

# Bodies and desires on the internet: An approach to trans women sex workers' websites

**Julieta Vartabedian**

University of Cambridge, UK

## Abstract

Most literature on prostitution centres exclusively on street and female sex workers. Considering the lack of inclusion of trans sex workers within research agendas and public policies, in this article I analyse websites where trans women offer their services in Portugal and the UK. I examine the way trans women escorts present themselves to potential clients through detailed descriptions of their bodies' sizes, physical attributes, personal characteristics and lovemaking skills, and how they negotiate gender, nationality, race, ethnicity and sexuality in relation to the cultural and socio-economic demands of the market. An intersectional framework provides the critical perspective from which to consider how certain trans narratives are displayed through these online advertisements while decentring hegemonic notions (mainly, white and middle class) of representing trans experiences. This exploratory research aims to better understand the online trans sex industry as a place of empowerment where 'beautiful' trans escorts can strategically position themselves in order to succeed in a competitive market and, simultaneously, lay claim for a certain degree of (finite) recognition.

## Keywords

Bodies, intersectionality, online advertisements, sex work, trans women

## Introduction

This article presents a multi-sited discourse analysis of the websites where trans women advertise their services.<sup>1</sup> The study provides an exploratory analysis of the ways in which certain bodies, desires and sexual practices are described and exposed online.<sup>2</sup> My aim is to explore trans women escorts' descriptions of their bodies, personal characteristics and sexual skills: a) to better understand how the

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### Corresponding author:

Julieta Vartabedian, Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge, CB2 3RQ, UK.

Email: [jlartabedian@gmail.com](mailto:jlartabedian@gmail.com)

online trans sex industry is displayed in Portugal and the UK; and b) to re-signify discourses and images from the online trans sex market as a place of empowerment and recognition.<sup>3</sup> This article understands sex work as an empowering activity which allows trans women not only to earn money but to develop self-confidence and experience pleasure. For many trans women prostitution is the main (and only) place where they can be admired and desired in a social environment that otherwise enables great discrimination and structural violence against them. They present themselves as good lovers who are able to perform virile sexual practices, but, at the same time, their 'beautiful' and feminine bodies are of great importance. Finally, as most of the trans women sex workers are migrants in both countries, an intersectional framework is also considered to examine how gender, race, nationality, ethnicity and sexuality influence the way they advertise online.

### **Decentring female street sex workers**

Most literature on prostitution centres exclusively on street and female sex workers (Weitzer, 2009). The abolitionist lobby has defined prostitution in terms of male violence, thus placing the female 'prostitute' as the central victimised figure to be 'saved'. In dominant representations, men are considered sexually threatening clients or evil pimps and traffickers, deceiving 'innocent' women (Matthews, 2008). Beyond abolitionist discourses, the connection between the categories of 'sex worker' and 'woman' is still very strong.<sup>4</sup> Empirically, 'the focus on women tends to be justified (if it is justified at all) on the grounds that the "vast majority" of sex workers are female' (Smith, 2012: 590). Nevertheless, these assessments underestimate the diversity among sex workers. The lack of inclusion of male and trans sex workers within research agendas and public policies is evident (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014; Smith and Laing, 2012). Although some studies do focus on male sex workers (Aggleton, 1999; Aggleton and Parker, 2015; Minichiello and Scott, 2014; Padilla, 2007; Whowell, 2010), trans sex workers remain almost ignored (with few exceptions such as Howe et al., 2008; Kulick, 1998; Ochoa, 2014; Pelúcio, 2009; Silva and Omat, 2014).

Simultaneously, empirical evidence challenges the overwhelming focus on street prostitution by examining the indoor sector as a notably growing modality of work (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014; Sanders, 2006; Weitzer, 2005).<sup>5</sup> The sector's growth in the direction of indoor-based sex work arises as a response to the increasing legislative harassment towards street-based workers, measures that 'combat' sexual exploitation by rendering prostitution invisible in public spaces. That is, 'street prostitution is being increasingly repressed (and displaced) by the state on the grounds that it is benignly seeking to protect both prostitutes and communities' (Hubbard et al., 2008: 149). Considering that only a minority of sex workers are street-based (Weitzer, 2005), the predominance of indoor sex markets remains unexplored (Hubbard and Prior, 2012).<sup>6</sup>

In the indoor sector, profits depend on advertising as the main resource to make workers visible. The internet has an increasingly relevant role in the sex market;

in fact, ‘social relationships involved in paying for sex are being transformed by the Internet’ (Sharp and Earle, 2003: 37, cited in Sanders, 2006). This platform provides a cost-effective way to advertise, making the sex trade more lucrative and safer than street-based work (Hubbard et al., 2008; Phua and Caras, 2008). It also facilitates the opportunity to work without third-party management, provides control over one’s business with very little legislative regulation (Bernstein, 2007a) and allows ‘privacy and anonymity, protecting both clients and providers from harassment [and] embarrassment’ (MacPhail et al., 2014: 485). Scholars have analysed female and male sex workers’ online advertisements through different approaches, ranging from psychological and sexual health prevention studies to sociological ones (Bernstein, 2007b; Bimbi and Parsons, 2005; Logan, 2010; MacPhail et al., 2014; Phua and Caras, 2008; Pruitt, 2005; Sanders, 2005, 2006; Tyler, 2015). In the case of trans people (mainly trans women), it is common to find behavioural and medical studies based on public health to evaluate and prevent the risk of HIV infection among trans people who use the internet to meet sexual partners/clients.

