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Masculinity and the Occupational Experience of Male Independent Escorts Who Seek Male Clients

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Academic Editor: Martin J. Bull

Received: 27 January 2017; Accepted: 31 May 2017; Published: 5 June 2017

Abstract: While male sex work (MSW) is a highly gendered practice involving the commodification of the male body, masculinity has rarely been examined to understand this new occupational environment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty male independent internet-based escorts in Brisbane, Australia. Masculinity was used as a conceptual tool to understand the nuances of the escorting experience, resulting in two themes: Endurance and Technical Skill. These themes were aligned with hegemonic expressions of masculinity, a system that orders masculinity into a hierarchy and potentially marginalises escorts. Participants thus used features of a system that subordinated them to attain primacy in the same framework, avoiding stigma. These themes described were far removed from dialogues of deviance oft-repeated by past sex work research, and instead bolster the view that male escorting is moving toward a paradigm of normalisation. We thus argue that masculinity is a critical conceptual tool in understanding the contemporary dynamics of the male escorting experience as it becomes increasingly normalised

Keywords: male escorting; sex work; masculinity; occupation; legitimization

1. Introduction

Masculinity has been a constant fixture in framing the way in which male sex work (MSW) has been understood and experienced. In early MSW research, typologies of sex workers were created based on the extent to which workers deviated from masculine norms (Kaye 2004; Scott 2003). More recent research has moved away from the paradigm of deviance, examining MSW as a stigmatised, albeit legitimate form of employment, the meaning and experience of which varies widely depending on a range of contextual factors, including the social and legislative environment (MacPhail et al. 2015; Smith and Seal 2008b). Given that masculinity underlines the processes of male escorting, including important features such as marketing, it is surprising that studies rarely utilise masculinity as a tool to understand the occupational dynamics of male escorting.

Following Evans (1987), occupation is defined as the active process of participating in goal-directed and gratifying activity. In the few studies that apply masculinity as a means of understanding the occupational experience, the tendency is to centre on specific aspects of the field, such as wages, instead of taking a more expansive view of the male escorting occupational experience, which includes symbolic and contextual factors, such as status and stigma. As MSW is intertwined with discourses of power within masculinity and broader societal structures, the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity will be used to guide the study to explore key features that define the larger occupational experience of male escorting, in the case of male independent escorting in Brisbane, Australia (Connell 2005).

Within the multiplicities of MSW (Ellison and Weitzer 2016), independent internet-based escorting was chosen as the site for study given both its recent technology-assisted growth and dominance of the field owing to its advantages over other streams of MSW in terms of safety and earnings, among other factors (McLean 2013). Independent internet-based escorting in this context refers to men who operate independently on the internet, without a manager or brothel, and engage with primarily male customers. The term *escort* or *male escort* will be used to connote a male independent internet-based escort. Through interviews with 20 escorts in Brisbane, Australia, this paper will utilise masculinity as a conceptual tool to understand two key aspects of the MSW occupational environment. These features, Endurance and Technical Skill, are aligned with hegemonic masculinity, indicating that escorts craft their field in line with a framework that subordinates them. Consequently, these expressions are considered as a means of managing stigma arising from public associations with subordinated masculinities. The use of masculinity to bring forth the indicative themes in participant discourses will demonstrate the significance of masculinity to understanding the increasingly normalised occupational arena of male escorting.

2. Sex Work and Masculinity in an Occupational Context

Connell (2005) indicates that masculinity is defined by the procedures and relationships through which men and women conducted their gendered lives. Thus, masculinity is a location within gender relations, where men and women engage their place in gender and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, character and culture. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This point is important, as sex work has long been characterised by power imbalances. While this has been especially true of female sex work, which has been linked by feminists to patriarchy, it is also true of male sex work, which has been linked to survival sex. This noted, many early studies of both female and male sex work focussed on street work, which we consider to be more indicative of inequalities and is not representative of 'typical' forms of sex work in the contemporary period (Scott 2003). Indeed, the last twenty years have seen a significant restructuring and reorganisation of sex work across the globe in response to opportunities provided by new information technologies (MacPhail et al. 2015).

