

# Masculinities on Stage Clients and Representations in the Italian Sex Market<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

As known, masculinities on stage are plural (Connel, 1995; Ciccone, 2009), furthermore there is a continuity between the various expressions of being male, especially when considering interaction with female gender representations. Synthetically, some cultural influences contribute in a dichotomist system, amounting to a hierarchy and to the supremacy of male over female gender, which fact involves: a female citizenship always at risk, being its acknowledgement owed to the “sexual reputation”; disavowal of female physical pleasure; a collective, standardized and rhetoric imagination about Eros, crossing men and women, sex clients or not, and pinpointing highly diversified representations between male sexuality - outburst - and female one - service (Tabet, 2004).

The paper is intended to a critical approach on various erotic models and on dynamics of physical pleasure legitimating “a certain way to be male” right because of the prerequisite of male domination (Bourdieu, 1998). It arises from the outcomes of a research by University of Genoa in 2013, in range of the ETTS, a European project on fight against sexual trafficking and tourism, with a special focus on consumers of the sex market.

The research was carried out by using a number of qualitative research techniques: radio interviews through which opinions and representations were gathered on the theme of prostitution; half-structured interviews to young men and women attending the upper school; in-depth interviews to clients of sex markets, and to sex workers (women and transgender); analysis of websites more frequently visited by clients of sex markets. Having in mind that sex buying approach and practices do cross through social classes, rather than focusing on a categorization of sex consumers, the paper will focus on “masculinities” on stage, moving from the premise that clients and non-clients are equally grounded (Leonini, 1999).

**Key words:** Sex Market, Italy, male sexuality

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## Görünürdeki Erkeklikler İtalyan Seks Piyasasında Müşteriler ve Temsiller

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### Özet:

Bilindiği üzere görünürde pek çok erkeklik mevcuttur (Connel, 1995; Ciccone, 2009). Özellikle kadın cinsinin temsilleriyle olan etkileşimi düşünüldüğünde, erkek olmanın farklı ifadeleri arasında bir süreklilik söz konusudur. Her zaman risk altında olan kadın ve kadın olmanın onayının “cinsel şöhretle” sağlanması; kadının fiziksel tatminini kabul etmeme; seks müşterisi olsun ya da olmasın erkekle kadını karşılaştıran Eros hakkında kolektif, standart ve retorik bir tasarım üretme; ve erkeğin cinselliği - taşkınlık - ile kadının - hizmet - arasında (Tabet, 2004) oldukça çeşitli temsiller belirleme gibi bazı kültürel etkiler, hiyerarşinin ve erkeğin kadın üzerinde üstünlük kurduğu ikili sistemlerin yapay bir şekilde kurulmasına etki eder.

Bu yazı farklı erotik modeller ve erkek tahakkümünün ön koşulu olması nedeniyle “erkek olmanın kesin yolu”nu meşrulaştıran fiziksel hazzın dinamikleri (Bourdieu, 1998) üzerine eleştirel bir yaklaşım sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Yazıda 2013 yılında Cenova Üniversitesi’nde gerçekleştirilen, seks ticareti ve turizmine karşı savaşım üzerine yapılmış ve özellikle seks piyasasının tüketicilerine odaklanan araştırmanın sonuçları kullanılmıştır.

Araştırma pek çok niteliksel yöntem kullanılarak yürütülmüştür: seks işçiliği teması çerçevesinde bilgilerin ve fikirlerin alındığı radyo röportajı, okullu genç erkekler ve kadınlarla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler, seks piyasasındaki müşteriler ve (kadın ve trans) seks işçileriyle derinlemesine görüşmeler, seks piyasası müşterilerinin sıkça ziyaret ettiği internet sitelerinin analizi. Seks hizmeti satın alma pratiklerinin ve yaklaşımlarının tüketicilerin sınıflandırılmasıyla değil toplumsal sınıf aracılığıyla ilişkilendirilmesi akılda tutularak, bu yazı görünürdeki “erkekliklere” odaklanacak, müşterilerin ve müşteri olmayanların eşit bir şekilde suçlu olduğu önermesiyle (Leonini, 1999) yola çıkacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Seks Piyasası, İtalya, erkek cinselliği

## 1. Introduction.

In the collective imagery, prostitution is “the world’s oldest profession”, and the iconographic image of it, at least in Italy, is of a client concealed by a car’s window. A client who is everybody and nobody, the protagonist and the main engine for the sex market’s existence, a silent figure who is in the background of public opinion so that there is a lack of the clients’ perspective in scientific representation. The client is the ‘notably absent’ (Abbatecola, 2006; Morniroli, Oliviero, 2013). Moreover, in the symbolic domain characterized by masculine domination (Bourdieu, 1998), the tendency is not to reflect upon masculinity. There is no need to explain all that dominates (Jacose, 1996), for this reason the tendency is to underestimate the very narrow link between narratives on prostitution and representations of male sexuality (Bellassai, 2006; Ciccone, 2009). We tend to talk about prostitution as a necessary disease (Danna 2004), and this seems to be coherent with the essentialist vision of male sexuality as naturally explosive, instinctive, uncontrollable, impulsive and active. Male sexuality, as it is envisaged, would respond to impulses that could degenerate in absence of an adequate outlet.

