The Weblight-District: A study of how women use the internet to work independently as 'sex workers', their investments in this kind of work, and the challenges this poses.

by

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Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Sociology at Stellenbosch University

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Cr tkl 2014

Declaration

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Abstract

One of the characteristics of discourses about people who are marginalised such as sex workers, in many societies, is the way they are rendered through these very discourses as 'Other' through, for example, forms of generalisation and homogenisation, attributions of immorality and infantilisation, which construct sex workers as bad or as helpless victims with little or no agency. In opposition to these discourses, my research is primarily concerned with advancing the voices of sex workers engaged in particular contemporary forms of sex work made possible by the access to the internet, and exploring with them how they construct and experience sex work: how they present and identify themselves.

A qualitative, netnographic methodology influenced by grounded theory was employed, drawing extensively on semi-structured interviews with 15 independent escorts who advertise on a South African escorting website, referred to as *Redlace.com*. Content analysis of this website provided an additional source of data.

The construction of the sex worker as someone who is simply controlled and exploited by others and who has no mind of her or his own, I found, was very much at odds with the manner through which the independent escorts in my study presented themselves. As I started conducting the interviews, I discovered that even the term 'sex worker', which I had always understood as non-judgmental, was considered inappropriate and pejorative by most of the women in my study. In my discussion, I illustrate how, by soliciting clients via the internet, escorts are able to gain control over their working conditions allowing them to work independently and anonymously, which in turn renders them less publicly visible compared to other sex workers who solicit clients form the street. While I identify various continuities and discontinuities between independent escorting and other forms of sex work, the most profound and unanticipated difference was how some independent escorts whose independence and dissociation from organised forms of sex work in institutions such as brothels or escorts, placed them in a position where they were able to, and wanted to, present the 'girlfriend experience'. Herein the independent escorts performed and/or became like girlfriends offering sex, but sex mediated by 'dating', and expressions of care and warmth symbolically associated with developing girlfriend/boyfriend relations.

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor, mentor, and friend Professor Rob Pattman, who has guided, supported and inspired me. His endless patience and encouragement throughout the completion of my thesis has been invaluable.

I would also like to thank the staff at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology for all their help during the past two years.

Thank you to my friends and family who have been supportive throughout. Thank you for your motivation and many kind words. Special thanks to my parents, Willie and Dorothy van Rooi, the Keyser family, and my partner, Chantel O'Neill, for their unwavering support, love and words of inspiration throughout.

I also want to thank all of the research participants for sharing their personal experiences to make valuable research possible.

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Introduction

1.1   Background and research problem statement

> *If you're going to have opinions about sex work, you need to start by listening to sex workers. Far too many laws and public policies about sex work get set without ever inviting our input. Many of these laws and policies are supposedly in place to protect us from abuse and exploitation… but if you don't listen to us about what our problems are and how we want them handled, it doesn't help us. It patronizes us. It treats us as children, incapable of making decisions for ourselves. And the laws and policies will typically hurt us more than they help us.* (Christina, 2004:5).

One of the characteristics of discourses about people who are marginalised such as sex workers, in many societies, is the way they are rendered through these very discourses as 'Other' through, for example, forms of generalisation and homogenisation, attributions of immorality and infantilisation, which construct sex workers as bad or as helpless victims with little or no agency. By 'Othering' sex workers, the voices of the men and women working in this trade are also silenced or marginalised. 'Othering' sex workers often involves homogenising sex work and this is reflected, I want to argue, in the lack of recognition in much of the literature on sex work (popular and academic) of the very different forms it takes in South Africa and many other contemporary societies.

My research, in contrast, is primarily concerned with encouraging (advancing?) voices of sex workers engaged in particular forms of sex work made possible by the access to the internet, and exploring with them how they construct and experience sex work. How they present and identify themselves, what they like or dislike about what they do, the kinds of relations they establish with clients as well as friends and relatives and the risks and or benefits they experience or derive from their work are all key themes which I aim to explore with sex workers who work independently and advertise themselves over the internet. Rather than assuming basic commonalities between these sex workers and those engaged in other forms of sex work, my interest is in exploring how the sex workers in my study construct and experience their social worlds, and whether and how they compare themselves with people

engaged in other forms of sex work, which may involve working in institutions with other sex workers, being employed by others and/or being more publicly visible.

During the last two decades, mainstream media has focussed on sex work largely through the lens of sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS, women and children, and sex workers who solicit clients from the street, while academic literature has most often targeted women and children who solicit clients outdoors as convenient objects of study (Weitzer, 2005a: 211). There is a deficit in the literature regarding the experiences of sex workers who solicit clients indoors, male and female customers, male and transgender workers, and managers. This deficit in literature is problematic since it reinforces the stereotype of sex workers as women forced into the industry, who solicit clients from the street, and are controlled and dominated by pimps and or clients. I conducted this study not only to help fill this gap in the literature, but also because I am interested in how my findings may challenge stereotypical constructions of sex workers.

My research focuses on female independent escorts who work from home or a hotel, and who utilise a wide range of media to advertise their services. These include the classified sections in magazines and newspapers, pamphlets and even business cards strategically placed in phone booths or other areas where potential clients might frequent. Authors such as Pruit and Krull (2011), Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor and Wolak (2011), and Jenkins (2004) are of the opinion that during the last decade, the internet has become the main medium through which independent escorts solicit clients. This shift could be attributed to the rise in internet access worldwide. In 2012 the number of internet users worldwide reached 2.27 billion, almost double what it was 5 years ago at 1.15 billion (Internet world stats, 2013). Therefore, in theory, the internet could have exponentially increased the ability of sex workers to reach many potential clients through informative advertising.

Apart from advertising to a large audience, utilising the internet to solicit clients offers additional advantages. Studies suggest that sex workers who solicit clients on the internet run a lower risk of being arrested and victimised (Pruit & Krull, 2011; Sanders, 2004; Jenkins, 2004; Luiz & Roets, 2000). This is because different levels of visibility are required from the sex workers who solicit clients via the internet and those who work from the street. Arguably, sex workers who solicit clients from the street are the most visible since they operate in public spaces, whereas those men and women who solicit clients via the internet are less

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exposed and have more control over what identifying information they provide. Notably, sex workers who work from the street have to present themselves according to the stereotypical construction of a sex worker, to differentiate themselves from other individuals who may also be in the area but who are not sex workers. In addition, independent escorts are said to possess more control over their working conditions. However, soliciting clients via the internet is not without its pitfalls, since the exposure of their identity, blackmail and stalking are all listed as potential risks. A more detailed discussion of the benefits and risks associated with soliciting clients via the internet follows in Chapter 2.

This study is interested in whether similar arguments might apply in South Africa. According to *World Wide Worx*'s executive summary, the South African internet user base has grown from 6.8 million in 2010 to 8.5 million at the end of 2012 (Goldstuck, 2012)[1]. A large proportion of the growth in access to the internet is a result of smartphones and ordinary mobile phones that can be employed to access the internet. Studies that have attempted to map the commercial sex work industry in South Africa have all found that independent escorts constitute a minority of sex workers – sex workers who solicit clients form the street being the majority (*WLC*, *SWEAT* & *Sisonke*, 2013; Gould & Fick, 2008). Nevertheless, one has to remember that independent escorting is a more clandestine form of sex work. If all these factors are taken into account, there could be a considerable number of independent escorts in South Africa unaccounted for – of who relatively little is known because of their low profile or invisibility in public spaces such as streets, clubs or brothels.

Apart from establishing the risks and benefits South African independent escorts' experience, this thesis will also explore how and why these women choose to advertise themselves on the internet and how this affects and impacts on the way they see and present themselves. In addition, I will examine a trait which authors such as Brennan (2001) and Bernstein (2007) have argued is unique to indoor forms of sex work: the formation of intimate and/or romantic relationships between sex workers and their clients. Milrod and Weitzer (2012:449) are of the opinion that in recent years, there has been a "gradual normalization of independent escort prostitution, where sexual encounters have come to resemble quasi-dating relationships". These authors conducted a study where 2,442 online postings on an escort review website

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[1] *World Wide Worx* is South Africa's leading independent technology and strategy organisation with a focus on technology in business strategy.

were analysed. Approximately one-third of these discussions included narratives about emotional intimacy between sex workers and their clients, many of who expressed a desire to grow their relationships beyond the physical level (Milrod and Weitzer, 2012:447). Where these authors focussed on the experiences of intimacy from the perspective of clients, this thesis will explore how independent escorts experience and construct intimacy with clients. An intimate labour perspective and Erving Goffman's work on the presentation of self will inform the analysis of these constructions. By employing an intimate labour framework, I will be able to identify how intimacy or intimate relations have entered the commercial sex trade market place, where they are bought, sold, packaged and commercialised, and what benefits and challenges these pose to escorts who have chosen to offer this service. I elaborate on this intimate labour framework in Chapter 4. In light of this discussion, the problem statement can be constructed as follows:

> *To explore how particular women use the internet to work independently as*
> *'sex workers' and how these women experience and construct 'sex work',*
> *themselves and their relations with clients.*

1.2   Key objectives this thesis will examine

1) How they construct themselves as independent escorts, their investments in their work and how they position themselves in relation to sex workers engaged in other forms of sex work.

2) Their experiences and constructions of intimacy in their work.

3) The perceptions of the benefits and problems or risks incurred by engaging in this form of sex work, and their understandings, experiences and responses to stigma.

4) How they present themselves to potential clients on websites.

1.2   What do I call the people I am studying?

1.2.1   Sex workers

The ability to provide a clear account of its subject matter is usually considered a basic pre-requisite of a good research project. But in my project, how to name the people I am studying is in itself a contentious issue, which raises questions about gender and sexual power relations. Writers and gender activists critical of the judgmental connotations the term 'prostitute' carries, introduced the term 'sex worker' which I have been using. 'Prostitute' implies a bad woman and is indeed a commonly used term of abuse, along with 'whore' 'bitch' 'harlot' 'slut' 'tart' 'slag' and many others, for girls and women who are perceived as deviating from certain norms and standards of femininity in a patriarchal society, evaluated as either 'Madonna' or 'whore figures' (Goode, 2008:244). This means that they are expected to live up to high expectations and standards regarding their movements, how they dress, and socialise. Women are constructed as deviating from standards of femininity for wearing skirts which are considered 'too short', or socialising with 'too many' men, or being unaccompanied at night by a steady boyfriend or husband, and the effect of deploying such categories in this way is to control and regulate the behaviour of girls and women (Cowie & Lees,1981). Goode (2008:244) argues that a feature of patriarchal cultures is the operation of double sexual standards with boys and men tending to be positioned as the subjects of a 'sex-drive' discourse, and girls and women as the objects of this. According to Hollway (1984:238), the role of the heterosexual woman in this discourse is to act as gatekeeper who must not express her own sexual desires and needs. In contrast, women are positioned as subjects of what Hollway (1984:232) calls the 'have/hold' discourse, which defines and evaluates them in terms of their capacity to 'hold on' to what are perceived as naturally promiscuous men. While girls and women are praised in romantic fiction and idealised and sanctified in many religions as subjects of a 'have/hold' discourse, the female sex worker represents, according to Goode (2008:244), "the quintessential bad woman" for openly opposing the 'have/hold' discourse and expressing their sexuality, needs and desires with multiple partners.

While the term 'prostitute' is thus not a descriptive label which applies to people who sell sex but rather a pejorative term which connotes the deviation from womanhood; 'sex worker' is a non-judgmental term in the sense of identifying sex workers like any other workers, and does not contribute to their stigmatisation by defining them as particular types of (bad) women.

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For these reasons, I employ the term 'sex worker' to refer to a person who consensually exchanges their own sexual and/or 'intimate labour' for money. I wish to highlight the word 'consensual' as it allows for the differentiation between sex work and forced sex trafficking or sex slavery. I want to extend this conceptualisation by adding that the term cannot be applied to a person who is underage and compensated for sexual and/or intimate labour. This constitutes the commercial sexual exploitation of children and not sex work. The *Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce* (*SWEAT*) and other organisations who argue for the decriminalisation of sex work, also employ the term 'sex worker' to refer to the legal adult industry where sex work is acknowledged as work. *SWEAT* is a non-profit, South African organisation dedicated to defending the rights of sex workers, amplifying the voices of sex workers, and empowering sex workers with skills and knowledge. This organisation also offers services such as crisis counselling and providing legal advice to sex workers.

By employing the term 'sex worker', I hope to engage with the participants in my research in a non-stigmatising manner, yet the term 'sex worker' is not without its drawbacks, as Henry Trotter argues in his ethnographic study of the dockside sex work industry in Durban, South Africa. Trotter (2008:17) found that the term 'sex worker' was so "anodyne and literal and had almost no purchase among the women themselves" who participated in his research. Trotter (2008) sought a term that was sexually suggestive, locally meaningful, non-judgemental and 'catchy', and employed the term 'sugar girls' to refer to the sex workers he interviewed. I found Trotter's undertaking to find an alternative term that resonated with the views about themselves, of the women he was studying, particularly pertinent in the course of my own research. Indeed, the term 'sex work', which I had always understood as non-judgmental, was considered as inappropriate and pejorative by most of the women in my study who were apprehensive about being seen as workers simply selling their labour power, and commodifying aspects of the relationship they offered and developed with some of their clients. These women preferred to be called 'escorts' rather than sex workers. In addition, the South African websites where men and women can post advertisements also lists these individuals as 'escorts'. I therefore decided to use the term 'independent escorts' to denote the type of sex work addressed in this study. Therefore, an independent escort can be conceptualised as a (generally female) sex worker who advertises his/her services through either print or electronic media, and who is normally contacted by clients telephonically. Independent escorts operate from private premises and/or hotels. The prices charged are high while exploitation by third parties and violent victimisation are low.

1.4   Research Questions and research design

A qualitative research methodology, situated within a social constructivist and symbolic interactionism theoretical perspective, was adopted for this study. I chose to conduct a qualitative study because it emphasises the insider's perspective and provides data that not only aids in understanding the social actions of research participants and addresses them as active agents, but also how they construct and experience these actions. I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with female, South African independent escorts who advertised themselves on the internet. In contrast to the discourses which pathologise sex workers, my aim is to engage with the women in my study as authorities and to encourage them to raise issues relating to their experiences of sex work. I adopt a semi-structured interview approach in which I ask questions in relation to already specified themes but in ways that encourage them to raise issues, which I explore with them. My concern with encouraging my participants to contribute to setting the research agenda is reinforced by the relative scarcity of literature about independent escorts in SA. Additional protocols were also developed to ensure that data was not only gathered from research participants, but that they could also contribute to the very process of the analysis of the findings. A more detailed discussion of the research methodology I employed is provided in Chapter 5.

1.5   Chapter Outline

One of my key concerns in this study is not to homogenise the people engaged in different forms of sex work, as is often the case in popular debates about sex work. In Chapter 2, I set out to discuss and compare different forms of sex work in South Africa. I examine continuities and discontinuities between these forms in terms of conditions and types of work, and the extent to which the work produces identifications with other sex workers or not. How publicly visible are sex workers who engage in particular kinds of sex work and how do particular forms of sex work produce particular kinds of relations with clients and other sex workers? Do different kinds of sex workers experience stigmatisation and if so what forms do these take? Are they more or less susceptible to particular forms of abuse from clients and others, such as the police? I develop a critique of popular and contemporary ways of homogenising sex work which conflates this with trafficking. While many women working in the sex industry are indeed victims of trafficking, I argue that it is highly problematic to present sex work as being synonymous with trafficking because it denies very significant

differences between different forms of sex work and people's motivations for engaging this, as well as the kinds of challenges that these pose. I argue that this is problematic because it feeds into and is informed by constructions of sex workers as the 'Other': as people who are coerced and manipulated and are not able to rationalise or think for themselves. The construction of the sex worker as someone who is simply controlled and exploited by others and who has no mind of her or his own is certainly, I found, very much at odds with the ways in which the independent escorts in my study presented themselves. Indeed one of my interests is to explore how they construct their lives and identifications, and the particular attractions their kind of work holds for them, in the specific social, cultural and material contexts they inhabit.

In Chapter 3, I examine theories of how and why sex work is so stigmatised in many societies including South Africa, and how stigmatisation may take different forms or constitute different kinds of problems for women (and men) engaged in different kinds of sex work depending on factors such as public visibility. I also examine different feminist contributions (radical and liberal) on how to theorise sex work in the context of patriarchal cultures, and the implications of these for developing social policies, which are seen as acting in the interests of women and sex workers. I elaborate on the work of *SWEAT*, a non-profit organisation in South Africa, influenced by a liberal feminist approach to sex work, which campaigns for health and human rights for sex workers and for the decriminalisation of sex work. I address concerns which the Director of *SWEAT*, Sally Shakleton, whom I interviewed, raised about the situation of online sex workers. I reflect upon my own orientations in my research and some of the theoretical underpinnings which inform this.

In Chapter 4, I engage with what has come to be called the 'intimate labour framework'. This framework focuses on the work that women engaged in 'sex work' do, but rather than reduce this to 'sex', it examines the emotional labour these women perform which includes offering forms of care, support and companionship. Such forms of support and care often typify what are predominantly (poorly paid) female professions. The intimate labour framework is particularly relevant in my research with independent sex workers, whose independence and dissociation from organised forms of sex work makes it possible for them to present the 'girlfriend experience' in which they perform and/or become like girlfriends. This means offering not just sex, but sex mediated by 'dating', and expressions of care and warmth symbolically associated with developing girlfriend/boyfriend relations. If intimacy does

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manifest itself during the interactions between independent escorts and their clients, it could be argued that these women are not only selling their bodies, but also intimacy. I elaborate on the commodification of intimacy in Chapter 4 where I discuss the intimate labour framework. I am interested in exploring the attractions such relationships and performances may hold for the women in my study who engage in these with clients, as well as the costs they may incur in terms of the hard emotional labour they involve, and how easy or difficult it is for them to perform this work with different clients and on a regular basis.

Chapter 5 expands on the research design and also addresses ethical considerations and the limitations of the study. Chapter 6 presents the findings from my field work, identifying key and emerging themes from the semi- structured interviews I conducted with 15 independent escorts and providing analysis of their narrative accounts, as well as focusing descriptively and analytically on how they present themselves to potential clients on the websites. Finally, Chapter 7 contains my conclusion where I synthesise key issues raised in the thesis and reflect on the significance of my work, in terms of its contribution to understanding a relatively new form of sex work in which the practitioners are relatively independent and publically invisible.

Chapter 2

Sex work in South Africa: Empirical studies about independent escorting and other forms of
sex work

2.1   Introduction

While my study focuses on women engaged in the independent escorting form of sex work, I compare this with studies about other forms of sex work where the solicitation occurs at streets, clubs, brothels and escort agencies. In a society in which sex work is stigmatised and illegal, studies of sex workers who are most publicly visible, notably those who solicit on the streets, have indicated that they are particularly prone to forms of violence and abuse from clients as well as, ironically, the enforcers of the law, the police. I conclude this chapter by focusing on independent escorts and what the perceived benefits, risks and challenges are of working in this way versus other forms of sex work. The literature discussed in this chapter serves as a point of comparison for identifying the differences and similarities in experiences for the independent escorts I interviewed, and other sex workers who solicit clients from the street, brothels or escort agencies.

2.2   Experiences on violence and abuse on sex workers

In this section, I provide a brief discussion of sex workers in South Africa and their experiences of violence and abuse, as well as the continuities and discontinuities of these experiences among sex workers working indoors (in organisations such as brothels and escort agencies) and working outdoors (on the streets). As stated earlier, these studies will be employed, as a point of reference, to identify how the experiences of the independent escorts I interviewed are similar and different to those discussed below.

In March of this year, sex workers and human rights activists held a protest against the continued abuse of sex workers at the hands of the police in South Africa. *The Sowetan* ran an online article on this event that featured the story of Zandile*, a 27 year old sex worker and *Sisonke* member who was raped by a Khayelitsha police officer[2].

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[2] *Sisonke* is a South African based organisation that advocates for sex workers to be recognised as professionals who have the same rights as other workers.

> I was working in Parow, and a man in a white Chevrolet stopped next to me. When I saw he was a police officer I tried to run away, but he threatened to call back-up if I did not get into his car. Once inside he asked what my prices were. I refused to tell him, so he said he would just take one of them then. He said if I did not give him my services he would arrest me. He then proceeded to do whatever he wanted with me in the car. After I reported the case to *SWEAT* and the *Women's Legal Centre*, the police officer started following me and I couldn't sleep at night. (Sowetanlive, 2013)

In a study about the nature of sex work in Cape Town, South Africa, Gould and Fick (2008) highlight the various forms of physical abuse, violence and corruption sex workers experience at the hands of police. Data was collected from 2 focus groups with 10 participants and 118 completed surveys (83 sex workers who solicit clients indoors and 35 who solicit clients from the street). According to their survey findings, police had threatened 47% of the sex workers interviewed with violence, 12% were raped by police officers, and 28% were asked for sex as payment for release from custody. While crimes by police against sex workers are a major issue in South Africa, it is important to note that the levels of violence vary according to the form of sex work. Gould and Fick (2008) argue that police tend to tolerate escort agencies and that they seldom have any interaction with police. This is in sharp contrast to the relationship between police and sex workers who solicit clients from the street.

A 2012 report by the *Women's Legal Centre* (*WLC*), *SWEAT* and *Sisonke*, provides a detailed account of violence experienced by sex workers in South Africa. A total of 308 sex workers were interviewed for this report. The majority are based in Cape Town (223) and Johannesburg (77), while the rest are located in Limpopo, Durban and Pretoria. The majority of these sex workers were women (276), with a small number of males (20) and transgender females (12). Of the sex workers who were prepared to provide their age, the majority were between 18 and 40 years of age. 64% of the respondents were sex workers who solicit clients from the street, whilst 35% worked indoors (some from brothels and others from hotels where they both live and work). According to this report (*WLC*, *SWEAT* & *Sisonke*, 2012), police abuse of sex workers is widespread as 70% of the respondents interviewed experienced some form of abuse at the hands of police. This included assault and harassment,

arbitrary arrest, violations of procedures and standing orders, violations in detention, and exploration and bribery[3].

In both the Gould and Fick (2008) and the *WLC*, *SWEAT* and *Sisonke* (2012) studies, it was female sex workers who solicit clients from the streets who experienced the most violence and abuse from police. This could be because sex workers, who solicit clients from the street, have to place themselves in a vulnerable position by transgressing both the law and the constructed normal standards of womanhood publicly. In this profession where visibility counts against you, the primary benefit of being an independent escort could be that the risk of violence and arrest is low due to the solicitation of clients and the meeting between the escorts and their clients being less visible to the public. Furthermore, there seems to be a shortage of capacity in dealing with sex workers who solicit clients via the internet. According to the South African Law Commission's paper 19 (2002), there appears to be no single consistent national policing strategy regarding brothels, escort agencies and those who employ the internet to solicit clients, with the general approach recognising that the enforcement of the Sexual Offences Act is a personnel-intensive endeavour, requiring methods such as continuous surveillance or entrapment. In more recent years, the conflation of trafficking and sex work has resulted in a more intensive focus on the indoor sector, especially if the sex workers are female and foreign. I will elaborate on this in the subsequent section of this chapter.

Returning to Gould and Fick's (2008) study of sex work in Cape Town, it becomes apparent that sex workers, predominately females, can also experience violence from their clients. In this study, sex workers who solicit clients from the streets were asked whether a client had ever raped them. 'Being raped' was conceptualised as being forced to have sex against their will, or forced to have sex in a manner which they had not agreed to e.g. unprotected- or anal sex. One in three sex workers reported being raped by a client (Gould & Fick, 2008). The catalyst for violence was the refusal of the sex worker to comply with the client's requests, particularly for unprotected or anal sex. Gould and Fick (2008) also state that half of the sex workers that reported being raped believed the police would not help them or that they did

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[3]In this study, the term 'harassment' was employed to refer to complaints by sex workers of how police officers will often park in the areas they work, then chase them away, threaten to arrest and/or the threat of physical assault, sit outside the apartments where they work and use dogs to scare them off.

not have sufficient evidence to lay a charge. Other crimes that respondents also felt they could not report to police were verbal abuse, refusal to pay, being robbed, and threats of physical assault. My study seeks to explore what experiences of violence and abuse, if any, independent escorts have had with law enforcement officials, what factors they believe influence the amount and degree of these experiences, and how their experiences are similar and different to those reported in the studies discussed above.

2.3 Concerns about the growing popularity of discourses which conflate sex work and trafficking

In her discussion of the narratives of sex trafficking, Carole Vance (2012:201) argues that the term 'trafficking' is often used as an equivalent and interchangeable term for 'sex trafficking': the trafficking of persons into a labour sector involving sexual labour rather than, for example farming, domestic service or factory work. By employing the terms 'trafficking' and 'trafficking into prostitution' interchangeably, it suggests that sex trafficking is the essential and most common form of trafficking. Vance (2012:203) also discusses how anti-trafficking documentaries can serve as a "form of propaganda that succeeds by appealing to visceral emotion" through their relentless focus on horrifying (and sometimes true examples) of abuse, as if these describe the diverse and complicated situations of sex trafficking. At this stage, I want to briefly focus on how the conflation of sex work and trafficking can affect the lives of sex workers.

