likely that clients may be intimidated by providers offering the PSE because it then requires them, too, to perform at a porn star-like level. Less demand for this niche may also account for lower rates among these escorts.

On the contrary, providers who have photos in which the upper half of the torso is exposed (but not necessarily the nipples) and those who include photos of themselves in formalwear, such as cocktail dresses or gowns, charge higher rates. Providers with topless photos charging higher rates partially supports Griffith and colleagues' (2016) finding that providers who included photos of their bare breasts had significantly higher rates than those who did not. Had our content analysis sample size been larger this might have been true of our sample. However, the provider with the highest rate in our content analysis sub-sample (AHR = \$1056) had photos in which her breasts were bare, but her nipples were covered, and this was sufficient to make the presence or absence of nipples insignificant but the presence of absence of "topless" photos significant. The significant difference in providers posting photos of themselves in formalwear likely represents their effort to target clientele willing and able to hire them for time

spent in public as well as in private, and to demonstrate their ability to fit in and be attractive within a wealthy client's social milieu. Such efforts at presenting oneself as similar to one's clients is described by Carbonero and Garrido (2018) as an important element of providing a successful girlfriend experience.

Conclusion

This research on women choosing to labor as independent online escorts provides further evidence against the reductionism of contemporary anti-trafficking narratives which characterize women in the sexual marketplace as passive victims. Despite this, since we began this research project the online escort industry has been significantly disrupted by the 2018 passing of FOSTA-SESTA by the United States Congress. This overly-broad, protectionist, anti-trafficking legislation has had a dramatic impact on independent online escort businesses, the women who run them, and their clients. For example, as of March 2019, directories like TER and the Open Adult Directory have had to block U.S. internet users or eliminate links to U.S. escorts' sites, while others (including AdultFax, Verified Playmates and VIP Room Service) have closed. EROS, Slixia and Red Paramour continue to advertise escort profiles across the United States in defiance of FOSTA-SESTA, for now relying on a strategy of verifying advertiser (provider) identities as a prerequisite to placing ads as at least one strategy to assert they are not a venue for trafficked victims (Schrager, 2018, April 14). Unlike review sites like TER, sites like EROS may be able to assert more deniability that escorts are engaging in prostitution because they do not publish the graphic descriptions of sexual acts present in reviews of escorts. Some escorts' personal websites have been taken down by fearful web hosts, and sites used by providers to share information about clients and to collaborate and support one another's safety are at risk. Although many of the providers' sites used in these studies and a few of the directories they

advertised on are still active, anti-trafficking narratives, practices, and legislation are reportedly severely impacting autonomous adult sex workers, including our online, independent erotic entrepreneurs, but having little impact on trafficking and likely only making trafficking more difficult to monitor by decentralizing escort ads among the numerous new platforms that have cropped up to take the place of TER and Backpage.com (Kessler, 2018, August 20). This dangerous conflation of all sex work with sex trafficking, as in FOSTA-SESTA, makes research on the most independent and entrepreneurial participants, and the desires of their customers, that much more critical to document and understand.

In answer to our research question of how independent escorts' online marketing and advertising strategies are related to their rates, we found that geographic location matters, and that advertising in more cities and on more online platforms generally align with higher rates. Providers marketing their race/ethnicity and claiming to be between 21 to 35 command higher average hourly rates than other groups, while African American women and trans independent escorts have lower rates, likely reflecting both lower market demand and client bias.

From our in-depth qualitative and quantitative content analysis, we found that advertised hourly rates are lower for escorts who market porn star experience services, say that they provide full sex, identify themselves as busty, say that travel is a hobby, have tattoos, and use website space explaining to clients what to expect when they meet. Conversely, a cluster of variables were significantly associated with higher rates. Elegant and topless photos, promotion of one's race/ethnicity, particularly women who market themselves as multi-racial, and providers who explicitly offer a girlfriend experience, particularly when adjectives like seduction, romance, enthusiastic, and authentic are used to demonstrate what that service will be like. These

differences between marketing and rates may also be mitigated by more subtle nuances related to class and social and cultural capital (Korgan et al., 2016), though further research is necessary.

With respect to client demand as indicated by provider rates, our findings add quantitative and qualitative support to the growing consensus that there is significant client demand for consensual erotic interactions, preferably with emotional labor as is provided with the GFE, with adult women who freely engage in sex work by choice. Clients of our research subjects tend to desire services that are as indistinguishable from non-remunerative sex as possible, involving the intimacy such sexual relationships normally entail, but without the normally commensurate social obligations of courtship or marriage. These men are willing to pay large sums of capital for this privilege, or travel to the global south where it is more affordable (Gezinski et al. 2016, Rivers-Moore 2012, Yokota 2006). Providers offering high demand personal characteristics, services, and strategic advertising yield higher rates from clients, even before the add-ons and upsells that we could not account for in this analysis.