In history the auto-representations of male identity as a stratified reality between civilised and savage, good and evil, rational and irrational, could be considered an extraordinarily recurrent theme: composed, on one side, by an intrusive body, nonetheless vulgar, dirty and brutal whose violent potential is more or less hidden and whose sexual desire would be the immediate voice; and on the other side, by some superior rationality and/or spirituality capable to empower, in a manly way, the “beast” hiding in the most obscure parts of a man (let’s consider the Victorian image of Jekyll and Hyde). The perception of the body, and therefore of desire, as an ignoble dimension of personal identity, has lasted for a long period in the history of gender imagery of the male (Bellassai, 2006).

In this sense, prostitution would represent a warranty safeguarding 'respectable women' and the respectability of the whole society. This way of thinking, apparently so strictly attached to a logical structure, "blocks" its entry into discussion, and we so rarely think over the fact that (Abbatecola, 2012):

The confrontation with prostitution questions how the impoverished images of male sexuality are restricted to a purely physiological "outlet" disconnected from the emotional and relational spheres, as often offered by young rapists in their defence, as by supporters of the idea that prostitution is unavoidable with a social function that "binds" male sexuality (Ciccone, 2009: 40).

Little is known about the client, beside the fact that he can be anybody (Chetwynd, Plumridge 1994; Benson, Matthews 1995; Mckeganey, Barnard 1996; Leonini 1999; O' Connell Davidson 2001; Serughetti, 2013; Morniroli, Oliviero, 2013), but in the end this seems enough. We are interested in the prostitute (Abbatecola 2011), as she is the catalyser of discontent, protestations and repressive strategies. She is the evil, especially if migrant or undocumented. This article, however, mainly focuses on the point of view of the sex market's clients. The purpose of this close examination is therefore to consider a rather new complementary perspective to the "traditional one" mainly proposed by the scientific literature of reference, that is to say the analysis of the point of view of the people selling sex in exchange of money<sup>2</sup>. The idea is to develop a critical approach on various erotic models and on dynamics of physical pleasure legitimizing "a certain way to be male". Furthermore as "Masculinities on stage" are plural (Connel, 1995; Ciccone, 2009), we suggest that there is a continuity between the various expressions of being male, especially when considering interactions with female gender representations.

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<sup>2</sup> For the Italian case see also: Corso and Landi, 1998; Leonini, 1999; Serughetti, 2013; Morniroli and Oliviero (eds.), 2013.

Hegemonic cultural models produce and re-produce a dichotomist system, where differences become hierarchies: black and white; homosexuality and heterosexuality; female and male. Referring to the supremacy between genders, the social construction processes of gendered sexualities deeply shape some dominant representations, such as: a female citizenship always at risk, as “sexual reputation” justifies a disavowal of female sexual pleasure; a collective, standardized and rhetorical imagination about Eros, crossing women and men - sex clients or not - and pinpointing highly diversified representations between male sexuality - as an *outburst* - and female one - as a *service* (Tabet, 2004).

In this paper we intend to analyse and de-construct this prevailing social imagery, usually critically taken for granted, through the outcomes of a field research conducted by the University of Genoa (Italy) within the ambit of the ETTS<sup>3</sup>, an European project on sexual trafficking and tourism involving four different countries: Italy, Spain, Romania and Brazil.

In Genoa, the research was carried out by a number of qualitative research techniques: a four week radio programme on the topic of prostitution; 15 semi-structured interviews to boys (8) and girls (7) attending the upper school; 10 in-depth interviews to clients of sex markets, all biological males aged from 34 to 65 and only one of them declared to be homosexually oriented; 5 in depth interviews to non-trafficked sex workers (women and transgender); an analysis of a 3 month long netnography of an online forum (“gnocca forum<sup>4</sup>”), which is one of the more frequently visited by male clients of sex markets.

It is important to stress that, from a methodological point of view, the stigma generally associated to the purchase of sex might affect the interview climate, altering the interviewees’ self-representation. Actually, we faced some resistances entering the field, and the dynamics of trust acquisition between the researchers and the interviewed had to be renewed constantly. Hence a “snowball method” of sampling was

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<sup>3</sup> [www.etts.eu](http://www.etts.eu)

<sup>4</sup> Translatable as “pussy forum”.

chosen, starting from one “hub” that consisted of the researchers’ friendship networks and reaching, thanks to the introduction of this gate-keeper, to other clients willing to narrate their experiences. This field strategy allowed us to conduct interviews on the basis of a good degree of initial trust, although some aspects of social desirability - as well as the recognition by the respondents of the “institutional” role of the researchers - may have affected some narratives<sup>5</sup>. As it will be further shown, in fact, some arguments (such as for example the frequency of purchasing of sexual performances) seem to have been told in order to underline the distance between them and the “other customers”. Furthermore, in order to observe the processes of construction of masculinities within the scope of the sex market through an additional perspective, we considered useful to explore also the interaction among customers on the online platform of “gnocca forum”. Our hypothesis was that the total anonymity of the forum subscribers might have represented a key factor in the perception of an equal climate among them. Actually, within this particular context of interaction we observed spontaneous accounts that allowed us to explore complementary - or, anyway told with greater richness of details - themes, with respect to those collected through the interviews. Specifically, the performative components of sexual encounters and the self-celebratory speeches about the clients’ sexual power, emerged with greater prominence thanks to the netnography. The conversations on the forum have therefore provided additional and important information regarding the grammars and the symbolic references most used for the self-representations as “clients” and, above all, as “males”. Although in this paper we will limit our analysis to the output of the interviews to clients and sex-workers, the results gathered through the netnography