Svati Shah (2011:16) argues that the conflation of sex work with trafficking has led to a heightened criminalisation of sexual commerce and has increased the social and legal stigma and discrimination that sex workers have to face. Sally Shakleton, Director of *SWEAT* indicated, when I interviewed her, that in South Africa there is also a conflation between foreignness and trafficking: "Whether you have been trafficked or not, if you are a foreign sex worker, your venue will be raided by police and you are likely to be targeted" (Shackleton, 2012). During this interview, she also reflected on an incident where a Nigerian female escort was arrested, offered no assistance, and kept in a cell for three days without any blankets because she was an alleged victim of trafficking. If this woman was a victim of trafficking, why was she treated in this manner? This incident is reminiscent of the *WLC*, *SWEAT* and *Sisonke* study, where sex workers reported similar experiences when being arrested.

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2.4   A comparison between outdoor and indoor forms of sex work

As previously mentioned, the majority of studies on sex work focus on the outdoor solicitation of clients and many of the problems associated with sex work are concentrated in this sector. According to Weitzer (2007:28), many of the sex workers who solicit clients from the streets work under abysmal conditions, sell sex out of necessity, use addictive drugs, risk contracting and transmitting sexual diseases, are exploited and abused by pimps, and are vulnerable to being assaulted, robbed, raped or killed. The study by Gould and Fick (2008) of sex work in Cape Town also found that more sex workers who solicit clients from the streets sell sex out of necessity, compared to sex workers employed at a brothel – see figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Reasons for entry into the industry (street-based) (Gould and Fick, 2008)
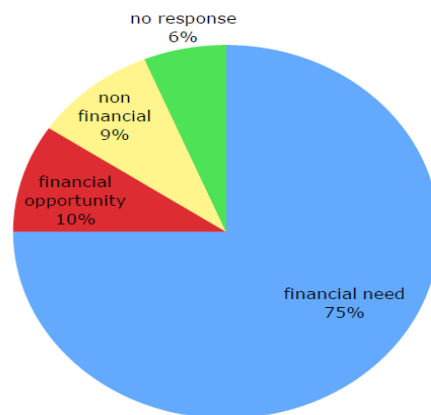
Figure 2: Reasons for entry into the industry (brothel-based) (Gould and Fick, 2008)

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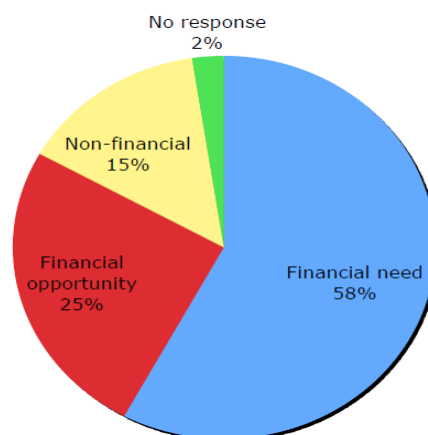
It is interesting to note that Gould and Fick (2008) differentiate between 'financial need' and 'financial opportunity'. The former is best described by the 'selling sex for survival' discourse, whilst the latter highlights a factor which is often not considered when exploring the reasons for selling sex. Bernstein's (2007) study on independent escorts in five US and European post-industrial cities between 1994 and 2002, expands on the reason why sex work has become so appealing to individuals who, in comparison to their street-based counterparts, have combined racial, class and educational advantages. Bernstein (2007:475) argues that despite the huge expansion of jobs in post-industrial economies, patterns of gendered inequality within the high technology sector meant that even white, college-educated women were likely to be excluded from the highest paying positions. Other studies (Milkman & Dwyer, 2002; Sassen, 2002; McCall, 2001) also indicate that compared to men with similar forms of educational capital and class provenance, middle-class women working in a post-industrial economy are more likely to work in the lowest-paid quarters of temporary help, the hospitality sector, or other poorly numerated occupations. Taking note of these gender disparities that characterise post-industrial economic life, the relative high pay of some forms of sex work, compared to other service sector jobs, this provides a persuasive motivation for women to become sex workers.

Class specific cultural dispositions are additional economic factors that shape middle-class sex workers' choices. Bernstein (2007) employed Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'the new petite bourgeois' to illustrate two primary class trajectories of the middle-class in post-industrial societies. The 'new petite bourgeois' refers to individuals who, on the one hand, have not "obtained from the educational system the qualifications that would have enabled them to claim the established positions their original social position promised them", and on the other hand, "those who have not obtained from their qualifications all they felt entitled to" (Bourdieu, 1984:357). In Bernstein's study the former is exemplified by Anna, a sex worker she met from an affluent suburb in Colorado, who had completed her BA degree but had decided to further her studies since she was struggling to find 'satisfactory' work with her current qualification. Women such as Zoey or Elise, who were dismayed that their current educational credentials had not lifted them to greater heights, illustrate the latter.

From this discussion, it is clear that various factors influence the motivations of individuals to become sex workers, and also that not all sex workers are forced into the profession. Nonetheless, I want to emphasise that even though some sex workers do have a choice, this choice is limited and constrained by broader societal issues such as unemployment and gender inequality (not just for sex workers but for women in general). In my study, I also explore the motivations of the independent escorts for becoming sex workers and whether financial need, financial opportunities or other incentives also factor into their decision.

I have highlighted that compared to sex workers who solicit clients from the street; those who solicit clients indoors are less likely to experience violence at work or to be arrested. These workers are also less drug-dependent and use drugs for different reasons. According to Weitzer (2007:29), street workers consume drugs or alcohol to cope with the adversities of the job, whereas indoor workers use them for both coping and as part of socialising with customers. In summary, sex workers who solicit clients form the street and those who work indoors differ markedly in their autonomy, motivations for doing sex work, work experiences, and risks.

2.5   Independent Escorts

In the previous section, I touched upon some of the unique characteristics of independent escorts. I wish to elaborate on this form of sex work in terms of risks and benefits associated with working independently and soliciting clients via the internet. To reiterate, an independent escort is a (generally female) sex worker who advertises her services through either print- or electronic media, and who is normally contacted by clients telephonically. For this discussion, I will focus upon independent escorts who employ the internet to solicit clients, the subjects of my study. These sex workers operate from private premises and hotels. Prices charged for services are high, while exploitation by third parties and risk of violence and arrest are low.

2.5.1   Advantages

The sex work industry is based upon the idea that the human body and sex can be commoditised, i.e. that sex workers literally sell their bodies and sex to generate an income. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006:19) describe how, in a hierarchal society, human bodies have become "sexed, gendered, racialized, and classed". The body is thus a site where social meaning can be constructed or resisted. Apart from soliciting clients in a red-light district, a sex worker can be identified according to the manner in which he/she is dressed and his/her demeanour[4]. Clients could thus base their decision on which sex worker to approach on criteria such as, the sex worker's beauty, race and build. Other features, such as the sex worker's personality, become irrelevant in this situation since the preliminary decision is based purely upon appearance. However, it could be argued that individuals who solicit clients on the internet have more control over the manner in which they present themselves to clients. Pruit and Krull (2011:53) argue that women who solicit clients on the internet can "pitch" themselves more accurately to clients, since the majority of websites allow for sex workers to provide information on the services offered, the rates, if they are willing to travel, the type of clients they seek, their personality, and a textual or visual description facilitated via photographs attached to the advertisement. Furthermore, when responding to an advertisement, clients usually have to contact the sex worker via telephone. Based on her research of web-based sex work, Sanders (2004:69) states that when clients respond to the online advertisements, sex workers have the opportunity to "screen and check the client's personality". The screening of clients could also be a safety precaution: by screening a potential client, the sex worker can obtain clues on the client's personality, which could assist the sex worker in determining whether the client is dangerous or not. Therefore, soliciting clients on the internet can be advantageous to sex workers, as they are able to seduce and screen clients in ways that sex workers who solicit clients from the street cannot.

The internet also allows for male clients to screen the sex worker who posted the advertisement. Jenkins (2004:15) states that one of the advantages for men, who seek sex workers on the internet, opposed to, for example sex workers who solicit clients from the street, is that they have more time to evaluate the potential service-providers by examining

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[4] The red-light district is a section of a city or town where sex workers solicit clients. One can also find brothels and other forms of adult entertainment in a red-light district.

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their pictures and personal descriptions. Some South African escort websites even rank workers and provide forums where male clients can post comments on the various sex workers and the quality of the services rendered.

From previous discussions, it became evident that the main motivation for engaging in sex work for both indoor- and outdoor workers is to generate an income. Other forms of sex work, where the solicitation occurs on the street or in a brothel, are characterised by having third-parties, such as a pimp, madam or manager, taking a percentage of a worker's earnings; the internet has thus facilitated escorts to work independently. Agresti (2009:40) argues that technology is more responsible for facilitating sex work by "expediting communications" between suppliers (escorts) and demanders (clients), than necessarily creating an increase in the supply of, or demand for sex workers. The internet seems to increase opportunities for entrepreneurialism within sex work, thereby allowing sex workers to set their own working hours, eliminate third party management and gain control over their working environment.

2.5.2   Disadvantages

The previous section illustrated how independent escorts who employ the internet to solicit clients, run a lower risk of being arrested and victimised, have more control over their business and the manner in which they represent themselves to clients, while also being able to screen potential clients before meeting them. However, soliciting clients via the internet is not without risk.

In his ethnographic study of the dockside sex work industry in Durban, Trotter (2008:52) describes how, as a result of the stigma surrounding sex work, many of the sex workers he interviewed led "double-lives", by ensuring that their friends and family were rendered unaware of the fact that they were selling sex. By advertising on the internet, the double-lives of sex workers could be exposed. Weitzer (2000:37) argues that sex workers who solicit clients on the internet, risk being 'discovered' by their family and friends, since they have to provide their personal contact details to the potential clients. These personal details include the sex worker's telephone number, location, and even photographs of his/her body and/or face. While the majority of sex workers are listed under a working-name, the amount of personal information available can lead to their real identity being exposed.

The literature has indicated that sex workers who solicit clients on the internet run a lower risk of being victimised than sex workers who solicit clients from the street. Yet, Jenkins (2004) states that some of the sex workers, who she interviewed, reported being stalked as a result of advertising their services on websites. Women like Tanya and Tamara expressed how "dodgy" clients have become obsessed with them and bombarded their email inboxes (Jenkins, 2004:39). Another potential danger brought on by posting such explicit and identifiable advertisements online, is the threat of blackmail. Tina stated that an ex-client sent a CD with her website to her partner, who did not know what she did, while Holly recollected how some people can save the pictures on the websites, which could be used against them in years to come (Jenkins, 2004:40).

It has been argued that the internet allows for escorts to work independently from home. However, some authors have also investigated the isolation many independent, home-based sex workers experience. Chapkis (2000:185) argues that while home-based workers in all trades risk some isolation, for those in the sex industry, the effect of social stigma exacerbates the problem. An independent escort interviewed by Chapkis reported the following:

> It's really isolating if you work for yourself. You wait for the phone to ring, talk to some jerk and hope he shows up. There is so much silence and secrecy involved that you need to talk to someone. (Chapkis, 2000:197)

Bronny's (1999) autobiographical study on sex work also emphasises how important it can be for some sex workers to avoid isolation. She states:

> Over the years I have undertaken different types of sex work… More often than not I chose to work in established businesses, as I preferred the supportive environment of working with peers. No one understands the experience of a hooker like another hooker. Another advantage was being able to leave work behind and go home to a separate personal life. (Bronny, 1999:15)

Therefore, sex workers who solicit clients on the internet may experience isolation and desire the sense of comradery felt by, for example, sex workers who are employed at brothels or escort agencies. Conversely, it should be noted that not all sex workers experience the need to work with other sex workers. Plumridge's (2001) study on the different forms of sex work in

New Zealand illustrates contrasting views on co-workers. He states that many women recounted how they would "watch TV", "have a coffee between clients", and "enjoy the company" (Plumridge, 2001:205). However, not all the women in his study welcomed the company of other sex workers, and reported that co-workers could be "very bitchy and not so nice to each other" (Plumridge, 2001:205). These workers also stated that making friends was not a priority: "You need to make money, not friends" (Plumridge, 2001:205).

2.6 Conclusion

I set out to discuss and compare different forms of sex work in South Africa, examining continuities and discontinuities between these and independent escorting facilitated by the internet. I highlighted the marked differences between different forms of sex work in terms of conditions and types of work, the extent to which the work produces identifications with other sex workers or not, forms of visibility or invisibility, makes possible particular kinds of relations with clients, other sex workers, and creates or minimises various kinds of risks for female sex workers, in a society in which sex work attracts stigma and is illegal. What makes various kinds of sex workers so vulnerable to forms of violence and abuse is, however open to debate, with some writers such as Peterson-Iyer (1998) and Jagger (1991) arguing that this derives from the criminalisation of the industry, while others such as Farley (2004) and Raymond (2004) have argued that sex work is inherently violent and should be equated to rape. In the next chapter, I engage with theoretical debates influenced by versions of feminism, the nature and source of stigma and violence towards (various forms of) sex work, as well as the policy implications which follow from these in relation to sex work.

Chapter 3

Stigmatisation, liberal- radical- and polymorphous feminist theoretical perspectives
on sex work.

3.1   Introduction

This chapter examines how theory can contribute to an enhanced understanding of sex work in a South African context. It is important to examine how sex work is theorised, since I am interested in how gender, sexuality and power feature in these theories and what the implications of these theories are for policies in relation to sex work.

I begin this chapter by discussing theoretical perspectives of how and why sex work is so stigmatised in many societies including South Africa, and how this stigmatisation can assume different forms or constitute different kinds of problems for women (and men) engaged in different forms of sex work. I draw upon Erving Goffman's work, *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (1963), where he examines why and how individuals become stigmatised and what coping strategies they employ when they diverge from socially constructed, acceptable forms of behaviour or appearance. The value of this theory is that it highlights the functioning of stigmatisation in relation to sex work, instead of taking for granted that sex work is innately problematic. I will also draw upon earlier works of Goffman (1959), and that of Hughes (1945), Goode (2008), and Crawford and Popp (2003) to enhance my understanding of the stigmatisation of sex work. I am interested in exploring whether independent escorts experience stigmatisation and if so, what form this takes, how these women manage this stigmatisation, and how similar or different it is to that experienced by other sex workers, such as those who solicit clients on the street.

I discuss different feminist contributions (radical and liberal) on how to theorise sex work in the context of patriarchal cultures, and the implications these have on developing social policies which are seen as acting in the interests of women and sex workers. Liberal feminists emphasise the construction of sex work as a voluntary contract, where the autonomy of both the sex worker and the client is stressed. Proponents of this perspective also advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work as, they argue, it will improve the working conditions and safety of sex workers. In opposition, radical feminist equate sex work, or as they refer to it - prostitution, to rape and slavery. They also argue that all women are affected by the coercive,

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exploitive and oppressive inclinations of men towards woman in patriarchal cultures. I provide a discussion of both these opposing perspectives in an attempt to illustrate their shortcomings, which has led to the call for a polymorphous feminist perspective that is sensitive to the complexity and diversity of the commercial sex trade.

3.2   The stigmatisation of sex work

Stigma is a complex concept and is closely related to the idea of prejudice: how people in positions of relative power and influence treat those who hold less power. In the case of stigma, those who are believed to hold the power are the 'normals', whilst those who are constructed to hold less power are the 'stigmatised'. A person becomes stigmatised when he/she is perceived as failing to live up to society's constructed norms. Goffman (1963:151) states that stigmatisation occurs when there is a significant gap between "actual and ideal identities, and especially discredited identities". To apply this logic to the phenomenon of sex work, it is crucial to answer the following questions: what type of stigmatisation could sex workers suffer from, and what constructed norm(s) are sex workers transgressing for this stigma to be attached to them?

In South Africa, there are various reasons why sex workers are stigmatised. One of these factors could be the illegal nature of sex work. As was highlighted in the previous chapter, both sex workers and their clients are criminalised in South Africa according to the Sexual Offences Act of 1957. Therefore, in part, sex workers are stigmatised because they are transgressing the law and could thus be constructed as deviant.

With his discussion of how sexuality is gendered, Goode (2008:244) highlights another factor that contributes to the stigmatisation of sex workers. He argues that the stigmatisation of especially female sex work, is a feature of a patriarchal culture that prevails in some societies wherein women tend to be judged and expected to live up to "high expectations and standards" regarding their movements, how they dress, and socialise. Stigmatisation occurs when women are perceived as 'failing' to live up to their societies constructed 'normal' standards of womanhood. For example, women who wear certain types of clothing (miniskirts), who drink and socialise with more than one man at a time, or women who solicit men, are prone to being called 'loose', 'slut' and 'whore'. Notably, it is often expected of young boys and men to engage in the same behaviour which could lead women to be called

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'loose' and 'whore' (Goode, 2008:244). The reason why young boys and men are 'free' from this censure, according to Hollway (1984:238), is because of the 'male sex drive' discourse that operates in patriarchal societies, wherein men are constructed as having a strong, natural desire for sex. In this discourse men are the subjects and women are the objects. The role of the woman in this discourse is to only act as gatekeeper and not to express her own sexual desire and needs (Hollway, 1984:232). Crawford and Popp (2003:15) referred to this as the 'double sexual standard' that controls the behaviour of women in general: it 'prescribes' what they can do, say and wear and it also reinforces women's dependence on men. Therefore, in societies where the double sexual standard is prevalent, sex workers could be perceived as explicitly transgressing the constructed 'normal' standards of womanhood, and therefore suffer from the stigma of blemishes of individual character. Notably, because female sex workers who solicit clients on the street have to publically transgress these constructed standards, it could be argued that these workers experience the most stigmatisation. This also raises the question of whether independent escorts do experience stigmatisation and if so, what forms this stigma takes since independent escorts are less publicly visible than those sex workers who work from the street.

Having identified why sex workers are stigmatised, I will now discuss the manner in which the stigmatised are treated. While inherently different, all three types of stigma identified by Goffman have the same effect: an individual who may have been easily accepted in normal social interaction, possesses a certain attribute that interjects and demands attention, causing other attributes that this person may possess to be ignored (Goffman, 1963:14). A few years before Goffman wrote the notes on stigma, Everett Hughes referred to this 'master status'-determining trait in his discussion of the dilemmas and contradictions of status. According to Hughes (1945:357) a 'master status', or in the case of female sex workers 'mistress status', denotes the primary identifying characteristic of an individual and overshadows all other social positions of the status set in most or all situations. For example, a sex worker who solicits clients from the street may be a mother, have completed high-school, or even be a wife. However, the stigmatisation attached to the profession renders the status of mother, high-school graduate and lover, irrelevant. 'Sex worker' becomes the master status. Goffman (1963) went further by describing how the non-stigmatised – 'normals' – treat and discriminate against the stigmatised. "We" (normals) construct the stigmatised as not quite human and based on this assumption we reduce their life-chances, build theories to explain their inferiority and the danger they present, impute a wide range of imperfections on the

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basis of the original one, and sometimes use this as a rationalization for animosity (Goffman, 1963:14).

The most apparent manifestation of this animosity for sex workers, who solicit from the street, is the abuse and violence they experience at the hands of police or clients, as highlighted in the *WLC*, *SWEAT* and *Sisonke* (2012) study. It should be noted that in South Africa, sex workers face double stigmatisation since they are constructed as the deviant 'Other' that perpetuates the HIV epidemic in this country. Deacon, Stephney and Prosalendis's (2005) theoretical and methodological analysis of HIV/AIDS related stigmatisation expands on this. According to Deacon *et al.* (2005:7), a wide variety of groups have been identified as particularly at risk for (and somehow responsible for) contracting HIV/AIDS, these include supposedly 'oversexed' black people, white people, 'promiscuous' homosexual men, commercial sex workers and women in general. As a result of this double stigmatisation, some sex workers could also experience difficulty in accessing health care. A submission by the *Sonke Gender Justice Networ*k to the African regional dialogue in 2011 includes several stories by sex workers, about how they were denied access to their medication and experienced ill-treatment at clinics (Sex workers stuck in HIV nightmare, 2011).

An interesting aspect of stigma is that it can spread to those close to the stigmatised. Goffman (1963:42) argues that the "relationship between the stigmatised and those related to him/her through social structures tends to lead to wider society treating both individuals in some respect as one". Thus, to return to the earlier example, the parents of a sex worker may also experience a degree of the stigma and their attributes can also become tarnished and questioned. The tendency for stigma to spread provides a reason why these relationships are either avoided or terminated.

At this stage, I want to briefly discuss how the stigmatised deal with stigma. First, the stigmatised could engage in a process of "normification". Goffman (1963:43) describes this process as "the effort of the stigmatised individual to present himself as an ordinary person, although not necessarily making a secret of his failing". An example of this is the Muslim dockside sex workers from Henry Trotter's study. According to Trotter (2008:97), the Muslim women at the club not only live beyond the boundaries of polite society but also reject Islamic gender norms since they drink, smoke, take drugs, consume non-halal foods,

wear skimpy outfits and curse. Yet, the one thing these women do not do is eat pork. Trotter (2008:97) states that as "long as they insist on this one prohibition, they feel that they can still claim their religious identity". By emphasising attributes which are constructed as 'normal', the stigmatised person could thus lessen the stigma attached to them.

A second strategy is to exercise information control. This applies only to when the stigma-carrying attribute is not easily identifiable, or as Goffman (1963:64) refers to it, "the perceptibility of the stigma". For example, a person who works as a private escort could easily 'hide' this trait, whilst a sex worker soliciting clients from the street could find this task more challenging as she is engaging in a more visible form of sex work. Goffman (1963:41) also makes reference to this strategy employed by sex workers and classifies it as "leading a double life". This strategy for dealing with stigma is based upon the idea that an individual is able to control his/her presentation of self to others. One of Goffman's earlier works, *The presentation of self in the everyday life* (1959), gives a detailed account of the various methods available for fostering a certain impression. Allow me to briefly reflect on these strategies, since I will also employ this theoretical perspective to examine what presentations of self, independent escorts deliver via the advertisements they post online and during the semi-structured interviews.

This dramaturgical approach can be equated to a metaphor which compares life and the world to a stage, where we are all actors performing and presenting different versions of ourselves, both consciously and subconsciously. Goffman (1959:8) defines the term performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way other participants". When Goffman uses this term, it usually refers to forms of physical behaviour and speech and not simply the written word. Whilst analysing various representations of independent escorts on websites, I treated the written word and uploaded photographs, as a type of performance - carrying emotions – with the deliberate intent to generate a reaction from others. Goffman (1959) suggests that there are several techniques available to performers for presenting and sustaining a certain impression. These include, presenting an idealised version of self, conveying to the audience (for those who the show is put on) that the current performance is genuine and original, by providing the audience with as much background information on the performer as possible to minimise the chances of the show being disrupted, and concealing responses that might not be appropriate, while at the same time displaying a response which is accepted (Goffman, 1959). I am interested in

examining if independent escorts, who solicit clients via the internet, employ these dramaturgical techniques, and if so, how they employ these techniques to present themselves in a certain manner to potential clients, and/or to manage stigmatisation.

From the discussion above, it is evident that symbols are important aspects of information management and the presentation of self. With their discussion of culture and communication, Anderson and Taylor (2006:56) state that symbols convey information that we use to understand each other. For example, a woman who is provocatively dressed, wearing heavy make-up and standing on a street corner could be constructed as a sex worker, purely based on the symbols she is wearing. However these authors (2006:56) also state that symbols vary in reliability and that their meanings are socially constructed. The same woman described above may be on her way home after an evening out and would thus not be a sex worker. An interesting aspect of the stigmatisation surrounding sex work is that the sex worker has to be secretive about "failing" to one group of people – police, family and friends – while systematically exposing the stigma-laden attribute to another group, the clients. Exercising information control may be one of the best strategies to deal with stigma, yet it is not without consequences. Goffman (1963:42) warns that "hiding" or leading a "double life" can lead to experiences of further isolation, depression, and anxiety as the individual has to constantly be alert and check his/her body and/or property for signs which could reveal the stigma.

Finally, stigmatised individuals can find support and sympathy from others who are also stigmatised. They can form support groups, national associations or other groups to feel a sense of belonging (Goffman, 1963:36). This may be a viable strategy for sex workers, who solicit clients from the streets, or who are employed at a brothel, or escort agency since these women and men tend to work in groups. However, this begs the question of what support and coping structures independent escorts have in place? Could the lack of peer support and comfort be one of the challenges independent escorts experience?