This study has limitations. First, it would be preferable to not only consider rates, but to also assess the number of inquiries escorts receive based on how they market themselves and the rates they post, how many actual dates they book, as well as their overall earnings. Second, the gap in time between our initial database construction and the collection of rates data 6 months later resulted in rates data for a smaller percentage of the sample than might have been possible had the two been collected simultaneously. Third, our study is based solely upon data from the 10 largest metropolitan areas in the United States, plus Las Vegas. Expanding this research to additional cities and communities, as well as other parts of the global online escort industry, would provide meaningful and important data and expand upon our findings. Fourth, by focusing intentionally on a narrow niche of independent online escorts we are unable to characterize, or

compare our findings to, other types of online escorts. Finally, adding additional subjects to our content analysis and in-depth interviews would provide a more robust sample and greater reliability.

Future research should address these gaps and limitations. It is important to broaden our understanding of independent online escorts' marketing, business practices, and rates in relation to supply and demand for particular types of providers and services. Understanding this niche of the online sex industry is important to contextualizing and understanding the variability of sex workers' experiences, contributing to global discussions about the sex industry's regulation, and applying a business perspective that goes beyond anti-trafficking narratives by focusing on independent business-owning women in the sex industry.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Mann-Whitney U Test Results of Average Hourly Rates by

Metropolitan Statistical Area

MSA (N=839)	n_A	M_A	Mdn_A	n_B	M_B	Mdn_B	U	p	r
New York City	221	\$517	\$483	618	\$385	\$359	39864	0.001	-0.32
Los Angeles	157	\$478	\$422	682	\$406	\$371	41951	0.001	-0.15
Las Vegas	141	\$451	\$422	698	\$414	\$372	41350	0.003	-0.10
Miami	71	\$438	\$385	768	\$418	\$376	25679	0.417	-0.03
Chicago	90	\$418	\$377	749	\$420	\$377	32449	0.563	-0.02
Washington DC	95	\$406	\$370	744	\$422	\$378	34246	0.623	-0.02
Boston	55	\$392	\$361	784	\$422	\$380	20015	0.374	-0.03
Philadelphia	48	\$358	\$346	791	\$424	\$383	14686	0.008	-0.09
Atlanta	62	\$351	\$326	777	\$425	\$383	17331	0.001	-0.13
Dallas	60	\$343	\$300	779	\$426	\$383	15500	0.001	-0.15
Houston	36	\$330	\$307	803	\$424	\$380	9604	0.001	-0.12

Note: A = Found in our search of that MSA; B = Absent in our search of that MSA. Exact p values computed with

Monte Carlo Procedure, rounded to third decimal.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results of Average Hourly Rates by Number of Searched Cities Advertised in

# of Cities Present in (N=839)	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	$\chi^2(2)$	KW <i>p</i> Value
1 City	666	79	\$400	\$363	50.824	0.001
2 Cities	149	18	\$475	\$440		
3 Cities	24	3	\$628	\$595		

Note: Providers in 1 city have lower rates than those in 2 ($U = 35804$, $p = .001$, $r = -.19$) or 3 ($U = 3124$, $p = .001$, $r = -.19$). Providers in 2 cities have lower rates than those in 3 ($U = 1037$, $p = .001$, $r = -.25$). Exact p values computed with Monte Carlo Procedure, rounded to third decimal. A = code was present, B = code was absent.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Kruskal-Wallace H Test Results of Average Hourly Rate by Number of Advertising Platforms Utilized

# of Platforms	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>n</i> (%)	267(32)	273(33)	208(25)	78(9)	11(1)	2(.2)
Mean	\$391	\$416	\$455	425	511	450
Median	\$356	\$372	\$401	\$373	\$500	\$450
Min-Max	\$100-1017	\$125-1389	\$140-1200	\$183-944	\$340-1000	\$428-472
Kruskal Wallace Results:	$\chi^2(5) = 28.06$		$p = .001$		$N=839$	

Note: Exact *p* values computed with Monte Carlo Procedure, rounded to third decimal. Providers with ads on 1

platform had significantly lower rates than those on 3 ($U = 20914, p = .001, r = -.21$), or 5 ($U = 717, p = .003, r = -.17$). Providers with ads on 2 sites had significantly lower rates than those on 3 ($U = 23933, p = .003, r = -.13$), or 5 ($U = 898, p = .021, r = -.13$). Providers with ads on 4 platforms had significantly lower rates than those on 5 ($U = 266, p = .045, r = -.22$).