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<sup>5</sup> In this regard it appears important to emphasize that, although the first interview has been conducted by a female researcher and it has given satisfactory results in terms of the openness of the interviewed person, all the remaining interviews were conducted by male researchers in order to further reduce, through this aspect of proximity, a possible additional “distancing” factor between researchers and respondents.

will be included in the interpretative perspectives applied to the face-to-face accounts.

Thus, the focus of the paper will be on “masculinities” on stage, moving from the premise that clients and non-clients are equally grounded (Leonini, 1999). The article starts with a reflection concerning the imagery that builds the hegemonic representation of masculinity, considering its “dramaturgical” translation in the context of the relationships with the sex workers as a particular scope of cultural reproduction. Then the paper focuses on the narrative strategies through which the respondents have drawn a distinction between their own visions and experiences with respect to those of the “other” clients. Finally, the article deals with the relationship between the practices of reproduction of hegemonic masculinity and the control instances regarding the expressions of “deviant” femininity, with particular reference to the issue of de-legitimization of women’s sexual desire and to the concurrent exaltation of female pleasure only when functional to the confirmation of the masculinity acted by the man.

## **2. The magic mirror. Reflecting on clients' words and analysis of imageries beneath the discourse on prostitution.**

When the men interviewed told their experiences concerning the purchase and fruition of sexual performances, the scenario was strongly centred on protagonists-clients. In a metaphorical sense, clients appear at once as directors, screenwriters and protagonists of “almost-monologues” in which the role of the “stooges” is minimal and, for the majority of the cases, it appears subaltern to the power defining the outline and the scenes. In the stories, the encounters with the sex worker is often removed and the presence of the other person can be assimilated to the one of a “magic mirror” necessary for a successful staging of the clients' desires.

...but I don't know how to explain it... I tell you something stupid.. like to play at the games..... you pay you play!  
[Manuel; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

It is like a bitter beverage, I don't know... it is like those participating consciously in a farce in which he is the actor, right? And therefore takes the staging for real, being conscious that it is not so, right? This is a bit more refined thinking... but I think this can happen as well. [Adriano; 42 y.o.; heterosexual]

Maybe you do it to have less problems, to let off, to outlet without any compromise... of any kind. You do it because at least you don't have any sort of problems... if by chance you're married, or you are with someone that you don't want to leave... to do something different you go with someone you know, is not going to create any problem, as far as I'm concerned it has always been a form of masturbation, to me it is the same importance you give her, as far as I'm concerned... I don't know how it is for other people [...] A lot of people do it because at least don't have to give any explanation, don't have to put anything into discussion, I think... don't have to sit down and talk and cannot, I know men, with a woman only they get paranoiac... maybe they are insecure. Whereas with them, you don't have to do nothing, nothing: if you have some money on the side, you go, half an hour later you solved your problem... [Luigi; 39 y.o.; heterosexual]

Summing up, it is, banally, a hormone outlet... summing up if it's about having relations [for money]... generally I prefer whacking off at home [...] I think there is... that solipsistic element is back, that need is back that, actually, is a need we all have in our relations. [Leonardo; 38 y.o.; heterosexual]

It is not strange that in different passages of the interviews the sexual relation with a sex worker was assimilated to a solitary form of



masturbation, stating how the presence of the other person is merely functional to personal excitement. In this scenario there is no space for negotiation neither for quality nor for the possibility of the sex worker to state her desires. There are obviously some initial pacts for which sex professionals can define a range of allowed performances, excluding parenthesis or transgressions to the rule creating, in the meantime, a context for further potential negotiation; this latter aspect seems to attract clients (illustrative, in this sense, is the negotiation regarding the use of condoms), in a frame where, anyway, the economical nature of the exchange and the constant reaffirmation of the power inequality, powers of the parts, continuously sanction the clients' "superiority".

The only thing I was asking was to touch her tits, and there were some of them that wanted me to pay more, it's so funny! I even asked them to give me a blow job without condom... one of them did it, I liked it and intrigued me a lot, and so I went back sometimes... she was one of the street, funny, I really liked it, I mean I liked a blow job like that, done by someone that wasn't my girlfriend, it seemed, I don't know... exceptional, exciting. [Marco; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

By the point of view of the clients, relating to a sex professional means to prove themselves in an exercise of representation (therefore a mirror is necessary) of their own masculinity, but it's a desirable game only if the victory is granted in advance. As a consequence, in the majority of cases this exercise of auto-representation is felt as fulfilling only if the woman involved takes part to the staging and adheres to the prearranged script, using their "mirroring" function to give back an image carved on the desires of the client (for this reason the mirror has to be magic, therefore ready to lie<sup>6</sup>, if necessary).

