Beyond the Gaze: Briefing on Customers who Buy Sex Online

Background: Aims & Methods

Beyond the Gaze (BtG) is the largest study to date of the online adult sex work sector in the UK, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council from 2015-2018 it has been carried out by researchers at the University of Leicester & University of Strathclyde. The overarching question the research explores is: **How has the Internet shaped the 21st Century adult commercial sex industry in the UK and what is the role of regulation?**
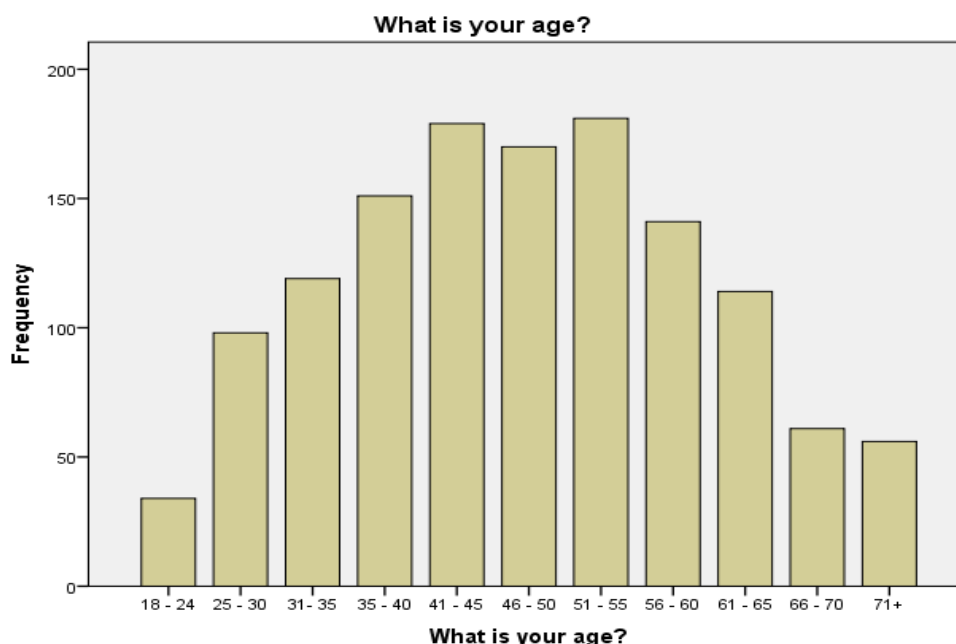
BtG is a participatory action research project which used a mixed methods approach. The key components of the study carried out have been:

   a. Largest online survey to date of internet based sex workers, in and/or working in the UK with n=641 participants;
   b. Semi-structured interviews with 62 sex workers of all genders who use the internet for their work;
   c. Semi-structured interviews with; 56 police officers from 16 force areas across Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. Plus interview with a further 21 stakeholders including managers or moderators of online advertising platforms/ forums/safety schemes for sex workers, plus other experts on online regulation of commercial sexual services.
   d. Largest online survey to date of customers of sex workers using the internet with 1,323 participants;
   e. Online survey of 49 projects providing support to online sex workers;
   f. Desk research to map online spaces where sex workers market and/or provide services.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

   • 1,309 (98.6%) provided information on their age. Figure 1 shows the distribution of age categories for the 1,309 individuals who responded to this question. As the graph shows, the majority (63%) of respondents were aged between 35 to 60 years. Very few (2.6%) were aged between 18-24 years, whilst 9% of the respondents were over 65 years old.

Figure 1: Distribution of Age of Respondents

- Regarding gender, as Table 1 shows, overwhelmingly 1271 of 1,299 participants identified as male, with 13 identifying as female, 1 transgender female-male, 1 transgender male-female and 5 identified as non-binary.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	1271	97.8
Female	13	1.0
Transgender female - male	1	0.1
Transgender male - female	1	0.1
Non-binary	5	0.4
Other	3	0.2
Prefer not to say	5	0.4

Table 1: Gender frequency of respondents

- Of the 1,300 individuals who provided information on sexuality, more than three quarters indicated that they were heterosexual (76.5%). The remaining included gay (9.6%), lesbian (0.2%), bisexual (11.7%) or preferred not to say/other (2%). Of the 5 individuals who identified as non-binary 3 indicated that they were bisexual and 1 indicated that they were heterosexual. Four of the 13 females reported that they were bisexual.
- 1,305 respondents answered the question regarding marital status: 499 (38.2%) of participants were single, 463 (35.5%) of individuals were married, co -habiting accounted for 97 participants (7.4%) and the remaining 93 responses stated that they were divorced (7.1%).
- 1,323 participants provided information on ethnicity. 80.9% identified themselves as White English/ Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British. Table 1 highlights the gender of respondents in the study.
- Of 1,287 participants willing to discuss dependents, 437 (34%) indicated that they did financially support dependents whilst 850 (66%) indicated that they did not financially support any dependents.
- Regarding salary before tax, 1,294 individuals responded. 16.2% of individuals reported that their annual salary before tax was between £21,000 and £30,000. Similarly, 15.5% reported a salary more than £70,000. Very few individuals (1.2%) reported an annual salary of less than £5,000.

