

Culture, Health and Sexuality - Decision on Manuscript ID TCHS-2023-0203

Subject: Culture, Health and Sexuality - Decision on Manuscript ID TCHS-2023-0203
From: "Culture, Health and Sexuality" <onbehalf@manuscriptcentral.com>
Date: 8/13/23, 19:29
To: lynn.kennedy@populationproject.ca
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Dear Lynn,

I am writing in connection with your paper entitled, The Changing Meaning Of “No” In Canadian Sex Work recently submitted to Culture, Health and Sexuality.

I am sorry to inform you that having carefully reviewed its contents, we are unable to accept it for publication. Copies of our referees’ comments, which will be helpful to you, can be found at the end of this message.

I am sorry to bring you what I am sure will be disappointing news, but you will understand I am sure that we must be guided by the judgements of our academic referees. Thank you for considering Culture, Health and Sexuality as a possible journal in which to publish your work.

With all good wishes,

(Professor) Peter Aggleton

Editor-in-Chief, Culture, Health & Sexuality

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Reviewer(s)' Comments to Author: **[Author responses in bold]**

Reviewer: 1

Comments to the Author

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper study in the use of the word 'no' in online advertising within sex work. The paper presents primarily descriptive and comparative analysis of how the word no is used to communicate restrictions that people advertising sex work might communicate in their online ads. While the amount of data is to be commended, there are some inherent logic flaws in the paper that would require fixing for this paper to be an appropriate fit for this journal.

The primary challenge I experienced in reading through this paper was the implicit assumptions that appear to underpin the argument **[What argument? Having a line reference would help here.]** but are not explicitly clarified or substantiated in the context of the vast body of evidence/research in sex work occupational health, safety etc. The gaps in clarification limit the coherence, rigour and implications for this piece of work. **[If you are referring to the comparison of the methods used in this paper (and by other researchers) to much of the small-scale qualitative research in the field, this is not the primary objective of the paper.]** The first problematic assumption is that all **[The word "most" was used.]** previous work related to sex work is problematic due to small samples or geographic locations. However, much of this work has included in-depth analysis into specific socio-structural contexts that were not intended to necessarily generalize and indeed many scholars note the importance of context when examining such issues as safety and security. **[The problem here is that too many authors generalize based on inadequate samples and often this research is used as the basis of government policy.]** Scientific investigations into sex work health and safety have repeatedly illustrated the importance of context beyond legal context to appreciate the complexity of working conditions. Additionally, intersectionality has contributed significantly to understanding how 'race', gender, economic class, etc. play out as relevant. **[This is discussed in the paper at length.]** This knowledge is not well integrated into this paper but instead dismissed as not being useful **[Again, where did I say this?]** which is problematic in a paper that is intending to build upon a vast knowledge base. I can appreciate the need for large scale studies, but to assume that the prior work is limited by researchers' "technical incompetence" is somewhat misleading. **[Once again I never said "technical incompetence".] [Given that the likely paragraph in question (the second paragraph in the Introduction) is not actually relevant to the paper apart from providing context for the approach taken, it has been removed.]**

What is fully meant by restrictions (or limitations) requires earlier unpacking in the introduction. There is a lack of definition which limits clarity for analysis and discussion. **[This has been added.]**

The rationale for data mining as an appropriate strategy to capture sex work practices is not

sufficiently described in the context of literature and scientific methods. There appears to be an assumption that advertising can be used as a proxy for actual practices – which may be the case – but literature demonstrates that this is not always the case due to other situational variables (e.g., length of time client is known; willingness of clients to pay more for specific services). There is a world of difference between what is in an online ad versus what happens in an interaction. This is not meant to limit the potential for what the authors have undertaken here, but again, generalized assumptions requiring unpacking and evidence to substantiate approach and claims, as well as addressing limitations of such arguments is warranted. **[This has been added to the discussion.]**

It is unclear why Wikipedia is seen as an appropriate source for terminology given the lack of rigour in this particular database. Rationale for using this source to guide coding/search terms is warranted as well as identification of the limitations. **[Wikipedia was the only source that had any comprehensive list of these words. As it is not necessary for the argument presented - that restricting clients based on race - the section has been removed.]**