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<sup>6</sup> About these reflections, it might be useful to consider the point of view of some sex workers involved in the investigation. As much as also in this domain, they cannot be considered representative of the complexity of the different points of view of the sex professionals, but their stories offer some useful perspective of the "capsizing" beliefs given by clients. First of all, as it seems obvious, the claim of a neutral and non-judging behaviour seems to be in contradiction with sex

[In a dating house in Germany] it's like the game of the hunter and the prey... you are courted a bit... because it is not a real courting... or you are the one picking, then you stop by the girl, you start talking to her and then you tell her "Come on let's go upstairs"... I preferred the aspect "I'm the one picking", maybe probably because actually... at least I'm convinced that actually they are the one picking [laughs]... I mean as males we are mere puppets! [Giuliano; 34 y.o.; heterosexual]

In this domain, the range of the representations turns around to the different aspects of what we call, in general, a traditional "masculinity": male as hunter, the sexually exuberant male capable to fully satisfy a partner, the sexually hyper-active male, the economically powerful male and conscious to be able to buy the desired services. In this sense, the group of peer male friends could be another kind of mirror (Colombo, 1999a):

One night we were 5 friends because we wanted to see the length of time each of us took... so we didn't have intercourse but oral sex. It was almost... a game: who would last longer, right? The one who lost would pay for everyone [...] I find it like... I'm paying for something, I'm choosing a sweatshirt... bad comparison... but I mean: if I go choose something I pick that sweatshirt instead of the other one,

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workers' point of view as, in fact, they share anecdotes, nicknames and opinions concerning the clients - they do judge! -, and underlie their right to refuse those who don't respect specific behaviour and aesthetic and/or hygienic standards. Concerning the mirroring function expected from sex workers, some transsexual professionals told us about clients who choose a passive role and, soon after the intercourse, expressed anger and disgust towards the sex worker. As if, once the intercourse is over, the mirror would lose its magic and becomes necessary "convince" it to give the desired image back ("real man"?). According to the transsexual sex workers' accounts, many clients find the need to affirm to the people from whom they have just been penetrated, in an aggressive way, "Look I'm not gay", trying in this way to push away the evidences that, in that context, could undermine their own perception as male exclusively attracted to traditional heterosexual practices and intercourses.

whereas if you make it as a gift to me either I like it or not I cannot say anything... I'm not saying that what I think is correct... but... I'm buying something, so in that moment I feel like something and I know that I can pay for it right? And I don't have the time to court her or ask her to do things so... [Gennaro; 38 y.o.; heterosexual]

Thus, the function of “stooge” played by sex workers is limited to a series of determined roles complementary to the male protagonist. In the interviews, clients depicted sex workers as a prey to conquer, or as professionals that – according to the notable sexual performances carried out by the client – are invaded by a sincere pleasure hence “forgetting” to apply the typical detachment of their usual role.

Some would be whores even though you had not to pay them, so they are already disposed to that sort of job, they are at ease and they suffer less than others maybe... you see it from the way they behave, you see if she likes it as well. Because some of them like to do it, you can see it. [Luigi, 39 y.o.; heterosexual]

In some other narratives sex workers are defined as nymphomaniacs, and in frequent cases where the women are not of Italian origin, their profiles drawn by clients appears strictly bounded to specific expressions concerning ethnic characteristics. Stereotypes on an ethnic basis are in fact a recurring characteristic in the interviewed clients' stories and, in a larger sense, they represent a determining aspect in the necessary objectification of sex workers in clients' visions; this objectification appears essential to safeguard the good result of the representations staged during the encounter, working as a mechanism for removal of the unknown reasons for sex workers to be on the market. The categorization is quite rigid: South-American women are supposed to be happier and more oriented to a ludic approach to sex, women coming from Sub-Saharan Africa keep a bond with a heart corresponding to animal behaviours (see also Dal Lago, Quadrelli, 2003), Chinese women and Eastern-European women are more detached and cold during the

sexual intercourse. In this sense Italian sex workers (whose offer has, according to the interviewed, drastically lowered during the recent years) seem to be more inclined to show the difficulties of their profession, ending often to be judged as less desirable or, in any case, hardly “manageable” by the client.

The sensation is that the Italian woman is always angrier to do what she is doing. The Chinese is like a robot... that's why I haven't gone with them much, just with a person that was amused by the situation to the point that she was amusing to me as well. South-American women instead are really positive people. Really positive, in the approach, talking to you, asking you if you want a tea afterwards, Italians instead I've always found them very angry. [Giovanni; 40 y.o.; heterosexual]

[Referring to the first sex worker he went to] I think she was from the East... I think... Yea, almost sure... I mean I don't know, because practically beyond the linguistic barrier I don't know how to say... she was cold, eyes... Barbie eyes a bit as well... like to say “Now we start it out...” [Giuliano; 34 y.o.; heterosexual]

Who knows now... let's say that lately they are all from South-America so... but in general I prefer South-Americans like... [...] Maybe South-Americans have that attitude... I don't know... more joyful I don't know how to tell you... I don't mean sexually, but the first approach... they might be kinder, maybe more *naïve*... I don't even know if *naïve* is the right adjective, they are... it almost seems that their problems... that problems to them are like water on a duck's back comparing to others [...] on average I think that Italians are more problematic, in any case they carry more problems than South-Americans... that happens independently from the prostitute, I think women in general. [Manuel; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

