Buying the Girlfriend Experience: an Exploration of Men’s Experiences With Escort Workers
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This study explores the men’s consumption of a commercial sex encounter known as the girlfriend experience (GFE). To derive value from the GFE, the consumer must provide more than money: he must commit emotional intimacy and reciprocal pleasure. GFE consumption is linked theoretically to value co-creation, pleasure, and consumer fantasies.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Cuddling and talking – we shared interests, but most importantly, she made me feel like there was no other place she would rather be in that moment in time. (Lub, Montreal)

The informant who posted this comment is not referring to his wife or girlfriend, but to an encounter with a female sex worker – an escort – with whom he shared a particular type of commercial sex encounter known as the girlfriend experience (GFE). As the focus of this paper, the GFE differs from other types of commercial sex encounters in that it involves more than the exchange of money for sex; in order to derive the true value of the GFE, the male customer must not only pay the sex worker, but must also provide her with sexual pleasure and emotional intimacy. The result is that the encounter feels, to him, more like a romantic encounter with a girlfriend than straight-up sex. For an hour or two, or perhaps an entire evening, the customer indulges in his fantasies of a romantic encounter with a legitimate girlfriend and seeks to be perceived as a nice guy by the escort. This context provides the basis for an examination of the ways in which consumers engage in a form of consumption that has been largely overlooked by consumer researchers, and how consumers experience the blurring of boundaries between purely transactional service encounters and those that entail a deeper connection between provider and consumer. In addition to shedding light on this consumption context in the form of description, I seek to illuminate some aspects of GFE consumption that are theoretically interesting (beyond the context itself) to consumer researchers.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of male customers of escorts who provide GFE. In doing so, I offer a deeper understanding of the consumption of covert pleasure, consumer fantasies, and the ways in which consumers co-create value in the consumption experience. While different forms of prostitution exist, I am explicitly concerned with indoor prostitution, which encompasses call-girls, escort services, and massage parlor workers. The motivation for this focus is two-fold. First, there is substantially less research on indoor prostitution, in comparison with street prostitution. Second, and more important for this consumer research, “indoor [commercial sex] interactions are typically longer, multifaceted, and more reciprocal” than interactions between street prostitutes and their customers (Weitzer 2009, 220). Therefore, the experiences of male customers of indoor prostitutes are more likely to be characteristic of a romantic, intimate encounter with a partner (Malarek 2009; Sanders 2008), and therefore be of greater curiosity to consumer researchers interested in the blurring of boundaries between commercial transactions and social relationships. Further, I take a rather narrow perspective on sex work. I am explicitly concerned with consumption of prostitution services in a context where use of such services is legal, and I choose to focus on a context where sex workers are more likely to be employed of their own free will (Weitzer 2009).

Using a combination of netnography and depth interviews, I seek to understand how customers (i.e., Johns) experience and reflect on GFE. Findings are organized around three central consumption themes: covert pleasure, co-creation of value, and consumer fantasies.

GFE is defined by covert pleasure – a combination of emotional and physical intimacy in a context where consumption is socially contentious and often kept secret. The emotional intimacy component is essential to the GFE, and is closely intertwined with the requisite physical intimacy. These two hedonic and highly emotional aspects comprise the pleasure in GFE (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), and this pleasure is of a covert nature (Frank 2002; Malarek 2009): Johns are highly concerned with keeping their dirty little secrets from family and friends, in part due to the socially contentious nature of prostitution usage, and in part due to the physical risks associated with their hobby. The pleasure of GFE is a flow experience, wherein the John’s total immersion in the high-risk context provides a cathartic and highly satisfying end state, which he seeks to experience again (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993).

This context also provides an interesting perspective on value co-creation. Deriving value – in the form of pleasure – from the GFE requires the John to give more than money. He is compelled to give a short-term commitment of emotional and physical intimacy, and he becomes accountable for his own level of pleasure in the consumption experience. That is, he derives pleasure from ensuring that the escort has a pleasurable experience, and from adequately performing his role in the GFE such that he can form a temporary emotional connection with her. The escort and the John have roles that require and enable them to create value together (Payne, Storbacka, and Frow 2008), and the John becomes essential as a co-producer of the service (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

Immersion in the fantasy of the girlfriend is critical to the GFE. As he works to perform and co-create value from the experience, the John engages in a temporary escape from reality wherein the norms of everyday life are suspended (Goulding et al. 2009). The fantasy revolves around a romanticized notion of what a girlfriend is, not the reality (Belk and Costa 1998). The more adept the John becomes at immersing himself in the fantasy and performing his role in the GFE, the more value he derives from the experience and the better he performs in subsequent GFEs (Holbrook et al. 1984).

In this study, I seek to establish some preliminary connections between a rather novel research context and three existing streams of consumer research. These connections provide the basis for further developments in our understanding of experiential consumption, the ways that consumers engage in play and fantasy to derive pleasure, how consumers manage and experience consumption in a secretive context, and the ways that consumers can play an active role in value co-creation.

REFERENCES


