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#Follow: exploring the role of social media in the online construction of male sex worker lives in Dublin, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article draws from qualitative interviews with 18 South American male sex workers in Dublin, exploring how their use of the gym and new social media has created alternative spaces for the conduct of commercial sex. The interviews reveal how sex workers alternatively use escort specific sites in conjunction with mainstream dating apps like Grindr, offering greater flexibility and control over how they are self-defined within the sex industry. These male sex workers become known for their presence in gyms and clubs within the small gay community offering potential clients a real-time embodied interaction. Social media, like Instagram, offered the men in this study a further platform to share part of a choreographed online world with thousands of followers presenting new economic opportunities. The men trade access to their bodies and to their taste in designer commodities and lifestyle to interact with followers who can financially contribute to dictate the format of the photos available for private or public consumption.

#Seguir: exploración del rol de las redes sociales en la construcción virtual de las vidas de los trabajadores del sexo hombres en Dublín, Irlanda

RESUMEN

Este artículo se basa en entrevistas cualitativas con dieciocho trabajadores sexuales sudamericanos hombres en Dublín, explorando cómo su uso del gimnasio y de las redes sociales nuevas ha creado espacios alternativos para la conducción del sexo comercial. Las entrevistas revelan cómo los trabajadores del sexo utilizan alternativamente sitios específicos de compañía al mismo tiempo que aplicaciones de citas comunes como Grindr, que ofrecen mayor flexibilidad y control sobre cómo se definen dentro de la industria del sexo. Estos varones trabajadores del sexo se vuelven conocidos por su presencia en gimnasios y clubes dentro de la pequeña comunidad gay que ofrece a los potenciales clientes una interacción corporizada en tiempo real. Las redes sociales tales como Instagram ofrecieron a los hombres en este estudio una plataforma adicional para compartir parte de un mundo virtual coreografiado con miles de seguidores, presentándoles nuevas oportunidades económicas. Los hombres intercambian el acceso a sus cuerpos y a su gusto en *commodities* y estilos de vida de diseño para interactuar con lxs seguidorxs que pueden contribuir económicamente para determinar el formato de las fotos disponibles para el consumo privado o público.

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关键词

男性性工作; Instagram; 健身房; 社交媒体; G达 (Grindr)

#追踪：探讨社交媒体在爱尔兰都柏林的男性性工作者的网上生活建构中扮演的角色

摘要

本文对于都柏林的十八位南美洲男性性工作者进行质性访谈，以此探讨他们的健身房和新兴社交媒体之使用，如何创造商业性交易的另类空间。这些访谈，揭露了性工作者如何交替使用特定的伴游网站以及诸如G达（Grindr）的主流交友手机应用程序，提供他们如何在性产业中自我定义的更大弹性与控制。这些男性性工作者在健身房和酒吧现身，因而在提供客户即时亲身互动的小众男同性恋社群中变得知名。诸如Instagram之社交媒体，为本研究中的男性提供了进一步的平台，与呈现崭新经济机会的数以万计追踪者分享编排过的网上世界。这些男性交易他们的身体以及设计师商品和生活风格品味，从而与能够在金钱上指定这些照片的形式是提供私人或公共消费的追踪者进行互动。

Introduction

This article explores the experiences of a group of young, gay South American migrants living and working in Dublin who are supporting themselves, partially or wholly, through commercial sex. While previous research has continually emphasized the 'underground' nature of male prostitution (Kearins 2000, 20; INMP 2001, 12), I argue that new sites, both off and online, have emerged in which male sex work can be advertised which represents a radical transformation of our understanding of both its discourse and practice. This new visibility represents a continuation of a documented mainstreaming of elements of the sex industry within society and specifically, within gay communities (Bretners and Sanders 2010). In this article, the data from male sex workers reveal them to be challenging and redefining the social definitions around the meanings of sex work through the use of social media applications like Grindr and Instagram. These applications offer the potential of a more transitory, ambiguous and opportunistic definition of sex work as opposed to the previous means by which men advertised. Earlier contributions exploring the intersections between sexuality and space have focused on the emergence of gay urban space (Castells 1983; Valentine and Skelton 2003), gay villages (Quilley 1995; Nash 2010) and gentrification (Knopp 2007). While there has been an expansion of research into the digital world which problematizes the construction of exclusively gay or straight space, these have been largely disembodied (Roth 2014, 2215). My study seeks to redress that absence, placing the material body centre stage as the gateway to online interaction.