Using technology

- Of the 1,323 responses 88.4% indicated that they used internet escort directories to look for sexual services online followed by independent sex worker websites (56.9%) and client review websites (40.4%). Social media was not a common method for searching online sexual services.
- 1,241 individuals answered the question regarding commercial sexual services used via the internet. Many responses highlighted in-person services (93.8%) followed by webcamming (21.3%). 20 selected other with responses including buying intimate items and sex emails.

- Interestingly those aged between 31-35 were more likely to use the internet to access phone chat than any other age group. The 18-24 age group were most likely to organise via instant messaging than any other age category.
- Most participants when asked about frequency of searching (488 out of 1,307) said that they used the internet several times per week to explore commercial sexual services (see Table 2); with some highly prolific users (178, 13.6%) searching several times a day.

Frequency of Searching	Frequency	Percent
Several times a day	178	13.6
Once a day	151	11.6
Several times a week	488	37.3
Once a week	221	16.9
Once a month	132	10.1
Every few months	118	9.0
Once a year	12	0.9
Less than once a year	7	0.5

- Regarding length of time using the internet for sexual services of the 1,308 responses 74.1% had used the internet for this purpose for more than 2 years, 50.2% of these individuals said between 2 and 5 years whilst 23.9% said 5 years or more. Lastly, 6.7% said they had only been using the internet for less than two months.

Table 2: Frequency of Searching by Respondents

- A large proportion of respondents (59.1%) used smartphones to access commercial sexual services, laptops (59.3%), desktop based computers (39.2%) and Tablets (36.7%). Smartphones were the most popular device used amongst those aged 31-35 (84.9%).
- Customers filtered the search results in many ways. The most popular way to filter the search result was by geographical location (88.7%), services on offer (62.6%) and price (61.2%).
- The majority of the sample (1,050 out 1,323) said they had websites which they either preferred or frequently used.
- A variety of methods were used to negotiate or make appointments. 905 (68.4%) of the 1,323 individuals said that they used email, phone calls were used by 913 (70.4%) while text messages were used by 824 (62.3%) of responders. Only 2.2% (n = 29) used Skype while personal messaging was used by 138 (10.4%) responders.
- When respondents were asked if they would buy sexual services from providers in other sectors if the internet was not available the results indicated that 42.2% would, while 55.9% said they would not. 2.0% did not respond.
- With reference to reviews of sex workers, 230 (18.9%) of responders said that reviews were essential and they would not book an escort without it. The bulk of responses (n = 958; 78.8%) stated that the reviews were very useful (n = 506; 41.6%) or somewhat useful (n = 452; 37.2%). Only 2% (n = 27) said that client reviews were not useful.
- When writing reviews, of the 1,284 responses, 843 said that they had written a review. 946 people provided information on how many reviews they had written with 252 writing no more than 2, 259 wrote between 3 and 5 and 93 had written more than 30 reviews. Content of reviews contained: location, price, quality of service, appearance and accuracy of photos, specialities as well as safety.

- 521 out of 1,272 individuals had concerns surrounding review sites. General themes within responses contain: inaccuracy, boastful or fake reviews, and the subjective nature of reviews.
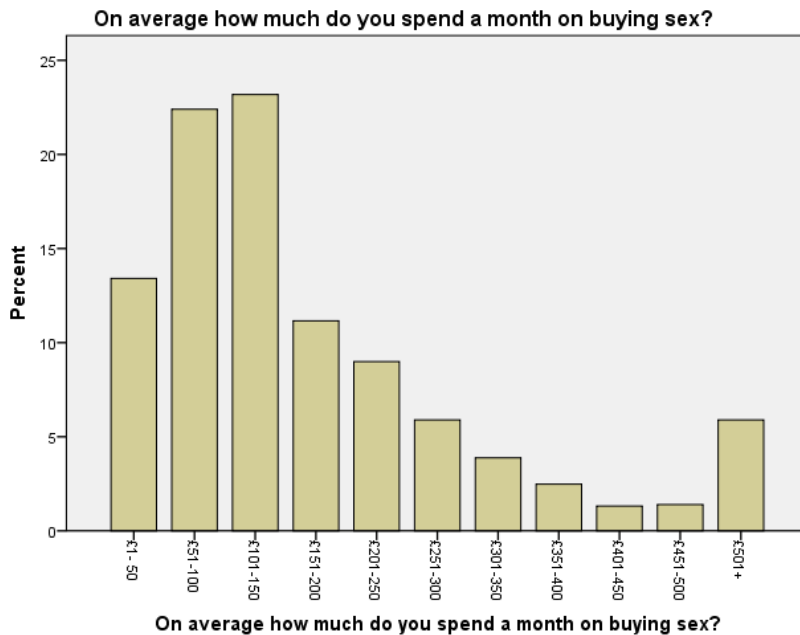
Purchasing sex history