This article contributes towards filling this gap in the social sciences by exploring a subject that is thus considerably under-researched. I examine trans women sex workers’ use of advertisements on websites in Portugal and the UK where they offer their sexual services. This research aims to decentre hegemonic notions on trans sex workers based exclusively on HIV infections or marginality (Infante et al., 2009; Prado Cortez et al., 2011). By examining the way they advertise online, my objective is to stress the strategies they employ as skilled sex workers, prepared to succeed and be selected in a competitive sex marketplace. Their online advertisements emphasise beauty and pleasure as key elements in their activities as sex workers. Without denying the structural violence against trans people and the precarious border between life and death that many of them have to face daily (Haritaworn et al., 2014; Namaste, 2000), this article aims to show their online advertisements as sites of empowerment and spaces to claim a certain kind of recognition.

### **Making visible other trans narratives**

The article assumes a critical perspective towards trans narratives based on dominant Western, white, middle-class frameworks. Many scholars have questioned the ‘U.S. hegemonic block on canon-making scholarship’ (Noble, 2011: 263) when analysing trans experiences. For example, Dan Irving interrogates the ‘efforts to construct *proper trans social subjects* that can integrate successfully into mainstream North American society’ (2008: 39, emphasis in original). This formulation constructs some trans bodies as more legitimate than others. Such embodied subjectivities can be more visible within – and less disruptive of – hegemonic boundaries such as social class, race or nationality. Skidmore (2011) examines how the narratives of the ‘good transsexual’ embodied by media personalities

such as Christine Jorgensen were constructed by the institutional power of white, heterosexual and middle-class womanhood. Jorgensen performed 'correctly' what was expected from a woman in her society. Trans bodies are thus regulated and disciplined according to dominant structures that render some trans subjects more acceptable than others. Bailey (2011: 366) describes the strategic performances that American black queer members of a ballroom community employ 'to unmark themselves as gender and sexual nonconforming subjects'. His interlocutors know they can be more easily beaten, attacked or even murdered with impunity as queer, black and working-class subjects. Being safe and visible in the public space is a privilege that many trans people cannot afford. 'Passing' or adjusting themselves to 'realness' are strategies used to minimise and avoid race, class, gender and sexual violence and discrimination.

Therefore, this article must be read as a way to address narratives outside the mainstream parameters of the 'good transsexual'. It is positioned at the margins of a 'correct' way – that is, mainly white and middle-class – to understand trans subjectivities. I will consider an intersectional approach to interrogate how race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality influence trans' discursive and bodily representations (Baderoon, 2011; Bailey, 2011; Silva and Ornat, 2014). Considering that the number of migrants within the sex work industry is significant in both countries (56% are migrants in Portugal and 41% in the UK) (see TAMPEP, 2009),<sup>7</sup> racialised gender expectations inform how some trans escorts negotiate their situation to succeed in a competitive sex work marketplace. As will be shown, diverse trans bodies, nationalities, physical and personal attributes and sexual services are produced and offered to satisfy heterogeneous demands.

Finally, I understand sex work as an activity which provides not only money but also pleasure and confidence. Trans escorts can control their own bodies and sexuality to negotiate with their clients the services they desire and expect. Thus, sex work can also be read as a space of empowerment – and for many, the 'only' space – where trans escorts develop self-confidence and self-esteem, as they are desired and their beauty is admired in a social world characterised by great marginalisation and violence against them (Kulick, 1998; Vogel, 2009).

The article is divided in two parts. The first part lists the websites analysed along with trans escorts' profiles, paying special attention to the categories they employ to describe themselves. In the second part, I focus on the descriptions of their bodies and sexual services to reflect on beauty as something that can provide a certain kind of social legibility to many trans women who seek it. However, beauty does not allow them to become legitimate subjects, as they are still excluded from citizenship and continue to be stigmatised. This section also discusses how online trans escorts offer 'something else' to clients which makes them unique in the sex market, that is, the combination of an 'exuberant' femininity with their virility distinguishes them clearly from other cis women and male sex workers. Finally, as professional escorts, they can also claim pleasure, placing their own desires as relevant elements in their performances as sex workers.

## Part I

### Websites selected

The profiles of 145 individual escorts were analysed between March and April 2015 (three websites and 65 advertisements were examined in Portugal, four websites and 80 advertisements in the UK).<sup>8</sup> Through these websites, trans escorts publicise their advertisements with the intention to make an appointment with a client and meet this person somewhere (generally, the escort's own apartment) to carry out the sexual services that have been agreed upon. The websites were selected employing Google. A wide range of keywords to name trans escorts was used to obtain a ranking of the most common websites in both countries – 'transex', 'travesti', 'transsexual', 'shemale', 'transgender' and 'trans'. Also included were other more specific references found in a preliminary search. For example, the Portuguese words '*boneca*' ('doll', a popular name for a Brazilian trans woman),<sup>9</sup> '*gata*' ('female cat', referring to beautiful women) and '*ninfeta*' (a 'young girl' who incites sexual desire) were very common categories in the context of Portugal, whereas 'ladyboy' and 'tranny' were far more prevalent in the UK. The websites with the highest Google rankings were examined. In Portugal, these were [www.viptransex.net](http://www.viptransex.net) (VIP Transex) and [www.tgatas.net](http://www.tgatas.net) (Tgatas), while [www.classificadosx.net](http://www.classificadosx.net) (ClassificadosX) was among the most relevant websites. In the UK, they were [uk.trans-escorts.com](http://uk.trans-escorts.com) (UK.Trans-Escort), [www.londonts.com](http://www.londonts.com) (London TS), [www.londonshemaleescort.co.uk](http://www.londonshemaleescort.co.uk) (London Shemale Escort) and [www.yummyasianlondon.co.uk](http://www.yummyasianlondon.co.uk) (Yummy Asian London).<sup>10</sup>