Numerous references to sub-groups are made but it is not clear what these are. **[These are advertisers who apply specific demographic categories to themselves based on ad metadata. I have made this clearer.]**

Within the presentation of data extraction there are multiple references to an earlier publication. While I appreciate the need for brevity and the referral to the other source(s), greater detail of the databases used and rationale therein is warranted. It is difficult to assess the validity of the sources or potential limitations and strengths of these sources when they are not included. **[If you are asking for the actual websites used, for privacy reasons they are omitted. They are websites that are commonly used in Canada by sex workers based on the recommendations of experiential experts. I have added an explanation of why the sources were selected taken from the original paper.]**

Within analytic techniques, the actual meaning of the analytic coding and rationale are required. **[I believe the actual meaning is described.]** Additionally, the use of Braun & Clarke approach to thematic analysis is not clear. Their more recent work on reflexive thematic analysis as an analytic technique is quite well detailed in the literature as is their earlier versions, but it is not clear how this particular approach to RTA is applied thereby leaving the reader wondering about the rigour and accuracy of the thematic analysis. **[This has been added.]**

There is insufficient detail to warrant comment on the appropriateness of this method and how the findings were generated. It is also unclear who was involved in the thematic coding, how these codes were agreed upon, and how the theoretical perspectives on restrictions, safety, race, etc. were used to inform the analysis. **[I have added a more detailed rationale.]**

There are many terms used in the paper that have various theoretical underpinnings. Given the diversity of conceptualization of sex work and safety, for instance, the paper could be strengthened by clearer operational definitions of these concepts and reference to the body of literature they are using to inform their definitions. There is then a need to link these definitions in the analysis and discussion. **[Having specific text references would have made it much easier to see what terms you are referring to. However, I think we need to be careful to**

not read too much into ad content. The use of the word “safe” in an ad for example may mean different things to different advertisers. This study simply reports how often these words are used as it is primarily about how the use of language differs between different segments of the industry and how this language use changes over time.]

It would be helpful to define what is meant by contact sex work as that has been defined in various ways as well and why that particular type of sex work was used, what it means, and what then is excluded in this research pertaining to the vast complexity of sex work. **[The main operational difference between contact and non-contact sex work is that contact sex workers meet clients in person. I have added this.]**

Demographic variables are significant social and cultural constructs that are well substantiated to influence safety and practices in sex work settings. There are repeated mentions of ‘race restrictions’ by cis-females as a “disturbing trend” but there is no engagement with social science or health literature that pertains to racism as a structural concept. **[This has been added to the discussion.]**

Given the complexity of these social constructions, attending to clearer articulation of how the authors take up concepts such as gender, race, etc. is important as it is difficult to assess relevance of these findings when it is not clear how they were operationalized as variables in the context of this study or the limitations of using these ‘characteristics’ as analytic categories as something static versus embedded in larger social, historical and cultural context. This journal is well known for its attention to the socio-cultural elements of sexuality inclusive of sex practices and therefore articulation of how such characteristics are taken up and why is warranted. **[They were operationalized as self selected metadata categories chosen by the advertisers. A limitation of this type of data source is the advertisers don’t provide the detailed rationale for their choices you are asking for here. However, further research which specifically investigates advertisers - which has been rarely done and as far as I know never attempted in Canada - is needed to clarify many of your questions. For practical reasons I am limited to using publicly available sources which precludes actually contacting advertisers.]**

The discussion reads as a conversation and series of questions. It is unclear what the overall implications are particularly as we consider the argument made in the paper about safety and restrictions. What is the relevance of these findings for further research? For legal reform? For example, there is documentation of apparent increased travel but the implications of this on our understandings of advertising, communications about restrictions etc. is not articulated. **[I have added a discussion of the effect of travel on the results in the discussion. I have added points for further research to the conclusions]**

Reviewer: 2

Comments to the Author

Thank you for the chance to read and review this interesting paper, which accesses a large dataset of sex work profiles to investigate some characteristics of the industry in Canada. On the whole, I think this paper makes an important contribution but I invite the authors to consider the following reservations:

(1) I found the section 'Research at scale' a bit slight and missing several studies by Minichiello, Scott, Kumar, Callander, Grov, and others who have made ample use of large profile datasets to characterise diverse dimensions of the sex industry globally. While it is never necessary to cite all studies, I would perhaps de-emphasise the 'methodological novelty' of the current study, as this doesn't quite jive with the extant literature. **[I have added more references as examples and also discuss the extensive abolitionist literature.]**

