

**Displaying Your Best Assets:
The Presentation of (Sexual) Self in Male Sex Work**

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Abstract:

Several theoretical approaches have been taken to the analysis of commercial sex work, but they are usually used in isolation. In this paper we combine performative, relational, field, exchange and intersectional theories in a unified framework to analyze the physical presentation that sex workers present to potential clients. In contrast to the majority of scholarship, we analyze the presentations of male sex workers, allowing us to make novel contributions to empirical analysis of gender, masculinity, and sexuality. Specifically, we explore the degree to which dominant social narratives related to masculinity, gay male sexuality, and race affect the presentation of self of male sex workers' online advertisements. Drawing on a number of theoretical approaches, we posit that male sex workers adhering to traditionally masculine sexual personas will display more frontal nudity and those adhering to traditionally feminine sexual personas will display more rear nudity in their sexual presentations. We also hypothesize that this relationship will be mediated by race and physical body type. Using a novel data source that compiles content analyses of advertisements from male sex workers with detailed measures of the pictures that accompany their advertisements, we find that escorts actively cultivate a presentation of self that closely adheres to racial and gender stereotypes. Our findings illustrate how the merging of a broad base of theory can provide new understandings of both sex work and social forces' impact on the crafting of the presentation of self and how the body becomes the personification of social stereotypes of race and sexuality.

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The study of sex work provides an opportunity to analyze how culture and society regulate the presentation of sexual personhood and how that presentation is mediated by the market forces of sex work. Sex work is, at a minimum, a performed exchange. Both clients and sex workers adopt certain roles to fulfill client demand for fantasy, intimacy, and other non-sexual services (Hoang 2010). These desires exert pressures on the ways that sex workers present their physical selves to clients. In this way, the body and its presentation itself become part of the exchange, which itself is informed by societal notions of desire, attractiveness, and sexual stratification.

The literature analyzing these effects suffers from two significant shortcomings. First, the literature has focused on female sex workers (Bernstein 2007). The investigation of male-male sexual configurations has the potential to provide new understandings of how gender, sexuality, and other social forces interact to perpetuate stratification and uphold prevailing social norms. For example, little research has focused on how masculinity broadly construed (e.g., or gender configurations and relations other than those of the normative heterosexual dyad) shapes the construction of sexual selves in general and in commercial sexual transactions in particular.

Second, the social theories of sex work have been used in isolation, and theorists have not considered how they may be used in concert with one another to explain the regulation of the presentation of self. . The study of sex work draws upon a broad base of sociological theories which attempt to highlight the ways in which market forces interact with social norms regarding sexuality, producing socio-economic presentations of sexuality, sexual behavior, and sexual fantasy. Sex workers must exploit entrenched social conventions about sexuality and sexual behavior for profit. This creates a unique space where social stereotypes, norms, and taboos regarding sexual behavior and desire are codified and explicitly marketed for consumption.

For instance, Goffman's (1959; 1963) concepts of stigma and the presentation of self have been applied to analyze the lives of sex workers. Queer theorists such as Butler (1990) and Connell (1992; 1995) offer insights that can be integrated with Goffman's theories to better conceptualize sex work as a nexus where gender relations are made manifest on sex workers' bodies. A sex workers' sexual presentation must be *seen and acknowledged* as sexual presentations by the intended audience, and this acts to filter the salience of presentations to the

intended audience. Gender norms and stereotypes mediate and inform the ways in which sex workers present their sexuality to the market through the presentation of their bodies as sexual objects. One of the most basic market forces, product differentiation, requires sex workers to tap into gender distinctions. Furthermore, theories of sexual fields (Green 2009a) show how features of collective erotic life may lead sex workers to accentuate certain aspects of themselves in their self-presentations. While sexual field theory has sought to limit the prospects of market behavior in the sexual field (Martin and George 2006), in the case of sex work the market and the field are inherently linked. To reach the largest market (client base) sex workers must engage with the broader sexual field and take their marketing cues from non-market sexual behavior. To the extent that clients desire an imagined, genuine sexual connection, sex workers must promise and fulfill desires rooted in *non-market* sexual desire. Intersection theory, too, can provide a framework for understanding sex work as an arena where racial stereotypes are perpetuated through interaction (Collins 2004). For instance, sex work is not only performative, but also relational. Dominant narratives about race and gender likely inform the performances sex workers give. Also, prostitution has economic exchange at its core (Simmel [1907] 1971), and it is notable that few economic exchange theories have been employed in its sociological study (Logan 2010). Integrating the insights from these theoretical perspectives could generate useful dialogue and greatly enrich the sociological understanding of sex work and the sexual spaces it informs and is informed by (e.g., Price-Glynn 2010; Thompson et al. 2001).