To understand the nature of masculinity, it is necessary to detail men's gender practices and how gender crafts, empowers and restrains men (Connell 2002), as exemplified in MSW by how workers have to align themselves with gendered norms and are simultaneously constrained by these mores. Masculinity is here defined as the summation of daily routines generally ascribed to boys and men, with these practices not necessarily bound by male biology (Dunphy 2000). Apart from gender, ethnicity also interacts with masculinity. The intersections between gender, ethnicity and class have allowed for the recognition of multiple varieties of masculinity. Research has noted how these features may influence the market for male sex workers impacting on pricing and earning capacity (Logan 2010).

Within the range of masculinities, at any given moment, there is one form of masculinity deemed culturally more important, known as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, defined as the group of features that connote the physical, physiological and cultural attributes espoused by elite males, and advanced as the ideal model for *all* masculinity (Connell 2005), will be utilised as the theoretical framework for the paper. It is these power dynamics that craft the stigmatised nature of male escorting, in which purported homosexual behaviour, often equated with effeminate behaviour, is marginalised. Male sex work has a double stigma as it is at once associated with homosexual desire and prostitution, both of which can be aligned with subordinated expressions of the masculine. Queer expressions of sexuality, such as MSW, undermine heteronormativity by interrogating and disputing traditional conceptualisations of sexuality. Sex workers, particularly those involved in MSW, operate outside these norms, and encounter stigma and marginalisation (McKay 1999). In addition,

by accepting payment for intercourse, sex workers queer heteronormativity through the overtness of the act (Pendleton 1997).

Anderson (2009) denoted the contemporary archetype of hegemonic ideals as orthodox masculinity, defined as a young, married, urban, heterosexual, Protestant white male, and stated that it subordinated homosexual, nonathletic and effeminate men (Messner 2002). It seemed to be fairly easy to emplace oneself in the marginalised masculinities, when one engaged in supposed feminine behaviour such as weakness, compassion or fear (Messner 1995). Thus, through the hegemony, patriarchy was asserted, along with heterosexual dominance over non-heterosexuals (Anderson 2009). Through the lens of patriarchy, homosexuality was the sum of the unwanted attributes of hegemonic masculinity, running the gamut from effeminate behaviour to bottoming. The masculinities embodied by gay men were a continuum of sorts, and in their entirety, analogous to femininity and consequently at the bottom of the hierarchy. The hierarchy of masculinity is well represented within male escorting, with effeminate behaviour and bottoming incurring penalties in rates charged (Logan 2010).

Mirroring the primarily homosexual and bisexual orientation of the sample in this article, the literature that follows will centre on male sex workers who primarily provide services to male clients. Many studies indicate that escorting is primarily about providing company, or the boyfriend experience (Kong 2009; Pleak and Meyer-Bahlburg 1990; Smith et al. 2014; Walby 2012). Sexual services are sometimes mentioned as a secondary aspect of escorting and engagements without sexual activity is common (Grov et al. 2015; McLean 2013; Smith and Seal 2008a). Such a definition of escorting contrasted with past pathological characterisations of escorting being a solely sexual encounter. Escorting as a form of emotional labour draws parallels with past research on female sex work (Brewis and Linstead 2000; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006). This noted, rather than normalise male sex work, as emotional labor may do with female sex work, the association with emotional labor may further stigmatise male sex work, given the links between emotional labour and femininity.

A variety of paths exist for potential escorting encounters. Of the multiplicity of paths an encounter may take, a more common process began when a client viewed a profile on an escort site and made a selection based on preferences (McLean 2013). Clientele then contacted the escorts they were interested in and a conversation began, either on the website itself, or through text/call (McLean 2013). Escorts and clientele would then determine whether the other was suitable for the planned encounter, based on service standards, sexual services and rapport. Once the client selected an escort, a time and place would be decided (incall/outcall). One party would then travel to the other and the encounter commenced. Payment was usually made at the start, and clients usually extended engagements longer than planned (Bernstein 2007). McLean (2013) argued why independent escorting was likely to represent MSW in the future: the reduction in street work; the waning of brothels and agencies; issues with print media; simplicity of internet-based work; privacy and safety; and increased economic gains. A few studies explored the occupational paradigm of male escorting, detailed below.