(2) I wasn't quite sure what was meant by the expression a "sex worker population dynamics study" (line 65). Can this be rephrased for clarity? **[I have rephrased this as "identify how sex worker populations changed over a two year period."]**

(3) I invite the authors to reconsider how they have described their method; from my reading, this is actually a *content analysis* whereby they used a thematic analysis to define a descriptive framework for this dataset and then applied that framework to facilitate statistical and other forms of analysis on the corpus overall. **[I'm not clear on what the difference is except that the paper is not uniquely about what the themes are but how they relate to other factors. Thematic analysis is one component of the analysis, not the final goal.]**

(4) I found this sentence a bit difficult: "...tabulating statistics on how they were used..." (line 71). Surely the *how* of their use was derived from the thematic analysis, not the basic text mining processes? **[I have changed this to "how often" as that is what is measured.]**

(5) Braun and Clarke are incredibly critical of any description of thematic analysis that characterises themes as 'emerging' or being 'discovered' (e.g., line 76, line 150) as this erases the reflexive role of the researcher in this process. I would review for this kind of language and instead describe themes as 'defined' or similar. **[I have changed the word "discovered" to "identified." I hope this makes it clear that I had to decide what the phrases meant. I have also added a section in the methods using their list of questions to characterize how thematic analysis was used.]**

(6) In several places, the authors make a claim that "social desirability biases are avoided" (line 78) via online profiles. I strongly disagree, especially in the context of online sex work

profiles, which are literally tools for self-marketing and are, therefore, very explicitly informed by perceptions of how desirable one is viewed by others. This point must be considered across the whole analysis, as there tends to be a lot left unsaid in these profiles (rather than, as is suggested, the opposite). **[This is a very good point. I've removed the comparison with interview based research. However, the lack of derogatory language might be an example of what you are talking about.]**

(7) Far more information could be provided about the websites from which data were scraped. Who uses them (men, women, gay, straight, all, etc)? How long have they been active? What level of overlap is there between their userbase? Do they cater to specific sexual cultures, or are they more general? Similar questions, even just a sentence or two, are important for understanding the context. **[I have added more detail on the sources in the methods. Originally, I was hoping to reduce length by referring to my previous study of which this is an offshoot.]**

(8) What does "nationally representative" (line 105) mean in this context? I would stray away from this very specific language of demography, especially if what is meant is that profiles were sampled from every province and territory. **[I have made the language here more specific.]**

(9) Similarly, what does it mean to say that the 2007-2009 sample was "representative of one western Canadian province"? Anyone who knows western Canada know how different each province can be, but also how varied the social life within BC is... thus, I would steer clear of claims of 'representativeness' without some kind of evidence in support. **[I have rephrased this.]**

(10) What does "abstract entity" (line 107) mean? **[Advertisers are not measured directly but derived from other data (e.g. contact information). This is described in the associated study.]**

(11) How were "the most frequent no bigrams" (lines 135-136) characterised (i.e., what was the specific cutoff)? **[They were the top 100 based on advertiser frequency. I have clarified this.]**

(12) I wasn't exactly sure why you focused on gender and race/ethnicity as the primary sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., why not sexual orientation and age)? Perhaps there is a reason, but would be helpful to explain (i.e., data availability, etc). **[These were the demographic variables that were available from the data. I have clarified this.]**

(13) I invite the authors to be a bit more reserved and critical about what an analysis of profiles can reasonably reveal. For example, is it really possible to "better understand the attitudes" of sex workers (line 162) through this text? Or is it really about defining the discursive techniques that sex workers deploy to minimise the chances of being perceived as racist? This is an important distinction that speaks to the treatment of the racial and racist

discourses as they are explored throughout this analysis and its manuscript. **[As there were objections to using Wikipedia (the only source I could find with a list of racial epithets) I have removed this analysis. The analysis is about discursive techniques as you describe.]**