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics and Mann-Whitney U Test Results of Average Hourly Rates by Advertising**Platform*

Platform (N=839)	$n_A(\%)$	M_A	Mdn_A	M_B	Mdn_B	$M_A - M_B$	U	p	r
The Erotic Review	691(82)	\$414	\$373	\$446	\$400	-\$32	45494	.035	-.07
P411	450(54)	\$427	\$388	\$412	\$372	\$15	78319	.009	-.09
EROS	313(37)	\$464	\$422	\$394	\$359	\$70	59970	.001	-.23
VIP RS	17(2)	\$526	\$437	\$418	\$375	\$108	4580	.015	-.08
Red Paramour	5(.6)	\$685	\$583	\$418	\$376	\$266	348683	.003	-.10
Twitter	175(21)	\$450	\$412	\$412	\$371	\$39	48124	.001	-.12

Note: A = providers using the platform; B = Providers not using the platform; Exact p values computed with Monte

Carlo Procedure, rounded to third decimal.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics and Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results of Average Hourly Rates by Age

Age:	18-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	50+	None
<i>n</i> (%)	8(1)	174(21)	252(30)	151(18)	86(10)	60(7)	38(4)	13(1)	57(7)
<i>M</i>	\$390	\$423	\$466	\$440	\$359	\$364	\$295	\$283	\$419
<i>Mdn</i>	\$327	\$384	\$426	\$392	\$336	\$350	\$261	\$272	\$387
Min	\$167	\$126	\$136	\$160	\$100	\$180	\$125	\$194	\$144
Max	\$937	\$1011	\$1200	\$1016	\$1389	\$758	\$750	\$383	\$900
Kruskal Wallace Results: $\chi^2(8) = 28.06$ $p = .001$ $N=839$									

Note: Exact p values computed with Monte Carlo Procedure, rounded to third decimal. See Appendix 1 for complete

matrix of significant Mann-Whitney U test results between age groups.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics and Kruskal-Wallace H Test Results of Average Hourly Rates by Self

Described Race/Ethnicity

MSA	N	Asian		Black		Latina		White		Mixed/Other		Kruskal Wallace H						
		n	M	Mdn	n	M	Mdn	n	M	Mdn	n	M	Mdn	χ^2 (DF)	p			
ALL	839	66	\$426	\$386	71	\$350	\$327	62	\$398	\$356	555	\$423	\$383	85	\$470	\$421	$\chi^2(4)=23.01$	.001
Las Vegas	141	13	\$467	\$455	8	\$295	\$286	4	\$457	\$450	106	\$450	\$424	10	\$563	\$512	$\chi^2(4)=13.73$	.008
New York	221	19	\$480	\$454	16	\$429	\$365	19	\$423	\$378	136	\$548	\$500	31	\$506	\$480	$\chi^2(4)=12.56$	.014
Dallas	62	3	\$432	\$480	9	\$271	\$261	5	\$266	\$257	10	\$349	\$300	3	\$534	\$490	$\chi^2(4)=10.64$	.031
Chicago	90	3	\$462	\$337	9	\$366	\$371	4	\$305	\$322	65	\$423	\$383	9	\$474	\$460	$\chi^2(4)=6.14$	.189
Atlanta	60	2	\$283	\$283	14	\$311	\$321	1			40	\$348	\$324	5	\$514	\$387	$\chi^2(4)=5.06$	.282
Philadelphia	48	1			4	\$396	\$387	5	\$334	\$348	33	\$357	\$325	5	\$347	\$358	$\chi^2(4)=3.86$	.425
Los Angeles	157	17	\$463	\$422	12	\$430	\$361	11	\$499	\$500	100	\$475	\$424	17	\$529	\$454	$\chi^2(4)=3.75$	.441
Wash. DC	95	7	\$396	\$337	9	\$341	\$321	7	\$433	\$400	56	\$422	\$384	16	\$377	\$353	$\chi^2(4)=2.99$	.559
Miami	71	5	\$482	\$400	2	\$692	\$692	15	\$400	\$375	44	\$428	\$388	5	\$505	\$375	$\chi^2(4)=2.63$	.622
Houston	36	0			1			2	\$280	\$280	26	\$322	\$300	7	\$371	\$354	$\chi^2(3)=0.90$	.825
Boston	55	6	\$375	\$352	3	\$420	\$378	3	\$436	\$357	37	\$384	\$362	6	\$425	\$360	$\chi^2(4)=1.01$	.908