3.3 Feminist perspectives on sex work

3.3.1 The radical perspective: Sex work as exploitation

Radical feminists argue that sex work is a reflection of male dominance and female subjection. Scoular (2004:344) states that this view highlights the opposing degrees of social power men and women exercise in some societies, since "men are assumed, expected and even encouraged to dominate women socially". MacKinnon (1987:59), a leading proponent of radical feminist- and domination theory, argues that female sexuality is constructed entirely as an object of male desire, and that women's sexuality is, socially, "something to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered or exchanged by others…Women never own or possess it". Radical feminists thus construct sex work as a product of a society in which women are demeaned sexual and constructed as objects of male desire, whereas sex workers are seen as victims of this objectification, who perpetuate their victimhood, and reinforce assumptions about men as subjects and women as objects by engaging in sex work.

Scoular (2204:245) states that where liberal feminist theorists emphasise the agency of sex workers, radical feminists argue that the consent to engage in sex work, is not true consent. Proponents of this theory therefore reject the possibility that agency and desire are factors which influence an individual's decision to become a sex worker. This belief is also conveyed through the dramatic language radical feminist writers employ. For example, where liberals will use the term 'sex worker', radical feminists use the term 'prostituted women' to emphasise that prostitution is something done to a person, and not something that can be chosen. Terms such as "users, batterers and sexual predators" also highlight the censure of these writers for those who employ the services of sex workers (Weitzer, 2009:212). Farley (2004) and Raymond (2004), extreme radical feminists, believe that exploitation, oppression, and violence against women are inherent to sex work, regardless of the form of sex work, and the historical- and social context.

It is therefore unsurprising that radical feminist proponents advocate for the partial criminalisation of sex work in South Africa – the criminalisation of the actions of pimps, brothel-keepers, traffickers, and sometimes clients, whilst the sex workers, or in the words of radical feminists, 'prostituted persons', are not criminalised, since they are considered to be victims. In South Africa, one organisation that assumes a radical feminist standpoint is *Embrace Dignity*. This organisation advocates legal reform to end prostitution and sex

trafficking (Embrace Dignity, 2012). The quote below by Kholiswa Tyiki, a media intern at Embrace dignity, illustrates this organisation's view of sex work. She states:

> We don't agree with the popular belief that individuals who are in prostitution get there by choice, but rather because of limited choices. We advocate for legal reform to end prostitution by offering support and services to women seeking to exit prostitution while helping them embrace their dignity. (Pondoyi, 2013)

Tyki's quote exemplifies the victim- and rescue discourse so prevalent in radical feminist writings of sex work. However, now the question arises of whether all sex workers need or want to be rescued? In the following section I discuss the liberal feminist perspective. Proponents of this feminist perspective assume a completely different stance than their radical feminist counterparts.

3.3.2   The liberal perspective: Sex work as contract

Feminists, who adopt this approach, construct sex work as a voluntary contract where the autonomy of both the sex worker and the client is emphasised: they are two consenting adults who enter into a mutually beneficial agreement. Peterson-Iyer (1998:26) states that according to this view, sex work is "no less legitimate than any other contractual business arrangement" and that while the state may have an interest in "taxing and/or regulating it, it has no business banning it". Jagger (1991:351) echoes Peterson-Iyer's argument by stating that liberal feminists attempt to minimise government interference in the lives of sex workers and assume that there is a "private" sphere of human existence. Sex work should thus be treated as any other business transaction or private contract in which a particular service is sold, in this case, sexual service.

According to this sex work as a contract view, the sex worker is a possessor of property who contracts out a certain form of labour power. Unlike radical feminist, liberal feminists argue that the sex worker is not selling his/her body, but rather a service (Bell, 1994:58). While there is uncertainty on the extent of this freedom of choice, proponents of liberal feminism argue that individuals in the commercial sex trade are exercising an autonomous choice. Peterson-Iyer (1998:27) argues that the overemphasis of male violence and domination in the sex work industry is at the expense of female agency. Liberal feminists have been

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instrumental in arguing for de-stigmatisation of people engaged in sex work and using the term 'sex worker' rather than 'prostitute'. Influenced by liberal feminism, *SWEAT,* a non-governmental-organisation in South Africa, presents itself as an informal trade union for sex workers, representing their rights as workers and fighting for the rights of sex workers for protection and support, rights which are greatly compromised, they argue, by the criminalisation of sex work in South Africa and other countries. This sex as contract view is reflected in this organisation's mission statement:

> *SWEAT* is at the cutting edge of sex worker advocacy, human rights defence and mobilisation in Africa. *SWEAT* has determined the discussions on a legal adult sex work industry where sex work is acknowledged as work, and where sex workers have a strong voice, which informs and influences wider social debates. (*SWEAT*, 2013)

SWEAT is concerned with 'empowering' sex workers, and one of the ways it seeks to do this is through its *Advocacy and Networking Programme*. This programme works closely with South African sex workers in relation to "legal rights infringements and mobilise sex workers to take their cases forward in a collective manner in order to impact changes to the law" (*SWEAT*, 2013) *SWEAT* also aims to empower sex workers via outreach and development programmes where they equip sex workers with general health and life skills and enhance their capacity to speak on their own behalf.

Sally Shackleton, the Director of *SWEAT*, raised concerns about the rights of sex workers, and empowering sex workers, in an interview I conducted with her about my proposed research with sex workers who employ the internet to solicit. She suggested that such workers may have more control over their clients than other sex workers, and that advertising online may allow sex workers to find clients without necessarily having to be placed in a vulnerable position. However, she also expressed concerns regarding the degree of control that sex workers might have, relating to the ways they presented themselves on the internet and the extent to which they could retain anonymity. These are some of concerns which I address in my research with these women.

3.3.3 The polymorphous feminist perspective on sex work

As stated, one of the key concerns of my study is not to homogenise sex work. This includes adopting an approach that undercuts an essentialist feminist insistence that there is unity to all women's experiences which stems from inequality and acknowledges that different varieties of sex work may have different social meanings and thus, demands different feminist responses. In this section, I discuss some of the critique and limitations of both liberal and radical feminist orientations that have led to the call for a polymorphous perspective which is sensitive to the complexity of the commercial sex trade.

With his discussion of the sociology of sex work, Ronald Weitzer sketches the limitations of both the liberal and radical, or as he refers to them, oppression and empowerment perspectives. Weitzer (2009:215) states that although exploitation and empowerment are present in sex work, there is sufficient variation across time, place, and sector to demonstrate that sex work cannot be reduced to one or the other. He illustrates this argument by discussing how some radical feminists typically employ terminology for maximum shock value and describe only the worst available examples of sex work and treat them as representative of the entire industry. For example, radical feminists such as Raphael and Shapiro (2004:137) state that "men must be viewed as batterers rather than customers", whilst Farley (2004) argues that clients are "regularly murderous towards women". Weitzer (2009) is also critical of the manner in which these authors attempt to refute the argument that the amount of violence differs significantly between street-based sex work and indoor sex work. Farley (2004) is of the opinion that "violence is the norm for women in all types of prostitution". Even though Raphael and Shapiro (2004:138) concluded that in Chicago violence was prevalent across both outdoor and indoor venues, they urge a mandate that we not strive to make distinctions or demarcations among different prostitution activities in terms of violence. Conversely, in some of his earlier writings, Weitzer (1991, 2000a, 2000b) also critiques some liberal feminists for focussing on upmarket forms of sex work and highlighting success stories to illustrate that it can be potentially empowering, lucrative and esteem-enhancing.

In an attempt to overcome the limitations of these two perspectives, authors such as Shrage (1994) and Weitzer (2005) suggests that when studying sex work, researchers need to be aware that different varieties of sex work may have different social meanings and thus, demand different feminist responses. These authors suggest that a polymorphous feminist approach should be employed to examine sex work. According to Bernstein (1999), a polymorphous feminist approach to sex work involves an acknowledgement that:

> Under certain circumstances, prostitution may be – at least in a very immediate sense – empowering or liberatory; under other circumstances, it can be the most disempowering of exchanges, particularly for the already desperate and weak. Once we recognise that all women are similarly situated, and that prostitutes are subject to different varieties of structural constraints, we can begin to sort out which accounts of prostitution are most applicable in any given empirical instance. (Bernstein, 1999:117)

3.4   Conclusion

In this chapter, I highlighted how predominately female sex workers in South Africa are at risk of being stigmatised because they are transgressing the law and constructed 'normal' standards of womanhood. I elaborated on the manifestations of this stigmatisation and what strategies are available for managing this by drawing upon the works of Goffman. In this chapter, I also stressed the importance of adopting a polymorphous feminist perspective to study sex work, since essentialist liberal- and radical feminist perspectives are not sensitive enough to the complexity and ever changing nature of this industry. Employing an essentialist feminist perspective to study sex work can also lead to certain aspects and experiences associated with being a sex worker: being ignored or dismissed. One of these is whether or not intimacy manifests itself in the relationships sex workers have with their clients. Proponents of radical feminism reject the possibility that agency and desire are factors which influence an individual's decision to become a sex worker. Conversely, I argue, that the over-emphasis of liberal feminists for the construction of sex work as a voluntary contract, could also lead to the manifestation of intimacy being neglected since sex work is seen as a pure business venture. For the sex worker, the benefit is generally considered to be material, whilst in return, the client receives sexual service.

By employing a polymorphous liberal feminist perspective, I am able to move beyond the construction of sex work as work and engage with an aspect that has not received enough attention – the manifestation of intimacy in the relationships some sex workers have with their clients. In the next chapter, I discuss the intimate labour framework and empirical studies that exemplify how some sex workers have begun to include intimacy and care in the services they offer.

Chapter 4

The Intimate labour framework

4.1 Introduction

I want to start this chapter by situating intimate labour within a Marxist feminist perspective to illustrate how the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism can contribute to the oppression of women.

Karl Marx (1970) argues that people must organise labour socially to produce what is needed for survival; how socially necessary labour is organised, shapes the organisation of all social life. Marxist feminists are critical of Marx's construction of socially necessary labour, since it primarily refers to those responsible for producing goods. Marxist feminist, Brenner (n.d.) expands on the definition of socially necessary labour to include collective labour that meets individual needs for sustenance and daily renewal, as well as birthing and rearing the next generation. She refers to this form of labour as social reproduction.

> Social reproduction involves various kinds of socially necessary work - mental, physical and emotional - aimed at meeting historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined needs and, through meeting these needs, maintaining and reproducing the population. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children is accomplished, how care of the elderly is provided, how adults receive social and emotional support, and how sexuality is socially constructed. (Brenner, n.d.: 2)

In patriarchal cultures, the social productive forms of labour are highly gendered and feminised. Post (2008) argues that in patriarchal societies, there is a gendered division of labour where women are relegated to the private sphere since they are assumed to be natural providers of domestic and care labour. Brenner (n.d.: 2) echoes this argument and states that the reason why we speak of production on one hand and social production on the other, is in part an artefact of masculine Marxist thought and the capitalist mode of production where the work done in households, although crucial to the reproduction of human beings, is separated from the production and circulation of commodities. The danger in this is, because women

are constructed as natural providers of care, the value of this form of labour can be taken for granted, rendered invisible and thus not paid for.

Today the gender division of care labour persists, although not in its extreme form. Post (2008) argues that even though men share more domestic and care labour than they used to, mothers, in general, sleep less and have less leisure time than fathers. However, in the 20th century, care work is no longer restricted to the home and mothers. According to Brenner (n.d.: 1), care work has been commoditised through paid domestic labour and the expansion of non-profit and for-profit business. Examples of workers who provide care work range from domestic workers to stewardesses, nurses, massage therapists, and to a certain extent, some sex workers. In the next section, I discuss how care work manifests itself in certain forms of sex work by referring to an intimate labour framework and empirical studies which have been conducted from this perspective to investigate intimacy in relation to sex work.

4.2   The Intimate labour framework

If intimacy does manifest itself in relations between sex workers and their clients, it can be argued that these women are not only selling sexual services, but intimate and emotional care as well. According to authors such as Zelizer (2005) and Constable (2009), intimacy or intimate relations can be traded, understood or thought of as if they have entered the market where they are bought, sold, packaged, advertised, fetished, commercialised, consumed, or assigned values and prices, linked in many cases to transnational mobility and echoing the global flow of capital goods. It is this commodification process that is the primary focus of the intimate labour framework. Eileen Boris and Rachel Salazaar Parennas, editors of *Intimate Labours: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care (2010),* provide the following definition of intimate labour:

> Intimate labour is work that entails bodily or emotional closeness or personal familiarity, such as sexual intercourse and toileting another, or intimate observation and knowledge of personal information, such as childcare or housekeeping. Such work exists along a continuum of service and caring labour, from high end nursing and low end housekeeping, and includes sex, domestic, and personal care work. (Boris and Parennas, 2010).

The intimate labour framework is particularly relevant to my study since it allows for a shift beyond the mere recognition of sex work as a legitimate form of work, towards the identification and studying of the labour processes of this industry. Borris and Parennas (2010:136) suggest that sex work examined from an intimate labour framework captures the structures and contours of this economic sector, and the mechanisms of "race, class, sexualities and gender embedded in the extraction of labour that involves the sexual". What follows is a brief discussion of the studies that have been conducted from this framework. These studies aid in conceptualising 'intimate labour' and highlight important areas that I will explore in my study.

As mentioned earlier, assuming an essentialist liberal or radical feminist stance in relation to sex work is problematic as it denies the possibility of relationships forming between sex workers and their clients. This sentiment is echoed by intimate labour theorists Borris and Parennas (2010:26) who state that an essentialist view of sex work assumes that market-based intimate or sexual interactions are inherently diminished in terms of authenticity by disregarding the possibility of establishing meaningful connections with clients. A key aspect of the intimate labour framework is that it helps to deconstruct this view. With her ethnographic study of Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry, Kimberly Hoang (2011) challenges the view that mainstream sex work is void of emotional ties by tracing the emotional labour attached to sex for money exchanges. Hochchild (1983) defines 'emotional labour' as the "management of one's own feelings as to maintain the well-being of the client-worker relationship". While Hoang (2011:393) did establish that all of the sex workers she interviewed engaged in some form of emotional labour, she does acknowledge that the geographical location within the city, racial and ethnic background of the customers, fees of the sex worker and socio-economic class, did determine the degree and type of emotional work involved. For example, Hoang (2011:393) states that female sex workers in the low-end sector have limited resources and target local Vietnamese clients, while the mid- and high-tier sex workers enjoy more favourable conditions with a client base consisting of wealthy locals, Asian businessmen, Overseas Vietnamese men, Western businessmen and Western travellers. The former only focuses on the economic aspect, while the latter also searches for migration opportunities through frequent emotional interactions with their clients. Hoang's study not only deepens the concept of intimate labour, but also stresses the fact that the nature of emotional, bodily and economic relations differ among various forms of sex work.

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An area of the intimate labour framework that will be examined in this thesis is how the commodification of the intimate is understood and experienced by those involved in these relations and practices. Numerous studies have examined the cultural constructions and experiences of intimacy and love in a variety of contexts and how they are commoditised in terms of material expectations, gift exchanges and mass mediated images of romance. One of these is Denise Brennan's study of female sex workers, in the small town of Sosua, in the Dominican Republic who do business with foreign men. Brennan (2001:623) argues that the global mobility of people, money, racialised bodies and idealistic notions of paradise facilitate sex tourism in Sosua. She stresses that a common and an interdependent interest facilitated the intimate labour she studied, for both the foreign male visitors and the sex workers. For example, the initial sexual encounter is driven by economic and sexual interest: the women sell sex because it is the best way to make money given their lower-class status, and the men are drawn to Sosua because of their economic mobility and the "dirt cheap" prices and availability of sex (Brennan, 2001:625). This initial encounter can then be transformed into a transnational relationship for economic and/or romantic reasons. Brennan (2001:629) illustrates this by stating how the majority of sex workers constructed the men they meet as their "stepping stone" towards a better life, and nurture the relationship with the men by enacting attraction and engaging in a "performance" of love. In Brennan's study, both sex workers and their clients construct intimacy and love as a performance employed to mask the economic exchange and benefits received.

Where Brennan's study examines intimacy and love as performances, Elizabeth Bernstein's study situates these concepts within historical constructions of romantic intimacy. In contexts such as the United States and Europe, Bernstein (2007:483) argues that "traditional, proactive and modern companionate" models of sexuality are increasingly being replaced by a "recreational sexual ethic" that can be defined by "physical sensation and emotionally bounded erotic exchanges". She refers to this as the emergence of bounded authenticity – an authentic, yet bounded form of intimate relations. An example of this bounded authenticity is the "girlfriend experience" which is increasingly offered by escorts. According to Bernstein (2007:484), the girlfriend experience exemplifies a situation where both eroticism and an authentic relationship (although within a bounded frame) are for sale. In this case, the market basis of exchange for the services provides an important emotional boundary for both the worker and the client. However, this boundary can be easily shifted aside for the clients and/or sex worker's desire.

Anne Allison's (1994) study of sexuality, pleasure and masculinity in a Tokyo hostess club also exemplifies intimate relations bounded by authenticity. Allison (1994) worked as a hostess in the club and describes how the men who visit the establishment gain satisfaction from the care and intimacy they receive from the hostesses. The "recreational sexual ethic" described by Bernstein (2007) is highlighted here, since the men in Allison's study receive sexual and intimate attention together with a lack of on-going responsibility that accompanies the market transaction. In this example, it is both the monetary exchange and the responsibility towards one 'partner' which bounds the relations.

Brennan, Bernstein and Allison's studies highlight how intimacy and/or sexual relations within a bounded frame have become much sought after commodities. These studies also challenge the view that commodification diminishes intimacy. Yet, something that is not addressed in any of the studies is how easy or difficult this line of work is where intimacy is commodified? Authors such as Brewis and Linstead (2000:209) argue that sex work is a "consumption industry that leaves the body in an ambiguous state of commodification, the individual sex worker risks the consumption of her self-identity together with her sale of sex". To minimise this risk, a sex worker has a range of individual and collective psychological strategies at her/his disposal. In her ethnographic study of indoor female sex workers in Britain, Teela Sanders (2005:325) argues that these distancing strategies focus on the women performing "emotion work"[5]. Hochschild (1979:552) defines emotion work as "labour that requires one to induce or suppresses feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others". In relation to sex work, emotion work is carried out by the sex worker on internal feelings to separate, change and revise one set of emotions or feelings that are appropriate during sex work, while reserving another set of emotions or feelings for private interactions (Sanders, 2005:325). Apart from performing emotion work, the sex workers in Sander's study minimised risk by not engaging in certain intimate sexual acts such as kissing, constructing unprotected sex as intimate by always using condoms with clients, and by manufacturing an identity specifically for sex work.

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[5] 'Emotional work' and 'emotional labour' is often used interchangeably, yet there is a distinction between these two concepts. 'Emotional labour' refers to the management of feelings done in a paid work setting, whilst 'emotional work' refers to the unpaid emotional work an individual does in their relationships with family and friends.

If emotional work is a strategy available to sex workers to minimise psychological risk, the question now arises of how independent escorts minimise this risk since they have to experience and express emotions and feelings during work that is usually reserved for 'private' interactions. Further questions generated from the above discussion are what are the characteristics of a bounded authentic relationship that distinguishes it from a conventional heterosexual relationship? Finally, what are the challenges these bounded authentic relationships pose? Presumably, a sex worker would have to be a 'girlfriend' to various individuals at the same time. Could there be instances where clients become too demanding and seek to break the so-called rules that bound the relationship? Do clients become jealous of one another? It is these questions that this thesis will aim to address by employing an intimate labour framework.

4.3   The Girlfriend experience: Intimacy in relation to independent escorting

A key focus of this study is how independent escorts experience intimacy in their profession. The performance of intimate labour is yet another aspect where sex workers who solicit clients from the street and those who work indoors differ. Sex workers who solicit clients from the street are less likely to perform intimate labour due to the nature of their encounters with clients – limited, quick and mechanical sex. On the other hand, escorts (and to a lesser extent, massage parlours and brothel workers) are often expected to counsel and support their clients, while at the same time, their meetings may resemble dating experiences that include kissing, hugging, massaging and the exchange of gifts. Sex workers who provide this service advertise it as the "Girlfriend experience" (GFE).

The GFE is argued to be a defining characteristic of escorting and something desired by many clients. Holt and Blevins's (2007) exploratory study of client's experiences of online escorts, found the GFE to be the "ideal" service for which male clients search online. Wietzer (2007) also found that many customers of escorts are searching for more than sex. Reviews of several websites where clients can discuss their experiences of escorts, indicate that many seek women who are friendly, conversational, do not rush the meeting, and who engage in cuddling and kissing (Weitzer, 2007:3). Below is a posting Weitzer collected from a website where clients review and discuss escorts – i.e. Punter-websites.

> There was intimacy and sweat and grinding and laughter, and those
> moments that is sexy and funny and warm and leaves you with a grin
> on your face the next day. Girlfriend sex. (Weitzer, 2007:4)

From this posting it is clear that sex remains part of the services offered, but it is coupled with mutual sharing, support and companionship. Apart from the kissing and cuddling, clients also focus on providing oral sex to the escort, allowing for the sexual enjoyment to be more reciprocal, than what generally occurs during the interactions between street-based sex workers and their clients. Lever and Donick's (2008:92) study of escorts in Los Angeles, found that 17% of the escorts reported that they had received oral sex from their last client; in 30% of the cases the client performed non-sexual massages on her; and in 42% the two parties engaged in hugging, caressing and kissing. It is interesting to note that to maintain the work- and personal-life boundary, some sex workers, especially those working from the streets, will not engage in intimate acts such as kissing and hugging. Pateman (1988:207) argues that the integral connection between the self and sexuality necessitates the adoption of strategies to maintain the demarcation between commercial sex and intimacy and/or love. Thus, certain sexual acts, such as kissing, cuddling and other forms of displaying affection, becomes privatised and excluded from the range of sexual services offered.

The situation becomes more complex when considering Henry Trotter's study of the dockside sex work industry in Durban. This study illustrates that the status of the client can also determine whether intimate acts, such as kissing, are made available. In comparison to other forms of sex work, the dockside sex trade is quite marginal. The women Trotter interviewed solicit clients from seamen's clubs that cater to mostly low-status foreigners who are transient visitors. According to Trotter (2008:27), dockside women are "not controlled by pimps, do not advertise their services publically, don't peddle drugs, don't work mandatory shifts, don't have to accept any john who walks through the door and don't have to split their earnings with a boss". From this description, it would appear as though this form of sex work is a variation of independent escorting. Nevertheless, in some instances, the meeting between a dockside sex worker and a client resembles that of sex workers who solicit clients from the street; and at other times, the meeting resembles that between an independent escort and a client who requested the GFE. The extract below from Trotter's book clearly illustrates the forms these meetings can take:

> At the one extreme, if the guy's a low-ranking Chinese sailor with very little time or money, she'll try to complete the job with haste. She won't bother with bathing, massaging or foreplay. At the other extreme, if he's a high-ranking Japanese office with plenty of time and money, she'll deliver five-star treatment. (Trotter, 2008:100)

This "five-star treatment" includes setting the mood that involves both the women and the seamen cleaning themselves up, lying on the bed where there is caressing, kissing and foreplay. Similarly to Lever and Dolnick's study, Trotter also found that some men, especially Filipinos, do try to provide sexual pleasure to the women. According to Trotter (2008:101), the Filipinos he interviewed enjoyed performing oral sex on the women and argued that this not only provided them with egotistical satisfaction, but it also made the sex seem more authentic to them. These clients believed that by taking the time to massage and stimulate, the women became more than just sex workers they were lovers. The sex therefore transcends being only a commercial transaction and could instead be viewed as making love.

Allow me to return to the quote of a client Weitzer collected from a punter -website. In this description of the GFE, this punter employs the term 'girlfriend sex' to describe the sexual interaction with the escort. According to Earle and Sharp (2007), 'girlfriend sex' is about making love rather than having sex. I find this description interesting since it echoes narratives about being in love and expressing this love through sex. Julia O'Connel Davidson (1995:4) states that sex workers and their clients exist within a normative moral order where particular meanings are ascribed to human sexual interactions. These meanings dictate that legitimate sex is that which occurs between men and women who are 'in love'. Therefore, while the authenticity of the love or intimacy escorts and clients experience during their meetings can be questioned, I am inclined to argue that interactions during the GFE could be less stigmatised, and to a degree, be constructed as more normative than the interactions that occur between sex workers who solicit from the street and their clients.

Having outlined the physical and sexual aspects associated with the GFE, I would now like to shift the focus to the emotional and mental aspects of this service. The GFE is based upon the idea of a conventional heterosexual relationship. Therefore, it would be useful to

examine western constructions of the role of the girlfriend in a relationship. Interestingly enough, I found it difficult to obtain academic literature that delineates what it means to be a girlfriend. This could be as a result of the manner in which the understanding of the concept is greatly dependent on the historical time period, societal- and cultural factors. The difficulty associated with the conceptualisation of this term could further complicate the task of independent escorts in providing the 'ideal' girlfriend experience. Nonetheless, I turned to non-academic literature to identify what makes a good girlfriend. The best examples came from articles on websites dedicated to male internet browsers. Notably, many of the constructions of a 'great girlfriend' corresponded with each other across websites. I decided to focus on one article on *SheKnows.com* that captures the most common western constructions of what makes a great girlfriend[6]. These constructions are from 20-something to 40-something American men. According to Coopersmith (2010), the men describe a great girlfriend as someone who encourages freedom, has similar interests, has a life of her own, knows when to zip it, is a positive person, will leave me alone sometimes, and lets me be who I am.