Following De Souza e Silva (2006, 271), I understand Grindr and Instagram as representing spaces embedded in social practices and interactions facilitated by their mobile technology that can potentially transform space in ways that are transformative and transgressive. These *hybrid* spaces are the result of the blurring of the physical and digital boundaries as people navigate themselves throughout the city where the online world ceases to become a mere storage depot for data, photos and chat (Batty 1997). Such hybrid spaces are utilized by the respondents in my study to connect the physical and the online to facilitate entry into sex work, but also crucially to sever this connection through the use of blocking technology that terminates communication.

The widespread use of mobile applications by the gay community has occurred within a context of socio-economic and political change that has transformed the nature of male sex work in Ireland since the economic boom of the early 2000s. These changes have corresponded with the increased visibility of the gay community in political and public life mobilizing around civil partnerships and later marriage equality (Ryan 2013). This changing landscape of intimate life intersected with the growing labour demands of a booming neo-liberal economy that would transform Ireland into a desirable migratory pathway. An analysis of the inward migration that further transformed Ireland from a country of emigration and exile to a host country for immigration reveals data that includes refugees, asylum seekers, labour migrants and returning Irish emigrants (Mac Einri and White 2008, 151). Thousands of these migrants found work in the construction, hospitality and technology sectors but it also brought

a new wave of more precarious non-EEA workers who arrived under the student stamp two category (some 49,500 in 2014), often funding degree and English-language training courses through the maximum 20 h work a week allowed under their visa conditions. Of these 49,500, Brazilian nationals account for the highest percentage at 13,336, while Venezuelan nationals account for 1012 of the visas issued.¹ Often poor English-language skills, continuing economic turmoil in home countries like Venezuela and the contraction of opportunities following the global recession of 2008 set the stage for a new type of entrant into the male sex work market. This article is based on interviews with 18 self-identified gay men from Brazil and Venezuela, aged between 19 and 27 who had engaged in some form of commercial sexual activity. These men, bar one, all entered Ireland on a student visa and as such demonstrated access to €3000 prior to arrival, and were studying either at college or university or were attending a recognized English-language school. The respondents were recruited through the gay dating site PlanetRomeo and through subsequent snowball referrals from existing contacts. Brazilian and Venezuelan men were selected given their prominence on the dating site's escort section; out of 84 escorts advertising in March 2015, 41 identified as either Brazilian or Venezuelan with a further 16 as identifying their ethnicity as 'Latino' though not specifying their nationality. The role of ethnicity in the construction of the participants' online self-identity varied. As countries of inward migration, the skin colour of the Brazilian and Venezuelan escorts interviewed often reflected this mixed race heritage with most choosing the – *Latin*, *Black* or *Mixed* from pre-selected ethnicity categories and they constructed their profiles online.

The interviews were conducted by an in-depth qualitative approach through English although the information sheet given to participants was translated into Portuguese and Spanish. Participants were offered €50 for their contribution to the research of which 14 availed of and 4 declined. At the time of interviewing, the English-language competency of the participants ranged from elementary to proficient although the data reveal the difficulties encountered by them as they entered sex work upon their arrival in Ireland with limited English-language skills often reliant on applications like Google translate in online conversations. Participants did not encounter violence during their work although disagreements with clients did arise concerning rates and services. I entered into these interviews as a supporter of a harm reduction approach to sex work and through my role on the board of a sex work advocacy project, Sex Workers Alliance Ireland; I have campaigned against the further criminalization of commercial sex. I have outlined elsewhere the difficulties faced by researchers of the sex industry in a time of contentious politics (Ryan and Huschke, [forthcoming](#)) and the challenges of positioning oneself as the researcher within feminist inspired sexuality research (Ryan 2006).