Although ClassificadosX (Portugal) and UK.Trans-Escort provide free-registration (online classified advertisements), the quality of their websites differs from the rest which are specialised directories where independent sex workers and, especially in the UK, some agencies advertise their services with much more professionalism. The only professional agency analysed was that of Yummy Asian London in the UK because it was relevant in the escort market.<sup>11</sup> No escort agency was found in the Portuguese context. The selection of these websites was diverse, as sex workers can advertise freely or pay to have their own advertisements featured. The size of the pictures, and their visibility and position in the main pages of the websites contribute to the success of an advertisement. For example, a 'super VIP spot' (bigger and flashing pictures more likely to be noticed) can cost £57 for 14 days in the UK (London TS); for the option of 'VIP Transex of the month', namely, being the first escort to appear with a highlighted advertisement, an escort is expected to pay €300 (for 30 days), a large sum of money compared with the €50 per month for a regular advertisement in Portugal.

Trans escorts' advertisements are displayed on the main pages of the websites or can be selected by city. In both cases, an initial presentation picture is shown along with the name, telephone number and city, and on some websites select words/titles are used to define them. Once the escort is selected, more information and

photographs are displayed. Generally, there is some text where trans escorts describe themselves and outline the services they offer. Some fields are to be filled in according to each website: nationality, age, ethnicity, height, weight, hair colour, eye colour, foot size, languages spoken, penis size, sexual orientation, services, rates and contact details. Photographs (and in some cases short videos) are important tools to attract clients' attention and show that descriptions are 'real'. The veracity of the pictures was an issue that many escorts highlighted by announcing that they were sharing 100% real pictures or that they did not use Photoshop. Photographs can be professional or homemade. The number used varies on each website, but eight photographs is the average. In this article I will not analyse the photographs, but focus instead on the written descriptions trans escorts use to characterise themselves. It is not my aim to question the 'veracity' or authorship of the advertisements; rather I prefer to consider them as a visual text chosen to represent the escorts. I will use excerpts without any editing, maintaining the original spelling and occasional typing mistakes. Finally, I have followed the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth's ethical code of good research practice: all the quotes used have the informed consent from the research participants. I also maintain their anonymity.

### *Trans escorts' profiles*

Young escorts are the most sought-after workers in the sex industry in general, as youthfulness 'has long been associated with sexual attractiveness' (Pruitt, 2005: 197). Ages range from 18 to 40, with an average of 25.5 in Portugal, while the range is from 20 to 32 with an average of 24.3 in the UK.

Considering nationality, not all escorts included their place of origin in their advertisements nor were they obligated to disclose it. Although some nationalities were 'discovered' through trans escorts' personal websites, they were not taken into account as only the information obtained in the selected websites was analysed. As described in Table 1, the great majority of escorts in the advertisements in Portugal were Brazilians. With 82,590 citizens, Brazilians are the main non-Portuguese community living in the country (SEF, 2015). These women, men and trans people play an important role within the Portuguese sex industry (Piscitelli, 2008). The UK offers a more varied panorama of nationalities.<sup>12</sup> Although Brazilian escorts were also numerous, it was difficult to identify the number exactly. I have preserved the use of the categories 'Latin' and 'Asian' as these were the only identifiers some escorts used. I realised through other sources that some 'Asians' were Thais and few 'Latins' were Brazilians but, as stated, this 'evidence' was not included in the current analysis. I consider it more relevant to consider why some trans escorts make specific reference to their place of origin and what purpose that would serve.

Next, I highlight the percentage of escorts who used their place of origin as a relevant piece of information in their advertisements beyond a mandatory field. It is revealing that only 20% of trans women escorts with Brazilian nationality described themselves as Brazilian while advertising in Portugal, whereas half of

**Table 1.** Origin of trans escorts. Portugal ( $n = 65$ ); UK ( $n = 80$ ).

Portugal					
Brazil	35				
Portugal	9				
Eastern country	1				
Unknown	20				
UK					
Brazil	12	Spain	2	Mexico	1
Latin	8	Bulgaria	1	Panama	1
Asian	7	Cambodia	1	Philippines	1
Thailand	7	Colombia	1	Russia	1
UK	4	Hong Kong	1	Venezuela	1
Malaysia	3	Italy	1	Unknown	27

Source: Own elaboration.

the total of Portuguese escorts deliberately underlined their nationality.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, there is a difference in the way Brazilian and Portuguese escorts employed their references to nationality. While Brazilians emphasised how ‘hot’, ‘lustful’ and ‘sexy’ they were (‘I am the hottest morena with the legitimate Brazilian swing’ (Tgatas))<sup>14</sup>, the majority of Portuguese escorts wanted to differentiate themselves from the ‘others’ (Brazilians) and stressed a kind of national pride stating they were ‘100% Portuguese’ or ‘very Portuguese’.