An early study by Luckenbill (1985, 1986) framed MSW as a form of employment, albeit a deviant and highly stigmatised one, setting the stage for further occupational exploration of the field. Luckenbill (1985, 1986) indicated that the various forms of male sex work represented a hierarchy. Street workers occupied the lowest tier in the hierarchy, followed by those who worked in bars and with escorts inhabiting the highest rungs (Luckenbill 1986). He also outlined three forms of mobility; stability, minimum ascent and maximum ascent. Although Luckenbill (1985, 1986) highlighted a hierarchy of MSW and processes of mobility, he did not consider how normative features of masculinity were used to organise and structure the tiered system he had proposed. Focusing on the internet-based worker, Escoffier (2007) examined the male sex worker career path of porn star-stripper-escort. While Escoffier (2007) provided a detailed description of a particular class of worker, he did not apply masculinity to conceptually explore the occupational structure of the field.

Browne and Minichiello (1996) suggested that masculinity defined how male sex workers construed their occupation. They argued that male sex workers aligned their occupation with discourses on entrepreneurship and technical ability, features commonly associated with masculine

norms. Continuing in this vein, Logan (2010, 2016) proposed that wages in the market for male escort sexual labour were determined by the level of conformance to masculine norms. For example, those who were overweight or slight in build encounter price penalties, with these characteristics proposed to be analogous to femininity (Bourdieu 2001; Hennen 2005). Masculinity also extended to the bedroom, with topping receiving a price premium, and bottoms earning less. This income differential was argued to be due to gay/bisexual men yielding to conventionally masculine roles (Clarkson 2006; De Lind Van Wijngaarden 2015). Although pricing in the escort environment was likely more nuanced than Logan (2010) postulated (Walby 2012), by applying the lens of masculinity to explain the wage differentials present, Logan (2010) illustrated that masculinity was critical in comprehending the nuances of the occupational aspects of male escorting.

Walby (2012) indicated how the *touching* inherent in MSW confounded mainstream gender and sexual norms, demonstrating the context-dependent nature of masculinity in the male escorting environment. Although Walby (2012) explored how masculinities were enacted in the lives of escorts, his focus was to demonstrate how touching unwound gender and sexual roles, rather than to chart how masculinities were enacted in the occupation. Using the lens of masculinity to understand the occupational experience of male escorting yielded valuable insights that were neglected in research that did not harness the framework of masculinity. However, these studies have centred on highly specific aspects of the occupational environment, instead of applying masculinity to highlight key themes in the occupational experience. Further, studies have not focused in any depth on the contemporary phenomenon of male internet escorting. Studies have suggested that male internet escorts work in environments that are highly conducive to hegemonic expressions and interpretations of masculinity. For example, it has been suggested that male internet escorts are more independent than other escorts and tend to have relatively more career options available than other male sex workers as a result of higher levels of education and skills (Minichiello et al. 2013).

3. Methodology

Research was carried out in Brisbane (the capital city of the state of Queensland), Australia. Ethical approval was sought from the University Human Ethics Committee and a Queensland-based sex workers' community organisation, Respect Inc. Respect Inc. is a non-profit community-based organisation for sex workers of all genders, focused on the rights and welfare of sex workers in Queensland, Australia. Previous research suggests that male sex workers in Brisbane tend to be in their 20s, possess tertiary education and identify as gay/bisexual (Minichiello et al. 2002). Thus, the population of male sex workers in Brisbane appears largely homogenous and the number of data sources for this study was decided based on guidelines for qualitative research in homogeneous samples. A range of 12–20 participants is recommended for such samples, and 20 participants was selected as the sample size for this study as it would provide an adequate chance of attaining data saturation (Kuzel 1992; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007).