The research took place at a time of increased debate surrounding the future direction of prostitution policy.² The criminalization of the purchase of sex in Sweden in 2003 has provided a catalyst for a diverse range of women's organizations, religious groups and non-governmental organizations to agitate for similar legislation to be passed in countries such as France, Britain, Denmark and Ireland (Hubbard, Matthews, and Scoular 2008, 142; Ward 2010). The Irish government has published a Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill 2015 which introduces a sex purchase ban but also retains provisions which criminalize the sellers of sex.³ Male and trans sex workers have remained outside this public debate surrounding this legislative proposal although accounting for 9% of all sex work advertising in Ireland (Maginn and Ellison 2014).

The (re)construction of the male sex worker

The nineteenth century gives us an historical context for why male prostitution did not emerge as a focus of governance in a similar way female prostitution did. In Ireland, women who worked in prostitution were seen as conduits of venereal disease, and as such, they were perceived as a grave risk to both the military capacity of the nation and the moral boundaries of the family unit (McCormick 2009). The situation was different for men. Male prostitution became closely associated with effeminacy in the nineteenth century and the emerging sexologist study of the homosexual (Kaye 2003; Scott 2003, 180; Walby 2012, 5). While masculinity – particularly the dangers of masturbation and effeminacy – were a

concern to politicians and social commentators (Sinfield 1994, 27) it never embodied the nation in a manner in which women's bodies did.

By the mid twentieth century, the male prostitute had become reconstituted as heterosexual and masculine – a young, innocent victim whose low educational attainment and disruptive family background made him vulnerable to predatory older men (Butts 1947; Reiss 1961; Ginsberg 1967; Kaye 2003; Scott, MacPhail, and Minichiello 2015). Further research would lead to a greater understanding of the diversification of male prostitution with hierarchical categories of street, escort and 'kept' boys established (Weisberg 1985). Each category would become an object of governance to different degrees during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s amid fears that male prostitution would become a conduit of transmission to mainstream society. Through the institutional links forged between gay and lesbian communities and government health officials male sex work emerges as almost an exclusively gay phenomenon benefiting from the increasing status of campaigning by the gay community (Scott, MacPhail, and Minichiello 2015, 85). Notwithstanding these developments, a substantial body of research has emphasized the deviant (Luckenbill 1986) and the pathological (Sagarin and Jolly 1997) nature of male sex work.

An understanding of sex workers as rational agents seeking to maximize their financial gain through the commodification of their own bodies would develop slowly (Weisberg 1985) but it was a process that would intensify with the rise of global consumer capitalism. People could now shape their own identities, not dependent on background or educational status that could be tailored from a range of commodities that communicated the taste and values of the purchaser. These identities became something created; reflected upon and maintained to tell a story that was consistent with the biographical narrative told to the world (Giddens 1991, 53). This project of the self is embarked upon under the eye of commodity capitalism which standardizes our desires and places the burden of self-improvement on the individualized actor (Bauman 2000, 31). In Giddens (1991, 102) words, 'we have become responsible for the design of our own bodies'.

I argue that male escorts have been pioneers in embracing that responsibility to recreate, not just the body, but to reimagine the very definition of the sex work itself. Men's bodies specifically have become the object of a new gaze that depicts them in an idealized and eroticized fashion allowing them to be looked at and desired (Gill, Henwood, and McClean 2005, 38) with the increasing popularity of male strip clubs among female patrons further contributing to this inverted gaze (Scull 2013, 558). This increasing commodification of the male body within mainstream culture has further increased the pressure on gay men to attain and pursue this idealized body (Kendall and Martino 2006). It is within gay male culture that this body has been most celebrated, idealized and sought after by a Pride movement eager to distance itself from the effeminate stereotypes of the past (Bronski 1998).