In the UK, 75% of Brazilians stressed that they were from Brazil, suggesting that in such an ethnically-varied sex work market it is necessary to emphasise every trait that potentially makes trans women escorts more desirable: ‘My Name is L. I am a friendly and always horny Brazilian Tgirl living in London who loves to please and to be pleased!’ (London TS). 90% of escorts who identified as ‘Latin’ emphasised that they were ‘Latin’ in the UK. The category ‘Latin’ (‘Latina’ in Portuguese) was not used in any advertisement in Portugal. Many escorts employed ‘Latin’ as a reference to underscore their claims of being ‘sexy’ and ‘passionate’ escorts but, unlike ‘Brazilian’, this was a broader category which included escorts from different countries. Although ‘Latin’ refers to people from Latin America, the term cannot be interpreted as representing a homogeneous ethnic group (Arrizón, 1999).<sup>15</sup> However, many escorts used it in a uniform way to show how ‘hot’ they were.

70% of escorts who identified as Asians used the word ‘Asian’, while only 30% of Thai escorts stressed ‘Thailand’ in their advertisements. In contrast to ‘Latin’ or ‘Brazilian’, it was employed as a piece of factual information, but did not seem to have further connotations nor was it accompanied by additional information. Nevertheless, Asian escorts (Thai, Cambodian or Malaysian) had a particular way of embodying beauty and femininity: they presented themselves as very slender



and hyper-feminine (perfect make-up, sexy lingerie, suggestive poses). It might be that the use of 'Asian' already has great meaning and is associated with a certain style of escort.

All the escorts who added the UK as their place of origin said explicitly that they were English/British: 'An English Rose: My name is R. and I'm 27 years old. I'm a young fun friendly English TV girl' (UK.Trans-Escort). As in the Portuguese case, English trans escorts wanted to reaffirm where they came from as a possible 'extra value' in an ethnically diverse sex market.

Sex workers embody histories of colonialism, racism and exoticism while offering their services on the internet. When Brazilians or Latinas present themselves as 'hot' or 'passionate' trans escorts, they are condensing discourses grounded in racial inequalities of a colonial past. According to Silva and Ornat (2014), Brazil's reputation as a racial democracy has been used to explain and sustain a particular Brazilian female beauty and, more specifically, the construction of the *brown mulata* as 'the embodiment of national identity' (Caldwell, 2007: 58). The celebration of female beauty as a 'natural' result of miscegenation was part of a nation-building project that prevails today (Edmonds, 2010). In contemporary Brazil, while certain physical features such as skin colour, hair texture or the shape of the lips are read from a category of beauty, others like hips, breasts or buttocks are assigned to a sexual category (Caldwell, 2007). Black women have traditionally not been considered beautiful but rather sexual beings. Although *mulatas* or *brown* women have been constructed as beautiful, they are also eroticised. Sensual *mulatas* are commodified as erotic *samba* dancers and as exotic bodies available to men. Nevertheless, in transnational contexts, these images of provocative *mulatas* exceed the eroticisation of particular racialised bodies to focus on the perception of a sexualised Brazilianness. In migratory contexts it is ethnicity (rather than race) that attributes meaning to female, male and trans bodies. Brazilian sex workers in transnational settings appropriate strategically objectified characteristics such as being 'brown' or 'horny' in order to stand out in the competitive female (Piscitelli, 2011) or trans (Silva and Ornat, 2014) sex markets. In a similar way, although racialised gender hierarchies were different in many Latin American colonial processes, when Latina trans escorts self-exoticise and embody hypersexuality they are re-signifying stereotypical constructions in order to obtain greater visibility. As 'other' social/racial subjects, they are appropriating the notion of 'hot Latinas' to gain an advantage and improve their economic position as sex workers.

### *Categories employed*

Some escorts, in both contexts, used more than one category to identify themselves; thus these categories are not exclusive. In addition, the percentages (as shown in Tables 2 and 3) only reflect the most commonly used terms highlighted in my sample, not the entire gamut of categories mentioned, as these were not numerically significant.



**Table 2.** Categories employed by trans escorts in Portugal.

Trans	26%	Woman/girl	9%
Tgata/gata	17%	Transex	8%
Travesti	15.5%	Boneca	8%
Ninfeta	11%	Crossdresser	6%

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 3.** Categories employed by trans escorts in the UK.

Transsexual	36%	Tgirl	9%
TS girl/TS escort	19%	Woman/girl	7.5%
Shemale	15%	Ladyboy	6.5%
TV girl	9%	Trans	4%

Source: Own elaboration.

The most relevant terms Portuguese escorts used to describe themselves are represented in Table 2.<sup>16</sup> In Portugal, Brazilian concepts as *tgatas*, *travestis* and *ninfetas* are very relevant within the online trans sex industry. ‘*Travesti*’ connotes an existing trans identity distinct from the others (mainly in Latin America). They are trans women, many of whom are engaged in prostitution, who come from poor backgrounds and have a low level of education (Kulick, 1998; Pelúcio, 2009). They usually feminise their bodies through different aesthetic practices but do not want to undergo genital surgery. ‘Transex’ can be either the abbreviation of ‘transsexual’<sup>17</sup> or the combination of ‘trans’ and ‘sex’ (this meaning is more common in prostitution settings). ‘*Tgata*’ is a very popular category used in Brazil which has two origins: 1) it is the Portuguese translation for the expression T-girl, that is, a reference used to define trans (*travesti*) people online, and 2) *gata* is a Brazilian expression used for a beautiful woman. So a ‘T’ before *gata* implies beautiful *travestis*. ‘Trans’ is the category most often selected by escorts in Portugal, wide enough to include diversified gender expressions. On the contrary, ‘crossdresser’ is at the bottom of this ranking, while ‘transsexual’ is used even less and is not included in the chart. Crossdressers in Portugal feel more comfortable advertising in more varied sites as ClassificadosX. The websites Tgatas and VIP Transex are oriented to trans with a more ‘feminine’ style (*travestis*, *tgatas*), and on the websites where femininity is highly valorised and escorts present a similar bodily style it is more difficult to find someone who identifies as a crossdresser. In addition, it seems to be easier for someone who in certain contexts would identify as a crossdresser to use the category *travesti* on some of the websites: generally, in a European context the term ‘*travesti*’ means ‘transvestite’ and is rarely understood as the aforementioned feminine Latin American *travestis*. Although Brazilian