Even the stories concerning experiences judged negative by the interviewees seem to confirm clients' expectations concerning the "neutrality" of the roles acted by sex workers; almost in all the unsatisfying or frustrating episodes told, it is in fact the non-coincidence of the professionals to the outline expected to determine an unattended result. All the – voluntary or accidental – occasions for the rise of backstage aspects of the sex workers' life are judged inappropriate. In a certain way, it seems to be, subtracting from the profiles imposed by the script, the individuality of sex professionals would be stolen on these occasions as part of the scene dominated by the protagonists-clients, creating short circuits not tolerated from the buyers – also because merely the fact of buying should represent the right to fully direct the scene. Quintessential in this sense are the passages from the interviews in which sex workers are reported as excessively detached and uninvolved, to underline the "betrayal" that these women have made to the client's initial expectations.

You see it from the behaviours... some really aren't capable... some you see they don't feel like... sometimes some seemed on drugs... I'm not one of those that uses drugs or alcohol but sometimes I remarked that some either they were drunk or they were fully on coke... occasionally I paid for it and then I went away without doing anything... if it had started badly, maybe I would have left without doing anything, and wouldn't have to pay... but sometimes... right in the middle of the performance you saw things that... you didn't like... lazy behaviours, I mean... like a vegetable... a minimum of participation has to be there, right? Anyway when a person goes with a prostitute he buys, right? [Manuel; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

After a while she arrived [in a hotel room], I paid the girl directly and it was such a disappointing experience... like a doctor's appointment... the woman was very, very, very beautiful, let's say a magazine-girl... but... how can I say... very cold as an experience [Giuliano; 34 y.o.; heterosexual]

Within the “scenario” of paying encounters, it seems clear that the references to their own private lives should be managed by sex workers in the most discrete way, as if they were general stories regarding “other” people in (possibly) “other” places.

Sometimes I’ve talked with some girls that complain about their troubles... but it’s the same in our daily life, if you have problems... anyway... professionally speaking, right? There’s the problem of the loan you can’t pay, then we could discuss which problem is the worst, but to me the problem that I can’t pay my loan is the same as her having been beaten for months. What I mean is that... for instance, if I tell you that I can’t pay my loan you might be sorry, but you won’t say “Oh wait a sec let me give you 200 Euros to help you out”... I see it this way... [Gennaro; 38 y.o.; heterosexual]

The clients interviewed showed the tendency to censor all the possible connections to exploitation: they usually (re)built the sex workers’ seeking “proof” confirming their entrepreneurial choices. Almost all prostitutes mentioned, according to clients’ opinion, are on the market for an individual reason made in full freedom and consciousness. The unbalanced relation based on the rigid scripts described in the earlier pages calls for the removal of the private details concerning the lived-experience of the sex worker, so hiding the clients’ view of the actual living conditions of the sex workers they interact with.

For instance, Chinese... it is clear that they’re in the racket’s hands – for this reason I haven’t gone much with Chinese – while the South-Americans, I can confirm this because I became friend with some of them, are always independent, [with them] at least you go with a person that decides to earn her living in that way, assertive, she choose to live so. When these women have the opportunity to choose other jobs, they often answer “No, I’m well organized this way. I’m independent, I gain “X” every month, and I would not go back.” [Giovanni.; 40 y.o.; heterosexual]

Ignoring the reasons why a sex worker decides to sell sex, the clients interviewed are able to draw an aesthetic representation of the sex workers' living conditions, stressing some characteristics of the sex workers' behaviours: they describe these women as particularly joyful and amused (with a further reference to their ethnic-based personality). They sometimes refer, as well, to some specific work places where the frame of luxury and relaxation is meant as a warrant to the high standards of living for the people working in it. Description of dating houses in Switzerland or Germany, for example, imply a soft representation of sex workers' working conditions thanks to frequent references to their freedom of choice (also in terms of possibility to select client) and to the sanitary praxis (perceived as a warrant for a full respect of the worker's rights). Hence, as far as negotiations and dynamics among clients and sex workers are substantially similar to the outdoors ones, in the luxury dating houses the different frame in which the situation is located - a sort of "spa" - seems to allow clients to represent their experience from an aesthetic and enhanced perspective. This also implies the possibility to share this kind of experience with friends in a free-way, as underlined in the following interview:

I saw how it [the luxury brothel] worked: every Monday the girls get a medical check-up for the principle STDs, every week so that they can have their working permit renewed. Then I also had other information when I talked to the girls about the mechanism of the structure. [...] No regrets... so I'm not ashamed to talk about it freely, I even talked about it with female friends, with male friends, with people I know without being in a close relationship... but it's something that I don't know how to say... it's like having gone to Disneyland... because fundamentally it's something beyond reality... [Giuliano; 34 y.o.; heterosexual]

I also know other friends that went to Switzerland I don't know if you've ever heard of them... those are places where you get in, you pay "X"... I think 100 Euros... there are many girls there, hydro-massages... you go around practically in

your bathrobe I've never been there... I've been told I would have liked it... I wanted to go but... if I went there I would tell you, but it's almost been four years that I [laughs] didn't have a job so I cannot afford it. [Manuel; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

According to the words of the people interviewed it is possible to reconstruct two essential profiles for sex workers: on one side there are trafficked women who are forced to prostitute themselves mostly on the streets, on the other side there are those described as professionals, managing their job autonomously or using the services offered by the dating houses. Independently from the “status” assigned to sex workers, the general tendency is to depersonalize them, limiting their description to the merely aesthetic aspects or to the scripts acted during the encounter. Also the clients interviewed who declared themselves to be more open and “secular” in relation to the moral judgment of the prostitutes, seem somehow to fear the judgment that “the rest of society” could have on them in case the relationship with the prostitute should get deeper. In this sense, therefore, also when the women are represented as “free” and almost “amused” in doing their job, their presence in public contexts seem to be accepted only if it does not violate the borders of their role as sex workers.