Male sex workers have capitalized upon this sexualisation of the body. The body becomes a vehicle for self-expression supported by an army of fitness entrepreneurs from dietitians to personal trainers to help you achieve your goals (Featherstone 2010; Monaghan, Hollands, and Pritchard 2010). Equipped with a newly acquired bodily capital, male sex workers have taken advantage of society's increasing gaze upon the young muscular male body. The gym becomes a key site for the production of this body while the proliferation of social media sites has encouraged its advertising and display (Lee-Gonyea, Castle, and Gonyea 2009). Using social media to advertise sexual services has allowed men to work independently exercising greater control over the selection of their clients while charging more with less risk of arrest or harassment than street-based workers (Parsons, Kohen, and Bimbi 2007, 221). Technology has contributed to these structural changes in the industry accelerating the decline of both brothel and escort agency work where escorts hand over a high percentage of their earnings to third parties (McLean 2013, 5, 6).

There are three key elements which have to date have not been addressed by the small body of research on male sex work in Ireland – the role of technology, immigration and the commodification of the body – all of which are central to this article. This existing research has all highlighted the clandestine nature of male prostitution (Kearins 2000, 20), which I argue has greatly diminished amongst recent entrants to the sex industry. Similarly, an almost exclusive focus on unstable family backgrounds,

sexual abuse, homelessness and drug abuse (EHB 1997; Quinlan, Wyse, and O'Connor 1997, 24; INMP 2001, 27, 28; National Advisory Committee on Drugs 2009), while still evident amongst men who sex in Dublin, no longer describes the backgrounds of the majority of men who enter the sex industry.

Building and displaying bodies

The data from the interviews with the men in this study reveal the continued evolution of male sex work. Their stories reflect new trends in the industry and support some existing findings, like the continued decline of street-based work which now accounts for 10% of all sex work (Weitzer 2005). None of the men in this study had ever done street work with the majority working from their own apartments, or through the use of hotels, gay saunas or the gym to meet clients. Two men were working in a brothel. The young men who embark upon selling sex in Dublin are doing so at a time when the sex industry itself has undergone a transformation. There has been a normalization of many aspects of the industry which has seen commercial premises selling sexual products move from the backstreets to the high street (Maginn and Steinmetz 2015, 9). The use of the Internet by gay men to connect with each other (Shaw 1997; Campbell 2004; Mowlabocus 2010) and to advertise sexual services (Parsons, Kohen, and Bimbi 2007; Lee-Gonyea, Castle, and Gonyea 2009) have been well documented. However, the men's interviews also reveal a similar mainstreaming in which their advertising of sexual services has moved from gay escort sites like PlanetRomeo into more popular gay dating apps like Grindr. Grindr is a location-based dating application based on GPS coordinates launched in 2009 with over 3.5 million users in 192 countries (Gudelunas 2012; Woo 2013; Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott 2014). Users can upload a photo and enter details of their height, weight and ethnicity with optional links to Facebook and Instagram on free or paid versions providing a 'new infrastructure of the sexual encounter' (Race 2015a, 254).

The men explained that sites like Grindr offered them flexibility in not having to exclusively identify themselves as escorts, but rather present themselves as regular users of the application (Scott, MacPhail, and Minichiello 2015, 93). It is this cohort of men that is the most elusive to researchers and little is known about the prevalence of those that operate on a continuum of male sex work (McLean 2013, 12). Grindr was most often the respondents' entry point into sex work, requiring little effort and no cost to set up a profile. Bruno, a 21-year-old chef who moved to Ireland from Brazil in 2014 to study English explains his use of Grindr and his entry into sex work.

I would turn it [Grindr] on and it would be these messages 'are you an escort' 'are you an escort' and I thought well maybe ... had no money and was sleeping on the sofa at the house of a friend. I never said I was one, guys would message me if I had put up a photo from the beach or gym ... later I would put just the dollar sign [\$] to stop some guys, it was hard to follow 30 or 40 messages a day.