and Latin American trans sex workers and activists are contributing to redefining this category in Europe, it is also considered a pejorative term by Portuguese/European trans people as well as in some academic and political contexts (Silva and Ornat, 2014).

Escorts in the UK most often employed the terms shown in Table 3.<sup>18</sup> In the UK, 'transsexual' is most often employed while 'trans', contrary to Portugal, is less common. It is significant that 'transsexual' is used by Brazilian, European, Asian and Latina escorts and it seems to be important within the UK online trans escort market.<sup>19</sup> While Asians use 'ladyboy' exclusively, there is no specific profile among those who prefer 'shemale'. 'Shemale' is generally used within the sex work industry to name trans women, but often has an offensive connotation as it minimises trans people's own gender identity while placing emphasis on their 'biological' sex. 'Ladyboy' is a Thai coinage of English words to name *kathoei* – people designated male at birth who want to 'pass' as women (Aizura, 2009). However, 'ladyboy' can also be used as an insult, especially when directed at those who aim to transition. The term can also suggest that they are 'men' who 'merely' dress-up as women. TS and TV are popular abbreviations of 'transsexual' and 'transvestite', respectively. They are very influential in Anglophone scenarios which have a longer sexual and medical tradition of 'scientifically' distinguishing gender identities (Meyerowitz, 2002). Finally, 'woman/girl' are terms chosen by escorts almost with the same proportion in Portugal and the UK. They are not at the top of the ranking; therefore, it is clear that the majority of escorts prefer to make a reference to their trans identities. There is no room for confusion: clients searching for trans escorts know where to find them. Even websites that advertise trans and female escorts differentiate them clearly by having different sections or adding a 'TS' before the name of the trans escorts.

## Part 2

### *Bodies on stage*

The description of escorts' bodies is a very important element for guaranteeing the success of the advertisements. With more or less enthusiasm, a great number of trans women escorts stressed some of their physical characteristics. Many websites include certain fields to be completed such as: height, weight, hair colour, eye colour, foot size or dress size. Table 4 includes the most relevant traits highlighted by the escorts in order to define themselves. I have not included any mention of mandatory features that 'had' to be filled in, analysing only those elements chosen by the escorts in their written texts.

Many characteristics were repeated and stressed in both settings, although the percentages differ. It is significant that in Portugal a great number of escorts openly described their penises as one of the physical attributes that made them more sought after. In Portugal, penises were not only described more often but were also exhibited: 78.5% of the escorts showed them in their advertisements,

**Table 4.** Features described by trans escorts.

Portugal		UK	
Penis description	44.5%	Femininity	20%
Body shapes	24.5%	Eye colour	19%
Breasts	20%	Skin texture	17.5%
Buttocks	18.5%	Slender/slim	17.5%
Femininity	18.5%	Penis description	15%
Height	14%	Buttocks	14%
Skin texture	10.5%	Breasts	12.5%
'Colour'/race	9%	Lips	12.5%
Lips	9%	Legs	12.5%
Hair colour	7.5%	Body shape	11%
Eye colour	4.5%	Height	9%
Legs	3%	Hair colour	6%

Source: Own elaboration.

compared to 24% in the UK. In Portugal, body shapes are referred to as sensual, 'perfect' and with sexy curves. This was a feature highlighted by the Brazilians and none of the Portuguese mentioned it. The size of their breasts and 'tasty' buttocks was also prominent in their descriptions. Having a 'feminine face' or just being 'super feminine' referred to the ability to look *like* women (to 'pass').

'Femininity' is, precisely, the most relevant characteristic mentioned in the UK advertisements. Eye colour and skin texture occupies an important place rather than descriptions of the penis, buttocks or breasts which rank at the top in Portugal. Slender and slim bodies were mentioned frequently in the UK. When bodies were described, there were many references to the 'body of a model', to being 'fit' or 'athletic' or to being 'healthy'. References to healthy or thin bodies were not mentioned in Portugal, where 'sculptural', 'dream' and 'perfect' bodies were emphasised.