...anyway these are activities that I think you can do for a certain period to put some money aside... to be able then to have a real life... because I think you cannot have a life until... I mean you can for sure be a doctor, a railwayman, a mailman and in the meantime... if you're a male or female prostitute you cannot have a family in my opinion... nor a porn-star... if you talk to a porn-star and they're married and have children... to me is crazy... I mean if you're a porn-star you cannot have a family, I'm sorry... it's also true that it concerns the sexual sphere and not the personal intimate one... but anyway, I don't know... I might be moralistic in this sense... it doesn't sound good... [Giuliano; 34 y.o.; heterosexual]



## 2. The first experiences and the categorization of “other” clients.

The first experiences of buying sexual performances are, in the majority of cases, reported as something somehow unavoidable and strictly linked to contextual conditions. The stories of the first approaches to the world of prostitution are one of the aspects of major homogeneity between the interviews collected: for almost all the clients interviewed it is a lived-experience at about 18 years old. In the narratives about the first encounters there is a recurrent reference to a ludic-explorative intent, in which the “comradely” dimension of sharing in a group of friends is often indicated as one of the major motivations to measure themselves within the dimension of sexual relations – (that for the majority of the people interviewed this is the very first experience of sex) – through the “facilitated” context of paying relations.

The first time as I was a little kid... I've never really liked that thing that much, but we've done it maybe together... you see? The first time you know... 2 or 3 of us went together... we were about 18 years old or a bit older... but only a couple of times... we went together for kerb-crawling, and other stuff like that... then afterwards... a few times I actually bought sex. [Luigi; 39 y.o.; heterosexual]

This fact of chasing masculinity that would find its stamp, its seal in the first act... it was during the 80s and they were Southern-Italian women. In my case it was a woman quite aged... I wonder how old she was... but the context was the one of “Bocca di Rosa”<sup>7</sup>... she would stay on the door, we

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<sup>7</sup> “*Bocca di Rosa*” is the title of one of the most known songs of the Genovese singer Fabrizio de Andrè. The song tells the story of the “impossible love” between a client and a prostitute, and in the meantime, it has become one of the most efficient and used symbolic representations of a traditional prostitute (characterized by an offer of girls almost totally of Italian origin). Often the term “*Bocca di Rosa*” is used as a nostalgic reference to a world, the one of Genovese historic city centre prostitution, that rapidly changed during the past fifty years.

came in a pair, one of the two would wait outside and the other went in... [...] I mean it was a woman that realized she was dealing with kids so she would be quite rude... she made no effort.... probably she had no fear or embarrassment from the two kids that would come there. [Adriano; 42 y.o.; heterosexual]

The link among these narratives can be identified in the echo derived from the traditional representation of the “visit to the brothel”. For the interviewed people the meaning of the first experience with a prostitute seems to correspond, at least partially, to the value of initiative rite to the adult age, although the idea that this rite confirms a “healthy” masculinity seems to be less and less entrenched. Considering that the average age of the people interviewed is around thirty-five years old, it can be hypothesized that this generation of men has personally experienced the change of cultural meanings assigned to the experience of mercenary sex fruition. For the generations before the dichotomies opposing wife and lover, mother and prostitute, holy and profane love were a cultural premise, and it was so pervasive that the brothel was perceived as a “necessary” place to experience the first experimentations of sexuality. Now, also because of the stepwise process of cultural legitimization of female sexual desire – although, as we will see later, this process still faces diverse resistances – the present generation have a wider range of casual sex opportunities, and this affects the cultural representation of purchasing sex, strengthening the potential stigmatization of clients (and self-stigmatization as well).

For the self-declared occasional clients there is always a “before” in which they put their experiences setting them away from the present or a “not anymore” to the choice of not buying commercial sex anymore.

Well at that time... now it's been awhile that I don't pay anymore because since I work for myself... now my budget is too tight. [Gennaro; 38 y.o.; heterosexual]

Anyway I haven't [bought sex] that many times, it's something I don't like, I don't like it because what I like

doing with women... first of all I like being liked by a woman, as a consequence I know already that... moreover the things I like to do with a woman I know I cannot do when other men are there with them [sex workers]... I'm picky at times so if I go to a woman's place I get disgusted about going to the same bed where other men have been... [Luigi; 39 y.o.; heterosexual]

I only told my closest friends, and not even all of them, only those that I shared some connection with, but I can say that I went with prostitutes for many years, but a few!... not that much, not always, only once in a while. [Marco; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

The distance is not only temporal, considering how the interviewed people distinguish their auto-representation as clients from the stereotype (in the majority of cases negative) they share with “other clients”.