Bruno never placed an advertisement on an escort site preferring the flexibility and spontaneity of communicating on his phone that Grindr offered, representing a category of escort that is more opportunistic by operating on the margins of male sex work. Bruno never solicited a potential client rather he waited to be propositioned using Grindr as a means to screen clients in terms of location, sexual interest etc., a common means by which gay men in general use the application as a screening device before meeting prospective partners (McLean 2013, 8; Race 2015b, 260). This flexibility that mainstream gay apps like Grindr offered escorts was not always seen as the most productive route to access clients. Rafael, a 26-year-old escort from Brazil described his frustration of using Grindr as opposed to escort sites on which he also maintains a profile.

It takes so much time talking to guys who are wanting to see photos of you ... more photos, more photos and they never want to meet and you learn fast to know these guys and block them because there are so many guys, who want some chat and some wank [laughs] but never meet; some want to chat with you or date you and it is so slow ... I try to be nice to people but it is hard sometimes, at least on PlanetRomeo there's less chat and more business.

This use of gay social networking applications solely for the purpose of trading photos for sexual gratification as described by Rafael above has been established (Race 2015b; Tziallas 2015) disrupting the original real-time intention of the app. Not only is the method by which male escorts are communicating

with potential clients are changing so are the means by which escorts advertise. The photos of escorts come alive in real time in city central gyms or as dancers in clubs popular with the gay community. Dublin is a small European city with a population of 1.2 million people and just two gay bars, two nightclubs and a gym popular with the gay community. Spread over a small geographical area are the 90 escorts, overwhelming from South America, that regularly advertise on PlanetRomeo, in addition to those on Grindr become more than just a one-dimensional photo; they become embodied, known, admired and desired. The gym, which I call Fitness365, plays a central role in this new form of advertising. Located in a former city centre nightclub, the gym has become popular with a range of city centre residents including many local and newly arrived migrants to Dublin's gay community. The use of applications like Grindr has been identified as facilitating sexual hook-ups by gay men in the gym (Gudelunas 2012, 357), overcoming some of the frustrations concerning the practicalities of real-time meeting (Race 2015b, 506). The gym also plays a central role in the lives of the male sex workers in this study with all the interviewees going a minimum of three days a week. Lucas, a 24-year-old Brazilian student describes both how he used Grindr and the gym as an entry route to sex work upon his arrival to Ireland.

I spoke no English really, a few words then and with no job with so much extra time, I went to the gym six days a week maybe ... the first guy I met was on Grindr when we were both in the gym and we chatted and another day I met him at reception, I asked him if he wanted some fun and how much he would give ... that time he gave me €50 and we showered together.

In this case, Grindr facilitates a physical meeting between Lucas and a client that would have been very unlikely to have taken place otherwise without their proximity in the gym and the client decoding the photo that suggested Lucas' potential availability to commercial sex. Grindr has enabled male sex workers (though not female) to expand the real-time space in which they can advertise their services. Even the most unlikely venues can offer possibilities; Lucas also describes making contact with a client in a STI screening clinic and on-board a Ryanair flight prior to departure.

Other male sex workers used the gym not as a location to meet clients, but to recruit them for the future. Gustavo who is 22 explained that often clients would introduce themselves in an online message on Grindr or PlanetRomeo with – 'I saw you at the gym' – reflecting a belief among many of the interviewees that the gym contributed to a wider off-line profile. The gym allowed men like Gustavo to arouse the sexual desire of some men whose gaze often translated into the procurement of sexual services through applications like Grindr. Working out at the gym to hone a lean muscular body constituted a key element of the identities of many of the interviewees, a process that started long before they arrived in Ireland and prior to their entry to sex work. Gustavo, now a university student, explains –

I used to do gymnastics in school and gym work in school since I was 14 or 15, it is what I do, and I can't imagine not going to the gym – what do you guys do in Ireland? (*laughs*) I mean even the skinny guys are fat in Ireland, skinny with big belly – ughh it is so weird, I hate to look.

Bruno (21) who also started going to the gym as a teenager describes the cultural differences he sees between Irish and Brazilian men with regard to the body and gym work.