Beauty matters. In both contexts escorts used expressions like 'Beauty in the form of desire', 'a radiant beauty that is the envy of women and infects men', 'blonde bombshell beauty' and 'The ultimate essence of beauty'. Beauty is something significant that trans escorts aim to achieve to present themselves as desirable. Beauty exists while *doing* (Moreno Figueroa, 2013), that is, it is performative and is created through discourses and modes of representation. As I describe elsewhere (Vartabedian, 2016), there are few ethnographic works that analyse beauty through the embodied experiences of trans people. Most of these examine trans beauty pageants as places where gender, 'Western' beauty patterns and the ideas of nation and modernity intersect. In Thailand, trans beauty pageants like Miss Tiffany Universe or Miss International Queen are important, nationally televised events where feminine *kathoey*s 'embody cultural norms of beauty'

(Jackson, 2011: 36). Although *kathoeys* are represented in popular culture as *fake women* (Ünaldi, 2011) and are highly stigmatised, they do not passively accept their 'second-class status'. They invest a lot of time and money in medical and cosmetic procedures to reach their own feminine ideal of beauty, thus asking 'for recognition and status in a beauty-obsessed society' (Jackson, 2011: 36). They usually engage in practices to whiten their skin, narrow their noses and make their eyes more 'Western' looking. It is through the processes involved in creating beautiful *kathoeys* that they demand recognition, embodying ultra-feminine and 'Westernised' beauty. Engaging in these practices of beautification is, for *kathoeys*, a way of being 'modern', that is, it signifies being middle class, white and 'Western' and marks them as consumers. Although trans prejudices and marginalisation are not subverted, achieving a 'Westernised' beauty enables *kathoeys* to construct themselves as 'modern' and admired beautiful subjects.

Ochoa (2014) has studied how femininities are produced through the analysis of a Venezuelan local gay and *transformista* (trans woman) beauty pageant called La Noche de las Luciérnagas (Night of the Fireflies), showing that to be 'a queen for a day' is a form of power which allows *transformistas* to gain momentary authority as they can '*project themselves out onto an audience, to show the world how beautiful or fabulous they are*' (Ochoa, 2014: 109, emphasis in original). As hegemonic notions of femininity are inscribed on bodies considered abject, and not on people designated female at birth, participants are subverting expectations of gendered performance. Nevertheless, it is possible to see that they 'do not gain social legitimacy' (Ochoa, 2014: 109) through their participation in the pageant, that is, exposing their own femininity and gaining social legibility do not necessarily mean they are becoming legitimate subjects. *Transformistas* are still excluded from citizenship. Beauty pageants, then, allow *transformistas* to achieve prestige and (temporary) local authority and legibility, though they are still not legitimated.

Finally, Johnson (1997) states that gay/*bantuts* in the Southern Philippines are also in a paradoxical situation while embodying 'Western'-looking beauty and femininity: on the one hand, they are considered as beautiful and have even gained a certain social status through their beauty salons and participation in beauty pageants; but on the other hand, they are still stigmatised as 'sexual deviants'. *Bantuts* consider that they 'expose their beauty', that is, that it is a sort of 'coming out' for them connected with the expression of their selves (to have the 'heart' of a woman). They do not simply imitate (North American) women's styles and beauty; rather, they are engaged in 'an active process of appropriation' (Johnson, 1997: 125–126). They feel powerful as they are able to self-transform and embody 'the total ensemble of elements in the beauty contests – beautiful faces, sculpted bodies, glamorous costumes, the English language and various performative talents' (Johnson, 1997: 221). As with *kathoeys* and *transformistas*, beauty is a way to seek social legitimacy and 'modernity'.

For the Brazilian *travestis* with whom I interacted in previous research (Vartabedian, 2016), the quest for beauty is an empowering process that many feel gives meaning to their identities and lives. In a setting that revolves around

physical appearance, beauty situates them in a privileged position. They establish internal, symbolic and corporal hierarchies that organise them as ‘successful’ or not, according to the degree of beauty achieved. The pursuit of beauty allows *travestis* to construct themselves as social subjects who feel powerful and desired, and it also situates them (precariously) in the world.

Although much empirical work is needed, we can advance that when trans escorts display their ‘beautiful’ bodies through online advertisements, they are also making claims for a certain kind of legibility. As sex workers, they discover that the capacity they have to draw attention gives them power as men’s desire reinforces their self-esteem and security. This recognition, however, is finite. Once the service offered is finished, they go back to a reality of loneliness and discrimination.

For those who identified as Brazilians or Latinas, beauty is presented following a model of femininity that is considered ‘exuberant’, one that differentiates them from ‘regular’ ciswomen. Here, Ochoa’s concept of *spectacular femininities* to invoke ‘a kind of hyperfemininity intended for display, created as the objects of an imagined masculine gaze’ (Ochoa, 2014: 208) is useful. Although there are some differences in the way trans escorts present themselves in Portugal and the UK, the combination of (hyper)femininity and versatility characterises the trans sex work market. Even though their penises seem to be less visible in the English advertisements, trans sex workers offer (implicitly or not) ‘something more’ that differentiates them from ciswomen. This makes them ‘complete’ escorts and it is what fascinates their loyal clients. Like a puzzle, different body parts are individualised and valorised through the advertisements. Trans women escorts imagine their bodies and select the most relevant ‘pieces’ to highlight in their written texts: some of them accentuate physical traits while others emphasise how these body parts could be used through the services offered.

### *Escorts or girlfriends?*

In this section I present the most common practices offered by trans escorts (Table 5) and then examine the very popular ‘girlfriend experience’ service (GFE) displayed in the UK context.