Two modes of recruitment were used, given the hard-to-reach nature of potential participants (OliFFE and Mroz 2005). The main male escort websites in Australia (squirrt, hourboy, rentmen, rentboyaustralia) indicated a total of about 150 unique profiles listed in Brisbane. All 150 escorts on the sites were emailed at addresses listed (Morrison and Whitehead 2007; Parsons et al. 2005), and advertisements were also placed at the Respect Inc. headquarters. The contact email and adverts explained the nature of the study and contained a link to a KeySurvey form, which was encrypted and housed on the university server (WorldAPP 2015). Participants were asked to key in a pseudonym and contact details. Escorts were also asked to indicate demographic information, to determine suitability for the study. To prevent sampling escorts who had worked while underage, participants were asked to list their age (>20) and time involved in the field (>two years) (Parsons et al. 2001). Participation in independent escorting was moderated by verifying whether they contacted clientele on their own, without a third party, such as pimps or agency owners/managers, and it is acknowledged that such arrangements are rare. As stated, only independent escorts were selected as this strand of MSW has

recently come to dominate and typify the market, owing to advances in telecommunications which, such as the internet and mobile phone, make it easier to work independently in a safe and economically beneficial environment (McLean 2013).

Of those contacted, 23 participants responded to the research team, all meeting the above criteria. Of these, only 18 were successfully contacted through the telephone numbers they provided. In addition, two participants were referred by Respect Inc. and both were eligible under the study criteria, bringing the total participants in the study to twenty. Further emailing and referral through Respect Inc. may have allowed for greater participant numbers, but only 20 participants were required as per the study design.

Participant interviews were generally conducted at cafes close to escort residences or at the university. On two occasions, participants requested that interviews be conducted in their homes. Participants were advised to use pseudonyms and no identifying details were noted. A semi-structured interview style was used. This facilitated the sharing of thoughts and ideas, allowing the researcher to gain understanding of the meanings underlying participant dialogue (Murray and Sixsmith 1998). This allowed for a coherent framework of the occupational features in male escorting to materialise, without the researcher having to probe for additional detail (Parsons et al. 2005).

The interview schedule was divided into two parts. The first section sought to understand how participants conceptualised escorting. Example questions for this section are as follows: 'Say I am an outsider to escorting; can you describe it to me?' 'How might escorting be considered an occupation?' The following section was concerned with how masculinity framed various aspects of the field, with questions such as: 'How do you define masculinity?', 'How does (particular aspect of masculinity) relate to masculinity?' Questions were rephrased and abridged where necessary, such as in cases where the participant was a second language speaker. The order of the questions was sometimes altered to reflect topics broached by the escort. The interviewer also did not interrupt or ask questions while the participant was speaking, and memorised the interview schedule (Olliffe and Mroz 2005). A smartphone application, Smart Voice Recorder (SmartMob 2017), was used to record interviews. One participant requested notes to be taken instead, due to perceived privacy issues.

To reimburse the costs of participation in the study (i.e., transportation) (Fernández et al. 2004), AUD50 was given to each participant upon completion of the interview, based on university research funding guidelines. Participants were also provided a gift bag which contained safer sex materials donated by Respect Inc. and various prophylactic manufactures, and a booklet on safer sex work, also provided by Respect Inc. (Seib et al. 2009). Interviews were then transcribed and identifying details removed. The transcriptions were uploaded onto NVivo 10 for coding and analysis.

Using the principles of thematic analysis, the research team reviewed transcriptions and codes for narratives around the male escorting occupational experience and thus features parallel to the discourses of masculinity were identified, expressed through the dominant masculinity of male escorting. Thematic analysis has shown to be an effective method for evaluating a large spectrum of qualitative data (Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 1990). Each theme outlined in the results was endorsed by several participants. The quotes were edited for grammar expression where this did not change the meaning of the statements provided by the participants. Participant discourses were placed under two themes: Endurance and Technical Skill.

3.1. Demographic Information

Most participants (19) identified as white and one identified as East Asian. Most (17) participants were in their 20s and three were in their 30s. On average, participants had been escorts for about 2.25 years. All participants were from middle-class backgrounds and 19 had grown up in large cities (>1M population). Escorts usually saw five clients a week, charging AUD250–AUD300/h. Participants primarily saw older (40s) male clients, typically described as wealthy married men, and on occasion had engagements with heterosexual couples.