 Below are some of the responses of the men interviewed for this article:

> All of my relationships have started to sour when my girlfriend began suffocating and trying to control me. Nick, NY, 25. (Coopersmith, 2010)

> I need to have the same idea of what fun is as my girlfriend does. We need to like the same kind of restaurants, parties, etc. Manny, Seattle, 43. (Coopersmith, 2010)

> The biggest thing that separates a good girlfriend from an OK one is someone who has a life of her own. Mark, Los Angeles, 27. (Coopersmith, 2010)

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[6]Tristan Coopersmith is a writer for the love and sex section of the American website *Sheknows.com.* According to this websites' *About Us* section (2010), *SheKnows.com* has been one of the top 10 most-visited websites for women in the last 8 years, providing current information on topics relevant to women's lives.

> Good girlfriends don't nag or hassle you or argue all the time. When you complain all the time, I stop listening and start thinking about someone else, so you are really just wasting our time. Tim, Grand Rapids, 38. (Coopersmith, 2010)

> Just be happy. Be someone I look forward to seeing because of your light, positive energy – project sunshine. John, Washington, DC, 35. (Coopersmith, 2010)

> My best relationships have been with women who have been supportive when I needed support but also respected my space when that is what I needed. Jay, Atlanta, 43. (Coopersmith, 2010)

Could it be that many clients also seek these expressions of emotionality and character traits from escorts proving the GFE, whilst the latter is said to have become increasingly sensitive to adding this to the services offered? Earl and Sharp (2007) also concentrated on the girlfriend experience in their book on sex and the internet and argue that the quality of the physical experience is often contingent on the perceived reality of at least some emotional chemistry between the parties. A girlfriend experience is constructed as meaningful or successful when there is a connection and the escort's capacity for emotional expression is equal to, or more refined than her physical attributes (Earle & Sharp, 2007:11). Therefore, it could be argued that, to a degree, these interactions between escorts and their clients offer intangible benefits that mirror non-paid relationships – except that the demeanour and intimacy are paid for.

As stated earlier, the GFE is a key focus of this study. More specifically, this study is interested in independent escorts' experiences of the GFE. While there is literature that describes this phenomenon, I am interested in how independent escorts construct the GFE, since the majority of literature focuses on the clients' constructions of this service. Also, providing the GFE seems to require a large amount of physical and mental energy and I am interested in exploring how easy or how difficult it is to be a girlfriend to a client. In this chapter, I also discussed the intimate labour framework where Brennan (2001) argued that when providing the GFE, most women do not experience real feelings and that it is more of a performance, while authors such as Bernstein (2007) and Allison (1994) argue that the women can experience real emotions since the relationship between the escort and the client

is bounded in authenticity. Therefore, I will also examine if the emotions experienced is bounded in authenticity or whether the escorts are only delivering a performance to foster the impression with the client that the experience is 'real'. Finally, I will explore how similar or how different the GFE is from a modern, conventional, heterosexual relationship, by examining what emotions and character traits independent escorts have to express in order for them to be constructed as a girlfriend.

Chapter 5

Methodology

5.1   Introduction

I would like to start this chapter by reiterating the problem statement of this study. Consequently, I describe the way in which I have thought about, approached and conducted the fieldwork for this study. The problem statement reads as follows:

> *To explore how particular women use the internet to work independently as 'sex workers' and how these women experience and construct 'sex work', themselves and their relations with clients.*

When I had to decide which research design to employ, various factors were taken into consideration. One of the key concerns of my study is to encourage the voices of marginalised groups who experience stigmatisation and not to contribute to the homogenisation of sex work. Thus, it was essential that the methodology I employed allowed the independent escorts I interviewed to be addressed as active agents and experts on their own lives, and also, where they had ample opportunities to let their voices be heard. In addition, I sought a research design that would permit me to develop relationships with the escorts that would aid in the construction of a respectful and judgement free environment.

Second, unlike sex workers who solicit clients from the street, brothels or escort agencies, independent escorts are a publicly invisible population, which complicates the process of gaining access to this group. This required the adoption of an unconventional approach to traditional research protocols such as contacting potential research participants, obtaining informed consent, and gathering data.

Taking all these factors into consideration, I adopted a qualitative approach for this study. The underlying epistemology is situated within a social constructivist and symbolic interactionism theoretical perspective. Social constructivism emphasises the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999:198). Symbolic interactionism is comprised of several diverse and, at times, conflicting perspectives. I will be employing the earliest version

of symbolic interactionism offered by the works of George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman. According to Blumer (2005:88), the essential features or fundamental premises of symbolic interactionism include "understanding society as comprised of interacting individuals who possess selves, recognising individual action as a process of meaning construction; and acknowledging action as occurring in the context of manipulating shared symbols". Thus, the experiences of escorting and intimacy were treated as fluid concepts that are negotiated, constructed and performed in various ways. However, I do acknowledge that the performance and constructions of experiences are constrained by the social- and historical context in which the participants are located

My motivation for employing a qualitative approach is taken from Babbie and Mouton's *The Practice of Social Research* (2001). According to these authors, the key benefit of the qualitative approach is that it "takes its departure point from the insider perspective on social action" (2001:270). This approach not only seeks to understand the social actions of independent escorts, but also how these individuals construct and experience these actions. This is crucial for addressing my research problem since I am interested in independent escorts' own constructions and experiences of their profession.

The specific qualitative methodology chosen is netnography. Robert Kozinets (1998:366), originator of this methodology, defines 'netnography' as a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the "cyber-cultures" and "virtual-communities" that emerge from online, computer mediated, or internet-based communications, where both the field work and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology. While the classification of independent escorts as a "virtual community" is debateable, the value of employing netnography for my study is that it provided access to a difficult to reach population and allowed the field to be mapped unobtrusively. By employing a netnographic approach, I was able to learn the rules and norms of the independent escorting websites which aided me in the latter stages of the data gathering process.

My data gathering- and analysis approach is influenced by a grounded theory approach. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that the value of grounded theory is that it emphasises the voice of the participant. Today, Glaser and Strauss's original methodological development of grounded theory has diverged quite markedly. I employed the version of grounded theory posited by Kathy Charmaz and Richard Mitchell. Their grounded theory builds on social

constructivist methods and a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective. According to Charmaz and Mitchell (2001:160), their approach to grounded theory assumes the existence of multiple realities, the mutual creation of knowledge by researchers and research participants, and aims to provide an interpretive understanding of the studied world. The elements of grounded theory I have employed in my study relates to theoretical sampling, concurrent data- collection and analysis, and pursuing emergent themes through early data-analysis. I will elaborate on how I employed these elements in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

My interest in a grounded theory approach derives from my concern to engage with my participants as active agents and to learn from them. While I am interested in exploring how they make sense of and construct their social worlds by engaging in a close textual and comparative analysis of their interview transcripts, I do not, however, embrace Glaser and Strauss's (1967:37) view that, in order to do analytic justice to the accounts of the interviewees, we should "literally ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study to allow the emergence of categories not contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas".

I argue this for several reasons. I am concerned that the number of interviews I have done may be inadequate to generate a theory, even if it was only 'substantive': one which is developed for a "specific area of inquiry e.g., stigma, deviant behaviour, formal organisation, socialisation, reward systems etc." (Glaser & Strauss, 1967:31). Furthermore, because the research participants are a marginalised group who do experience stigmatisation, it was crucial that I familiarise myself with the research and theoretical perspectives on this area to sensitise myself to the area of investigation, and also, to avoid contributing to the continued stigmatisation and 'Othering' of sex workers. Also, while I did employ concurrent data-collection and analysis to identify key themes raised by the research participants, I also had themes informed by literature, established theory and initial analysis of data. Thus, the initial research questions drawn from my review of literature were constantly adapted, refined or changed in relation to the analysis of data. In sum, what I am attempting to do is to develop a methodological approach that places the onus on the research participants for raising issues and conceptualising them, whilst at the same time, consulting literature and theoretical framework to identify central themes to be explored.

In this chapter, I reflect upon the research methods of data collection and analysis I employed. First, I account for how I went about selecting the research site and research participants. Second, I elaborate on the manner in which data was collected, analysed and validated. Third, I address how I overcame the ethical challenges associated with conducting research on sex work and finally, I reflect on my position as a researcher, the strengths and limitations of the research methodology and my study in general.

5.2   Research methods

5.2.1   Choosing a research site

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 has shown that very little is known about independent escorting facilitated via the internet in the South African context. When I performed a simple web-search for South African escorting websites on *Google*, I realised that this industry is bigger than what I had initially anticipated. The search results yielded several pages of websites that all feature advertisements by escorts. The majority of these websites did not require users to sign-up to be able to view content and it can therefore be argued that these website are in the public domain. I gained cultural entrée to these websites by "lurking". Catterall and Maclaren (2001:231) stated that one of the key steps when conducting netnographic research is to gain cultural entrée into a virtual community through a form of non-participant observation – that is by "lurking". By lurking on these websites, I discovered that they varied in level of quality and professionalism. Some of them were very well designed and organised, charged a fee for posting an advertisement, and featured high quality photos of the escorts who advertise on the site. Also, these websites required escorts to provide as much autobiographical information as possible. Other websites were less developed where advertisements could be posted for free, contained fake advertisements, while photos and autobiographical information were non-essential. I decided to select a website from the former group as I consider the photographs and information provided to be rich sources of data.

The websites on the first five pages of results were filtered to include only those that contained the required information[7]. I then employed an online tool at *Alexa.com* to rank these websites according to the amount of visitors each site has[8]. Through this process, I was able to determine which South African escorting website was the most visited. I shall refer to this website as *Redlace.com*.

Redlace.com does not require visitors to register to be able to view content. However, there are certain areas of this website that are reserved for members who have taken the time to sign-up for free. Non-members only have access to the advertisements of escorts, while those who have signed-up are able to access the discussion forums, view extra photo galleries of each escort, communicate with some of the escorts via video chat, and view the website's locally produced adult video. There are various options available for browsing through advertisements. First, there are new listings. Second, *Redlace.com* provides a list of the top ten escorts on the site. Finally, the escorts are categorised according to city or town. Information provided on each advertisement is the escort's working name, location, and a short autobiographical description. The advertisement also provides the escort's age, build, height, hair colour, eye colour, languages, star-sign, if she smokes or not, likes, dislikes, and contact information.

Please refer to Appendix 1 for a mapping of all the advertisements posted on *Redlace.com* between 16 and 19 August 2013. This mapping of *Redlace.com* was compiled by viewing every advertisement posted in the specified time-frame. The distinction between independent escorts and those employed at an agency was informed by autobiographical information provided (most escorts mention the name of the agency they are working for) and/or the venue listed (the agency is usually listed as the venue). Duplicate entries were deleted by cross-referencing the telephone numbers provided.

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[7]I chose to   focus only on the first five pages of results because these websites catered exclusively to escorts who wanted to advertise their services. Consequent result pages listed general classified websites such as *OLX* and *Gumtree*.

[8]*Alexa* is one of the leading providers of free, global web statistics. This tool is generally employed for competitive analysis, benchmarking, market research, or business development.

5.2.2. Selection of participants

One of the key characteristics of the grounded theory approach is the use of theoretical sampling. Charmaz (1990:1163) states that when sampling theoretically, the researcher collects new data to check, fill out, and extend theoretical categories. This process usually involves soliciting specific participants or data collection sources that will provide further information on the particular concept being studied. In contrast to Strauss, Charmaz (1990:1163) argues that theoretical sampling should occur when the researcher has a "few hunches or even hypotheses which he or she wishes to check". Thus, theoretical sampling features into the research and analytical process much later than initial sampling of sites, people, or documents.

At the start of my data collection process, the only selection criterion was that the women had to be an independent escort – not employed by an escort agency. Also, I wanted to interview escorts from the four main cities in South Africa, Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria. When viewing escort listings according to city on *Redlace.com*, the newest or most recently updated advertisements are displayed first. I choose to contact escorts listed first since this would eliminate the chances of contacting individuals who may not be as active on the website and/or may no longer be working as an escort.

Theoretical sampling was employed when unexpected themes started to emerge as a result of the concurrent data- collection and analysis. In a study of how a chronic illness affects people's self-concept, Charmaz also employed theoretical sampling at a later stage of the data gathering process. Charmaz (1990:1163) states that she employed theoretical sampling to gather more materials to specify and clarify the conditions under which ill people form identity goals and to delineate conditions when they revise their goals. One of the key emerging themes I sought to further examine via theoretical sampling was the girlfriend experience (GFE). I therefore began purposely selecting advertisements where the escort stated that she offers the GFE. I will elaborate on the other themes that emerged from the data itself in section 5.2.5 of this chapter.

5.2.3   Procedure for soliciting participants and obtaining informed consent

Due to budget constraints and the selected research participants being geographically spread throughout South Africa, an unorthodox method had to be employed to solicit potential research participants and obtain informed consent. As mentioned earlier, all the advertisements posted on *Redlace.com* provide the personal contact number of the escort. I therefore contacted potential research participants telephonically to provide all the necessary information regarding my proposed study and the informed consent form. Information provided included the study's aims, methods, timing of the research, anticipated benefits, outcomes, risks, costs, and referral information, acknowledging that valuable information could be missed during the process of obtaining verbal consent. A second phase was added to this process. Therefore, during this telephonic conversation, the potential research participant was provided with a link to a website I created specifically for this study where the informed consent form was placed as an information leaflet. This will allow potential research participants to read the information and reflect on whether they still want to participate in my study. After 2 days, I once again contacted the potential research participant telephonically to determine whether she understood all the information regarding informed consent on my website. It is at this stage where informed consent was sought verbally.

5.2.4   Data collection: Semi-structured interviews

Flick, Von Kardorff and Steinke (2004:255) define a semi-structured interview as a "qualitative method of inquiry that combines a pre-determined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes raised during the interview by the participant". I chose to employ this style of interviewing because of its open-ended approach to gaining knowledge, and the freedom it offers both the researcher and research participants. I was able to explore themes as they emerged during the interviews; while the interviewees were able to raise issues they deem to be important. The interview schedule was designed to be flexible, whilst also providing structure and guidance to the researcher. Initially, this schedule was structured according to the results of the netnographic analysis of escort's advertisements. Thus, introductory questions were based upon the information displayed on the advertisements, such as the photographs, autobiographical description, likes and dislikes, and location. I found this method to be successful since it can be argued that it displayed my interest in the life and

work of the research participant. As a result of the concurrent data- collection and analysis strategy employed, the interview schedule was frequently adapted to feature questions about emerging themes. By conducting the interviews virtually, together with the selected format of the interview schedule, I was able to interview participants in an informal conversational manner while still having clear guidelines.

Fifteen interviews were conducted in English. Recognising the costs involved in conducting telephonic interviews, I decided to employ social networks and instant messaging tools such as *Facebook*, *Mxit* and *Whatsapp* to conduct the interviews. If a research participant did not have a social network- or instant messaging account, I provided them with the login details to an account created specifically for this study. The semi-structured interview was then conducted virtually via the social networking or instant messaging tool of the participant's choice.

The main advantage of conducting virtual interviews is that I had the opportunity to perform what I call speed data- collection and analysis. Turner (2010:754) suggests that when conducting an interview, the researcher should be prepared with follow-up questions or prompts in order to ensure that they obtain optimal responses from participants. During face-to-face interviews this task could be complicated due to the researcher having to divide his or her attention between acknowledging what the participant is saying, recording responses, and picking up on issues that need to be elaborated upon. Conversely, during a virtual interview there is a significant amount of time available for performing these tasks since responses have to be typed out.

Bargh, McKenna and Fritzsimons (2002) did an experimental study amongst students at a New York University to explore the activation and expression of the true-self on the internet. These authors found that the anonymity of the internet enables people to express themselves and behave in ways not available in their usual social sphere, both because they are free of expectations and constraints placed on them by family and friends, and because risks and costs of social sanctions for what is said and done is greatly reduced (2002:35). Applying this logic, and taking into account that the independent escorts I interviewed had to disclose information that they want to keep secret, I argue that the virtual interview fostered a relatively anonymous and non-judgemental environment where participants were able to

delivered due to mobile phone network problems. I had to switch to my computer and communicate with the research participant from the instant messaging application for computers. While the participant seemed to be okay with this, I have to acknowledge that it did jeopardise the conversational nature of the interview and constituted an unnecessary waste of the research participant's time.

5.2.5   Data analysis

The data collection process produced two forms of data: the advertisement on the websites and the semi-structured interviews conducted with independent escorts. Content analysis was employed to analyse the advertisements to produce a mapping of *Redlace.com*, whilst thematic analysis was employed for the data collected during the semi-structured interviews. Marks and Yardley (2004:56) state that content analysis involves establishing categories and counting the number of instances they occur in a text or an image, whilst thematic analysis focuses more on the qualitative aspects of the material analysed. The data analysis process involved searching for continuities and discontinuities in the women's responses and the literature reviewed. I also focussed on the things that were not said or taken for granted.

As stated earlier, prior to the interviews, I had identified themes to be explored. However, these initial themes merely acted as a guide and were changed and re-prioritised by interview responses. For example, with the preliminary themes I was interested in why independent escorts started employing the internet to solicit clients, and what the advantages and disadvantages were of doing this. The themes that emerged from the concurrent data-collection and analysis process covered a wide range of issues and concerns. One of the key unexpected themes that emerged was how intimacy manifests in the interactions between independent escorts and their clients. When these unanticipated themes emerged, I pursued them and explored all possible trajectories and included those themes for discussion in consequent interviews. The list of themes I wanted to explore constantly expanded and changed throughout my time in the field, to include, motivations for entering the commercial sex trade, risks and benefits, experience of violence and abuse, experiences of stigmatisation, and experiences of intimacy.

The following are themes and questions which I tried to address with my interviewees, though, how these were covered and the direction each interview took depended very much on the issues the participants raised in the course of the interviews and the questions I put in response to these:

1) their histories and backgrounds and how they became involved in their work

2) their views of the benefits and/or risks of soliciting clients over the internet

3) their constructions of themselves and their job

How similar or how different is independent escorting from other forms of sex work, e.g. working at an escort agency?

How do independent escorts employ visuals and text to present themselves on the websites?

What significance do these women attach to anonymity in relation to the form of sex work they do and what challenges, if any, they experience in relation to this?

What type of clients are they looking for and what kinds of relations do they try and establish with the clients they meet, in response to the particular advertisements they place on the internet?

4) whether they experience stigma and the forms this takes

5) their experiences and construction of intimacy in their work

Does intimacy manifest itself during their interactions with clients? If so, how?

Are there any challenges when intimacy manifests?

How do intimate relationships with clients differ from conventional heterosexual relationships?

Do escorts view expressions of intimacy as a performance or an authentic relationship bounded in authenticity?

5.2.6 More opportunities for voices and interaction: Member checks, additional questions and my research diary.

Amplifying the voices of independent escorts was a key objective of this thesis. This ambition is reflected by the manner through which I gathered data. Yet, I also wanted to provide research participants with an additional opportunity for interaction with myself, and for voicing their opinions and experiences of independent escorting. I therefore created a website, *Weblightz.com*, for these purposes. This website can be accessed through any computer or mobile phone that has internet access. What follows is a brief discussion of the role of this website in the data- collection and analysis process.

Creswell (2007:45) states that researchers should aim to improve the validity of their data by confirming or triangulating data from various sources, having the study reviewed by the participants, and having other researchers review the research methodology. While I did employ all of these strategies in my study, the website I created was crucial in performing member checks. *Weblightz.com* has a data analyses section where I uploaded my findings in a blog format. Research participants were notified via text message and were invited to comment on my interpretations of the data. I believe that this procedure deconstructed the unequal power relations that traditionally characterise relationships between the researcher and the researched, since both parties assisted in the interpretation of the data. In addition, by performing these member checks, I further adhere to my constructivist, 'bottom-up' epistemological approach to allow research participants to express their own understandings and experiences of their social worlds.

As I have stated, the lack of physical interaction between the research participants and myself complicated the task of establishing rapport. In an attempt to address this limitation, I posted my research diary as a blog on *Weblightz.com*. I wrote about how I felt about the manner in which the research progressed, any success or difficulties I experienced, and findings I found particularly interesting. I thus engaged in a process of self-disclosure in an attempt to foster rapport and break down traditional power barriers between the researcher and the researched,

which in turn aided the collection of information on intimate, possibly stigmatised, and secretive aspects of the lives of independent escorts.

5.3   Ethical considerations

5.3.1   Anonymity, confidentiality and referral information

Ensuring that the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity are met is an important consideration for any research study. However, ensuring that these ethical principles are met becomes more complex (and imperative) when conducting studies on sex work. This was highlighted in Norton-Hawk's (2004) study of pimp- and non-pimp controlled sex workers. Norton-Hawk (2004:191) states that on one occasion, a sex worker was physically assaulted by her pimp as punishment for participating in the research. Norton-Hawk fails to explain how the pimp became aware of the sex worker's participation in the study. There could be various reasons, for example, the pimp could have seen the sex worker in the presence of the researcher, heard from other sex workers that she participated in the study, or the sex worker herself could have told the pimp that she participated in the study. This risk was significantly lowered in my study since research participants never came into physical contact with me due to the interviews being conducted digitally. Therefore, the chances of other people, such as pimps, friends or family, discovering that an escort participated in the study is very low.

I upheld the ethical principle of anonymity by not reporting the name, address, or any other information which could lead to the identification of a research participant. In addition, any identifying characteristics (faces, website names, work names, locations and/or contact numbers) were removed from the social and cultural artefacts (advertisements) incorporated into this thesis. The name of the website from which data was collected was also changed and instead issued with the pseudonym of *Redlace.com.*

Every research participant was also provided with the contact details of the *Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce* (*SWEAT*). This served as both a referral practice and to aid *SWEAT* in establishing networks between themselves and independent escorts.

5.3.2 Remuneration for participation in the study

When applying for ethical clearance, a question often asked is "how research participants will benefit from the study". Researchers could answer this question by stating that participants would not benefit directly, but that the results with be of great value to society in general. Other researchers could offer payment or entry into a lucky draw for a prize, as both a beneficial aspect for participation and incentive to recruit research participants. However, while paying research participants may work well in some studies; this issue becomes more complex when doing research on sex work. Sanders's (2001) paper on female sex workers who solicit clients from the street, sexual violence and protection, discusses the issue of remuneration for participation in the study. In this study the sex workers were paid for their participation. Sanders (2001:7) argues that this demonstrated an acknowledgement of the risks taken by participants to be involved in the research, to add professionalism to the process, to recompense the sex workers for the loss of wages, and to gain the "methodical advantage since payment was employed as a vehicle to overcome the distance between the respondent and the researcher". While remuneration in Sanders's study seems justified, the decision to pay research participants could generate further ethical dilemmas. Sanders (2001:8) states that another ethical issue brought on by compensating sex workers for participating in studies, is that it allows room for similarities to be drawn between researchers paying sex workers for an interview, and a male client who pays a sex worker for sex. The similarities are that the researcher pays the sex worker for her time, attention, and stories in the same way that a client will pay for sex, companionship and time.

I chose not to offer any form of remuneration to the escorts who participated in my study. This was done to avoid being constructed as a male client, which could influence the information that the escorts were willing to provide. Furthermore, unlike studies where sex workers are approached while they are soliciting clients, I approached and contacted the independent escorts telephonically and conducted the interviews digitally. Therefore, these participants did not miss work opportunities or 'lose' clients by participating in my study, since the interview was conducted at a time most convenient for the research participants.

5.4   Reflections and conclusion: Position as a researcher and limitations

In conclusion, I reflect on the study and its limitations. By doing this, I wish to recognise my place as a student, and as a researcher in the environment that the respondents are situated in.

The literature review illustrated that sex workers, especially if they are female, are stigmatised by society for a variety of reasons. Goffman (1963:42) highlights an interesting aspect of stigmatisation and argues that those related to the stigmatised via social structures could also experience forms of stigma as a result of this association. It was fascinating to realise that this argument holds true even if one is only displaying interest, or in this case, conducting a study on a stigmatised group. I first became aware of this whilst discussing my research project with other students, friends and family. Sometimes the conversation would turn awkward and at other times, sexual innuendos and jokes would be made. For example, some of my friends would joke about me soliciting the services of the escorts, whilst others would question why I would want to look at nude pictures of these women. While I have to acknowledge that this bears little comparison with the forms of stigmatisation sex workers experience, these reactions to my research did sensitise me to their plight. I have mentioned before that it was difficult to convince independent escorts to participate in my study. This was demotivating, but as a result of experiencing a degree of stigma myself, I understood why these women would be reluctant to be interviewed.