Versatile trans people are those who seem to be the most sought after. In Portugal and the UK this is the service mentioned most often. In Portugal, it is followed by oral sex and ‘69’ sexual practices, which are not so well-positioned in the UK. More detailed descriptions of penises are found in Portugal. Big or ‘XXL’ endowments are highly valorised, thus many trans escorts gave a precise description of their penis size. In the UK, among the 76% of escorts who did not show their penises, almost 30% identified as Asian, 10% as Brazilian and 6.5% as English and Latina escorts. Advertisements in the UK also showed a higher level of professionalism in the way language was employed. Asian escorts (many of them working in agencies) used acronyms to label the services offered: A (anal sex), OWO (oral without condom), CIM (cum in mouth), GFE (girlfriend experience) and RIM (anilingus) were some examples. Similarly, while only 9% of the escorts

**Table 5.** Sexual services offered by trans escorts.

Portugal		UK	
'Active' and 'passive'	75%	'Active' and 'passive'	46%
Oral sex	20%	GFE	20%
69	20%	Role-play	15%
Role-play	17%	BDSM	14%
BDSM	15%	Only 'active'/top	10%
Massage	14%	Massage	10%
('Hot') kiss	12.5%	French kiss	10%
Anilingus (' <i>botão de rosa</i> ')	7.5%	Oral sex	5%
Golden shower	6%	Golden shower	2.5%
Only 'passive'	3%	Anilingus ('black kiss')	2.5%
No mention	1.5%	No mention	25%

Source: Own elaboration.

in Portugal announced the prices of their services (simply stating 'Minimum 50 euros', for example), 43% of escorts working in the UK mentioned their rates in detail: they differentiated in-call (in the escort's home) and outcall (outside the escort's home) services. One hour of service varied between £120/£220 (in-call) to £200/£300 (outcall). 'Duos', meaning services by two trans escorts or a female and a trans escort, were offered in the UK websites.

We can see that, on the one hand, trans escorts in Portugal openly exhibit their penises and talk about them while, simultaneously, stressing and sexualising some physical features in order to become desirable subjects in the market. On the other hand, escorts in the UK, who seem to be more professionalised as the market appears to be bigger and more competitive, are more 'discreet', not only in the ways they present and exhibit their bodies, but also in how they interact with the readers of their advertisements/possible clients. We can read these differences as strategies adapted to the market. Migrant trans sex workers move transnationally and are aware of the tendencies and expectations of each site. Brazilian trans escorts, as an example, are not 'shyer' in the UK than in Portugal when they do not expose their penises. They adapt to the dynamics of the market in order to make their experiences as sex workers as profitable as possible. I will now describe the 'girlfriend experience', one of the most professionalised services in the UK which, paradoxically, pretends to blur the boundaries between clients and sex workers.

Bernstein (2007a) recounts that, contrary to the quick and impersonal 'sexual release' that is related to street sex work, an emergent new paradigm of sexual commerce (mostly based in the indoor sector) reshapes sexual labour relationships. This change derives, principally, from what she calls 'bounded authenticity', that is, 'the sale and purchase of authentic emotional and physical connection'

(Bernstein, 2007a: 103). Indoor sex workers offer an emotionally engaged conversation together with sexual activities that resemble dating experiences (passionate kisses, hugs, massages). Escorts engage in ‘emotion work’ (Weitzer, 2005) to satisfy clients who are treated as boyfriends. A larger investment of time is required to show the clients that it is a kind of ‘non-paid encounter between two lovers’ (Bernstein, 2007a: 126). Common expressions like ‘unlimited time’ or ‘unrushed session’ ensure that escorts are not clock-watchers. This experience of making the client feel like a boyfriend has been commodified and sold as the ‘girlfriend experience’, one of the most sought after services in the UK.

Although in Portugal some escorts mentioned they were offering unhurried services or ‘hot’ kisses, the ‘girlfriend experience’ was not found as a ‘product’ to be offered. *Estilo namoradinha* is the Portuguese expression for this service and it was not mentioned in any Portuguese advertisements, although it is used in Brazil. On the contrary, it is very popular in the UK: ‘I am very open minded and I enjoy being treated like the girl I am. I am good company, adventurous and fun to play with. I enjoy pleasing nice guys and offer an unhurried service discreetly’ (UK.Trans-Escort). When trans escorts presented themselves as ‘perfect’ girlfriends, they also described some personal attributes and lifestyles. To start with, they generally stressed: ‘I came back’, ‘First time’, ‘Super novelty’, ‘Last days’, ‘Short season’. In Portugal and the UK these references appealed to: 1) a strategy of mobility among sex workers to present ‘new faces’ to clients, and 2) the ability to show that they were ‘worldly’ people, that is, there is a certain social prestige that escorts displayed through their homemade pictures while travelling around Europe or eating ‘exotic’ food, like sushi. In Portugal, trans escorts remarked that they spoke many languages and they also denoted an aspirational lifestyle by employing surnames like d’Montmartre, Bundchen or Kardashian.

However, there was a difference in the way certain attributes were presented. On Portuguese websites, very few trans escorts said that they were educated, gentle, sophisticated, intelligent or funny. Conversely, many escorts in the UK highlighted that they were well-educated, friendly, articulate, perfectionists, modest, upscale, easy-going, intellectually curious, sophisticated, elegant, spiritual minded, had a sense of humour, were respectful, classy, honest, well-mannered and genuine. They openly shared many details of their personal lives, for example that they were university students, or that they loved travelling or doing fitness. For example:

I’m 20 years old pre-op transsexual from the beautiful country of Brazil, down to earth, high class and with a chilled out personality, I will make you feel extremelly [sic] comfortable [sic] in my company. [. . .] I have female looks, brain and heart and I like to be treated as such! (London Shemale Escort)

Trans escorts in the UK sought to express that they were something more than merely escorts. However, this display of their ‘cultural capital’ was a way to reinforce and enlarge their position as sex workers, in contrast to trans escorts in Portugal who had a more ‘direct’ style of advertising themselves.