(14) In addition to the total number of profiles, it would be useful in the text to clearly describe the number of individuals these profiles represent. Also, what proportion of individuals posted only 1 ad? **[This is difficult to calculate from ad data although estimates were made based on name counts in The Silent Majority paper. I have added statistics for the number of associated names as well as advertising frequency for each advertiser from the original data sets to the supplemental materials (see the noidmap table in the database provided). Overall 24% (N=27226) only advertised once however, often these advertisers used multiple contact numbers. The advertisers, using raw name counts, represented 261403 workers but the actual number is lower for the same reason. The Silent Majority discusses this in detail. I have added a brief description of this in the results and limitations section of the discussion.]**

(15) As the primary analysis investigates individual level characteristics (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity), far greater detail is needed on the statistical methods accounting for repeated measures. If an individual contributed 500 advertisements are they treated as the same person or as separate data points? **[Same person]** What are the implications of this, or - conversely - how was it corrected? **[I consider the language used by the authors of ads who may not be the same as workers.]** This speaks to a very serious contention with the analysis, and it would be helpful for the reader to have much more information. **[The critical distinction is discussed in the limitations.]**

(16) While it makes sense to restrict the temporal analysis to BC given the thread of data across each period, does it also not make sense to restrict it just to the specific site available in each? Going from 1 site to 6 sites then back to 1 site makes inter-period comparisons very difficult, and we should not assume that all online spaces are the same (especially when it comes to sex work). It is quite likely this explains the drop in the second period and the rebound in the third (per table 3). **[Note that overall, advertisers tended to use “no” statements with similar frequency independent of time period. I think the most plausible explanation for the drop in *peace of mind* statements is the newness of online advertising in 2007-2009 where the number of advertisers increased 10 fold in 2 years. This is probably also true for *communication*.**

I believe using the largest available number of data points is the best approach as it is also not a given that advertiser behavior is consistent across time for each site. In each time period one site was the predominant place workers advertised: in 2007-2009 Craigslist, 2014-2016 Backpage, 2021-2022 Leolist. The population most likely moved (if they were still in the business) as the major venues changed. Keep in mind the population is very dynamic and the people advertising in one collection were generally not advertising in subsequent collections.]

(17) I assume "higher for Canada" (line 248) means for the dataset overall? Also, why focus just on BC in this sentence, as the 2014-2016 dataset has every jurisdiction. Sorry, perhaps I've just missed something here. **[I am describing the two figures. I have added language to that effect.]**

(18) Table 4 - If 'central Canada' just means Ontario, why not call it as such? Also, I did not understand the rationale of collapsing 'multiple' with the northern territories. Can this be explained? **[I have changed this. I collapsed multiple with the northern territories as there are very few advertisers and I believe most of them travel. I have added a statement to this effect.]**

(19) I was confused by the advertisements representing "multiple gender" (line 298), but note that this was later explained as likely representing a collective of sex workers. This point should be explained straight away. **[I have clarified this.]**

(20) I'm sorry, but I could not quite understand what is meant by the sentence that begins: "Advertisers using 'no' associated with multiple gender..." (lines 299-301); can this be reworked for clarity? **[I have reworded the sentence to read: "Advertisers who self-identified using multiple genders..."]**

(21) I found the expression "female-identified transgender identity" (line 302) very confusing, especially because many trans people will tell you it is not their 'identity' but just who they are. Perhaps better to stick with established nomenclature: "transgender women" or "women with transgender experience". **[I have modified this.]**

(22) Table 5 - If the row for transgender participants just means transgender women, I would definitely say so. If there were no transgender men in this dataset, I would say that too (or, if not, disaggregate as appropriate). **[I have changed the table to use "trans-women" or "trans-female".]**

(23) Figure 7 - I found the code/categories in this table very confusing; why not align these with the categories as provided by the websites (and call them as such)? **[The table was too large and quite hard to read with each category split out.]**

(24) Similarly, I think sometimes there was slippage between the distinction of race and ethnicity. Most would agree, for example, that 'Hispanic' is not a race (as defined on line 368). I appreciate these labels are often brutalised by the websites themselves, but referring to 'race/ethnicity' might be best here. **[The use of the word "ethnicity" is based on how the website uses the word "ethnicity".]**

(25) I wasn't quite sure what this sentence meant: "... roughly similar proportions of advertisers and posts used the word 'no'" (lines 393-394). Can it be reworked? **[I have removed**

the reference to “posts” as I don’t think it adds anything.]