I am a 24 year old male and during the planning phases of this study, it became apparent that I could be constructed as a potential client by independent escorts. Initially, I believed that the best way for me to resist this would be to not offer any remuneration for participating in the study. However, as the research progressed, and I learnt that independent escorts not only sell sex, but time as well, I realised that just like a potential client, I too was contacting these women and asking them to spend time with me. This was identified as another reason for why so many escorts declined participation since many asked if they would be paid for this interview. I believe that if I had wanted to conduct face-to-face interviews, it would have been even more difficult to convince escorts to participate in an hour-long interview for which they would not have been paid. However, the virtual interviews did not completely eliminate my concern. During one interview, the escort asked me if I would be interested in making use of one of her services. While I politely declined, I realised that it was very difficult to escape this construction.

The main limitation of this study is that because I only conducted interviews with 15 independent escorts, my sample is skewed. A high refusal rate, the time and money required to contact potential participants, a lengthy process of obtaining informed consent and conducting the interviews virtually, made it very difficult to include more respondents in this study. However, this limitation of my study can also be seen as a strength since the research participants proved to be exceptionally self-reflexive, informative and rich data sources, as one might expect from these women who, in contrast to the vast majority of sex workers I initially contacted, agreed to participate in an interview study about their lives as sex workers who solicit clients via the internet.

Another limitation is that escorts from only one website participated in this study. As previously mentioned, the South African websites where escorts can advertise their services vary in terms of quality and professionalism. It would have been interesting to contrast experiences of independent escorts who advertise across a range of websites, since their reasons for choosing a specific website could also indicate which clientele they seek to cater to. Also, as I have stated, some of the other websites contain fake advertisements and it would have been interesting to speak to the women who are marketed as escorts without their knowledge. A final limitation of this study is that certain themes and constructions could have been explored in more depth. Practical circumstances (time constraints and responses having to be typed during interviews) did not allow for the in-depth exploration of themes that would have been possible if the interviews were conducted face-to-face.

Despite these limitations, I am confident that the qualitative methodology and data gathering procedure was the most effective method to obtain rich data on the occupational culture of South African independent escorts in terms of risks and benefits, constructions of self and profession, and experiences of stigmatisation and intimacy.

Chapter 6

Research findings

6.1   Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from my semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 South African independent escorts, as well as netnographic analysis of *Redlace.com*. As was stated in the previous chapter, a concurrent data-gathering and analysis strategy was employed. Thus, the presentation of my findings is organised around themes identified before, during and after the data collection process.

The discussion is divided into seven sections. First, I provide a general demographic of *Redlace.com* and the 15 research participants who were interviewed. Section two addresses the various reasons why and how these women entered the commercial sex trade. The third section features a discussion about the manner in which independent escorts construct themselves via the advertisements they post. This section also examines what independent escorts consider to be the 'ideal' client. The fourth section revolves around the advantages and disadvantages of escorting by placing advertisements on the internet, whilst section five highlights experiences of violence and abuse. The sixth section addresses the research participants' experiences of stigmatisation and the strategies they employ to deal with this. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the 'Girlfriend experience'. I identify the manner in which independent escorts construct this service and the risks and benefits associated with being a 'girlfriend' to some clients.

6.2   General demographics of escorts on *Redlace.com* and the research participants

Through the netnographic analysis of *Redlace.com*, 499 individual advertisements were identified.

80% of these advertisements were posted by independent escorts, while only 20% were by escorts employed at an escort agency. Johannesburg (293 escorts) and Pretoria (132 escorts) were identified as the cities where the most escorts reside. However, it is important to remember that escorts are a publically invisible and hard to reach population and that *Redlace.com* is only one of several escorting websites. The numbers reported here could

therefore be considerably higher if more websites were included in my analysis. 99% of escorts on *Redlace.com* were female, while the rest described themselves as 'transgendered'. The average age of the escorts was 25 years.

As stated in Chapter 3, it was very difficult to convince escorts to participate in my study. Out of the approximately 80 escorts I contacted, only 15 agreed to participate in my study. Table 1 provides the demographics of these 15 research participants.

Table 1: Demographics of research participants

Name of the escort	*Age*	*Race*	*Time spent in the sex industry (years)*
Cindy	24	Black	1
Steph	25	Coloured	2
Amira	24	Black	1.5
Priya	30	Indian	4
Lisa	26	White	3
Tanya	23	White	4.5
Andy	25	White	3
Kristen	22	Black	1.5
Shelly	24	Black	3.5
Kate	22	Coloured	2
Chane	30	White	4
Helen	25	White	2.5
Portia	24	Black	2.5
Sylvie	23	White	2
Eve	34	White	3

6.3   Motivations for becoming escorts.

Authors such as Pruit and Krull (2011), Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor and Wolak (2011), and Jenkins (2004) argue that the internet has become the main medium through which escorts solicit clients. However, there is still uncertainty on whether escorts on the internet are individuals entering the commercial sex-trade for the first time, or sex workers who may have worked from the streets, at brothels or escort agency.

I found that 67% of research participants were either employed at an escort agency or a strip club before they started working independently. There are various reasons for why women chose to leave the agency or club and to work independently. One of the main reasons was because they had to share their profits with the manager of the club. Both Kristen, a former stripper, and Shelly articulates this motive in their responses.

> *Me: Hey I love dancing too. Lol but only when nobody is watching because I'm not that good ☺. If I may ask why did you leave stripping to do escorting?*
>
> *Kristen: I needed to make more money to support myself. And the manager of the place would always look for an excuse to take a cut of my pay.*

> *Me: Now I understand. It sounds like a great place to start out. Why did you decide to start working from home?*
>
> *Shelly: The hours that I had to work that was too much and having to give a percentage of my income to the agency.*

For Kristen, the transition from stripper to escort was not difficult because of the commonalities between the two, namely that she was already engaging in sex work with clients.

> *Me: Going form stripping to sex work – how easy or difficult was that?*
>
> *Kristen: It wasn't that hard. When I was stripping some men would ask for sex, but we couldn't at the club because it was not allowed. So we would meet up afterwards and they would pay me for sex.*

Some research participants said that they chose to start working independently because they felt that they had acquired all the necessary skills and confidence needed from working at an escort agency. In the extract below, Priya highlights the "skills" she had obtained through working for an "escort agency" enabled her to make this transition, with the implication that working independently represented a kind of career progression which demanded more advanced social and communication skills.

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> *Me: Why did you leave the agency?*
>
> *Priya: After working at the escort agency I had enough confidence to start doing my own thing. I grew tired of dealing with the middle man and didn't want to share profits.*
>
> *Me: Gain confidence… could you explain that to me?*
>
> *Priya: One needs different skills to be an escort. You need to be able to communicate with clients on their level, especially if they take you out to events. Also, you need to be presentable.*

The idea of sex work as a profession which demands good social and communication skills, contradicts popular stereotypes of sex work as morally and intellectually degrading or as turning women into commodities and objects of men's desire. This was a key finding which Henry Trotter highlighted in his ethnographic study of women sex workers in Durban who solicited in a club frequented by international male seafarers. Trotter (2008) observed how skilled the women were at engaging with potential clients through the ways they presented themselves and conversed and empathised with them, with the most 'successful' ones as multi-linguists who could communicate with the seafarers in their home languages. These were important skills which many of the women learnt on the job.

Priya's reference to being able to communicate with clients "on their level", especially if they take you out to events, implies that her status has been enhanced through the particular kinds of relationships she is developing with the types of clients who "take her to events". But she implies, too, that she is only able to claim this status through her ability to communicate on their level and present herself in ways which befit the occasion. And as I elaborate later, the performance which befits the public event is often one in which the escort plays the girlfriend or date at ease with, and supportive of, the client who becomes her boyfriend in the public contexts to which he takes her.

The construction of independent escort work as an elite form of work, was a common thread which connected a number of accounts which framed their current work in terms of 'progressions' from other forms of sex work, such as stripping or working for escort agencies. These lend support to Perkins and Lovejoy's (2007) contention about the importance of addressing sex workers' constructions and experiences of upward or

downward mobility in the industry. Another reason why women decided to work independently is because they felt that they did not possess control over their work environment. Amira articulates the lack of control in relation to the hours she had to work and how this interfered with her day job.

> *Amira: Don't get me wrong, I liked stripping. But it's just the hours I had to work that was bad. I also had a day job at the time so it was very tiring having to do both.*

Helen expressed concerns about how working at an escort agency denied her control over which clients she would see.

> *Me: I can imagine you must have met very interesting people. What was frustrating about working at an agency?*
>
> *Helen: I sometimes got assigned clients who I personally wouldn't have met with.*
>
> *Me: Why wouldn't you have met with them? What put you off?*
>
> *Helen: Nothing in particular. We all have our own taste and sometimes I got somebody who I don't like.*
>
> *Me: Can you give me an example of something about a client that you didn't like?*
>
> *Helen: I don't know. Like I'm not racist or anything but I always felt uncomfortable if the guy was black.*

Significantly, she begins by speaking about being "assigned clients" she "personally would not have met with" and mentions "if the guy was black" five lines later after I posed a question about why she would not want to meet with particular clients and asked for examples of something she might not like about a client. Clearly she was guarded about mentioning this, as signalled, of course, by her declaration "I'm not racist or anything" which preceded "I always felt uncomfortable if the guy was black". Helen was the only research participant who constructed a lack of control as not being able to decide which clients to see. However, on *Redlace.com*, the majority of the women provide specific information on the type of clients they cater for. (These not necessarily being racialised but focusing more on the personal attributes of the client). I therefore argue that having control over their work

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environment is one of the main reasons why women choose to work independently. I will return to the type of clients independent escorts cater to in section 6.3 of this chapter.

While the majority of research participants started out working at escort agencies and strip clubs before they became independent escorts, Cindy, Steph, Andy, Chane and Sylvie entered the commercial sex trade for the first time as independent escorts. In comparison to the women who had worked in the commercial sex trade before, those women who had started out as independent escorts found it to be very difficult. Andy expresses how difficult working as an escort was initially and also makes reference to one of the strategies she employed to render the transition into the sex industry easier.

> *Andy: In the beginning it was really difficult and nerve wrecking. I'd always have a glass of wine or two before a meeting. But I knew what I was getting into.*

Andy knew what she was getting into because she had done the necessary research on escorting.

> *Andy: Information on escorting. How to guides and things you should know. There's also blogs by other escorts. So I could really see what it's like before making a decision.*

During my review of literature for this thesis, I also came across various 'how to guides' for escorting on the internet. The quote at the start of Chapter 1 is from one of these guides that were compiled by sex workers for sex workers. It features information on what to expect when entering the commercial sex trade industry, how to manage the business and general tips on safety, to improve the working conditions of sex workers. Apart from the research she did on escorting, Andy's transition into escorting was also streamlined via the help of her friend, who is also an independent escort.

> *Andy: I was a student. I also did some waitressing. But you know studying can be expensive and then there's other things like rent and having to buy food. At a point it became too difficult to balance work and my studies. One of my friends was escorting and she told me that it is easy money. She referred a client to me and the rest is history.*

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Chane was also introduced to independent escorting through a friend.

> *Chane: It's a strange story. A couple of years ago I had lots of debt. One day I was talking to one of my close friends and she told me that she does it and that she makes a decent amount of money. She then suggested that I should try it out.*

Chapkis (2000) and Bronny (1999) argued that independent escorting is a very isolating profession, and emphasised how important it is for sex workers to avoid this isolation. In relation to this, I found that friends played a key role in many of the research participants lives. In this case, the transition into escorting was simplified due to friends, also in the sex industry, being able to impart their knowledge of the trade on the new escorts. I elaborate more on the importance of friends in section 6.5 and 6.6 of this chapter.

In his comparison of the various forms of sex work, Weitzer (2007:28) argues that many sex workers who solicit clients from the street, are exploited and abused by pimps and sell sex out of necessity. However, Gould and Fick (2008) highlight the complexity of this issue and argue that when examining reasons for entering the sex industry, a distinction should be made between financial need (selling sex for survival) and financial opportunity (selling sex for extra money). I found that money was the main reason the majority of women in my study gave for why they became escorts and this was usually articulated in terms both of 'financial need' and 'financial opportunity'.

> *Tanya: I worked at an escort agency and that was really fun. I started working there to earn some extra money… things being so expensive these days.*
>
> *Me: Would you then say that your primary motivation for becoming an escort was for survival or to earn more some extra money.*
>
> *Tanya: To earn some more money. With today's life; you could always do with that extra bit of cash.*

> *Me:*   *What would you say was your primary motivation for doing sex work? Was it because if you did not do it you would not have been able to survive or is it that you just wanted to make some extra money?*
>
> *Andy:* *I think it's a bit of both.*
>
> *Me:*   *Can you explain why you say that?*
>
> *Andy:* *As I said, I needed the money for university and other expenses. But it wasn't like if I didn't do escorting I would have had to drop out. I still would have survived if I kept my waitressing job. It would just have been so much harder for me… know what I mean?*

The majority (83%) of brothel based sex workers in Gould and Fick's (2008) study entered the sex industry because of financial issues. However, according to Gould and Fick (2008), 15% of their respondents became sex workers for non-financial reasons. Similarly to Gould and Fick, I also found that some research participants became, and continue to be, sex workers for non-financial reasons such as work enjoyment.

> *Me:*   *And why did you continue with escorting?*
>
> *Chane: I started to enjoy it.*
>
> *Me:*   *That's interesting. What about it did you enjoy?*
>
> *Chane: Meeting new people. Being treated in a nice way and having control over my work.*

> *Helen: I would say somewhere between the last 2. I'm not desperate for cash and I choose to do this because I enjoy interacting and meeting people.*

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> *Me: I have done some reading on sex work and some sex workers say they*
> *do it to survive whilst others say they could just do with the extra cash*
> *and others say they do it for other reasons. What would you say are*
> *your motivations for doing it?*
>
> *Portia: I do have a day job so I guess I'm doing it for extra cash and for the*
> *adventure*

> *Sylvie: I would say that I am doing it to make extra cash. But also because*
> *it's fun.*
>
> *Me: In which way is it fun?*
>
> *Sylvie: I get to meet very fascinating people.*

Discussions about motivations for entering the commercial sex trade are often laden with references to money. However, as these responses indicate, non-financial factors also play an important role in the research participants' motivation to start and continue being sex workers. I argue that if sex work is to be constructed and treated as work by researchers (and policy makers), this demands not simply addressing the material inducements offered by various kinds of sex work for sex workers, but also the emotional investments and satisfaction which people engaging in this work may derive from this. I am aware that this recommendation could be constructed as an attempt to romanticise sex work (if one subscribes to a radical feminist perspective), or an argument that women enjoy being demeaned sexually and constructed as objects of male desire. But I want to argue against academics and others deciding, in advance, the best moral interests of people who engage in sex work, in ways which preclude listening to and learning from sex workers themselves, about how they construct and experience sex work, and which impute 'false consciousness' to sex workers whose accounts accentuate positive experiences of sex work.

Research participants' motivations for becoming escorts also illustrated Bourdieu's concept of the petite bourgeois. The most evident form of the Petite Bourgeois is exemplified by Andy and Shelly responses.

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> *Shelly: You won't believe me but I had my own business. I did manicures and pedicures from home. I enjoyed doing that but with everything's prices going up I couldn't keep up. I also had a child to care for. I began working as an escort at an agency here in Durban.*
>
> *Me: Wow that's interesting and I do believe you. Did you study to be able to do manicures and pedicures?*
>
> *Shelly: I did. But I couldn't finish because I'm a single parent. So I just used What I learnt up till then.*

> *Me: Why did you choose to go into escorting then?*
>
> *Shelly: I tried to get other work, but everybody wants to see qualifications. And it's very expensive to look after a baby.*
>
> *Shelly: I want to finish up my studies and go back home and live with my daughter.*

In Bernstein's (2007) study, Anna exemplified the petite bourgeois since she turned to sex work because she had completed her BA degree but had decided to further her studies since she was struggling to find "satisfactory" work with her current qualification. Both Shelly and Andy represent Bourdieu's concept of the petite bourgeois. Shelly's response illustrates how hard it is to find work without the necessary qualifications, and that ultimately led her to become an escort. Similarly, Andy turned to sex work to pay for her studies, which would also provide her with a qualification. The question now arises of whether obtaining this qualification would provide Andy with all she feels entitled to, or would she continue being an escort because she is unable to find satisfactory work like Anna. When asked what she sees herself doing in the next 10 years, Andy said the following:

> *Andy: It's difficult to say. I do want to stop doing it but it's difficult to stop once you have started.*
>
> *Me: Why do you say that?*
>
> *Andy: As I said its easy money and work is scarce.*

In contrast to Andy, Shelly views escorting as a method of colleting enough money to continue her studies. In the next 10 years she sees herself completing her studies and moving back home to live with her daughter.

From this discussion it is clear that a variety of factors influence the research participants' choice to enter the commercial sex trade. Andy and Shelly illustrate that while becoming escorts is an exercise of agency and a free choice, it is a limited choice constrained by social issues such as unemployment.

6.4   The clean and pristine world of independent escorting: How escorts present themselves via their advertisements and what they consider to be the ideal client.

Soliciting clients via the internet has been constructed as a form of sex work where individuals can pitch themselves more accurately to potential clients. The majority of websites allow for sex workers to provide information on the services offered, the rates, if they are willing to travel, the type of clients they seek, their personality, and a textual or visual description, by attaching photographs to the advertisement (Pruit & Krull, 2011). It can therefore be argued that these advertisements can be treated as a kind of performance – carrying emotions – and deliberately intended to generate a reaction from others. By employing Goffman's dramaturgical theory, I was able to examine how independent escorts employ dramaturgical strategies to make their performance believable and ensure that their show is not disrupted.

Goffman (1959:23) argues that there is a tendency for performers to present an idealised version of themselves during a performance. As I stated elsewhere, there are many websites available where South African escorts can advertise their services. Some of these websites are very well designed, whilst others are less developed. Priya indicated that the quality of the website on which the advertisement is placed is fundamental in the construction of an idealised version of herself that she presents to potential clients.

> *Me: Why did you choose this website in particular?*
>
> *Priya: It looks professional.*
>
> *Me: Does that have an effect on the amount and type of clients you get?*
>
> *Priya: Oh yes. These cheap websites where one can advertise for free sometimes have fake ads. Websites that ask a fee for you to place an ad contains real ads from women and men who are serious.*

I found it interesting that Priya employed the term "cheap" to refer to websites that are of a low quality and contain fake advertisements. Overall, many of the escorts I interviewed attempted to distance themselves from being seen as "cheap". This was even manifested in the preferences of the women to be called 'escorts' instead of 'call girls'.

> *Me: I actually have a question that came to me while I was doing some reading on sex work. The form of sex work you do is described as being a call girl. But on the South African websites where sex workers can advertise, they don't use the word call girl. They use the word escort.*
>
> *Steph: Definitely escort. I have heard the term call girl in movies. Isn't there an old movie with that title? But anyway, I haven't really heard the word call girl used. I like escort. It makes things seem more professional and upmarket.*

Therefore, the stage where escorts deliver a performance not only functions as a way of presenting an idealised version of self, but it also aids escorts in conveying that they are upmarket professionals. Contributing to their presentation of idealised selves to potential clients, Cindy and Steph ensure that professional, high-quality photographs accompany their advertisements.

> *Me: Do you think it's important to have a picture in your advertisement?*
>
> *Cindy: Of course. It's one of the first things a client looks at. You have a choice with the pictures. You can take it yourself or the website people send a photographer to you to take the pictures. Only thing is that the pictures have to be of a high quality. It's free to post advertisements on this site.*

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> *Steph: I sent them to the guy who runs the website. If the photos are good*
> *enough then they post it to my ad.*
>
> *Me: What does good enough mean?*
>
> *Steph: It's the quality of the photo.*

Interestingly, even the owners of *Redlace.com* stress the importance of having high quality photographs since it is the key to a successful solicitation on their website. The extract on the next page is from *Redlace.com*'s rates page. Here the word 'punter' is employed to refer to potential clients.

> *The punters love to view new online content. It's a fact shown by our site statistics, our research shows the following packages get the most number of hits online. Redlace.com recommends the following packages to multiply your earnings:*
>
> *A: Advertising – 4 weeks @ R450 PLUS Top Value Gallery @ R450 – Watch your phone ring continuously.*
> *B: Advertising – 4 weeks @ R450 PLUS video @ R450 – They will be banging down your door!*
> *C: Platinum Studio Shoot @ R650 – High standard images always pay exceptional dividends, particularly for foreign punters!*

I am uncertain on whether this is the truthful statement or a clever ploy to convince escorts to make use of *Redlace.com* most expensive advertising. Nonetheless, by employing photographs to present an idealised version, escorts are able to deliver a timeless performance. What I mean by this is that the escort only has to look her best when the photographs or video recording is made. By uploading these photographs and videos onto *Redlace.com*, the presentation of self is always readily available to potential clients.

The second technique Goffman (1959:29) suggest for presenting and sustaining a certain impression, is to convey to the audience that the present routine is original and that there is something special and exceptional about it. I found that the autobiographical section on advertisements is perfect for fostering the impression that each client is special. Below are the autobiographies of Priya, Portia and Eve that illustrate how this is achieved.

> *Sensual and exotic female ready to service your every need, call me to experience 7th heaven! I travel international and locally, overnight, weekends, girlfriend experience, nervous and struggling to get an erection? I can help! PRIYA*

> *Hello gentleman, I am HOT Young Portia. I am Sexy, Elegant, Sweet, and Sensual.*
>
> *I have a body to die for... I am a passionate lady who knows how to please A MAN and will definitely leave you breathless.*
>
> *I am opened-minded, a fun-lover and wild. LOOK NO FURTHER, I AM THE ONE WHO CAN MAKE YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE!! 1 PORTIA*

> *Sensual exotic hot babe that loves to have fun.*
>
> *For the best girlfriend experience, I am your girl...*
>
> *Let's heat things up! xxx*
>
> *Call for weekend bookings. EVE*

By employing language strategically, such as addressing the potential client directly and inserting terms such as "your girl", these women are able to foster an impression of uniqueness. Whether clients receive the advertisement in this manner is debatable. Yet, as I was reading through all of the 499 autobiographies on *Redlace.com*, advertisements which were structured in this manner, I felt were speaking to me, and only me. Goffman (1959:30) states that a performance can be rendered unique by employing strategies to foster an impression of legitimacy, by separating different groups of observers from each other. Apart from the strategic use of language, I also found that the website itself, aided in this task. For example, the clients of street- or brothel-based escorts sometimes come into physical contact with one another as they search for a sex worker. One client can even see another dropping off a sex worker after services have been rendered. However, although clients are very much aware of each other and even interact on discussion forums, when searching for an escort online, it is very much a private affair between the escort and her client, where the client is made to feel as if the escort is "[sic] his girl". The next dramaturgical technique also involves those for whom a show is put on – the audience. Goffman (1959:152) states that the more

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information the audience has about the performer, the less likely the chances are of the show being disrupted. It is here where the likes and dislike section of the advertisements on *Redlace.com* play an important role. I argue that via this section, escorts are able to control the reaction of the clients by providing them with a script. For example, by stating that they enjoy being respected, receiving gifts such as perfume or lingerie, being spoilt and pampered, escorts directly convey to clients how they want to be treated. Also, by mentioning that they dislike negativity, time wasters, unsophisticated men, drunks, drug addicts and rude and rough men, escorts present potential clients with clear specifications on how they should present themselves. It would therefore appear as though escorts attempt to control every aspect of the show they are putting on.

I do wish to focus on the most prominent criteria set out by escorts in their likes and dislikes section. First, the like of good hygiene was mentioned 136 times, or alternatively, a dislike for men with bad personal hygiene was mentioned 342 times. Interestingly, the concept of good hygiene also surfaced in a discussion with Steph on how the clients she sees differ from those a sex workers soliciting form the street caters to.

> *Me:* *Do you think the clients you see are similar or different to the ones who would go to other sex workers who work in the street or at a brothel or escort agency.*
>
> *Steph: I think they are different. Those who go to sex workers on the street or brothel are cheap. I also think those clients are dodgy and dirty.*
>
> *Me: Dirty?*
>
> *Steph: Dirty, bad hygiene. The clients I get are very clean. We both take a shower before and after sex.*

Steph's response seems to imply that good hygiene refers to cleanliness. Admittedly, this was one theme that I should have explored with more research participants. Nonetheless, I did post the question of what 'good hygiene' constitutes on *Weblightz.com*. Below are two of the responses I received

> *Natalie: I don't know about the others but when I say good hygiene I mean the man must not have any diseases like AIDS and stuff.*

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> *Amy: When I say that it's a bit of both. Yeah I am talking about having showered and smelling nice but I also mean the guy shouldn't have any sexually transmitted diseases. If you get a sexually transmitted disease then you can't work*

From these responses, it would appear that the term 'cleanliness' is also employed as a euphemism that refers to being free from sexually transmitted diseases. The issue of HIV-AIDS was not a focus of this study. However, I found that independent escorts on *Redlace.com* not only attempt to minimise the risk of contradicting sexually transmitted diseases through emphasising cleanliness, but also by explicitly stating that they do not engage in anal sex, which according to Baggaley *et al*. (2010), has a significantly higher HIV transmission rate than vaginal sex. The dislike of anal-sex was mentioned 257 times, whilst a like for anal sex was only mentioned 23 times. In this case, I argue that "dislikes" should be understood as activities or behaviour that the escort will not engage in.