It's different for us, in my city I can walk in a speedo four blocks from the beach and no one looks, it's normal, the Irish in the changing room ... they are strange, like their body should be hidden more, maybe they are shy? No? It's all towels and showering in their underwear ... I work hard on my body and I enjoy showing it off; I wear t-shirts – like this one – that makes me look good, what problem is this? Guys look at me in the gym, they come up and talk to me, want to add me to facebook (*laughs*) I like it.

Scull (2013, 566) found that the respondents in her study of male strippers also placed great importance on the maintenance of their bodies which involved dieting, shaving, steroid use and on average 15 h working out in the gym per week. This bodily capital also facilitated five of the men in my study to work in various aspects of the gay club scene – one as a door host, and the other four as dancers at a monthly club night. A further two interviewees worked in a straight city centre club working as servers on weekly Brazilian and Spanish club nights. Erick, a 22-year-old Venezuelan student described how he is harassed by customers to a greater extent than his female colleagues in the bar that requires him to wear only cut-off jeans and explains that

it gets worse the later it gets and the more they [customers] drink, you have people touching you, they grab you ... your ass, your cock, they squeeze your nipples and you have to be polite because it's all joking ... I hate it, I really hate it and it's only €12 an hour.

Experiences like Erick's reveal that satisfaction gleaned from the gaze on the male escort body is highly dependent on the level of control the men are able to exercise over those encounters. The male strippers in Scull's study (2013, 571) also report levels of female aggressiveness at strip shows with men having their genitals grabbed but also being scratched, bitten and left bleeding by overzealous patrons. Studies of male strippers routinely see female audiences as more demanding and intrusive compared to gay male (Boden 2007, 140).

The satisfaction the men garnered from this gaze and the ability to control the context in which it occurred also varied within their commercial sex encounters. While respondents all detailed how the range of sexual services offered was modified on a client to client basis, many referred to viewing the reaction and pleasure of clients to their bodies as being one of the most satisfying aspects of their sex work. Rodrigo is 24-year-old sex worker from Brazil who previously worked in a bank before coming to Ireland after being made redundant. While happy at the flexibility and money offered by sex work, he is anxious to take up a position that reflects his training and skills in business administration. Rodrigo expresses surprise and pleasure at the reactions of his clients to his body –

It wasn't something I'd expected; one of my first clients was an older guy ... a big guy who was very emotional ... I had taken my clothes off and he was crying and I'm not sure what was happening, he just was saying that I was beautiful, again and again and we did not do much, he looked at me for ages ... It was me, or not maybe, for him maybe I was him much younger and that made him sad but he always treated me like I was this God to him.

Other accounts of male sex workers have also identified the difficulties of dealing with clients, often married, who are uncomfortable with their sexuality and where escorts can become a source of support in such circumstances (Parsons, Kohen, and Bimbi 2007, 233). Other men reported that by advertising their services as sexually 'top' and 'dominant' that this enabled them to maintain the focus on their own bodies rather than their clients, a useful strategy with those they found less attractive. This process where the traditional gaze on the sex worker's body is subverted is explained here by Thiago, a twenty-one year old escort from Brazil –

People outside think it's more hard than it is really, I do enjoy the sex but only when I'm in control of what is happening, this is easy with older or fat guys who don't want it about their bodies, they want it about mine so I love that ... watching them enjoy my body and I get paid, it's easy for me ... I offer massage too but sometimes they [clients] want to pay to massage me.

Men working within the sex industry catering for the gay community have reported a greater 'sub-cultural prestige' where a combination of youth, beauty and a muscular body transforms them into the most coveted men on the gay scene (Boden 2007, 130). The experience of being the object of such sexual desire and attention of others proved almost addictive for some male escorts whose egos were enhanced to such an extent that they were drawn back to sex work after initially deciding to leave (Parsons, Kohen, and Bimbi 2007, 235).

Watchers and 'meeters': generating social media 'fans'

Social media provided an increasingly important platform for the sex workers in this study to advertise and market themselves with people directed to their Instagram and Facebook accounts through a variety of channels. Some are directed from a link added to a Grindr profile while others connect independently to these social media accounts which are mostly kept open for the public to view either gym photos or more lifestyle identity photos such as vacation or consumer purchases. Instagram, a mobile photo-sharing app launched in 2010 with over 150 million subscribers (Schwartz and Haleboua 2014, 8), is the preferred social media site. Seven of the interviewees in my study had over 5000 followers on Instagram with two men having over 20,000. The relationship between the construction of this online presence, the accumulation of 'friends' or followers and male sex work is less than clear. The men retain private profiles in which they communicate with family and close friends, alongside more

public profiles, common practice identified among sexual minorities who seek to conceal their sexual identity (Gudelunas 2012, 356). This facilitates a majority (63%) of my respondents to advertise publicly on PlanetRomeo using a face shot – a figure comparable with the research findings of studies of internet escorts in the United States (Pruitt 2005, 197). When my respondents are using Grindr, this figure is higher though the men sometimes changed their profile photo daily, choosing sometimes to be more anonymous using a photo of their chest as opposed to their face or temporarily deleting their profiles, an recognised advantage of internet-based male sex work (McLean 2013, 9). In small cities – like Dublin – even efforts to partially conceal identities are not always successful with Gudelunas (2012, 359) Dallas-based respondents being able to identify each other through first names and a search of mutually shared friends on Facebook.

One of the most prolific users of social media in this study is a 23-year-old Venezuelan student called Renzo. He is in a relationship with a fellow Venezuelan national and both work as sex workers, either separately or as a couple charging €150 to €300 per hour depending on the service. When asked about the role Instagram plays in his life and how they intersect with his work as an escort he explains that –

It's about me but you don't know me from looking – what do you know from my photos? A guy with abs that likes Louis Vuitton (*laughs*) it's nothing, not me, my fans don't want that anyway, they want to see my body, my trainers ... I don't need them [Facebook & Instagram] to get business but guys get to see new photos so it's not like other sites [e.g. PlanetRomeo] where they have to log in, I'm on their phone when they wake up in the morning, on their bus and some guys will turn from watchers to meeters.

Renzo does indeed like Louis Vuitton. Many photos on his Instagram profile are of his designer luggage, shoes, wallets or holdalls usually travelling through airports or on trains travelling between Zurich and Vienna, the two cities he describes as being the most financially lucrative when on tour. Renzo prefers to use the word *fans* to describe what Facebook calls friends or Instagram's followers. Indeed many of his photographs are taken in clubs with fans – strangers or acquaintances – that are shown beside a smiling and an always shirtless, Renzo. Significantly, these social media fans – the watchers – as Renzo describes them above can also be a source of financial reward. I argue that the interaction men like Renzo have with their followers resembles a form of para-social relationship developed by Horton and Wohl (1956) to explain the intimacy between fans and television stars of the era. In a digital age that has facilitated the proliferation of both the very concept of celebrity and the mobile technology that has granted access into the lives of the famous and not so famous, we have to re-evaluate the role of what Rojek (2016, 15) describes as 'second order relationships' in people's lives. Although Rojek's analysis focuses largely on celebrity culture and is premised on relationships with people we will never communicate with, the analysis of Renzo's use of social media reveals a fan base larger than many public figures that facilitate interaction – at a price.

He explains that –

Renzo: On Instagram a photo might get a few hundred likes – I love likes, when I put a new photo up I get crazy checking watching it go up, I'm competitive about it, it's crazy. I also get messages and some private ones wanting particular photos from guys than can be anywhere, everywhere or who want cam and I give them my Amazon wish list for that ...

Interviewer: What have you included in the wish list?

Renzo: Mainly its gym stuff – shorts, tops, underwear, I put a wallet on too – it was a lot but you never know ... if you want to look at photos of my body ... well you can support me

Renzo's almost obsessive pursuit of more photo 'likes' illustrates what Race (2015b, 498) describes as a gay identity that 'takes the form of a compelling mode of everyday distraction, personal validation and social recognition'. The quest for this social recognition intersects with the sexual entrepreneurship (Lane 2000) skills displayed by escorts like Renzo, who heavily invest in photos and services that adapt and target clients both online and off. Watchers and potential *meeters* are invited into a carefully choreographed online world of parties, travel and designer goods that allows them partial access to communicate with the object of desire. This online world represents a strictly edited version of an individual's tastes, interests and conversations (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010).

While previous research has identified clear boundaries between the professional and personal lives of male escorts (Smith, Grov, and Seal 2008, 194) I argue that this distinction regarding their online identity is far from clear cut. Escorts like Renzo are involved in the careful management of their online identities and the impressions of others in a manner reminiscent of Goffman's (1959) *front* and *back stage* performances. Goffman (1959) provides a framework to understand how social actors navigate front and back stage areas of their life as they perform social interaction with others. Drawing from a tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), this approach illustrates how the self and identity are created through interaction with others. Goffman (1959, 37) reminds us that for most social roles 'a particular front has already been established for it' including 'size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures' (55). As the data from the article reveal the lives of sex workers are no different although their merger of offline and online identities complicates a clear distinction between front and back stage.

Following Goffman (13, 14), there is a standard *setting* for these photos – usually the gym, but also nightclubs or retail stores. Renzo's nightclub photographs for example follow a standard pattern; he is taking the photo of himself, staring in the mirror, always shirtless while nightclub patrons pass either inconspicuously behind him or, more likely, join him in the frame. While the fellow patrons are invariably flushed and sweaty from the club, Renzo always remains composed, groomed and in control – reflecting the 'officially accredited values of the society' (23) – youth, beauty and muscularity. Also consider when Renzo talks, inadvertently about the rigour of the *back stage* performance in bathrooms where bodies are, in Goffman's words 'cleansed, clothed, and made up in these rooms can be presented to friends in others'.

People not turning up or sending a message late to say they are not coming is bad, you could have said no to other work or maybe these guys they get scared I don't know, it takes my time away, also when you have to prepare for clients, my hygiene procedure which takes my time away for nothing.

The hygiene procedure referred to by Renzo is an enema prior to sex with clients but he is also involved in other more time consuming preparation of the body before photos are placed online or he meets clients, from waxing, to monitoring a strict calorie intake to the 200 abdominal crunches he does daily.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that spaces in which male sex work is advertised and negotiated have continued to be subject to transformation. While accepting the dominant role of technology in the advertising of sexual services, there has been a movement from specific escort-only locations on websites like PlanetRomeo to mobile GPS applications like Grindr. While there has been a movement of elements of the sex industry (like sex shops) into the more visible mainstream high street, male sex work has also moved into more mainstream dating apps like Grindr. My respondents revealed the often mixed motivations for this shift where a majority enjoy the flexibility of online apps where they often do not have to self-identity as escorts, facilitating a cheap and efficient means to enter and re-entry the world of commercial sex. This rise in the ambiguity and fluidity between personal and professional online lives poses a continued challenge to researchers in capturing accurate data on the prevalence of those that sell sex within gay communities.

My respondents reveal the rise of social media sites like Instagram that continue to play a role in the sometimes ambiguous online performance of their lives serving to showcase their bodies that remain central to both their self-identity and to their connection with potential clients or paying admirers. The men in this study have capitalized on wider trends within society like the proliferation of social media, the continued sexualization of the male body and the increasing popularity of gym selfies. These developments offer prospective clients a window into the world, albeit a highly choreographed one, of the male sex worker where they experience a real life, real-time insight into the travel, consumer tastes and body projects undertaken.

Notes

1. These 2014 figures were obtained from the Press Office at the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service <http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/Home>.
2. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences Act) 1993 is the principle legal framework governing prostitution in Ireland which criminalizes the soliciting, loitering and importuning of sex, though not the exchange of money for sex itself. See Ward (2010) for a comprehensive overview.
3. <http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=29630>.

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