In terms of services, participants usually offered anal and oral intercourse, both insertive and receptive. Apart from these activities, escorts occasionally offered fisting, spanking, aspects of BDSM practice, kissing, mutual masturbation and massage. All participants reported regularly using safer sex practices, specifically condoms for anal and vaginal intercourse. Nineteen participants indicated that they were gay/bisexual and one identified as straight. The gender and sexuality of the participant's partners was not asked as part of the interview schedule. However, two of the participants indicated that they had female partners outside of their occupation. The demographic profile of the sample was largely similar to previous Australian studies (Minichiello et al. 1999, 2002).

3.2. Context

Sex work in Australia is not illegal, but regulators have deemed that all related acts, such as soliciting and brothel operation, are under the purview of law enforcement. In the state of Queensland, where Brisbane (population of 2.3 million) is located, independent escorting is legal, but it is an offence to publicly solicit for the purposes of prostitution. Sex work conducted in a licensed brothel is legal in Queensland. Any other form of sex work is illegal. Previous Australian research indicated that hegemonic masculinities may be affirmed through demeaning women, homosexuals and what might be considered effeminate behavior (Iacuone 2005). Such practices are also not restricted to 'straight' cultures and may also be expressed in queer settings (Connell 1992). Such findings, along with the data herein, did not indicate that the variant of hegemonic masculinity observed in large Australian cities was significantly different from similar environments in North America, or possessed of cultural variations not commonly observed in North America (Kimmel 1995).

4. Conceptualisations of Masculinity within the Sample

Participants were first asked to define masculinity. Overall, escorts indicated that masculinity was related to discourses on confidence, strength and dominance:

The idea of being masculine; you are confident in not just who you are, but what you are and how you look (Kyle).

I think a lot of people think masculinity means being an asshole but it's not, it's about being a strong person (Nick).

Masculinity is strength that a man carries within himself. It's not about how much muscles you have or how much weight you can lift or it's about the strength of the character you have within yourself (Peter).

Having that mental attitude is what makes me feel masculine, it's about having that mind-set of being a dominant sex partner (Chris).

These discourses of masculinity were related to traditionally masculine signifiers, such as strength and dominance (Boyce and Herd 2003; Kolb 1999). By aligning masculinity to hegemonic norms, escorts defined their occupations by a framework that dominated and subordinated them. At the same time, it is through conventional forms of masculinity that escorts fulfilled their occupation and reified their role in society. Developing these conceptualisations of masculinity, the next section will detail key features of the larger occupational experience, and demonstrate how masculinity can be applied as a conceptual tool to draw out the occupational machinations of male escorting. It is noted that the conceptualisations of masculinity herein are not representative of the broader escort community, but this sample. It is possible that other samples may have escorts who phrase their occupation through femininity or other modes.

5. Features of the Occupational Experience

Drawing from participant discourses, masculinity was used to develop two themes underlying the escorting experience: Endurance and Technical Skill. The development of these themes will advance

the argument that masculinity is essential in understanding the dynamics of the male escorting occupational experience.

5.1. Endurance

A clear message throughout the interviews was the tough schedules of escorting, phrased through masculine norms. Possible engagements were not just restricted to weekend nights, but could happen at any time:

You realise you are 24/7 on call, you can't have a normal life. So I don't sleep through the night as such. I sleep a little bit in segments. It is physically worrying, of course, but it is part of the job (Chris).

A participant stated that weekday lunchtime appointments were common, possibly because these may have been the only suitable appointments married clients could make without arousing their partner's suspicion:

They can't come out in the night after work, they are at home. So they think of doing lunch or something (Shaun).

Overcoming strain from the tough schedules of escorting seemed to rest on discourses of strength and bravery, which a participant associated with masculinity:

You put yourself in positions where things could go wrong. You are taking a lot of risk, so courage is masculine (Evan).