Finally, although they are professionals, or perhaps because of this, trans escorts claim pleasure in their advertisements: 'I am beautifully well-endowed at 20x6 and mad with desire, I have no limits and both you and I are always satisfied' (Tgatas); 'I enjoy and get huge satisfaction out of submitting men [sic], inflicting pain, or sensually dominating you to give us both that unparalleled feeling of power play and pleasure' (London Shemale Escort). They consider themselves very good lovers, skilled at giving pleasure to their clients and at receiving it. Pleasure is not absent within sex work and sex work is the main activity among migrant trans women in Europe. The combination of a low level of education, discrimination, poverty, race/gender prejudices and a lack of other job opportunities structure sex work as the foremost way of making a living in their countries of origin and abroad. But this work also empowers them, allowing them to construct themselves as subjects who can invest money to produce and maintain their feminine bodies and, thus, be desired and admired. Trans women escorts have 'something else' which makes them very sought after as sex workers in the online sex market.

## Conclusion

I have examined trans women escorts' advertisements on some websites in Portugal and the UK in order to shed some light on a thus far under-researched subject. This is a first step towards more empirical research to open up further study. Portugal and the UK can be seen as two settings through which trans escorts' styles of advertising entered into a dialogue. Trans escorts strategically use existing markers of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality. For example, Brazilian trans escorts reproduce a view of themselves as very 'hot', appropriating racialised objectifications. However, they make positive use of these to stand out in the sex market. Sex work is not only the main activity they can access to earn money but is also the space from which they can obtain a certain (temporary) recognition. Being 'beautiful', feminine and virile gives them an advantage within the market as they can simultaneously negotiate and control their own bodies, sexualities and pleasure. Although they live in a world of great structural violence and marginalisation, these online advertisements show confident, empowered and professional trans escorts who can contest, from the margins, a 'correct' way of embodying trans subjectivities.

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## Notes

1. In this article I refer exclusively to trans women sex workers, as trans men do not (openly) advertise their services. Trans men sex workers remain completely invisibilised

- (even more than trans women) and there is almost no research on/with them (see Young, 2015).
2. I use 'trans' as an umbrella term to include the wide variety of gender identities: transgender people, transsexuals, cross-dressers or *travestis*, among others.
  3. I was a post-doctoral researcher in a larger project on trans people's rights when I began to work on this manuscript ('TRANSRIGHTS: Gender citizenship and sexual rights in Europe: Transgender lives from a transnational perspective', Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon). Portugal and the UK were two of the five European countries compared in the project (including France, the Netherlands and Sweden) and the first ones to be analysed. Being a Portuguese and English speaker facilitated my understanding of trans women escorts' online advertisements in both countries.
  4. By 'woman' I refer to a ciswoman (non-trans woman).
  5. The indoor sex industry is organised in massage parlours, clubs, brothels, saunas, bars and private apartments where sex workers provide, either independently or through an escort agency, sexual encounters in exchange for money. I use 'escort' and 'sex worker' as interchangeable concepts, although an escort is a sex worker who mainly advertises her/his services through the internet.
  6. In Portugal and the UK (mainly England and Wales), prostitution itself is not illegal but some related activities such as pimping, running brothels and living off the earnings of sex workers are criminal offenses. In the UK, kerb-crawling and soliciting a person in the street or a public place to obtain sexual services are sexual offences. In the UK, brothel-work is developed in the informal sector as it is an unregulated activity, 'which allows for unprofessional and coercive management practices to go unchecked' (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014: 559). Some indoor-based sex workers have to face exploitative practices when working in brothels. At the same time, as legislation uses the term 'brothel' for more than one worker in a home setting, co-working (for example, two sex workers) is a criminalised practice although it clearly has some advantages in terms of the health and well-being of the workers (Hubbard and Prior, 2012).
  7. For the purpose of this analysis, 'migrants' are defined as those who were not born in the country in which they have come to live and work, including people from EU countries.
  8. I employed a simple random sampling to obtain the 145 advertisements analysed in this article.
  9. However, in the UK, a female trans escorts directory called 'Asian dolls' was found (<http://www.asiandolls.co.uk/index.html>).
  10. London Shemale Escort and Yummy Asian London were also ephemeral and have since been taken down.
  11. Although the great majority of escorts were Asians, escorts with other nationalities or ethnicities were also advertised by this agency.
  12. TAMPEP (2009) estimates that 64% of migrant sex workers in the UK come from Central and Eastern Europe (Central Europe 43%, Baltic 10%, Eastern Europe 7%, Balkan 4%), 16% from other EU countries, 10% from Latin America, 7% from Asia, 2% from Africa and 1% from North America. There are 35 different countries of origin in total.
  13. In the Portuguese context, Brazilian origin may also be evident in the form of writing and language employed.
  14. All translations from the Portuguese are mine.
  15. The term 'Latin' also applies to the linguistic origin of romance languages.

16. 25% did not employ any category.
17. In English, 'transsexual' is written with one 's' when the intention is to distance oneself from the medical notion of transsexuality.
18. 9% did not use any category.
19. The categories of 'transsexual' and 'shemale' also included those references to 'transsexual pre-op' and 'shemale pre-op'.

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**Julieta Vartabedian** completed her PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of Barcelona. She was a postdoc researcher on a European Research Council funded project at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon (Portugal, 2014–2015), and a Leverhulme Visiting Fellow in Sociology at Newcastle University (UK, 2013–2014). Currently, she is an affiliated researcher at the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge.