

Power users: Technology, trust, and the social networks of Canadian sex workers

Overview

- **What is the Sex Work Population Project?**
 - Published research
- **The Power Users Study**
 - Who are the sampled advertisers?
 - Advertisers' use of web resources
 - Themes
 - Main Findings:
 - Services are changing
 - New financial technologies have emerged
 - Extensive social networks
 - Risk, trust, and social capital are connected
- **Wrap Up**

What Is the Sex Work Population Project?

What can we learn from large scale trends in advertising?

- The project was started in 2021 to process, analyze, and publish existing datasets that had been collected between 2007 and 2016.
- Data was collected from almost all of the main advertising sites used by sex workers at the time.
- New data was collected in 2022 and 2023
- Goals:
 - Explore the data
 - Critique existing research
 - Provide researchers with resources

Published Research

Three papers have been reviewed and published:

- **The Silent Majority** DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0277550
 - Considered how advertiser populations changed with time
 - Asks: does existing research actually reflect this population?
- **Estimating Turnover** DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0298523
 - Considered how indoor worker populations changed with time
 - Used rigorous random sampling to identify advertisers
 - Companion study to the Power Users study
 - Asks: why are most workers only in the industry for short periods?
- **The Changing Meaning of “No”** DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0301600
 - Considered “restrictions” in ads - who uses them and how they change
 - Asks: why do so many advertisers restrict clients on race?

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Preprints:

- **Power Users** DOI: 10.31235/osf.io/u5kd2
 - Considered advertisers who use multiple web resources
 - Used rigorous random sampling to identify advertisers
 - Asks: what is the deeper social meaning of what advertisers communicate?
- **Effect of the PCEPA** DOI: 10.31235/osf.io/87u29
 - Considered how advertiser populations changed from 2014-2023
 - Asks: did legal sanctions have a meaningful effect on the industry?

The Power Users Study

Purposes:

- Study a group of advertisers who used external web resources in addition to online classified ads
- Use rigorous sampling methods
- Identify themes in these web resources
- Use grounded theory analysis to understand the meaning of the themes

Who Are the Sampled Advertisers?

Sampling Strategy

- 2452 advertisers (6%) using URLs as part of their contact info
 - All had to be active between Aug 22 and Sept 22 2022
- 1000 were randomly selected
 - **Final sample: 783** with accessible data October 1-9, 2022

How are the advertisers different from other advertisers?

- They **produce more ads**
- They **advertise for longer periods**
- Their ads tend to have **larger numbers of views**
- More **White, Cis-Female** and **Sexual Minority** advertisers

Advertisers' Use of Web Resources

The sampled advertisers could be divided into **four groups** based on their associated web resources:

- Users of **profile pages** on the classifieds site (N=48)
- Advertisers with **personal web pages** (N=322)
- **Social media** users (N=189)
- Advertisers with **content creator** pages (N=167)

Themes

Security (43%, N=336)

- Work location, Screening, and Deposits
- Consent, respect, and privacy

Identity (42%, N=325)

- Biographical information (sometimes extensive)
- Demographic differences (described earlier)

Social Networks (40%, N=313)

- Working collectively was common
- Some had massive social media followings (> 10k followers)

Health (35%, N=276)

- COVID-19
- Sobriety/drug use
- Sexual health

Main Findings: Services Are Changing

Advertisers had not only diversified how they market services but the types of services offered expanded.

More than 99% (N=780) offered in person services

70% (N=546) offered other types of services:

- Selling self-generated content (N=167) or products (N=27)
- Web camming (N=96)
- Sexting (N=57) and phone sex (N=11)
- “Dick rating” (N=8)
- Being a virtual “girlfriend” (N=2)

Little evidence that online had replaced in-person services

Main Findings: New Financial Technologies

Advertisers had diversified how they could be paid:

Nine compensation methods were identified other than cash

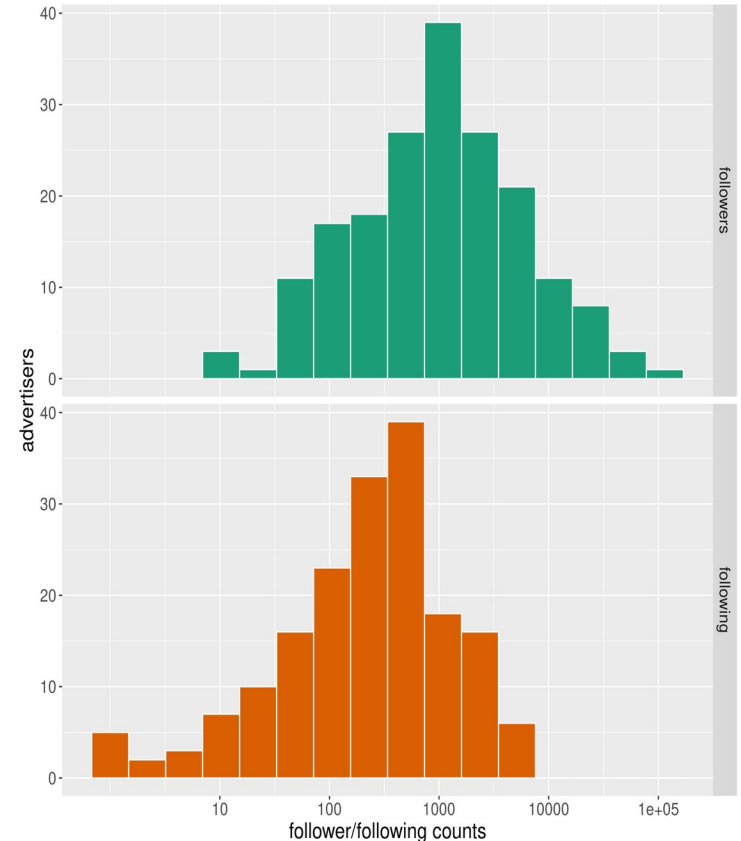
- wish lists (N=81) – never allowed for deposits
- e-transfer (N=53)
- gift cards (N=24) – also used by fraudsters
- online payment processors (N=21)
- cryptocurrencies (N=21)
- credit cards (N=16)
- ATMs (N=11)
- debit cards (N=9)
- Some advertisers **forbade certain types of payments**

154 of the sampled advertisers required a deposit

- **Other research** has shown that deposits are not common (~4%)

Main Findings: Advertisers Can Have Extensive Social Networks

- Many advertisers with personal websites offered services **with other workers** (N=77), **shared resources** (N=11), or **created content with partners** (N=51)
- Most workers (61%=1941/3189) were associated with a **small number of collectives** (N=102).
- Advertisers with **social media** accounts had **median 959 followers** (IQR 299.5-3039.5) (See graphic ►)
 - **13% (N=25) were suspended or missing**



Main Findings: Risk, Trust, and Social Capital

- **Advertisers clearly depend on social networks**
 - Other workers (“internal”)
 - Clients (“external”)
- **For networks to be beneficial trust is essential**
 - “bridging” social capital (Putnam, 1995)
- **Workers experience risk (65%) (UK study 2020)**
 - Excessive, harassing, or threatening communications
 - Clients who either do not pay or attempt to underpay
- **Clients experience risk (18% UK 2020, 60% Can 2006)**
 - Workers either not showing up or not providing the agreed upon service
 - Workers stealing from clients
- **Social capital = safety for both advertisers and clients**
 - Knowing each other - Understanding the “ground rules” - Reputation

Conclusion: Policy Is Failing Us

- Policy that discourages workers or clients from being identified **puts people at risk**
 - In Canada the “communication law” was an example of this
 - More recent bans on advertising are another example
 - **Clients will not want to be identified** if they are likely to be charged under the PCEPA putting worker safety at risk
- Online communication allows people to be identified **without enduring the stigma of being publicly “outed”**
 - Example: e-transfer identifies the transaction but not the payee (Hudson, 2024)
- For the sex industry to be safe and equitable it is necessary for policy makers and the public to understand that **it provides tangible social benefits**

Wrap Up

The industry is evolving

- See also the [Changing Meaning of “No”](#) study

Social networks are important in the sex industry

Social capital = safety

Policy that interferes with the development of these social networks
endangers industry participants

Thank You!

More information:

- <https://populationproject.ca/>
- <https://twitter.com/SexWorkPopCA>

**Sex Work
Population
Project**

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In this presentation I would like to introduce the Sex Work Population project and discuss the findings of a large qualitative study that was done as part of this project.

What Is the Sex Work Population Project?

What can we learn from large scale trends in advertising?

- The project was started in 2021 to process, analyze, and publish existing datasets that had been collected between 2007 and 2016.
- Data was collected from almost all of the main advertising sites used by sex workers at the time.
- New data was collected in 2022 and 2023
- Goals:
 - Explore the data
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The Sex Work Population Project was started in 2021 to address a lack of research on the sex industry in Canada using advertising data.

This data was collected during three distinct periods.

The first period was in the early 2000s when Craigslist was the main advertising venue used by sex workers in Canada

The second period was when Backpage was the largest venue for classified advertising although many still used Craigslist

Lastly, to supplement the analysis of the 2014-2016 period, more data was collected in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023

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As of now three studies have been published in PLOS ONE.

The first study titled “The Silent Majority: the typical Canadian sex worker may not be who we think” was an analysis of how the workers represented in classified ads changed over time. It also compared demographics of these workers with other Canadian research.

The second study is a companion study to the subject of today’s talk. It considered how long indoor workers were visible on websites that listed workers over a one year period and considered how many workers might be missed when doing population counts using classified ads.

Lastly the Changing meaning of “No” looked at how the use of this word changed from 2007 to 2022

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In addition to the three peer reviewed studies, three other papers have been published on SocarXiv.

The first paper is the subject of today's talk and will be described in more detail later.

The second study was a follow up to the Silent Majority that looked at how month to month sex worker populations from the one remaining major classifieds site in Canada compared with similar time periods from 2014-2016 and considers what effect, if any, the Canadian "end demand" legislation might have had on these populations.

The Power Users Study

Purposes:

- Study a group of advertisers who used external web resources in addition to online classified ads
- Use rigorous sampling methods
- Identify themes in these web resources
- Use grounded theory analysis to understand the meaning of the themes

The main subject of this talk is a study completed last year which looked at a sample of advertisers from a major Canadian classifieds site.

The impetus of the study is discussed in the Silent Majority, which asked: can we use advertising data as the basis of a more traditional qualitative study?

The ad data was used to identify advertisers who could then be randomly sampled.

The selected advertisers all had external web links that they had used in their contact information.

The study used thematic analysis and grounded theory techniques to better understand what the use of these external sites meant.

Who Are the Sampled Advertisers?

Sampling Strategy

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How are the advertisers different from other advertisers?

- They **produce more ads**
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Sampling was an important component of the study and because of the tendency, described in the Silent Majority, for advertisers to only advertise for a very limited time, the sample was constrained to one month in 2022.

Ultimately 783 advertisers had live ads at the time of data collection.

Because data was collected for all advertisers it is possible to compare them with the sample.

The sampled advertisers consisted of individuals and collectives who appear to have a more long term commitment to the industry than other advertisers.

There were very few cis-male advertisers, however, there were proportionally more fetish and trans-female advertisers represented in the sample.

Advertisers' Use of Web Resources

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The types of web links that could be found were roughly divided into four groups with some overlap between advertisers

The first two groups were advertisers who had personal web pages either on the classifieds site or on other sites maintained by the advertisers.

Some of these sites could be extremely elaborate and many provided detailed information on the advertisers themselves.

The other major group were social media links. These were important for gaining insight into the size of the social networks of the advertisers who used them.

Lastly, many advertisers had profiles on content creator sites indicating that they types of services now being offered had diversified.

Themes

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Four themes were identified from the thematic analysis of the advertisers' web materials.

The most prominent theme was security.

Security encompassed more than just physical security including treating the worker with respect, including respecting privacy.

Identity encompassed the often rich biographical descriptions provided by workers.

Social networks were a prominent feature of many of the websites which could have follower and following counts as well as indications of more informal networks of workers

Lastly, many workers discussed health related topics. In many cases it was clear that workers took their health and sobriety very seriously. However, this could vary.

Main Findings: Services Are Changing

Advertisers had not only diversified how they market services but the types of services offered expanded.

More than 99% (N=780) offered in person services

70% (N=546) offered other types of services:

- Selling self-generated content (N=167) or products (N=27)
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Little evidence that online had replaced in-person services

Given the nature of the classifieds site used as the source for the sample, it is not surprising that almost all of the advertisers offered in person services. However, most advertisers had indicated either in the “availability” metadata field found in ads or in their websites that they offered other services. This is a major change from earlier datasets where advertising online services was relatively uncommon. The most common type of service described was content creation followed by camming. However, many advertisers were quite creative in types of services they offered. I observed that some advertisers switched between advertising in person services and online services in their advertising histories.

Main Findings: New Financial Technologies

Advertisers had diversified how they could be paid:

Nine compensation methods were identified other than cash

- wish lists (N=81) – never allowed for deposits
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Another major change from previous years was the number of different ways advertisers could be compensated.

There appeared to be two main motivations for using these technologies.

One was collecting security deposits when booking an appointment. This was mentioned by 154 advertisers.

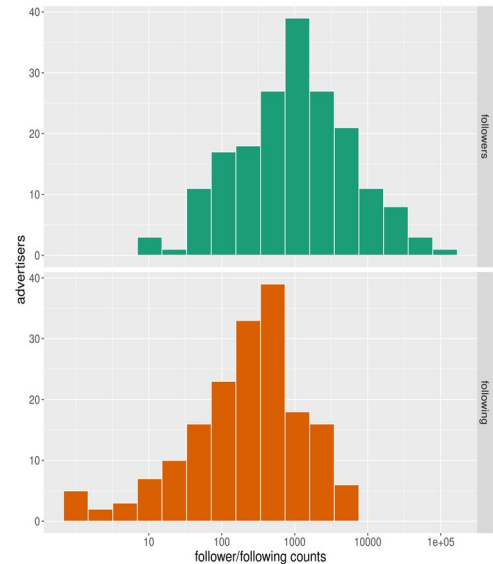
The second related to “tipping” the worker.

One payment option, gift cards, had previously been implicated in online scams

In some cases certain types of payments such as e-transfer were prohibited because advertisers who were concerned about being debanked.

Main Findings: Advertisers Can Have Extensive Social Networks

- Many advertisers with personal websites offered services **with other workers** (N=77), **shared resources** (N=11), or **created content with partners** (N=51)
- Most workers (61%=1941/3189) were associated with a **small number of collectives** (N=102).
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One of the truly striking findings was the size of the social networks of some advertisers.

The top part of the diagram shows the number of followers in green of 192 social media profiles associated with the sample.

Amazingly there were a handful of advertisers who had over ten thousand followers and one with over one hundred thousand followers.

Independent advertisers frequently mentioned offering services with others in their personal websites and many content creators worked with partners.

In the Turnover paper described earlier it was clear that most workers represented in the sample worked collectively although about half of the advertisers were independents.

Main Findings: Risk, Trust, and Social Capital

- **Advertisers clearly depend on social networks**
 - Other workers (“internal”)
 - Clients (“external”)
- **For networks to be beneficial trust is essential**
 - “bridging” social capital (Putnam, 1995)
- **Workers experience risk (65%) (UK study 2020)**
 - Excessive, harassing, or threatening communications
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- **Social capital = safety for both advertisers and clients**
 - Knowing each other - Understanding the “ground rules” - Reputation

The size of social networks may be less important than the quality.

The advertisers produce ads, websites, social media personas to attract prospective clients.

The types of prospective clients they attract have an impact on safety.

Online it is difficult to judge whether a client, or worker, is likely to be a risk.

Therefore advertisers use restrictions, such as restrictions on explicit talk, to test clients during their initial interactions.

The ongoing relationships between workers and clients in online spaces is an important safety strategy and is an example of “bridging” social capital.

This social capital is an essential part of staying safe.

Conclusion: Policy Is Failing Us

- Policy that discourages workers or clients from being identified **puts people at risk**
 - In Canada the “communication law” was an example of this
 - More recent bans on advertising are another example
 - **Clients will not want to be identified** if they are likely to be charged under the PCEPA putting worker safety at risk
- Online communication allows people to be identified **without enduring the stigma of being publicly “outed”**
 - Example: e-transfer identifies the transaction but not the payee (Hudson, 2024)
- For the sex industry to be safe and equitable it is necessary for policy makers and the public to understand that **it provides tangible social benefits**

Policy, such as the prohibition of in person contact on some content creator sites, or bans on sex workers on social media seen in the sample, in addition to hostile government policy interferes with the development of social capital in the industry.

These policies disrupt social networks and make the industry less safe.

While protecting privacy is important for many workers and clients, being accountable is also important.

Prohibitions on sex work make accountability difficult to implement in a fair, consistent, and affordable manner.

Policy makers need to understand that the sex industry provides tangible benefits to both workers and clients and need to begin to respect the choices made by industry participants.

Wrap Up

The industry is evolving

- See also the [Changing Meaning of “No”](#) study

Social networks are important in the sex industry

Social capital = safety

Policy that interferes with the development of these social networks
endangers industry participants

To sum up, the evidence collected in this study shows how the industry has evolved in the years following the original Silent Majority study.

One of the major findings was the size and importance of social networks to the industry.

Social capital is an essential feature of safety for all industry participants.

Policy that interferes with the natural socialization process that is facilitated by web technologies seen in this study is not protecting the health and safety of workers and clients.

**Sex Work
Population
Project**

Thank You!

More information:

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