Overall, participants stated that male escorting was an endeavour that required adherence to gruelling schedules, parallel to the discourse of endurance as an emblem of masculinity, as indicated by a participant. Similar notions of mental and physical toughness were observed in other occupations, where participants tied their punishing schedules to masculinity; what made 'a man's job' (Barrett 1996). The endurance expected of escorts is thus possibly phrased through masculinity, as indicated by a previous study (Craib 1987):

I'm naturally dominant, I'm actually an active person, part of being active and so on is to make this a real job—I'm available 24 x 7 (Chris).

Given the contextual nature of masculinity, it is proposed that in this particular sample, participants phrased their occupation through traditionally masculine signifiers, such as toughness and strength, as affirmed by participant conceptualisations of masculinity and past research (Boyce and Herd 2003; Kolb 1999). As conventional signifiers of masculinity, toughness and endurance are within the framework of hegemonic masculinity. Through placing themselves under the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity, escorts utilised the norms that marginalised them, to construct the ideals in the occupation that are to be aspired to.

Masculinity as a conceptual tool allowed for the discourses around physical endurance to be drawn out from participant dialogues around tough schedules. This is notable because managing such a schedule required a high level of organisational skill and competence. This, 'hard work' was both a mental and physical accomplishment. Consequently, masculinity allowed for the nuances within the occupational experience of male escorting to be articulated and understood. Female sex workers also work long hours and have demanding schedules, yet research has indicated that female sex workers are more likely to emphasise their work in terms of emotional labor or as 'social work' to legitimate and normalise it (Ngo et al. 2007; Ślęzak 2012; Story and Jankowski 2015). However, the aim of this section is not to indicate that endurance is inherently masculine, but that masculinity is an essential tool to understand how masculinity draws out the nuances of the male escorting occupational experience.

5.2. Technical Skill

This section details how masculinity functioned as a conceptual tool to illuminate facets of the escorting experience, explicating how two differing aspects, status-seeking behaviour and the provision of sexual fantasies, were underlined by the demonstration of technical skill.

Participants wanted to engage with clientele who appeared rich and worldly:

An average client has accommodation like better hotels or they are more educated and more intelligent, better to talk to, more widely travelled. You learn from them not just sex, but you learn about the world (Chris).

So it's nice to be invited into somebody's world. And to say that you were there and got the pictures taken and went to these amazing things and met wonderful people, and that's really fun. (Nick).

Conversely, while most clients could provide escorts with pleasant engagements, a minority did not. Without prompting by the researcher, all participants indicated dissatisfaction at having to serve unattractive or unhygienic customers, similar to previous research (Smith et al. 2014, 2013):

There was a guy, he had nothing, and he lived in a dirty house, he had no money but he seemed to come up with the cash to pay me when I walked in the door. And I had to sit there for two hours (Nick).

Sometimes it's a bit harder to engage with some customers because I don't like how they looked (Carlos).

Participants also volunteered details of other unfavourable behaviours such as: clients not wanting to pay, rudeness or requesting certain objectionable sexual activities:

Some customers were a bit rude at the end when giving me the money, saying, "I am the customer giving the money, give me the service" (Carlos).

A client of yours is into leather. You have to wear all this leathery stuff, but leather stinks and makes you sweat. But you have to wear it. Also, some men can be quite rough with deep throating (Evan).

Clientele provided access to expensive hotels and celebrity encounters, or on the other side of the spectrum, unsanitary homes and tedious experiences. A previous study indicated that access to preferred clientele led to increased income, and thus greater access to material goods (Mitchell 2015). In this case, given the highly contextual nature of masculinities, an alternative postulation is proposed.

Given the stark dichotomy in clientele experiences as proposed by participants, it may be that apart from the difference in attractiveness and resultant income of each encounter, there is another factor driving the illustrated gulf. Engaging with preferred clientele indicated that an escort possessed a level of technical skill, such as people skills or charisma. Conversely, if an escort engaged with undesirable clientele, it may signify that one was not skilled enough to attract better clientele, casting doubt on one's technical ability. Much like how the technical mastery exhibited by a leading sportsman or business tycoon were well-established markers of status (Donaldson and Poynting 2007), it is proposed that engaging with purportedly wealthy clientele was participants' mode of exemplifying technical skill. Technical knowledge and proficiency were construed as a subset of masculinity (Cockburn 1985; Hacker et al. 1990; Turkle 2005). It may be that through demonstrating technical skill, participants phrased their occupation through masculinity. Masculinity as a conceptual tool thus allowed for the status-seeking behaviour of participants to be contextualised and understood as the manifestation of technical skill.