On a symbolic level, their opposition to men with bad hygiene could also be understood as being linked with the concern to distance themselves from stigma attached to sex work, and to present themselves as the kind of professionals who attract clean, professional men who treat them with respect. Their opposition to 'unclean' male clients, and the construction of clients with HIV as 'unclean', is perhaps also reinforced by popular and stigmatising constructions of sex workers as carriers and spreaders of HIV/AIDS (Campbell, 2000) from which they are invested in distancing themselves, along with 'unclean' male clients.

From this discussion, it is clear that independent escorts have significantly more control over their working conditions than their street-based counterparts. By soliciting clients on the internet, escorts can provide an abundance of information about themselves, how they want to be treated, the services offered, and what clients they cater to. However, the question now arises of whether the show escorts put on is ever disrupted, and if so, how they deal with this. I attempt to answer this question in section 6.5 of this chapter.

The final dramaturgical technique I want to discuss is the management of the face and body. I found that the face, or in this case, the decision to not show the face, plays an important role in the presentation of self to clients. This is because only 35% of the women displayed their

faces in the photographs, while the rest either wore a mask or simply did not include their face. There are several factors which influence an escort's decision to reveal their face in photographs. For Steph and Lucy, the fear of being identified as an escort by friends and family was why they chose not to include their faces in the photographs. While they present themselves as independent and upmarket, to distance themselves from the stigma attached to sex workers, stigma shows itself here in relations to these acute concerns about not revealing what they do to family and friends.

> *Me: And I saw that you didn't include your face in the photo, why is that?*
>
> *Steph: It's so people don't recognise me.*

> *Lucy: Private because I am not as exposed. That's why I don't post pictures with my face in.*
>
> *Me: Would you then say it's dangerous to post pictures with your face in it?*
>
> *Lucy: Not dangerous, more risky because it's easy for someone to recognise you if they see your face then if they just saw a body.*

Priya raises another factor escorts take into consideration when deciding if they should include their face.

> *Priya: Clients that want to take you out to a party; function, etc. often want to see your face.*

Thus, according to Priya, for those escorts who market themselves as not only providers of sexual services but also companions, it is very important to show their faces to potential clients, yet this compromises their anonymity as sex workers with friends and family. It is almost as if they can never quite escape the stigma attached to sex work, even if they try to distance themselves as professional and independent escorts from 'cheap' and 'unclean' clients, and present themselves as upmarket companions for upmarket clients. While the majority of escorts on *Redlace.com* did not employ their face in presentations of self, all the escorts employed their bodies. This echoes Hesse-biber and Leavy's (2006) argument that the

sex work industry is based upon the idea that the human body can be commoditised. The majority (65%) of escorts on *Redlace.com* included photos where they are wearing lingerie, whereas 35% included nude photographs. Based on this, I am inclined to argue that regardless of the form of sex work, the sex worker's beauty, race or build are important factors potential clients take into consideration, even though, in the case of the sex workers I interviewed who advertised independently on the internet, placed much more emphasis on their personality traits.

6.5   Advantages and disadvantages of independent escorting via the internet

In the previous sections of the chapter, I have already touched upon most of the advantages of being an independent escort who uses the internet to solicit clients. These include being able to control working hours, deciding which clients to see, and not having to share the income with a third party, such as a manager. Escorts also expressed the ability to control the presentation of self to clients as a key benefit. In this section I expand upon the various benefits and risks of escorting as is experienced by the research participants.

Bargh *et al*. (2002:35) found that the anonymity of the internet affords people the freedom of expression and behaviour because they are free from expectations and constraints placed on them by family, friends and society in general. For Steph and Chane, a very important benefit of employing the internet to solicit clients is the anonymity it grants them. Steph and Chane's responses below illustrate how the anonymity provided by the internet helps them in keeping their profession a secret.

> *Steph: But my parents are technophobes ☺ So the chances are slim of them going onto the website and seeing my photos and stuff.*

> *Chane: One thing that stood out for me was how secretive it can be.*
>
> *Me: Could you elaborate on that?*
>
> *Chane: Like I said. I had no clue that my friend did it. If you are careful, you can be an escort and nobody would ever know.*

I also found that these escorts were aware that there are varying degrees of anonymity. As highlighted in the previous section, the exclusion of one's face in the photographs posted is an important strategy of ensuring complete anonymity. Also, by using a working-name, escorts further limit the chances of people identifying them on the internet. The anonymity the internet provides is also a strategy available to escorts for dealing with stigma. I will elaborate on this in section 6.6 of this chapter. Another benefit that stems from the anonymity provided by the internet, and the control independent escorts have over their working conditions, is that some escorts were able to hold two jobs. One of these women is Portia who is a cashier during the week and an escort during the weekend.

Me: *Do you mind me asking what your day job is?*

Portia: *I'm a cashier at a clothing store.*

Me: *Wow you have two very different jobs.*

Portia: *I know. I think if I was only a cashier I would die of boredom* ☺

Me: *Lol. So what would you say are the advantages of being an independent escort who uses the internet to advertise?*

Portia: *For me it's being able to do two jobs without the one interfering with the other.*

Portia's response exemplifies Goffman's argument that many sex workers manage stigmatisation by leading a double life. Yet, I am inclined to argue that due to the anonymity provided by the internet, it could be easier for independent escorts to keep their 'two lives' separate than it is for sex workers who solicit clients form the street and do not enjoy the same degree of anonymity and concealment.

As previously mentioned, I made use of concurrent data- collection and analysis to examine themes grounded in the view of the research participants. One of the unexpected themes that emerged from the data was the role Punter forums play. It was interesting to note that the research participants had mixed feelings about these forums. For Shelly, Portia and Helen, the possibility of being reviewed by a client adds extra pressure to their work.

> *Me: How do you feel about being possibly being reviewed by a client?*
>
> *Shelly: It makes me nervous.*
>
> *Me: Why is that?*
>
> *Shelly: It adds extra pressure.*

> *Portia: Have you heard about Punters?*
>
> *Me: Oh I see and yes I have heard about Punters. Guys who review escorts and post on websites?*
>
> *Portia: Yes that's what I'm talking about. You never know if the guy may be a punter. So there's extra stress to always be at your best.*

> *Me: Does it not add extra pressure knowing that you might be reviewed?*
>
> *Helen: It does but that's why I'm always at my best when I'm with a client.*

I find it interesting that Portia and Helen respond to the extra pressure and stress by always trying to be at their best when with a client. In contrast to Shelly and Portia, some of the other research participants constructed being reviewed as an aspect of any occupation and/or opportunities for them to market themselves.

> *Me: Very interesting. I have spoken to a few other escorts and they mentioned that there are website forums where clients can post reviews of the escorts they have been with. How do you feel about being reviewed?*
>
> *Chane: It's fine. It's like any other job where workers get evaluated on their performance.*

> *Tanya: I think its good way to get your name out there?*
>
> *Me: What do you mean with get your name out there?*
>
> *Tanya: If I get a good review then more people will know that I'm a good escort.*

> *Eve: I do know about these forums and think they are good and bad.*
>
> *Me: How are they good?*
>
> *Eve: It's like if I read about a restaurant that got a good review in a magazine I would want to go there. If I got a good review then it could mean me getting more clients.*

What is interesting about these responses is that regardless of whether the forums are viewed as sources of stress or opportunities for marketing, all of the women altered their behaviour (by being at their best) as a result of the prospect of being reviewed. I therefore argue that Punter forums operate as Panopticons. The Panopticon is an architectural penitentiary design developed by the 18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The principle of the Panopticon was that prisoners could be continuously observed, without realising that they were being observed. For Michel Foucault (1996), the Panopticon exemplified the core of the philosophy of observation that has become the guiding principle of policing in the modern state.

> Panopticism is one of the characteristic traits of our society. It's a type of power that is applied to individuals in the form of individual supervision, in the form of control, punishment and compensation, and in the form of correction, that is, moulding and transformation of individuals in terms of certain norms. This threefold aspect of panopticism – supervision, control, correction – seems to be a fundamental and characteristic dimension of the power relations that exist in our society. (Foucault, 1996:327)

In this case, the Punter forums become Panopticons where the punters are the 'guards' patrolling the area, policing the activities of independent escorts. Just as the citizens are never entirely sure whether they are being observed, independent escorts never know whether the client they are with could be reviewing them. Therefore, while independent sex workers who solicit clients via the internet may be void of third party management and have considerable control over their working conditions, their behaviour and performance as escorts is policed by punters.

Another set of disadvantages associated with being an independent escort and reported by those women who had worked at an escort agency or strip club, concerned the responsibilities they now bore, as women now working from home, for marketing themselves to clients.

> *Kate:* *When working from home, you are responsible for your own marketing.*
>
> *Me:* *I haven't heard anyone say that in the past interviews. Could you please elaborate on that?*
>
> *Kate:* *When working at an agency, the agency takes care of the marketing. Clients are drawn to the agency based on its reputation and if it looks upper class. But when working alone you have to make sure you attract clients.*

> *Me:* *I spoke to a woman who also worked at an escort agency and she said that a disadvantage for her when she started working from home was that she had to start marketing herself. Did you also experience this?*
>
> *Helen:* *Oh yes. You know at the website where you got my information I have to pay for the ad and also for the photos taken of me. Yes, it's quite expensive.*

Where both Kate and Helen constructed being responsible for their own marketing as a disadvantage, Helen also highlights the advantages of being able to do this.

> *Helen:* *Yes, I'm able to market myself to the type of clients I want.*
>
> *Me:* *I see, one of the things you weren't able to do when you worked at the agency.*
>
> *Helen:* *Yes.*

Earlier I mentioned Helen's concern about not being able to choose which clients she did business with as one of the reasons she chose to leave the escort agency. In an attempt to overcome this hindrance, both Andy and Kate employ social networking to market themselves to a wider audience than those on Redlace.com.

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> *Me: That's interesting. And this twitter page, was it under your working name?*
>
> *Andy: Yes.*
>
> *Me: What would you tweet about?*
>
> *Andy: I mostly post pictures of myself but I also tweet about the everyday things I'm doing like everybody else.*

> *Kate: I always keep the pictures of my advertisement updated. I also have my own twitter.*
>
> *Me: Wow really? I spoke to another escort who also uses twitter. I assume you are tweeting under your working name?*
>
> *Kate: Yes that's correct.*
>
> *Me: And what would you tweet about?*
>
> *Kate: I would post pictures of myself. But it's like any other twitter account. I comment on world events, how I'm feeling etc.*
>
> *Me: That's so interesting. So are your followers all clients?*
>
> *Kate: Some are clients but most are random people* ☺

It is fascinating that both Andy and Kate are invested in constructing their social networking accounts and activities "just like any other accounts". These statements by Andy and Kate could be seen as contradictory since the aim of the *Twitter* account is to market and present the women as escorts to potential clients. However, I argue that these quotations once again highlight that for some independent escorts, the presentations of self, involves more than simply displaying their bodies, but also presenting their personalities to clients.

Six of the women who had worked for clubs or agencies also expressed loneliness as one of the drawbacks of working independently. Helen, for example, misses socialising with her ex-colleagues who worked at the escort agency.

> *Helen: It's lonely working on your own.*
>
> *Me: Could you elaborate on that?*
>
> *Helen: When I worked at the agency I made lots of friends with the other*
> *girls there. It was fun meeting up with each other and just talking.*

Many of the responses on loneliness resemble those of the sex workers from Chapkis (2000) and Bronny's (1999) studies where the sex workers also reflected on the isolation they experienced as home-based escorts. Yet, for two of research participants in my study, the isolation was not viewed as a big of drawback. For Kristen, the advantage of not having to share her income with a third party outweighed the loneliness associated with working independently

> *Kristen: I think if there was more security. Like at the club where there was*
> *somebody who looks out for me. And it can get lonely working*
> *alone.*
>
> *Me: Interesting you say that because I have done some interviews with*
> *other escorts and they also said that it can get lonely. Have you*
> *considered maybe working at an escort agency where you would then*
> *work with other people and there would be security?*
>
> *Kristen: I have but then I would have to give away a cut of my pay again.*

In contrast to the other women, Portia constructed this isolation associated with working independently as an advantage.

> *Me: Okay I see. Escorting is very different from stripping. One thing I was wondering about is whether you miss working with other people? Like at the strip club you presumably worked with other girls and now you work alone.*
>
> *Portia: Honestly, I don't miss it at all.*
>
> *Me: Will you tell me why?*
>
> *Portia: Because some of the girls can be very bitchy. And I don't think they liked me very much.*
>
> *Me: Why don't you think they liked you?*
>
> *Portia: I don't know. They were never in your face bitchy but there was just something fake in the way they would talk with me.*

Kristen and Portia's statements echo the findings of Plumridge's (2001) study of different forms of sex work in New Zealand. Just like Kristen and Portia, some of the women in his study did not enjoy working with other women and described their co-workers as "bitchy". These workers also prioritised making money above making friends in the industry.

Finally, some women constructed working independently as more risky than working at an escort agency or strip club. The risk is heightened due to these women having to meet clients alone, whereas the agencies and clubs have security who protect the women.

> *Me: Now you work independently… so now I am wondering how you protect yourself?*
>
> *Amira: That's a good question. It's something I miss from being a stripper. The security, you know if something happens then there are people who can help you.*

> *Me: I'm wondering now, how do you protect yourself? I mean working from home can be scary since you are alone with a client with no one to help you in an awkward situation.*
>
> *Tanya: Yes it can be. I guess it's a risk that many are willing to take.*

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While it is considerably less than that experienced by sex workers who solicit clients from the street, the escorts I interviewed also experience a certain degree of violence at the hands of clients and/or police. Important questions are raised by Amira and Tanya's statements – what sort of violence have they experienced and who the perpetrators were? Also, taking into consideration the lack of security, what strategies do independent escorts employ to minimise this risk and increase their safety? I provide answers to these questions in the following section.

6.6   Experiences of violence and abuse

I argued that the independent escorts I interviewed construct their worlds as 'clean and pristine' in the sense of presenting idealised versions of themselves online, by specifying which types of clients they catered for and how their clients should treat them. However, this section will illustrate that, in some cases, this perfect 'performance' is disrupted and that clients do not necessarily stick to the script the escort presents them with. In this section, I discuss the forms of violence and abuse the research participants experienced, who the perpetrators were, and how they dealt with this. I also elaborate on the techniques independent escorts employ to ensure their safety.

In chapter 2, I addressed studies on sex workers' experiences of violence perpetrated by the police. What was striking, in contrast with my study with independent escorts who solicited via the internet, was that none of them experienced any interaction with the police.

> *Me: I have been doing some reading on sex work and many sex workers who work from the street here in SA report violence at the hands of police. Have you ever experienced violence/abuse/arrest from police as a result of being an escort?*
>
> *Tanya: Thankfully not. It's the same with stigma. Women who work from the street are more in public view then what I am.*

> *Me: I see. I have been doing some readings on sex work in SA, and I have*
> *come across many reports of street-based sex workers experiencing*
> *violence from police. Have you ever experienced abuse or violence or*
> *arrest at the hands of police?*
>
> *Andy: No I haven't*
>
> *Me: Would you then say that by advertising your services on the internet*
> *you limit your interactions with police?*
>
> *Andy: Yes, it's more underground.*
>
> *Me: What do you mean with underground?*
>
> *Andy: I mean that it will be difficult for people to discover my identity.*

Tanya's response illustrates that in South Africa, when working as a sex worker visibility does count against you. Because street-based sex workers have to solicit clients from the street, their chances are higher of coming into contact with police officers. The interactions between South African independent escorts and the police could also be limited due to the lack of a single consistent national policing strategy regarding sex work where the solicitation occurs indoors (South Africa Law Commission paper 19, 2002).

The policing of specifically independent escorts who solicit clients via the internet is further complicated due to the construction of the nature of the escorting websites. Below is the disclaimer of *Redlace.com*.

> *Redlace.com* does not offer services for prostitution or prostitutes. We provide advertising and referral services for adults, who are independent contractors, and any and all fees exchanged are for time and companionship only. No fees of any kind will be quoted, negotiated, or collected in exchange for any sexual conduct. Anything else that may occur is a matter of personal choice between two consenting adults of legal age, and is not contracted for, nor is it requested to be contracted for, or compensated for in any manner. (Redlace.com, 2013)

I found that many of the other escorting websites in South Africa employ a similar disclaimer. It is interesting to note that the language used here is similar to that employed by liberal feminists who also construct sex work as a contractual agreement between two consenting adults. By operating under the guise of the dating and/or referral websites, *Redlace.com* is able to avoid the Sexual Offences act 23 of 1957. Admittedly, this is another area where more data is needed. For example, more research needs to be done on foreign escorts and what their interactions have been with police, in light of the conflation of foreignness, trafficking, and sex work.

Five of the escorts I interviewed reported experiencing either violence or abuse at the hands of clients. Their experiences ranged from clients physically attacking the women to clients refusing to pay.

> *Me: I see, have you ever experienced violence from a client?*
>
> *Andy: Not violence, the guy just refused to pay.*

> *Kristen: Good question. It's hard to tell. I treat every situation as though it is dangerous. I have been beaten up by a guy and one did refuse to pay.*

> *Kate: I once had a client who just got really upset when I didn't want him to have unprotected sex with me. He didn't want to pay so I just asked him to leave.*

> *Helen: I was once slapped by a guy who got angry when I didn't want to do what he asked.*

> *Eve: A client wanted to do something which I was not comfortable with and when I said no he started grabbing me tighter. I got up quickly and left. Didn't even worry about getting paid.*

Similarly to the findings of Gould and Fick's (2008) study of sex work in Cape Town, I also found that the catalyst for violence was the refusal of the escort to comply with the client's requests, particularly for unprotected or anal sex. One has to remember that sex work in South Africa is illegal and this made it very difficult for Andy, Kristen and Helen to report the crimes perpetrated against them.

> Me: *Wow that's bad, what did you do about it?*
>
> Andy: *There's not really anything I could do. I can't go to the police and say this happened.*

> Me: *That's bad hey. What did you do about it?*
>
> Kristen: *There is nothing I can do about it. I'm doing something illegal.*

> Me: *I'm sorry to hear about that. What did you do about it?*
>
> Helen: *I couldn't do anything. Just had to take it. It comes with the job.*

Earlier I argued that for these research participants, independent escorting affords them a large degree of control over their working conditions since it allows them to state what clients they want and how they want these clients to treat them. However, these extract above exemplify a sense of helplessness. Just like Andy, Kristen and Helen, half of the sex workers from Gould and Fick's (2008) also did not report incidents of rape and violence to the police, believing that the police will not help them or that they did not have sufficient evidence to lay a charge.

The final form of abuse reported by the escorts I interviewed could be seen as being unique to escorting where solicitation occurs via the internet. This form of online abuse is facilitated by the punter forums, as illustrated by the extracts on the next page.

> *Tanya: Well, there is this one guy who writes bad reviews for girls he hasn't even met.*
>
> *Me: What would he write and has that happened to you?*
>
> *Tanya: Yes he has. He would write that the sex was bad or that the girl is Cold, things like that. And that can damage the amount of business you get.*
>
> *Me: That's bad. Have you asked the webmaster to ban him?*
>
> *Tanya: Did that. But he just returns under a different name.*

> *Me: So that's how these forums are good. How are they bad?*
>
> *Eve: They are bad because there are some jerks that go out writing bad reviews for everyone they see.*

Women who solicit clients via the internet are confronted with challenges unique to their form of sex wok. While it may appear as though the women I interviewed were passive recipients of the violence and abuse, I did find that some of the women had very creative strategies in place to limit the chances of them experiencing violence and abuse and being placed in a vulnerable and powerlessness position.

Similar to Sanders (2004), I also found that many of the research participants screen potential clients as a safety precaution. This screening process can take various forms. Amira and Portia screen potential clients by meeting with the client beforehand in a public space.

> *Me: But how do you ensure your safety now as a sex worker? I assume that clients have to call you to make an appointment. Is it possible to tell if a client could be dangerous from the call?*
>
> *Amira: I'll tell you what. I haven't been doing this for long and some women who have done this for longer might disagree, but I think it's impossible to tell from just hearing somebody's voice if they are dangerous or not. What I do is ask the client is to meet me for drinks beforehand. That's when I try to figure the guy out. But still it's impossible to tell.*

> *Portia: I placed an advertisement online where I advertised private lap*
> *dances. Anybody interested would have to be willing to meet*
> *beforehand in a Public place. I called it getting to know each other.*
>
> *Me: Do you mean meet before going to a hotel or wherever? And why did*
> *you want to meet the client beforehand?*
>
> *Portia: Yes that's what I mean and I wanted to meet beforehand to give my*
> *gut a chance to tell me if I should go with guy or not.*
>
> *Me: That was smart of you.*
>
> *Portia: Thanks. I have heard way too many stories of girls being raped or*
> *beat up by clients. I may be a bit crazy but I'm definitely not stupid* ☺

While Portia's screening technique is based on her "gut" feelings, other escorts employ a more systematic and technical approach. For example, before working independently, Kate was a booker at an escort agency. Her duties consisted of answering calls and screening potential clients. The extract below from her interview highlights some of the questions she would ask callers to map their personality.

> *Me: Could you give me some examples of the questions you would ask a*
> *potential client?*
>
> *Kate: Questions like what have your experiences been with escorts in the*
> *past? Where are you staying? What your preferences are?*

Eve employs a similar strategy and also screens clients by posing various questions to them.

> *Eve: What I mean is that meeting somebody at home or at a hotel you*
> *never know what could happen. It's so important to know that when*
> *somebody responds to my add that I ask the right questions.*
>
> *Me: I understand. Could you give me an example of questions you would*
> *ask potential clients?*
>
> *Eve: I ask questions about their preferences and if they read my*
> *advertisement and know what services I offer. It's always good*
> *to discuss this before meeting for real.*

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This screening technique is based upon Goffman's (1959) impression management strategy where the performer seeks to provide as much information as possible to the audience to minimise the chances of the show being disrupted. Earlier the escort was the performer, providing information on herself to the potential client. In this case, the potential client can be constructed as the performer from whom the escort is extracting information. Determining the client's expectations of the encounter, previous experience with escorts and general personality could be a very useful safety precaution, since the catalyst for violence was identified as clients requesting services the escort does not offer. Interestingly, this screening procedure allows the escorts to demarcate between safe and unsafe clients. Shelly started working at an escort agency and found the experience overwhelming. However, she considers herself "lucky" since the owner of the escort agency was very supportive and initially, only introduced her to safe clients.

> *Me:*   *What do you mean by "safe clients"?*
>
> *Shelly: Safe clients are those who have met with the other girls at the agency and who didn't do anything bad to the girls.*
>
> *Me:*   *That's so interesting. I haven't heard about this. Do all the new girls at the agency get the safe clients or do you think it was a special arrangement for you?*
>
> *Shelly: I'm not sure. It might have been a special arrangement for me because I really was out of place.*

When Kate started working independently, she also initially only met with clients who were regulars at the escort agency she worked at.

> *Kate: I was nervous as hell. Had to drink something to calm my nerves. At least I knew the guy because he was a regular at the agency. We met at a hotel. The experience wasn't as glamorous as I had imagined it to be. But it also wasn't bad. Afterwards I thought that if I just saw a few clients a month I could afford to stay at a nicer house.*

These extracts highlight yet another advantage (being able to build up a database of safe clients) for women who have worked at an escort agency and then decided to work independently. However, I also found that women, who are friends with other escorts, are also able to do business with so called safe clients. Chane, who was introduced to escorting

via her friend, reflects on how her friend helped her ensure that her first meeting would be with a safe client.

> *Chane:* *No I actually met with one of her clients that she referred to me.*
>
> *Me:* *Do you mind telling me why?*
>
> *Chane:* *Obviously I was crazy nervous and scared. I don't think I would have been able to do it with a complete stranger for the first time.*
>
> *Me:* *But technically this guy was also a stranger.*
>
> *Chane:* *You are right but my friend told me everything about him so he wasn't a complete complete stranger.*
>
> *Me:* *What things did she tell you?*
>
> *Chane:* *Like what he was like. What I could expect. If he was rough etc.*
>
> *Me:* *What do you mean with rough?*
>
> *Chane:* *Like if he enjoys rough, hard sex.*
>
> *Me:* *I see. And how did the first meeting go with this guy?*
>
> *Chane:* *It went okay. I think my friend told him that he was my first so he was also very caring. It eased my mind.*

Chane's response, once again, highlights the importance of having friends in the commercial sex trade, especially if the worker has no previous sex work experience. Therefore, while independent escorting could be constructed as an isolating profession where workers experience some degree of loneliness, for women like Chane, having friends in the industry and swapping out clients could be a very important and useful safety precaution that could aid in separating the safe from the not so safe clients.