- Study participants were presented with a large range of sexual services to describe their habits. Oral sex (82.1%) was most popular, vaginal sex (70.1%), followed by masturbation (42.9%), anal sex (31.2%), girlfriend or boyfriend experience (61.9%), BDSM (13.3%), role-play (14.8%) and three way (15.5%), erotic massage (28.5%), stripping (11.3%) and rimming (20.8%). Sixty-four individuals selected other including: fisting, cross-dressing, face sitting, bareback, pegging, photo taking/filming, and strap on/toys.
- How often participants paid for sexual services varied. Of 1,298 respondents, the majority (42.4%) reported they **pay for sex a few times a year** followed by respondents paying for sex once or twice a month (31.5%). A breakdown of frequency is shown within Table 3.

	Frequency	Percentage
I have only paid for sex once/a few times	**154**	**11.9**
A few times a year	**551**	**42.4**
Once or twice a month	**409**	**31.5**
Several times a month	**120**	**9.2**
Every week	**49**	**3.8**
Several times a week	**15**	**1.2**

Table 3: Frequency of Searching

- When purchasing sex, 47.5% of the 1,323 individuals in the survey said that they had only ever used the internet. Parlour and saunas had been used by 38.7% of responders while 11.9% had used walk-up flats in London. Purchasing sex on the street received 15% responses while bars and clubs was the least popular (7.8%). Other included: Amsterdam windows, newspaper/magazine adverts and brothels.
- Of the 1,323 individuals in the survey, nearly a quarter (13.8%) said that they purchased sexual services from men with the majority purchasing sex from women (86.0%). 3.8% and 4.0% of individuals reported that they purchased sexual services from transgender men and women respectively.
- The most popular age brackets for first purchasing sex were 21-25 (19.7%) and 26-30 (17.3%).
- 91.5% of survey participants purchased sexual services in the UK with 31.5% who had purchased services elsewhere in Europe and 26.8% purchased services elsewhere in the world. Countries most listed were: Australia, Netherlands, Ukraine, Thailand and Japan.
- When asked how long they would continue to buy sexual services 37.1% said that they would continue to buy sexual services for the foreseeable future, 12.8% said that they would continue indefinitely while 3.7% said that they have stopped and did not plan to start again. 25.5% said that they did not know.
- The amount spent each month on sexual services varies. 1,323 people in the study provided information on monthly expenditure for sexual services which is portrayed in Figure 2. The most popular responses were £51- £100 (21.8%) and £101- £150 (22.6%).

Figure 2: Average amount spent on sex
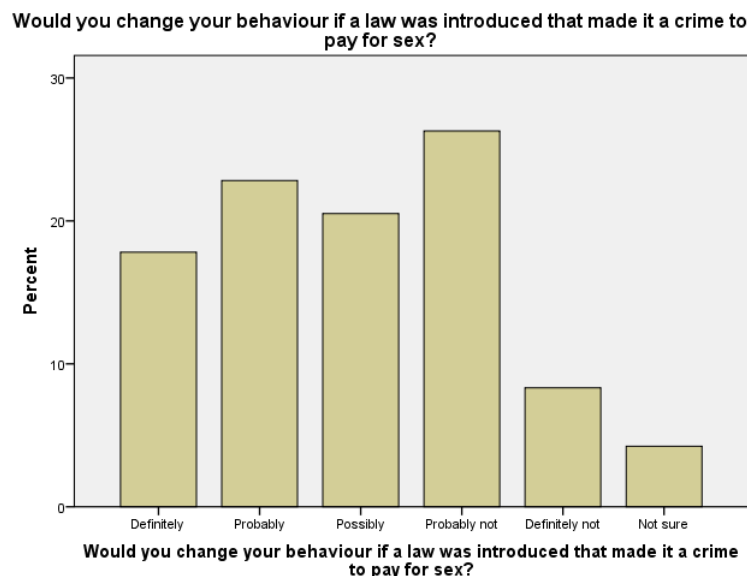
Relationship with sex workers
- 571 (43.9%) out of 1,302 said that they see different people when paying for sexual services. A number of people try or are able to see the same person: 41 (3.1%) always see the same person, 304 (23.3%) have a regular person but sometimes see others, and 279 (21.4%) try to see the same person but see someone else if that is not possible. The remaining 107 individuals stated that they had only paid for sex a few times.
- More than 50% of the 1,301 individuals who responded to the question indicated that they sometimes discuss family life with sex workers.
- The majority of respondents (918 out of 1,305) felt that sex workers sometimes received sexual pleasure in their interactions.