Participants also explained how they facilitated client sexual fantasies, as detailed. A participant stated that he could comport his personality to suit client needs:

I'm a fairly introverted person but I can portray that I'm extroverted (Kyle).

In this instance and others, sex workers made it known that they were not being manipulated in the encounter by clients, but were, in fact in control of the sex work encounter in a variety of settings. Not only could Kyle modify his personality, even his body could be presented as either masculine or feminine, dependent on client requests:

Some people tell me I have a masculine body, others say I have a feminine body. It depends on what I'm wearing but also how I'm presenting my body. Some clients like more dominance, so I will stand broad-shouldered and very domineering, whereas others will want me to be more submissive. So I will lie back, with my shirt up (Kyle).

Another participant developed this idea further, by designing a range of role-play scenarios he could engage in with clientele, thus catering to myriad whims:

I have different personalities or different sexual creations that I sell to my clients. I make ads and create personalities around things that the people want (Peter).

This participant could successfully conform to personae far from his own, a testament to the range of situations he could devise for clients:

Sometimes, I market myself as a straight guy. I mean I have a disco ball in my bathroom and people still believe that I'm straight. So even though probably 75% of them know that I'm not straight, they want fantasy (Peter).

Through adapting their personalities, and by extension, the roles they played in engagements, it is proposed that participants could accommodate the various sexual fantasies dictated by clientele. These fantasies may provide an outlet for needs that clientele were unable to express with their partners:

Clients can ask me anything, things that they are afraid to ask their partner or their wife or random hook-ups. I also made it clear that alternative things are fine. I'm not going laugh at them. I give them an experience that they can never have and this is one of the things I like most about the job. Quite often they have a particular interest, but in their mind it is too much to tell their partner. Sometimes they actually did ask their partner of many years. And some of their partners immediately divorced them. So they have someone they know will not laugh at them; that is one of the services I provide (Chris).

By providing an environment where one could enact a range of sexual scenarios, with a willing and experienced escort, participants provided clients with a sexual sandbox. Escorts allowed for clientele to explore their sexuality in a safe environment, as the following participant indicated:

The service I provide is being the first sexual experience with a man that many of my clients have had. Many people are struggling with their sexuality and need to find out whether they are gay in a stress-free environment (Chris).

A previous study highlighted how sexual exploration was key to identity formation in contemporary gay life (Prior and Cusack 2008). Perhaps the avenues of sexuality that participants traversed with clientele were more than just encounters, but transformative experiences that resulted in significant changes in client lives. This gave the work social value and moved it beyond the realm of the mere physical. Participants indicated that these life-changing experiences were the sole product of the escort at the encounter:

You feel a sense of fulfilment at the end of the day, that's what I get to do as a sex worker everyday (Peter).

An escort provides a highly personalised service, and no other escort would do the job in the same way. This in contrast to most other jobs, where there is more or less one way to complete tasks. So in escorting, you feel that you're making a genuine difference to people's lives and only you could've given a client this experience (Chris).

Consequently, it may be that participants were key agents in client wellbeing, as indicated:

I can't say to my client, "Look, I can't stay this Saturday night; you have to wait till the end of the month". And that person may have wife who doesn't interact with at all sexually, never mind socially. So that one visit we have together once a month is his life and that's important to his mental and social health (Peter).

It appeared that a large amount of preparation prior to the encounter was needed, along with much effort to facilitate the encounter itself, drawing on the participant's store of existing skills. Participants then alluded to how this resulted in significant experiences for clientele, reflective of the skill of the escort involved. By applying masculinity as a conceptual tool, technical skill is at the crux of dialogues around fulfilling client sexual fantasies. A participant shed light on this argument:

When it comes to making sure a client has a good time and finding what they respond to best, that makes me feel very masculine. When I give clients a truly transformational experience, I similarly feel very masculine about that (Chris).