The construction of the “other” is functional to the distinction of their own profile and, in particular, there are some details functioning as distinctive criteria. “Other” clients are therefore stigmatised by the frequency they have of buying the performances, through the habit of meeting people working on the street instead of referring only to the “indoor “ market, for their tendency to negotiate with the victims of exploitation or by the naivety which leads them to confuse paid sex with affective relationships.

There are people who really are fanatics, there are people that I don't think they get it stiff... they go get drunk at night in bars, every week end they go for whores around.. [...] Horrible degrading situations, it's something I would never do and I never did it, to take a slut home, but there are people that let them into their homes... my god! That's terrifying! But there's people that do it frequently... beside the fact that there's no other way they can go with women, I think... [Luigi; 39 y.o.; heterosexual]

As for girls in the street, I didn't feel like going with them because they were often sad. Then you immediately think of the fact that fucking is something bad, and they come to your mind, you know the movie with the pimp, the girl obliged to be a slut, or otherwise because she's poor, like in the movies, you know... every now and then I would go around and would catch girls that seemed easy, and so I would be easier as well, although that though would never leave me... No, black ones because they seemed even more sad, poor girls, at a moment I got to know that they were so exploited, you know black girls are trafficked... I don't remember, I must have read it on the newspapers. Every now and then they write that they're practically kidnapped, or blackmailed. Then it turned out that it was like that for Albanian girls as well, Albanian mafia etcetera, who are those staying on the street right? So I understood the sadness, and I really stopped going. [Marco; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

In summary, speaking about individual choices the habit of buying sex is considered by the clients interviewed as not being fully legitimate custom and, more importantly, it is only acceptable if done as an occasional alternative to “real” life relations, where the limit of the involved subjects' masculinities is wider. This aspect marks probably a generational change for the population of clients: the fact that falling back upon commercial sex shifts from an almost normal condition to an “uncool” custom to be ashamed of, mostly in cases where this results from being the only option for sexual encounters. It is as if masculinity became less and less of an *a priori* given category and if as if an elective domain of confirmation becomes the one of the sexual conqueror and, as markedly different from what happened for the earlier generations. This conqueror had to be obtained through a relation that is a more or less an equal one of negotiation with partners.

You know... I was short and a bit fat. Shy. I wasn't doing any sport, I was studying at a professional institute and every

once in a while I would work illegally helping out a friend of my dad. I had some friends, but just a few, we were the boring, the type that would go for a beer at the pub. My friends didn't know that every now and then I went for a slut, I was ashamed of it, it was a something uncool, right? I didn't have a girlfriend already, it was like certifying that if I didn't pay I could not fuck, as people would say "no one would come with you"... At least, during the first years [...]  
Whereas now, among colleagues, married or in couple at work with one or two children, with the eldest fully grown, maybe you touch upon the topic, and there you're not a loser anymore. Not that the topic is among those I talk to that important, in fact it is infrequent, but it can come up.  
[Marco; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

In my opinion let's say that if one is not married, or doesn't have strange problems for which he cannot show he is going... as far as I'm concerned because I've never had problems... with women let's say that if I had had problems with women I would have not gone to prostitutes. [Luigi; 39 y.o.; heterosexual]

...if my son went to prostitutes I would tell him exactly in this way: "If you go whoring on the street with a miserable kidnapped from her village... you're a disgusting man!"... I mean that, if you go with that one in Switzerland, in Austria, in Germany, things like that, where they get a lot of money, they do it by choice, because objectively what they earn and it's earned... so I say fine... but try not to consider it your only in the sexual sphere", I mean the only thing I would tell him is not to let it be a substitute, I mean it has to be something different. [Giuliano; 34 y.o.; heterosexual]

When opinions are expressed in a more and general abstract manner, the interviewees are more comfortable declaring themselves favourable to the legalization of prostitution, often reproducing a nostalgic reflection

attributing the application of the Merlin Law<sup>8</sup> the “original sins” of progressive degeneration of Italian sex market. Through the following passages it comes back to an evidence base that some narrative formulas – and the stereotypes connected – are particularly spread - “...it's the oldest job on earth”, “... when houses of pleasure were there, control, respect and cleanliness were also there” - and applied to build an aesthetical representation – and as a consequence a morally accepted - of prostitution.

I'm favourable for the re-opening of brothels. I think it would be the best thing. In any case you won't defeat the problem. You can take them away from the streets, but there are some apartments... So, I repeat, it's the oldest job on earth, right? I don't think it will ever die. The only way, according to me, is to do the same as with gambling games... earlier it was illegal like *Totonero*<sup>9</sup>, so to say, now you can play at a Tobacconist. Totonero is always there, it has not disappeared... I see it this way. At that point you should exploit the occasion: you control the girls who are regular, they are clean they don't have any problems like for sure the one staying on the street have. [Gennaro; 38 y.o.; heterosexual]

#### 4. The repression of female desire and the “de-legitimate” of hegemonic masculinity.

The considerations presented in the earlier pages have something directly to do with experiences and visions built through the sex market. It makes sense through thinking in terms of continuity (of

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<sup>8</sup> The “Merlin Law” ratified, in February 1958, the closure of the houses of pleasure, the abolishment of the regulation on prostitution in Italy and the introduction of penal punishment linked to the exploitation of prostitution.