(26) I found the attention to "non-random" samples of previous research (line 412) a bit confusing because the sample represented in this analysis is most certainly not random. **[I have removed the reference to “non-random”. I would say this advertising data however is much closer to the population of sex workers active at the time given how the data was collected. I made an effort to be as comprehensive as possible.]**

(27) Again, I strongly advise against characterising these profiles as free from social desirability, especially in the context of race and racism (line 415). Some might argue these profiles (which are public and for the purposes of self-marketing) are actually *more* affected by SD than interviews (which are private and one-on-one). **[However, they appear to be affected by social desirability in a different way. The people they are excluding are very unlikely to contact them which is not the case in an interview. I have removed the paragraph as I am no longer comparing this study to interview based studies.]**

(28) I found the paragraph that begins "Are racialized clients more sexist?" (line 421) to be highly problematic. First, I would advise that we are all racialised regardless of our skin colour. Second, from my reading the data and the results do not speak to or even engage with this idea in any meaningful way, thus such speculation instead risks reproducing a harmful and often disproven racial stereotype. Perhaps the authors wish to make the point that this *is not* the case, but that was not clear to me. I would strongly recommend reviewing this paragraph and questioning if it really adds to the Discussion narrative. **[I wasn’t sure how to describe this as the terminology seems to change. I was originally using “clients of color”. I have removed the sentence.]**

(29) I would also raise concerns about the claim that "client behaviour is the main motivation" (line 430) for racial discrimination through sex work profiles. Is it? Or is it more likely that racism - which can be internalised - is a stronger motivating factor here? Did anyone specifically exclude white clients? If not, or if not at rates that approach those excluding Black clients then we have to conclude that this is not driven by negative experiences but by something more systematic and oppressive. I encourage the authors to review their treatment of this issue, as to those who study racial discourses in online spaces it reads as somewhat problematic. **[I have removed this sentence.]**

(30) I did not see any evidence presented of "advertisers becoming more tolerant of racialized clients" (line 441) over time. Changes in discourse do not necessarily indicate changes in attitudes; instead, it seems far more likely that sex workers were reacting to the wave of antiracist protests and activism during and immediately before this period to reflect on how they were engaging with race and racism in the public sphere (i.e., becoming more covert and less explicit). **[Changes in discourse may still represent changes in attitudes. I have left this in as maybe this should be researched further. I added a sentence to that effect.]**

Reviewer: 3

Comments to the Author

Thank you for the opportunity to read this paper. I have provided some feedback below:

Overall, this read like a methods paper and a results paper trying to share the same space and limited word count. Have you considered writing two separate papers? Most of the paper is methodological, which takes away from the space to properly introduce the topic, contextualize the data, and provide a fulsome discussion and conclusion. For example, you open with a purpose statement (and an interesting claim that other researchers have used interviewing because they aren't experienced with text mining) without locating the project in a larger body of literature. **[I decided to focus more on the results and removed comparisons to interview based research.]**

I'm unclear how you used Braun and Clarke and your understanding of thematic analysis by way of QualCoder. Please provide some more detail about this. **[This has been added to the methods section.]**

Why was Wikipedia your source for understanding race in this space? **[This was the only source I could find with a list of racial epithets. As this is not required for the analysis I have removed it.]**

This paper is very technical and descriptive, which is occasionally contrasted with statements like "This is a disturbing finding therefore it warrants more comprehensive review" and "Are racialized clients more sexist?" I wonder if you're overreaching with the takeaways from your analysis. Again, the current iteration of the paper falls between a methodological exercise to identify patterns and an attempt to contribute to a larger discussion about sex workers' attitudes, agency and autonomy. I'm not sure this is possible in one paper, and more work needs to be done on the latter in the current iteration. **[I would say that the patterns in advertising are meaningful and represent attitudes, agency and autonomy. Unfortunately, I am limited to publicly available materials as I am working outside of an institutional context. Combining interview based research sampling from advertisers would be a positive next step. I felt the findings were clear enough that they were worth reporting. Even interview data is open to interpretation in terms of what it really means.]**

There are some minor grammar and style issues throughout (e.g., where brackets fall and sentence fragments). **[I am using google docs' grammar check but I will try and proofread it more carefully.]**

Best of luck with your work.