And drew comparisons with other fields typically associated with masculinity (Du 2006):

As to transforming people's lives, I think that is also very much a masculine ambition akin to the pleasure and job satisfaction that many men feel from building enduring structures and the disproportionate popularity of professions such as engineering and architecture among men (Chris).

As with discourses of endurance, technical skill is a feature commonly aligned with hegemonic norms of masculinity. By placing themselves under the auspices of hegemonic masculinity, escorts used frameworks that marginalised them to attain primacy within masculinity. Status-seeking behaviour by escorts and the provision of highly customised sexual fantasies are two variant aspects of the escorting occupational experience. Through the lens of masculinity, it was argued that these facets were underpinned by technical skill. While masculinity can be applied to understand highly specific aspects of the escorting experience (Logan 2016), it is also clear that masculinity is an appropriate tool for teasing out the themes that undergird the escorting occupational experience.

6. Conclusions

Through the lens of masculinity, participant dialogues were surmised into two themes, representing occupational features of male escorting. Masculinity demonstrated that the rigorous schedules of escorting may be conceptualised through masculine discourses on toughness and dominance, resulting in the theme of endurance. The conceptual tool of masculinity also allowed for the nuances of status-seeking behaviour and provision of sexual fantasies to be drawn out, detailing the underlying theme of Technical Skill. These features were far removed from dialogues of deviance oft-repeated by past sex work research, and instead bolstered the view that male escorting is moving toward the paradigm of legitimisation and normalisation. Endurance and technical skill are aligned with hegemonic masculinity, a system that places male escorting into the bottom rungs of the masculinity framework. Escorts thus used aspects of the system that marginalised them to gain entry into the hegemonic masculinity. The use of masculinity as a conceptual lens provided groundwork which furthered the argument that marginalised men may incorporate aspects of hegemonic masculinity into their lives. It may be that the process of aligning themselves to aspects of hegemonic masculinity may be a means through which participants dealt with stigma arising from non-conformance to the prevailing masculine identity.

Both endurance and technical ability are features associated with hegemonic masculinity. By aligning themselves and their occupations to hegemonic ideals, escorts used a system that subordinated them to gain a foothold into the very same framework. This process may be a coping strategy by which participants managed the stigma from non-conformance with masculine norms (Kong 2009). Kong (2009) participants spoke about stigma arising from morality and subordination,

among other factors, and escorts in other studies indicated stigma arising from homosexuality (Koken et al. 2004; Padilla et al. 2008). However, none of the participants in this study reported stigma arising from any of these sources. It may be that since participants generally took the view that escorting was underlined by technical skill and endurance, reporting stigma borne out of homosexuality and client domination may have been counterintuitive. Participants spoke instead of stigma arising from the public perception of escorts as drug users and being uneducated, in contrast to conventional norms of masculinity (Scambler 2007; Smith et al. 2014).

Previous research tended to apply masculinity as a means of understanding highly specific aspects of the male escorting occupational environment, such as wage structures (Logan 2010, 2016). This paper, however, demonstrated that masculinity is critical to providing insight on the broader aspects of the occupational experience of male escorting. By drawing out the meanings in participant dialogues and conceptualising themes that lay at the crux of the occupational experience, masculinity is essential in understanding the escort experience in line with hegemonic norms and the prevailing stigma associated with subordinated masculinities. As such, it is argued that masculinity is a valuable conceptual tool in understanding not just highly specific aspects of the occupational environment, but also critical in understanding the larger scope of the employment arena and its intersection with hegemonic norms. Given that a sub-sample of escorts was chosen for this study, it was made further apparent that different kinds of male escorts may engage in and perform different types of masculinity which in turn may be associated with the structure and organisation of their work environment.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank the reviewers and editors for their comments.

Author Contributions: Navin Kumar designed the study and wrote the draft. John Scott and Victor Minichiello revised the draft.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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