Online identity
- Nearly half (45%) felt that they always had concerns about using their real identity online.
- The majority 64.8% (842 out of 1,299) of respondents stated that they had a separate email address for commercial sex purposes.
- Regarding crimes and scams, of the 1,290 who responded, 235 (18.2%) had been victims when purchasing sexual services online. These included: payment for services that had not been delivered, credit card/ bank fraud and fake profiles.
- Using cash was the most popular way (1,217 out of 1,302 responses) to pay for services.
- A large majority (97.7% of 1,323 individuals) said that they did not pay third parties for access to sexual services.
- Surprisingly many respondents 62.6% (788 of 1,258) said that they do not take precautions to protect their financial security. Of those that did (470 individuals) ways to protect themselves included: cash only, using providers they trust, making sure the website is secure, using a dedicated sex work only debit card and also by using PayPal.

- Nearly half (49.9% of 1,301) of the respondents were not concerned about the legalities of looking for and arranging sex and again just over half (50.1% of 1,295) said that they had no concerns when it came to purchasing sexual services from a sex worker in person.
- Regarding exploitation, most (991 out of 1,300, 76.2%) of the participants said that they had never encountered conditions where they felt the sex workers were being exploited. 23.8% had encountered situations where sex workers were being exploited at least once, 2.9% said several times, 4.5% said a few times, 10.5% said rarely and 5.8% said once. Exploitative situations identified included: coercion, forced prostitution by pimp/ boyfriend/madam, exploitation of people with disabilities, trafficking of Eastern European women, women working in cramped and unhygienic conditions and potential underage foreign girls.
- When asked what they did, respondents said: they stopped using agencies, phoned crime stoppers/ police, walked away, gave money but did not have sex.
- Participants were asked if they would change their behaviour if a law was introduced that made it illegal to pay for sex. The results vary and are shown in Figure 3. 'Probably not' was the response which was selected by the highest percentage of respondents (26.3% of 1,297) but 'probably' was also selected by over 20%.

Figure 3: Change of behaviour if it was a crime to pay for sex

Webcamming
- Of the 1,293 responses received 487 participants indicated that they had watched live webcams while more (n=806) indicated that they had never. Of those who said that they had watched live webcams the majority (97.1%) were male. Single individuals accounted for the greatest proportion (40.9%) of those who had watched webcams while married individuals accounted for 34.0%.
- One third of 482 responders said that they only watched free shows while the remaining responses indicated some form of expenditure on webcamming services.
- When deciding to buy webcamming services criteria included: Physical appearance, fetishes, instant availability, wanting to try something new, seeing a regular model, someone that they could talk to or someone who puts the individual at ease.

- The majority of the 479 responses (45.1%) said that they liked both public and private shows. Public shows were preferred by 23.4% while private shows were preferred by 31.5%.
- When it came to tipping in public shows 31.8% said they sometimes tipped while 31.2% said that they never tipped. A small proportion (6.7%) always tipped and 81 responders (17.5%) said that they rarely tipped.
- When asked if they showed their face, of the 478 responses received, 89 individuals stated that they always did, 83 said they sometimes showed their face, 42 said they rarely showed their face, and 113 said that they never showed their face. In regard to models, 84.2% stated that they always chose a cammer who showed their face.
- Of the 444 who answered the question regarding preference for models. Few of the responses (7.0%) indicated a preference for the same model. Some (24.5%) said they usually had the same model but occasionally cammed with others. Many individuals stated that they had some favourite models but regularly cammed with others (36.9%).
- Nearly 50% (49.8%) of the 472 responders felt that webcamming was not intimate whereas 24.6% said that it was intimate and 25.6% said that it was sometimes intimate. Intimacy was obtained by mutual masturbation, talking to the model first, chatting about personal things, eye contact, intimate chats, shared audio, sharing their body with the model via pictures/webcam, shared experiences and the use of the individual's name in conversations.
- More than 50% of the respondents stated that they always masturbated during webcam sessions (52.2%) while 32.0% said that they sometimes masturbated. Very few said that they rarely (n = 45; 9.4%) or never (n = 31; 6.4%) masturbated during webcam sessions.

Further information

For further information and resources go to the BtG website https://www.beyond-the-gaze.com

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A book 'Internet Sex Work', based on wider findings from BtG is available from: http://www.springer.com/gb/book/9783319656298

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