We combine the relational (gender and exchange), performative, and intersectional, theories of sex work into a cohesive core which produces novel hypotheses about how and why male sex workers may differ in their physical presentations to the market. We adopt an empirical approach to test our novel hypotheses, which derive from a broad, integrated theoretical approach to male sex work. Specifically, we analyze the posted photographs of male sex workers on an online website to assess how they present their bodies to potential clients. In doing so we are able to closely align the predictions about the presentation of physical bodies with the empirical content in the male sex work market.

As sex workers have been shown to to present a self that is likely to lead to the most financial return through the attraction of clients, they will be attuned to the norms and values that dictate how they should present themselves (Logan 2010, Bernstein 2007). That is, escorts face clear context-specific market incentives that govern their physical presentations. At the same

time, escorts' personal attributes (e.g., body type, race, etc.) and sexual proclivities constrain which stylized presentations of self may be construed as both genuine and fitting of the escort, as assessed by potential and actual clients. In short, their presentations are inherently directed toward a financial return, and as such reflect an escort's attempt to maximize their marketability given the societal values and norms that apply in sexualized spaces. Accordingly, which aspects of the self that online escorts accentuate and deemphasize for *economic* gain are fundamentally of *social* origin and require sociological investigation and interpretation.

The analysis of these pictures also allows us to make specific predictions regarding the particular selves male sex workers choose to present to potential clientele. These sex workers' presentations of self, we argue, are largely influenced by pre-existing social norms. The presentation of (sexual) self that escorts partake in their profiles serves two primary functions. First, it enables these men to express their mastery of certain "sexual scripts" (Gagnon and Simon 1973) which clients desire to perform in their sexual encounters with escorts. Second, escorts' presentations of self also enable the men to express components of their *erotic persona*, which the men must situate within larger structures of masculinity, race, gender, and sexuality.

We use data collected from male escorts' photographs posted to a website for male sex workers seeking clients. We hypothesize that male sex workers will largely adhere to dominant narratives related to gender, race, and sexuality in their presentation of self. OLS regression of data compiled from male escorts' pictures demonstrates that social and economic forces influence the presentation of self of male escorts. The escorts largely adhere to racial and gender stereotypes in crafting their public erotic persona in an effort to secure clients. For example, escorts who advertise dominant sexual behaviors have a larger fraction of frontal nudity pictures while those who advertise submissive sexual behavior have a larger fraction of rear nudity pictures. Also, we find that this dominant/submissive distinction is even larger when interacted with race—black men who advertise dominance show the largest fraction of frontal nudity pictures and the lowest fraction of rear nudity pictures. The synthesis of multiple theories applied to the arena of sex work demonstrates the maintenance of gendered, racialized, and sexualized hierarchies in the presentation of self in everyday life.

Our contribution provides a new means of linking performative, relational, gender and economic theories together, which then permits us to conceptualize other social relations as affecting how MSM sex workers present their bodies. Specifically, our integrated theoretical

approach illustrates the utility of simultaneously employing Goffman's (1959) concept of the presentation of self, Butler's (1990, 1993) idea of the body as a site of performance, Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity, Collins' (2004) intersection theory, and Green's (2008a, 2008b) theory of erotic capital in understanding male sex work. Using the photographs male escorts provide to advertise for their services allows us to test features of these theories, and implications that can only be derived from their interaction, by focusing on the performativity of sex work, eliminating many of the exogenous factors (e.g., desire for romantic attachment, assortative mating, etc.) that are potentially important in analyses of non-transactional sexual relationships. Further, our findings demonstrate how dominant narratives about gender and race may manifest themselves within the broader MSM online community, indicating how these narratives are taken up by this social group.