Note: Exact p values computed with Monte Carlo Procedure, rounded to third decimal. Within the our full sample of providers who listed their

rates, according to Mann-Whitney U tests, providers who solely identified as African American or black had significantly lower average hourly rates than Asian providers ($U = 1581, p = .001, r = -.28$), Latina providers ($U = 1621, p = .008, r = -.23$), White providers ($U = 14462, p = .001, r = -.15$), and Mixed/other providers ($U = 1686, p = .001, r = -.38$). In this sample providers within the mixed race/Other category had significantly higher average hourly rates than Latina providers ($U = 2091, p = .032, r = -.18$), and white providers ($U = 19794, p = .016, r = -.09$).

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics and Mann-Whitney U Results of Website Content Associated with Significantly Higher Rates

IV	$n_A(\%)$	M_A	Mdn_A	M_B	Mdn_B	U	p	r
Photo Type Present - Topless _C	29(71)	\$426	\$395	\$329	\$290	101	.037	-.32
Photo Type Present - Elegant _C	14(34)	\$447	\$402	\$372	\$337	113	.037	-.32
GFE – Content _C	25(61)	\$425	\$400	\$355	\$279	107	.012	-.39
Service offered - GFE _C	23(56)	\$429	\$400	\$358	\$301	118	.018	-.36
GFE: Authentic _C	9(21)	\$489	\$403	\$372	\$338	60	.007	-.41
GFE: Enthusiastic/Seductive _C	6(15)	\$521	\$478	\$376	\$365	44	.023	-.35
GFE: Romance _D	4(8)	\$519	\$482	\$380	\$379	29	.021	-.26
Personalizing Info. - Ethnicity _D	13(26)	\$439	\$400	\$383	\$378	151	.048	-.24

Note: A = providers coded for the IV; B = Providers not coded for the IV; C = Dependent variable was the average

hourly rate ($N = 41$). D = Dependent variable was the estimated average hourly rate ($N = 50$). The IV “GFE –

Content” indicates that content was coded as pertaining to the concept of the girlfriend experience but that a GFE.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics and Mann-Whitney U Results of Website Content Associated with Significantly Lower Rates

IV	$n_A(\%)$	M_A	Mdn_A	M_B	Mdn_B	U	p	r
Porn Star Experience _C	4(10)	\$247	\$206	\$408	\$325	35	.039	-0.32
Full Service Sex _D	3(7)	\$244	\$255	\$410	\$379	15	.016	-0.33
Self-Description - Busty _D	2(5)	\$191	\$191	\$408	\$378	2	.01	-0.35
Saying Travel is a Hobby _D	4(10)	\$263	\$248	\$412	\$380	28	.042	-0.32
Explain - What to Expect _D	10(24)	\$298	\$301	\$430	\$395	85.5	.034	-0.33
Visible Tattoo in Photo _E	11(22)	\$310	\$307	\$419	\$394	115	.009	-0.33

Note: Note: A = providers coded for the IV; B = Providers not coded for the IV; C=Dependent variable was the 2-

hour hourly rate ($N = 41$). D = Dependent variable was the average hourly rate ($N = 41$). E = Dependent variable

was the estimated average hourly rate ($N = 50$).

Appendix 1

Significant Mann-Whitney U Test Results Comparing Average Hourly Rates by Age

Age	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	50+
31-35	$U = 18873$ $p = .015$ $r = -0.12$						
36-40	$U = 5584$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.21$	$U = 6765$ $p = .000$ $r = -0.28$	$U = 4587$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.24$				
41-45	$U = 4132$ $p = .015$ $r = -0.16$	$U = 5024$ $p = .000$ $r = -0.23$	$U = 3439$ $p = .006$ $r = -0.19$				
46-50	$U = 1469$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.37$	$U = 1799$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.36$	$U = 1223$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.40$	$U = 1072$ $p = .002$ $r = -0.27$	$U = 674$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.34$		
50+	$U = 479$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.25$	$U = 554$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.25$	$U = 386$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.28$	$U = 364$ $p = .045$ $r = -0.20$	$U = 224$ $p = .016$ $r = -0.28$		
None				$U = 1867$ $p = .017$ $r = -0.20$		$U = 488$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.46$	$U = 155$ $p = .001$ $r = -0.39$

Note: Exact p values computed with Monte Carlo Procedure and rounded to third decimal. Left column and top row indicate the providers' age groups compared.