6.7   Experiences and strategies for managing stigmatisation

Chapter 3 emphasised that regardless of the form, all sex workers are confronted with some degree of stigmatisation. Sex workers suffer from what Goffman (1963) referred to as the stigma of blemishes of individual character. I found that the majority of independent escorts I interviewed did not report experiencing any form of stigmatisation. This, in part, could be attributed to the manner in which I introduced the topic of stigma during interviews. The extract below illustrates how I would introduce the topic of stigma.

> *Me: As you know, there is a lot of stigma attached to the profession of sex work. Have you ever experienced any stigma as a result of being an escort?*

Such a question is problematic because it assumes a common understanding of stigma, and also because it invites my interviewees to distinguish between themselves, people who do not experience stigma, and other more publicly visible sex workers who do.

> *Me: You are lucky to have such a good friend. I was wondering, you said that you haven't experienced any stigma as a sex worker because you work as an escort, but what about sex workers who get clients from the street? Do you think they experience any form of stigma?*
>
> *Lucy: I think those women experience it the most.*
>
> *Me: Why do you say that?*
>
> *Lucy: Because they work in public where everybody can see them. They are more vulnerable.*

> *Me: I see. I have heard that sex workers who get clients form the street experience the most stigma. Why do you think these sex workers experience stigma the most?*
>
> *Eve: It's because they have to stand on the streets where practically anybody can see them*

> *Me:* As you know there is a lot of stigma attached to the profession of sex work. Have you ever experienced any form of stigma because you are an escort?
>
> *Helen:* No I haven't.
>
> *Me:* Why do you think that is?
>
> *Helen:* Only my friends I worked with and the clients know that I am an escort. So it's not like people will see me in a shop and yell whore because they know what I do.

> *Me:* As you may know, there is a lot of stigma surrounding sex work as a profession. Have you ever experienced any form of stigma?
>
> *Tanya:* No I haven't.
>
> *Me:* Why do you think that is?
>
> *Tanya:* I think it's because as an escort you only encounter people who want the same thing.
>
> *Me:* What do you mean? Can you give me an example of that?
>
> *Tanya:* I mean you won't get in a situation with somebody who hates escorts. It's like what are the chances that you will find somebody completely opposed to pornography in a porn shop?
>
> *Me:* Highly unlikely
>
> *Tanya:* That's my point.
>
> *Me:* That's interesting. Applying your logic then, do you think sex workers on the street experience stigma?
>
> *Tanya:* Most definitely. Those women stand on the street where many people can see them.
>
> *Me:* People who may not be accepting of what they do.
>
> *Tanya:* Yes.

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> *Me:*　*I have been doing some reading and studies show that sex workers who get clients from the street experience the most stigma. Why do you think this is?*
>
> *Portia:*　*I don't know. Maybe because they work from the street and there are lots of stereotypes about them.*
>
> *Me:*　*Stereotypes like?*
>
> *Portia:*　*Like they have AIDS or use drugs. Things like that.*

The anonymity afforded by the internet almost serves as a shield that protects these independent escorts from stigmatisation. As Tanya puts it, by soliciting clients on a website, the chances of coming into contact with people who disapprove of sex work are significantly lowered.

Goffman (1963:14) argues that we "normals" construct the stigmatised as not quite human, and based on this assumption, we reduce their life-chances, build theories to explain their inferiority and the danger they present, impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one, and sometimes use this as a rationalisation for animosity. The review of literature illustrated that experiences of violence and abuse at the hands of police, and receiving ill-treatment at clinics, were identified as the most apparent manifestations of stigmatisation against sex workers in South Africa. However, I also found that some research participants experienced more subtle forms of stigma. Andy, Kate and Sylvie have experienced forms of stigmatisation where individuals attempt to build theories for their constructed inferiority and impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original.

> *Andy:*　*I wouldn't say that I have experienced extreme stigma. But juts some clients who have this idea about what I should be like because of the stereotype of a sex worker.*
>
> *Me:*　*Can you give me an example of that.*
>
> *Andy:*　*Like this one guy asked me if the reason why I got into sex work was because I was raped as a child.*
>
> *Me:*　*Wow how did you respond to that?*

> *Andy: I just smiled and said no. I mean you can't go off at the guy. He is still a paying client.*
>
> *Me: That's true. It must be hard to always control your emotions?*
>
> *Andy: Sometimes it is hard. There are days when you feel down but then you have to act as if you are okay when seeing clients.*

> *Kate: Take my twitter account as example. I sometimes get messages from people asking me how I could sell my soul like this and am I not ashamed. I've been called everything under the sun.*
>
> *Me: Wow doesn't it get to?*
>
> *Kate: I have a thick skin and Twitter allows me to quickly block anybody hating ☺*

> *Me: As you know there is a lot of stigma attached to being a sex worker. Have you ever experienced any stigma as a result of being an escort?*
>
> *Sylvia: I did. It was while organising a meeting when the man said, you speak really nicely. I was thinking seriously? What was he expecting? Me saying uh me can speak the English.*
>
> *Me: I see what you mean. How did that make you feel and did you let the man know how you felt?*
>
> *Sylvia: I was very angry but couldn't show it. It's unprofessional and unattractive to go off at a client.*

Interestingly, these women are being stigmatised by their clients. These extracts seem to contradict Tanya's logic who asserted that independent escorts are not as affected by stigma since they are soliciting clients in a less judgemental environment, than women who have to work from the streets. It is also fascinating how professionally these women respond to their stigmatisation by not expressing their emotions of anger and hurt. I argue that these responses are a testament to the large degree of dramaturgical discipline the research participant's possess. By concealing responses that might not be appropriate, while at the same time displaying a response which is acceptable, these women are able to continue presenting an idealised (professional) version of self, whilst ensuring that the show continues uninterrupted.

At this stage, I want to discuss the various coping strategies the research participants employed to both cope with, and prevent stigmatisation. First, all of the research participants exercised information control to deal with stigma. For sex workers, this often constitutes leading a double life (Goffman, 1964:41). I found that all of the research participants employed this strategy to varying extents. The most apparent form of this was by not telling their family and friends that they are sex workers. The quotes by Portia and Shelly illustrate how they are able to "mask" their sex work status by telling their parents only about their day jobs.

> *Me: How do you think your parents would feel if they found out? And how do you keep them from finding out?*
>
> *Portia: They would be very angry. My parents live very far from me so we do not see each other that much. Only for Christmas.*
>
> *Me: And what do they think you do?*
>
> *Portia: They know I work at a clothing store.*

> *Me: Earlier you said that you left your child with your mother. Does your family know that you are an escort?*
>
> *Shelly: No! They think I'm here working at a spa.*

By fostering the impression that they are spa-workers and cashiers, these women are able to hide the stigma-carrying attribute from their families. I found that many of the research participants were invested in keeping their profession a secret, not only because it would lead to stigmatisation, but also because they do not want to hurt or disappoint their families. Below are some of the responses of the escorts when I asked them to reflect on what could happen if their family discovered what they do.

> *Me: How do you think they would feel if they found out?*
>
> *Andy: That's a difficult question. I don't think they would stop loving me. I think they would just be disappointed and feel as if they have let me down in some way.*

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can be described as easy, it is not always effective. Both Shelly and Kristen have had experiences where their double lives have been exposed.

> *Shelly: The friend I stayed with told me I can't stay with her anymore when she found out that I was working at the agency.*
>
> *Me: How did she find out?*
>
> *Shelly: She got suspicious after seeing me have to go out practically every night dressed up. At one stage she asked me and I spilled the beans.*
>
> *Me: That must have been uncomfortable. Did she tell you why she didn't want you to stay with her anymore? Like the exact words.*
>
> *Shelly: I can't remember. I think she said that she isn't comfortable with it. But I understand*

> *Me: The friend you stay with, does he/she know you are an escort?*
>
> *Kristen: It's a she and yes she knows. I was forced to tell her because she stopped believing that I would go out on dates and she had never met any of the men that take me out lol.*
>
> *Me: How does she feel about it?*
>
> *Kristen: She's cool about it. I'm just not allowed to bring any of the clients home with me.*
>
> *Me: Earlier you said that you wished you worked in a group and that you had somebody to talk to. Don't you talk to your friend?*
>
> *Kristen: That's another rule. I'm not allowed to talk about it with her.*

Goffman (1963:42) argued that those related to the stigmatised via social structures could also experience forms of stigmatisation as a result of this association. These relationships are therefore either avoided or terminated. When their friends became aware of the stigma-bearing attribute, Shelly and Kristen's friend reacted in this way. Shelly's friends responded to this by terminating the friendship, while Kristen's friend seems to take a less drastic approach and attempts to avoid the stigma-carrying attribute by not allowing Kristen to bring clients home and talk about her work. In both cases, the 'contagious' aspect of stigma tarnished the relationships these women had. Therefore, while information control may be the

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best strategy for dealing with stigma, it could also lead to further isolation, depression and anxiety, as the individual constantly has to try and mask the stigma-carrying attribute.

A second strategy the research participants employed to cope with stigmatisation, was to find support and sympathy from others who are also stigmatised. As previously stated, many of the research participants worked at escort agencies and strip clubs before working as independent escorts. I found that it is these women who are able to employ this coping strategy since they maintained the friendships they made with other sex workers they had worked with.

> *Lucy:* *My family doesn't know and only my best friend and of course some of the girls I worked with.*
>
> *Me:* *So you still have contact with them? That's good because I read that some escorts who work from home sometimes feel lonely and need somebody to talk to.*
>
> *Lucy:* *Yes, I mostly talk to my best friend, the one I told you about earlier.*

> *Andy:* *I'm lucky since my friend also does it and whenever I want to talk I can.*
>
> *Me:* *You said that you don't tell lots of people what you do. I'm wondering now, does your family and friends know that you are an escort?*

> *Eve:* *No they don't. The only friends that know are the ones I made when working at the agency.*

For Lucy, Andy and especially Eve, maintaining friendships with other escorts are very important since it offers support and combats feelings of possible isolation. These friendships could also aid in lowering depression associated with leading a double life. Earlier, I highlighted how friendship with others who are not stigmatised are often either terminated or avoided. Yet, Tanya was able to maintain her friendships with non-stigmatised individuals who offer a similar level of support experienced by Lucy, Andy and Eve.

> *Me:*   *That is very true. I would love to be my own boss one day ☺. You mention people, who are you referring to? Does your family and friends know that you are an escort?*
>
> *Tanya: My parents don't know. Besides for the friends I made at the agency, some of my other friends also know that I'm an escort.*
>
> *Me:*   *How do your other friends they feel about it?*
>
> *Tanya: I guess in a sense I'm lucky because they are supportive and find it amusing and interesting. Well, to my face at least, don't know how they talk about me when I'm not there lol.*

This extract from Tanya's interview is interesting for various reasons. First, by constructing herself as "lucky", Tanya highlights how rare her situation is. Second, since her friends are not fellow escorts, she is still apprehensive about whether her friends are expressing their true feelings, or are also employing dramaturgical discipline techniques to conceal responses that might tarnish the friendship, while at the same time displaying acceptable responses. Nonetheless, these extracts, once again, highlight the importance and benefits associated of having friends, preferably in the same line of work, as an independent escort who solicits clients via the internet.

The final technique I found research participants employ to deal with stigmatisation is to engage in a process of normification. Goffman (1963:43) describes this process as "the effort of the stigmatised individual to present himself as an ordinary person, although not necessarily making a secret of his failing". Where the Muslim dockside sex workers in Henry Trotter's (2008) study attempted to normalise themselves by emphasising their religious devotion by not eating meat, I found that Kate and Andy employ social networks for this process of normification.

> *Me:*   *And what would you tweet about?*
>
> *Kate:*   *I would post pictures of myself. But it's like any other twitter account. I comment on world events, how I'm feeling etc.*
>
> *Me:*   *That's so interesting. So are your followers all clients?*
>
> *Kate:*   *Some are clients but most are random people ☺*

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> *Me:*   *Do you have a blog?*
>
> *Andy:*   *Not a blog but a Twitter page.*
>
> *Me:*   *That's interesting. And this twitter page, is it under your working name?*
>
> *Andy:*   *Yes.*
>
> *Me:*   *What would you tweet about?*
>
> *Andy:*   *I mostly post pictures of myself but I also tweet about the everyday things I'm doing like everybody else.*

Just like the women in Trotter's study, Andy and Kate are attempting to normalise themselves, whilst not necessarily hiding their stigma-carrying attribute. These escorts normalise themselves by emphasising that they are also aware and affected by world issues "[sic] like everybody else", and that their entire day does not revolve around soliciting clients or engaging in sexual activities. However, it should be noted that both Andy and Kate are still leading the double life as they are posting under their working names. I therefore argue that they are attempting to normalise, and in a way critiquing, the stereotypical constructions of sex workers.

Earlier I argued that some of the research participants employ social networks to market themselves to clients. However, the discussion above has illustrated that these women attempt to market themselves as "ordinary, everyday" women, almost distancing themselves from the stereotypical construction of the sex worker. The manner in which these women are representing themselves also seems to be different from the type of sex workers authors such as Durschslag and Goswami (2008), Weitzer (2005) and Monto (2000) have argued male clients want. Durschslag and Goswami's (2008) study of why men buy sex from both outdoor- and indoors based sex workers in Chicago, highlights one of the key reasons why men buy sex. Out of the 113 men interviewed, 48% reported that they purchased sex either because they felt uncomfortable asking their partner to perform certain acts (anal- or oral sex), or because their partner refused to perform these acts (Durschslag & Goswami, 2008:12). These men therefore construct the sex workers as 'different' from their partners. These extracts from male respondents in Durschlag and Goswami's (2008) study illustrate this belief.

I want to pay someone to do something a normal person wouldn't do. To piss
on someone or pay someone to do something degrading who is not my
girlfriend.

Anything you can't get from your girlfriend or wife, you can get from a
prostitute." (Durschslag and Goswami's, 2008:12)

Weitzer (2008:223) elaborates on this and states that men frequent sex workers because they
desire sex with a person with a certain image (sexy, raunchy) or with specific physical
attributes (racial, transgender) or because they construct the experience as illicit, risky and
thrilling. The attempts by Andy and Kate to normalise themselves and thus distance
themselves from the stereotypical construction of the sex worker, leads me to argue that these
women could be catering to clients who want to be with someone 'normal'. However, there is
another avenue through which escorts distance themselves from the stereotypical construction
of the sex worker. Monto (2000) found that 33% of the 700 customers he interviewed,
purchased sex to avoid emotional involvement and commitment. However, I found that some
of the independent escorts I interviewed cater to clients who desire intimacy – or as the
escorts refer to it – the girlfriend experience.

6.8   The girlfriend experience: It's about more than sex

The manifestation of intimacy in the relationships between sex workers and their clients was
an unexpected finding of this study. This can, in part, be attributed to the overemphasis of the
sexual nature of these relationships and because male clients are assumed to frequent escorts
because they wish to avoid emotional involvement and responsibility. I found that many of
the independent escorts I interviewed considered intimacy to be a key feature of their
occupation – albeit in different forms. I want to start this section by highlighting what the
research participants consider to be the girlfriend experience.

In an attempt to conceptualise intimacy, Cordova and Scott (2001:76) state that intimacy
denotes non-verbal behaviour such as holding hands, hugging, kissing and sex. In relation to
the girlfriend experience, I found that for intimacy to manifest itself, escorts have to engage

in all of these acts with their clients. Below are some of responses by the research participants when I asked them to describe what the girlfriend experience entails.

> *Cindy: Ooooh. It means you just have to be loving. Sweet. If you meet a client you greet them with a hug. You talk to them. You let them kiss you. It's like your dating but not really.*

> *Steph: It's sort of like a normal relationship. There's caressing and hugging and kissing. Holding hands. Some clients love it when I call them hunny or sweetie.*

> *Tanya: There's lots of hugging and kissing and massaging. And clients are not afraid to go down on you.*

> *Chane: French kissing, holding each other and cuddling after sex. Lots of intimacy.*

> *Andy: It's exactly what it says. It's all the things you would expect if you went on a date with a girl you are dating.*
>
> *Me: Things like what?*
>
> *Andy: French kissing and exchanging gifts.*
>
> *Me: Do you also give the clients gifts or do they only give gifts to you?*
>
> *Andy: They only give gifts to me. I am the gift to the client ;)*

> *Helen: The whole meeting is very romantic. It's not straight sex. There is foreplay, kissing and cuddling and after sex there is pillow talk.*

I found it interesting that the escorts did not construct the sexual act itself as a display of intimacy, and instead chose to highlight kissing, hugging, caressing and, in the cases of the Tanya and Helen, mutual foreplay. These findings seem to echo those of Lever and Dolnick's (2008:92) study of escorts in Los Angeles, who also reported that the escorts they interviewed stated that clients would kiss, hug and perform nonsexual massages and oral sex on them. When I followed up on this, I realised that sex does feature in these relationships, yet it is constructed in opposition to the sex between sex workers who solicit from the street and their clients. I also found that for women such as Cindy, Amira, Tanya and Shelly, the sexual act itself is constructed as less important (and to an extent easier to perform) than the actions leading up to it.

Me: Do you think other sex workers who work from the street also have to be like that with their clients?

Cindy: NO! Definitely not. I don't think their clients are into that. They just want to fuck. Sorry for my language but that's the only way to put it.

Me: So to summarise, people who go to sex workers on the street just want sex whereas people who would come to you, they want something more than sex?

Cindy: Yes, exactly.

Amira: Yes that's it. It's not just sex.

Tanya: It's about more than the sex. Ultra romantic and intimate.

Me: I have read about that yes. It seems to be quite different to the meeting between a client and a sex worker that works form the street.

Tanya: Very much. No rushed and tantric sex. By being a gf you are generous with time spent with clients.

Shelly: I would be caring and warm. I would dress up and be really happy to see him. There would be lots of holding hands, kissing and caressing. It wouldn't be a rushed thing.

This construction of intimacy as something 'more than sex' was also identified by Weitzer (2007) in his study of male customers of clients. Earle and Sharp (2007) also argue that a key characteristic of the girlfriend experience offered by escorts, is that the sex can be described as "girlfriend sex": it's about making love instead of having sex. Cindy and Tanya's accounts construct the 'more than sex' narrative by contrasting the 'girlfriend sex' to the services offered by sex workers who solicit clients from the streets. They describe the clients who frequent street-based sex workers as people who "[sic] only want to fuck" whereas those who visit escorts, to who the girlfriend experience is provided, are in search of something that transcends mere sex. Also, for both Cindy and Tanya, sex with street-based sex workers is rushed and tantric, whereas the girlfriend experience entails being generous with time. The concept of time seems to be integral to the girlfriend experience. Trotter (2008:101) also argues that since clients are taking the time to clean them up before having sex, managing and stimulating the women, the sex is no longer viewed as a commercial transaction and instead resembles making love.

While the above constructions of the girlfriend experience emphasise the physical aspects of the encounter, I also discovered that the quality of the physical experience is often contingent on the perceived reality of at least some emotional chemistry between the parties. To foster this, I found that the women I spoke to who offered the 'girlfriend experience' scripted it along the lines of clients 'spoiling' and 'pampering' them, the escorts. For Steph and Andy, this involved receiving gifts and being taken out to dinner by a client.

> *Me:* *I looked at your advertisement and you said that you like sexy lingerie, expensive perfume and romantic evenings out. Is this part of being a girlfriend to a client?*
>
> *Steph:* *Yes it is. You see, I do expect a client to sometimes bring me a gift. Especially if he is a regular.*
>
> *Me:* *And do clients also take you out to dinner?*
>
> *Steph:* *Yes some do. We would meet a restaurant. Have a meal. And then head back to my place or a hotel.*

> *Me:* *Do you also give the clients gifts or do they only give gifts to you?*
>
> *Andy:* *They only give gifts to me. I am the gift to the client ;)*

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The mapping of *Redlace.com* also revealed that many independent escorts enjoy being spoiled and pampered and receiving flowers, perfume and sexy lingerie. It is very important to note that these gifts are supplementary symbols of affection and appreciation towards the escort and does not replace the fee paid for the services. Even though clients do contribute to the creation of some form of chemistry by pampering and spoiling the women, I found that it is the independent escorts who have to work the hardest to foster the impression of an intimate encounter. Prager (1995) and Cordova and Scott (2001) argue that intimacy involves engaging in a process self-disclosure, being in a space of comfort and ease, and experiencing feelings such as warmth, closeness and loving. I found that it is this process of self-disclosure that features the most in the research participants' descriptions of intimacy.

Shelly: I pretend to like the same things he does. When he says I like soccer then I will also say I love soccer or ask him to tell me more about soccer. I let the client do most of the talking so I only have to smile, agree and listen.

Me: What is pillow talk?

Helen: It's when I lay with the client after sex and just talk about things.

Me: Oh I see like in the movies ☺Do you mind me asking what you talk about?

Helen: Anything really. How it was. Some men want to talk about their issues.

Me: And then how do you respond when they talk about problems?

Helen: I just try to be supportive and sometimes offer advice.

Me: Do you ever talk about your problems?

Helen: No I don't. I don't think I'll get a good review if I go on and on about all my problems. That would be depressing.

> *Me:*   *Isn't it difficult to then listen to all these problems? And how do you*
> *respond when clients are telling you about their problems?*
>
> *Sylvia: It is. And I just listen and acknowledge what they say. I think that's*
> *what they want.*
>
> *Me:*   *Do you ever share some of your problems with clients?*
>
> *Sylvia: No that would spoil the mood. I don't think a client will like that.*
>
> *Me:*   *That's ironic. So a client can talk about their problems but you aren't*
> *allowed to?*
>
> *Sylvia: Yes it is. But remember he is paying and I'm not.*

> *Me:*   *How does this make you feel? How do you respond when a client*
> *talks about their problems?*
>
> *Eve:*   *Sometimes I feel bad. I just listen and say that I understand.*
>
> *Me:*   *Do you ever talk about your problems with clients?*
>
> *Eve:*   *No.*
>
> *Me:*   *Mind me asking why not?*
>
> *Eve:*   *I don't like mixing my work and private life.*

Cordova and Scott (2001:76) state that intimacy not only refers to acts of self-disclosure, but also to the interaction where self-disclosure is validated and reciprocated. These extracts above illustrate that it is the clients who engage in the process of self-disclosure, while the escort only has to listen, validate and 'counsel'. The reasons why these research participants do not disclose information about themselves also varies. For Helen and Sylvia, it is the fear of receiving a bad review or creating a "depressing" environment, whereas Eve does not share information about herself as she is heavily invested in maintaining the double life dichotomy. Interestingly, by letting the client do the talking, these escorts are assuming the role of what some heterosexual males considered to be the ideal girlfriend. According to Coopersmith (2010), "someone who encourages freedom has a positive attitude and similar interests, and who knows when to zip it". Taking into account that the clients are still paying for these services, these relationships exemplify Zelizar (2005) and Constable's (2009)

argument that intimate and emotional care has entered the market place where they are packaged, fetishised, advertised and sold. However, this commodification of intimacy is no easy task as I found that some research participants constructed intimate labour as one of the most challenging aspects of their profession.

> *Lucy:* *The sex part is easy. But it is hard work to make your client feel like he is your bf and you are his gf. You have to give more of yourself, and it can become draining.*

> *Tanya: Yes it is hard to be a gf to clients. As I said, you become a dumping ground, and when you are being a gf to clients you have to counsel and provide care.*

> *Andy:* *It's difficult. Because I have to be all in love. Sometimes with someone I am only meeting for the first time.*

> *Shelly: It's very difficult for me.*
>
> *Me:*   *Why?*
>
> *Shelly: Remember I told you it takes a while for me to warm up to somebody? Now that's why.*

> *Helen: It's difficult.*
>
> *Me:*   *Why is that?*
>
> *Helen: When I have to pretend there is a spark it's difficult.*

Holt and Blevins (2007) argue that the girlfriend experience is a defining characteristic of escorting and something desired by many clients. One could thus argue that many escorts would cater to this demand and offer this service. However, the mapping of *Redlace.com* reveals that only 8% of escorts mention the girlfriend experience in their advertisement. It should be noted that the number of women who provide this service could be higher since some only offer it upon request. Out of the escorts I interviewed, 6 marketed themselves as providers of the girlfriend experience, while 7 offered it upon request of the client. Portia and Kristen were the only escorts who did not provide this service. For Kristen, being a girlfriend

to many clients is difficult since she constructs it as a threat to the boundaries she has in place to separate her work from her personal life.

> *Kristen:I don't have it in me to do that.*
>
> *Me: That's interesting why do you say that?*
>
> *Kristen: To me it's just crossing the line between personal and work life. And it can create problems.*
>
> *Me: Problems like what?*
>
> *Kristen: I think it can make you forget what real intimacy is. If you have to act intimate with lots of guys you can lose touch of what it really means.*

Pateman (1988:207) argues that there is an integral connection between the self and sexuality and that this necessitates the adoption of strategies to maintain the demarcation between commercial sex and intimacy and/or love. By not offering the girlfriend experience, Kristen is able to maintain this in a similar manner to sex workers who solicit clients from the streets, who also do not offer the services associated with the girlfriend experience. This discussion has exemplified how strenuous and challenging the girlfriend experience can be. Escorts who provide this service have to possess in-depth knowledge on the role of the girlfriend in the heterosexual relationship, provide care and counsel to clients, and display affection that could threaten their work- and personal life boundaries. Taking into account all of these factors, one has to ask the question of why some escorts would choose to offer this service. What could these women gain by being a girlfriend to their clients?

In Chapter 4, I briefly discussed how Marxist feminists Brenner (n.d) and Post (2008) identified how in patriarchal societies, labour necessary for social reproduction is separated (and constructed as less important than) from the labour necessary for the production and circulation of commodities. Labour necessary for social reproduction is also highly gendered and feminised and the danger of this is because women are constructed as natural providers of care, this form of labour can be taken for granted, rendered invisible and thus not paid for. Post (2008) argues that even though care work has been commodified and the gendered division of labour exists in a less extreme form today, individuals providing this labour are still low-paid workers. In contradiction to this argument, I found that one of the benefits of

offering the girlfriend experience is that the escorts are able to charge more than those only offering sexual services. I argue that this is possible because clients recognise how difficult and strenuous it is for escorts to provide this service. A similar recognition is exemplified by clients who are willing to pay extra for painful sexual services, such as anal sex, as identified by Baggaley *et al*. (2010). Regrettably, I was unable to determine how much more escorts offering the girlfriend experience charge, since the issue of wages was perceived as a sensitive topic. However, on *Weblightz.com*, some escorts did elaborate on the reasons why the girlfriend experience is more expensive than just sex.

> *Natalie: I am able to ask for more money because like you said it's a lot of work. I think I can ask for more because the men know how much it requires to be a girlfriend. I mean it's not just something that happens just like that. I have to dress up and everything.*

> *Cindy: I agree with that. I also charge more for the girlfriend experience and my clients don't really mind paying more for it. I think they know that if they pay more they will get a good service.*

Apart from this material benefit, I found that some independent escorts provide the girlfriend experience because the clients treat them with more respect and make them feel special. These narratives about respect were particularly evident in the quotes below from Cindy and Amira's interviews.

> *Me: Which do you prefer?*
>
> *Cindy: The guys who want me to be their girlfriend.*
>
> *Me: Why is that?*
>
> *Cindy: Because it's nice. It makes you feel special in a weird sort of way.*

> *Amira: Yes that's it. It's not just sex. There is hugging and cuddling and a degree of mutual respect.*
>
> *Me: What do you mean with mutual respect?*
>
> *Amira: Not calling you bitch or things like that. Some men love talking dirty. But men who want the girlfriend experience would say hey babe.*

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Earlier I argued that many escorts attempt to provide their clients with a script on how they want to be treated via the likes and dislikes section of their advertisement. For many women, it was imperative that their clients are gentlemen, who know how to treat a lady, and make her feel special. However, I also identified that clients do not always stick to this script. I argue that by being a girlfriend, escorts like Cindy and Amira attempt to once again ensure that they are treated with respect and made to feel special.

While being a girlfriend to clients could ensure that escorts are treated with respect, this service is not without its drawbacks. The main disadvantage associated with providing the girlfriend experience was that some of the women believed they were unable to enter into a heterosexual relationship outside of escorting. Lucy avoids forming relationships outside escorting to "[sic] avoid any drama".

> *Lucy: I'm single.*
>
> *Me: Mind me asking why?*
>
> *Lucy: To avoid any drama. Like I said a real bf will get very jealous if his girlfriend saw other men.*

In comparison to Lucy, Tanya and Chane feel incapable of becoming involved with somebody since they have to give so much of themselves to their profession.

> *Me: I'm not hitting on you… but are you in a relationship now?*
>
> *Tanya: No I'm not.*
>
> *Me: Do you mind me asking why not?*
>
> *Tanya: To be a good escort I have to give a piece of myself to the job. If I have deep feelings for someone, I wouldn't want to share those same feelings with someone else.*
>
> *Me: Can you give me an example of that?*
>
> *Tanya: Let's take kissing. That is something really intimate and for me it's harder to do then just sex. If I had to be in a relationship it would be with someone I really really like and who accepts that I am or was an escort.*

> *Me: Whilst being an escort have you ever been in a relationship.*
>
> *Chane: No I haven't.*
>
> *Me: Mind me asking why.*
>
> *Chane: When I do have a bf I would only want to share myself with him.*

Tanya and Chane's responses highlight the cost of transgressing the demarcation between commercial sex and intimacy and/or love. Both Tanya and Chane expressed that they want to get married and "settle down" in the near future – once they have stopped working as escorts.

> *Me: Okay, so a final question. Where do you see yourself in the next 10 years?*
>
> *Tanya: Hard question. Like any other girl I want to get married and have children. You can't be an escort forever, age does count against you.*

> *Me: Okay. We are almost done. My last question to you is where do you see yourself in the next 10 years?*
>
> *Chane: I hope to have settled down. The whole married with kids type of thing.*

In light of this discussion, I am of the opinion that the girlfriend experience is built upon the idea of providing services, experiences and emotions normally associated with heterosexual relationships. According to Milrod and Weitzer (2012:449) the encounters with independent escorts who offer the girlfriend experience have come to resemble quasi-dating relationships. By employing the term "quasi-dating", these authors seem to be implying that there is an artificial element to these relationships. Similarly to these authors, Brennan (2001) also argues that when providing the girlfriend experience, most women do not experience real feelings and that it is more of a performance. Conversely, authors such as Bernstein (2007) and Allison (1994) argue that the women can experience real emotions since the relationship between the escort and the client is bounded in authenticity. I found that the research participants' accounts of their experiences of intimacy with clients contain elements from both Brennan and Bernstein's arguments. For example, Bernstein (2007:484) argues that the girlfriend experience is a realistic relationship within a bounded frame. I was able to identify how these relationships between independent escorts (offering the girlfriend experience) and their clients, are bounded by asking the women to compare their relationships to 'real'

heterosexual relationships. One of the key bounds of these relationships was that there is a limit on time spent together, as illustrated by Tanya, Helen and Portia's responses on the next page.

Me: How does the GFE differs from a real relationship?

*Tanya: I think we both know that it's only for that time that we are in a
          relationship.*

---

*Me: How does the GFE experience differ from a real relationship? Are
          there things that clients aren't allowed to do even if they are you
          "bf"?*

*Helen: In a real relationship couples will spend more time together but when
          meeting a client who wants the GFE then there is a time limit that the
          client pays for.*

---

*Portia: What doesn't make it real-real is that there money has to be paid for
          time spent together. I also don't think a client will take an escort to a
          Christmas dinner at his family's house and introduce her as his
          girlfriend ☺*

Even though these women are more generous with time than sex workers who solicit clients from the street, there is still a limit on the time spent together. In addition, Portia's response illustrates that not only are these relationships bounded by time, but context as well. She is unable to imagine a client inviting her to a family Christmas dinner. A possible reason for this is that, were people to discover that the client is employing the services of the escort, both parties could be reported and arrested. Another reason is that the client risks possible stigmatisation because he is associating himself with a 'bad women'. However, it should be noted that some clients are willing to take these risks since some research participants stated that clients have taken them to restaurants and other functions. This is possible due to the high levels of anonymity some escorts who solicit clients over the internet enjoy.

Another way, through which these relationships between escorts providing the girlfriend experience and their clients are bounded, is that the clients are free from any on-going responsibility towards the escort. For Helen and Chane, if they were in a real relationship their partner would be sensitive to their emotional needs.

Me: I find this very interesting. The GFE really does sound like what couples would experience in a real relationship. But now I'm wondering. How does the GFE experience differ from a real relationship? Are there things that clients aren't allowed to do even if they are you "bf"?

Helen: That's a good question. Only thing I can think of is that there is a limit

on the time spent together and in a real relationship I will be able to talk about my problems.

Me: How does the GFE differ from a real relationship with somebody?

Chane: I think that with a real relationship I wouldn't have to hide it if I'm sick or feeling down.

Me: That's very interesting. So in a way your partner will get to see you whenever. Whether you are feeling good or bad.

Chane: Yes.

Allison (1994) identifies a similar trend with her study of sexuality, pleasure and masculinity in a Tokyo hostess club. The men who visit the establishment gain satisfaction from the care and intimacy they receive. She argues that men visit this establishment because the receive care and intimacy, together with a lack of on-going responsibility towards their 'partner'. In Helen and Chane's cases, their relationships with clients are bounded by the fact that they do not share, nor expect, clients to cater to their emotional needs.

Tanya, Helen, Portia and Chane's accounts of the girlfriend experience do lend credibility to Bernstein's (2007:484) argument of how these relationships are authentic yet bounded in authenticity. However, I also found evidence that suggests that there are varying levels of authenticity. When I posed the question of whether the girlfriend performance is marked at all by 'real feelings' for the clients, both Chane and Eve stated that it is a performance.

> *Chane:* *I think everyone is different. For me with most of my clients it's an act that I put on.*

> *Eve:* *It's more a performance for me. I haven't felt any intense feelings for a client.*

These responses exemplify Milrod and Weitzer (2012) and Brennan's (2001) argument of how artificial these relationships between escorts and their clients are. However, some of the other participants had a different view. For women such as Tanya, Andy, Helen, Portia and Sylvia the issue of whether they experience real emotions or not was more complex.

> *Me:* *I'm fascinated by this. Being a gf to a client. Do you develop real feelings or is it like a performance?*
>
> *Tanya:* *I have special bonds with many of my clients and some I even consider friends. I don't think it's a performance where you feel nothing. But especially with clients I have known for a while you are happy to see them and I do enjoy spending time and being intimate with them.*

Like Tanya, Andy, Helene, and Portia also reported that they experienced 'real' feelings with clients whom they had known for a while. The quote from Sylvie's interview below illustrates that even though there is an experience of 'real' feelings, it cannot be compared to the feelings and emotions associated with being in love.

> *Me:* *I have done some reading on the girlfriend experiencing and some escorts said that they develop real feelings for clients and others said that it's only a performance. What do you think of this?*
>
> *Sylvia:* *I don't think we can dictate fate. If I was to meet my future husband through being an escort then so be it. We can't control who we fall in love with.*
>
> *Me:* *have you ever fallen in love with a client?*
>
> *Sylvia:* *I do have clients who I like very much but I won't say that its love.*

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In sum, the girlfriend experience is a highly sought after commodity that is a unique service offered by independent escorts. For the escorts I interviewed, this was characterised as one of the most challenging aspects of their profession since it involved participating in activities such as kissing and hugging which they, themselves, associated with 'real boyfriends'. The girlfriend experience seems to mirror modern day, heterosexual, romantic relationships, albeit it be in an unequal form where the escort carries the burden of ensuring the client truly experiences intimacy and/or love.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1   Introduction

In this study I have set out to examine how the use of the internet as a means of solicitation has impacted on sex work and the identifications and experiences of sex workers and their relations with clients. As I have repeatedly emphasised, sex work comprises a wide range of roles and settings, each with its various benefits and risks. My study offers a peek into one form of sex work of which very little is known in the South African context – female escorts who solicit clients by advertising on the internet. In this study, I answered the following research questions: the reasons and motivations for entering the commercial sex trade, constructions of self and profession, the risk and benefits of being an independent escort who solicits clients over the internet, experiences of violence and abuse, experiences of stigmatisation and coping strategies, and finally, constructions and experiences of the girlfriend experience.

In the next section, I identify some of the key findings in my research and in the final section, I discuss the significance of my work in terms of its contribution to understanding a relatively new form of sex work in which the practitioners are relatively independent and publically invisible. I focus on the implication of my study in relation to the usefulness of conceptual categories such as 'sex work' and 'intimate labour', feminist debates about sex work, and concerns and findings of interest to the *Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce* (*SWEAT*).

7.2   Some Key findings

7.2.1   What are their histories and backgrounds and how did they become involved in their work?

This study has shown that for the majority of research participants, soliciting clients via the internet was constructed as an opportunity to improve current working conditions, since they were already employed as either escorts at an agency or strippers. The reasons why these women choose to work independently ranged from needing to make more money, to possessing more control over their working conditions. The women who had no prior work

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experience in the commercial sex trade, found the transition into escorting to be more challenging. However, these women eased the transition by consulting friends, also in the sex industry, and reading guides for escorts, by escorts on the internet. The escorts' motivations for entering the commercial sex trade echoed Gould and Fick's (2008) study findings where the authors differentiate between entering the commercial sex trade for financial need (selling sex for survival) or financial opportunity (selling sex for extra money). A small minority of workers also reported non-financial reasons, such as work enjoyment, for becoming, and continuing to be, escorts.

7.2.2 How do they construct themselves and their jobs and how much power do they exercise?

The form of sex work, which my interviewees engage in, is relatively new because it depends, of course, on the accessibility of computers for sex workers. In the case of the women I was studying, using the internet to advertise themselves to potential clients was associated with autonomy and control and this was taken as a key feature of the kind of sex work in which they were engaged, from which they differentiated other forms of sex work, characterised by institutional settings and external forms of control.

The ability to control working- hours and conditions, deciding which clients to see, and not having to share the income with a third party, such as a manager, were reported as some of the main advantages of being an escort who solicits clients via the internet. Some of the escorts also constructed the anonymity the internet provided as a benefit since it allows them to keep their work- and personal life separate - leading a double life as identified by Goffman (1963). One of the main challenges, reported primarily by the women who previously worked at escort agencies or strip clubs, was the increase of risk in having to meet a client alone without any protection such as bodyguards. Another challenge concerns the role of punter forums which operate in much the same way as what Foucault describes as the role of 19th century Panopticons in Europe: to police and regulate their work, and pressurising women to be constantly ' at their best' as any client can post a review of them.

I have argued that the independent escorts can exercise a large degree of control over their working conditions, than other kinds of sex workers, as well as the clients they cater to, and how these clients should treat them. However, despite these women employing various

dramaturgical strategies to limit this, the show they put on was sometimes disrupted through the occurrence of violence and abuse. Absent from their stories of violence and abuse was the police, who featured often as perpetrators of abuse in the studies I referred to in Chapter 2 which focused on sex workers who were much more publicly visible than the women in my research. Rather, in my study, abuse was raised mainly in connection with clients who deviated from the script and requested sexual services (anal sex or unprotected sex) that the escort was unwilling to offer. While my interviewees spoke positively about the independence their work provided, compared with working for and in institutions such as clubs and escort agencies with other sex workers, they also spoke about this as being a problem which could especially lead to feelings of isolation and vulnerability with clients that they do not know.

7.2.3   Do they experience stigma and if so, what form does it take?

This study has demonstrated that the female independent escorts I interviewed, did not experience the extreme forms of stigmatisation associated with female sex workers who solicit clients from the street, as was highlighted by *WLC*, *SWEAT* and *Sisonke* (2012), Gould and Fick (2008) and Deacon *et al*. (2005). The research participants believe that they do not experience extreme forms of stigmatisation, as, unlike street-based female sex workers, they do not have to publicly transgress the law and constructed normal standards of womanhood and expressions of sexuality, as identified by Hollway (1984) and Goode (2008). I argued that the anonymity afforded by the internet acts as a shield which prevents the mistress status of these women from becoming sex worker and/or escort. Even though these women were able to 'escape' stigmatisation by the general public, some did experience subtle forms of stigmatisation from their clients. This manifested in the manner some clients questioned why these women chose to be sex workers, and how surprised they were when the escorts did not conform to the stereotypical construction of the sex worker.

But stigma *showed itself* in ways, which my interviewees did not necessarily recognise, or name as stigma, namely when my interviewees were reporting on the problems of keeping their work under wraps from some of the closest people to them such as family and friends. What they associated with stigma was the overt abuse that publically visible sex workers experienced, from whom they sought to distance themselves as upmarket professionals. It was not the *potential abuse* that they would experience if their friends and family got to know

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what they did and which caused them therefore to be constantly alert to the possibility of this and to guard against this happening.

Indeed, while none of the interviewees were openly abusive to more visible kinds of sex workers, their emphasis on 'cleanliness' and 'respect' as qualities they expected of their clients implied that they did not want to be tainted with the stigma which they associated with such kinds of sex work.

7.2.4   What are their experiences and construction of intimacy in their work?

Using the internet to solicit not only allowed them to work 'independently' but also relatively invisibly and to present themselves, in opposition (usually implicit) to stereotypes of sex workers as poor, stigmatised and highly visible, as upmarket for 'clean' clients who would respect them. Indeed, the majority of escorts on *Redlace.com* specifically mentioned being 'clean', 'well groomed', and 'respectful' and 'knowing how to treat a lady' as key features which they expected of their clients.

Of course, how they were constructing their clients reflected on how they were presenting themselves, namely as classy and upmarket women. This presentation is partly achieved by delivering the performance on a classy stage (exclusive website) and posting high quality photographs that convey to clients that the women are upmarket professionals.

This was also apparent in the ways they presented and constructed themselves on the web sites, not only by providing erotic pictures, but also combining these with statements about their personalities. Indeed, a common experience they offered was 'the girlfriend' one, in which they constructed themselves as potential girlfriends and scripted potential clients as gendered figures in popular boyfriend-girlfriend narratives, as people to take them out to events and to pamper and date them.

For the escorts who provide the GFE experience, it was constructed as one of the most challenging aspects of their work since it impacts their personal life. For example, some felt unable to form 'real' relationships whilst working as escorts, whilst others seemed to absorb their clients' problems as a result of the self-disclosure process. The advantages of providing the GFE was that some escorts believed that they were treated with more respect by clients

requesting this service, and that clients are willing to pay more. My findings also suggest that the intimacy experienced during the GFE can be bounded in authenticity, by both time and space, as identified by Bernstein (2007) and Allison (1994), or be a performance of intimacy as argued by Milrod and Weitzer (2012) and Brennan (2001).

7.3 Significance of my study and recommendations for future research

7.3.1 The usefulness of conceptual categories as analytic tools

As I stated in Chapter 1, the task of conceptualising the people who I planned on studying was a contentious issue that raised questions about gender and sexual power relations. Ultimately, I decide to employ the term 'sex worker' that was introduced by writers and gender activists critical of the judgmental connotations the term 'prostitute' carries. By employing this term, I was able to engage with the subject matter in a non-stigmatising matter, yet, during my interaction with independent escorts I realised that this term had no purchase with them, similarly to the sex workers in Trotter's (2008) study of the dockside sex work industry in Durban, who also found this term pejorative.

The findings of my study also illustrated exactly how different the independent escorts I interviewed are from those individuals to whom this term is generally applied namely, sex workers who solicit clients from the street, who the participants believed experience the most extreme forms of stigmatisation. I believe that this exemplifies the diversity of the commercial sex trade and that homogeneity simply cannot be assumed. It also highlights the importance of listening to sex workers about how they want to be presented and constructed. If we do not, we are also patronising sex workers and contributing to the problematic construction of them as the 'Other', incapable of thinking and speaking for themselves.

I also found 'Intimate labour' to be a useful concept for examining how some independent escorts commoditise intimacy and care. By employing this term, I offer a critique of the essentialist view, in some patriarchal societies, that women are natural providers of care and intimacy and also emphasise the large amount of (hard) work required for intimacy to be provided via the GFE. These women have to listen and counsel their clients, embody the image of the 'ideal' girlfriend, engage in behaviour such as kissing, hugging and foreplay that Pateman (1988) argues, jeopardises the home and work boundary. This concept was also useful because it does justice to the manner through which the independent escorts I

interviewed, describe the GFE: as something that does not occur 'naturally', but a distinct service offered (enabling the women to charge more than those escorts only providing sex), that encompasses either a performance of intimacy or an authentic relationship bounded by money, space and time.

7.3.2 Theoretical and policy implications

I conducted this study from a liberal feminist perspective where I am critical of the criminalisation of sex work in South Africa and many other countries and view this as a form of patriarchal stigmatisation. However, I have to emphasise that instead of adopting a specific feminist view and 'forcing' it upon the data, the onus was put on the experiences and constructions of the independent escort. Thus, I allowed the data to inform and guide the theory. This is in line with the call of authors such Shrage (1994), Weitzer (2005) and Bernstein (1999) who suggest that when studying sex work, researchers should adopt a polymorphous feminist approach as different varieties of sex work may have different social meanings and thus, demand different feminist responses.

By employing a polymorphous feminist perspective, I was free to adapt 'prescribed' terms, such as 'sex worker' that had no purchase with the women, and also to move beyond the mere construction of sex work as work and engage with an aspect that has not received enough attention – the manifestation of intimacy in the relationships some sex workers have with their clients.

My study also emphasises that it is crucial that policy reform regarding sex work in South Africa can only be made once a clear understanding of all the diverse forms of sex work have been established. There should be different recommendations for different forms of sex work. For example, policy reforms are pertinent to improving the safety and health of sex workers who solicit clients from the street and the focus should be on improving the relationships these workers have with the police and health care officials. Conversely, policy reforms for improving the safety of individuals, who work independently as escorts, should focus on establishing a formal online database of "unsafe clients" that would simplify the screening process these men and women employ. Regardless of what the recommendations are, it is crucial that sex workers and organisations working with sex workers are consulted and are able to set the agenda regarding the direction of policy reforms.

7.3.3   Recommendations for *SWEAT*

During an interview with the director of *SWEAT*, Sally Shackleton, it became apparent that there is a great need for research on how sex workers are employing technology and the internet in their profession. Shackelteon believes that in a situation where "visibility counts against you", sex workers who solicit clients via the internet can work without necessarily having to be placed in a vulnerable position. However, she did express concern regarding the amount of control independent escorts have over their working conditions.

The mapping of *Redlace.com* shows that 80% of 499 advertisements posted were by independent escorts, while only 20% were by escorts employed at an escort agency. Thus, the majority of the women on this site did place the advertisements themselves. In addition, the reason why many of the escorts I interviewed, who previously worked at agencies, chose to work independently was because they wanted more control over their working conditions. These included not having to share their income with a third party and being able to take control of their own marketing (for some participants this was constructed as a disadvantage), and being able to select which clients they see.

The numerous roles punter forums fulfil in escorting was one of the unexpected findings of my study. The independent escorts constructed these forums as spaces for marketing, policing, and abuse. Taking into account how much the escorts enjoy and are invested in preserving the anonymity soliciting clients via the internet provides them, I argue that these forums could be a useful tool that organisations such as *SWEAT* can employ to reach out to, even if it is anonymously, to sex workers and clients in terms of safer sex, addressing stigmatisation, or any other related questions they might have. By engaging with this 'virtual community' on a virtual platform, *SWEAT* can gain access to a publically invisible group of workers and make their services available to these escorts, without jeopardising their investments by not allowing 'sex workers' to become the mistress status.

7.4   Conclusion

At the start of this thesis, I argued that discourses about people who are marginalised, such as sex workers in many societies, render these men and women as the 'Other' through forms of homogenisation, and attributions of infantilisation, which construct sex workers as bad or helpless victims with little or no agency. One of the primary concerns of this study was to encourage the voices of sex workers, and if we listen to the voices of the escorts featured in this study, it is evident that these women are not helpless victims with no-agency. By listening to the voices of these escorts, we become aware that the commercial sex trade is not a homogenous industry, even for men and women employing the same method of solicitation.

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Appendix 1: Mapping of *Redlace.com* (16-19 August 2013)

Nature of the advertisement	Independent escorts	400	Escorts employed at an agency	99		
Number of escorts per city	Johannesburg	293	Pretoria	132		
	Cape Town	58	Durban	16		
Sex of escort	Female	496	Transgender	2	She-male	1
Race of escort	Black	262	White	148	Thai/Asian/ Singapore	41
	Coloured	36	Indian	12		
Type of Photos Included	Non-nude/ lingerie/ fully clothed	325	Nude (exposing breast completely or vagina)	174		
Escorts who include their face in photographs	No face/Mask	341	Face	158		
Likes mentioned in advertisement	Good Hygiene	136	To be spoiled and pampered	88	Flowers and perfume	61
	Gentlemen who knows how to treat a lady	51	Upmarket executives	43	To tease and please	37
	Sexy lingerie	36	Having fun	24	Greek	23
	Good wine	13	Kissing and cuddling	12	Traveling	6
Dislikes mentioned in advertisement	Men with bad personal hygiene	342	Greek (anal sex)	257	Negativity	3
	Rude and rough men	77	Drunk, druggies and dirties	11	Time wasters	7
	Unsophisticated men	3	negotiators	3	Kissing	2
Premises	Private house	318	Private apartment	96	Private venue	80
	Private hotel	3	Travel only	2		
Mentions the Girlfriend experience in advertisement	Yes	40				

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