<sup>9</sup> “*Totonero*” is a system of illegal betting, concerning the sportive domain (soccer in particular).

imageries, status, practices etc...) between clients and non-clients, in the same way it is important to explore the different reflections of the interviewees on the female world because the purchase of sex has a signification for the buyers also in relation to these representations.

Most of the accounts showed a gendered representation of sexualities where desire is the main distinctive dimension among women and men. According to these visions male sexuality would be mainly characterized by hormones and would determine an attitude oriented to the research of partners and encounters, whereas female sexuality would first of all have an inferior "urgency" in physiological terms and, as for the choice of the partner, would be pushed by values not depending on physical attraction.

I conceive two different sexualities... mentally... I mean that a male is more oriented to multiple experiences by his instinctive needs, although he has been given by nature the possibility to defend from these relationships... psychologically, from that point of view... whereas a female objectively can discern because she needs a companion... fundamentally because she has to raise a child... and so the bond... it's not like the male that can have a quickie and then leave as quick. [Giuliano; 34 y.o.; heterosexual]

It's like... if I see a woman drunk. If I think about it, it's normal: the same as I can get drunk it can happen also to a woman. But if I think over the nights spent with drunk women, feeling sick afterwards, and messing up things... it bothers me it's like if they lost their femininity, when it gets too much it bothers me. But if I think to a man as well, even a friend, when he is too drunk, not tipsy, so maybe it also depends on how much a person is drunk. Dude, if I think how much it bothered me when one of us got drunk and messed up or maybe was driving, even if he was a friend, a male... in that case it doesn't matter if you're a male or a female, but for sex it's harder right?!? [Marco; 44 y.o.;

heterosexual]

Maybe it was a necessity, a physiological one, a weakness [to look for prostitutes]. Maybe I mentioned weakness because it's a bit part of the deal, I added it now, but at that time I didn't think of it as a weakness. What pushed me was the need, maybe girlfriends would come and go, but the fact to have already done it and to know how good it is, how much fun it is to ejaculate, leads you to want it more. After having had sex the first time it becomes, depending on the subjects, a need. [Giovanni; 40 y.o.; heterosexual]

Particularly significant, in this sense, is the story of an interviewee concerning an occasional encounter of his with an unknown woman: the fact that the woman “took possession” of the script of the “male predator” – using therefore the occasion of the encounter to satisfy his sexual desire and reducing the relational components to the lowest – implicating the explicit disapproval of the interviewee. As much as the interviewee talks about the episode using a certain degree of irony concerning the consequences, it is quite evident that he will underline his distance from the woman encountered who, in this story, transgresses many expectations on her role, giving birth to a reflection on his own categories on the part of the interviewee.

Look, when I decided to talk to the psychologist and face some themes of a life that at that time didn't fit me, it was because of an episode that really affected me. It happened nearby Rome, I went into a bar, I glanced with good eye in search of the nymphomaniac of the place... I call her so as a joke, although it's a bit chauvinist... you recognize her from the laces coming out under the skirt, she stays on the left of the counter... she is the one that will say to you “Hi” bringing you over the fifty percent of the job. I ended up banging her so violently that it completely disappointed my vision of the women-kind. I don't look at a woman with that otherness like Dante for Beatrice, but I totally respect her: the



women's world is something that I really appreciate... but I perceived a violent and revanchist attitude... that really scared me. Well, the problem isn't to understand how she experienced it, but rather how I experienced it. Sorry if I take my defence [laugh]. The morning after waking up, I asked myself "Damn, is it possible to reach this brutishness?". The encounter wasn't even that pleasant ... I've always been a person that really enjoys occasional encounters. But this thing worried me to the point that I came back to Lazio and I gave myself up to the psychologist [laughs]. [Leonardo; 38 y.o.; heterosexual]

According to all the aforesaid, the fact of imagining a woman in the role of a client of commercial sex, has been experienced, by the interviewees, as a funny provocation although, de facto, completely detached from reality.

It seems strange to me [that a woman buys sex] because in any case to a woman sex is much easier with a man beside her beauty or ugliness... she finds a man... maybe not a model but anyways... to a man is more difficult finding a woman. Either he is very good looking... or you're so famous that you can bypass beauty... obviously a famous man is rich ... but if you're a normal type... [Manuel; 44 y.o.; heterosexual]

Anyway I'm convinced that women are a bit different from that point of view... because for them at least... not all of them because there are women that are worse than men... but broadly... for instance if it were my ex-wife that did something like this, I would have thought that she were psychologically compromised with the guy [Luigi; 39 y.o.; heterosexual]

Thus, also in this domain, the hegemonic vision of masculinity creates a contradiction which allows to control and, eventually, censor the disliked female expressions of desire. On one hand in fact, the opposite dichotomy

“romantic” female desire vs. “hydraulic” male desire, determines the conditions through which the male needs to seek different partners in order to satisfy his physiological needs are justified, on the other side the expression of a female eroticism “out of control” open the way to negative “sexual reputations”.

Therefore, also passing the borders of a merely erotic reflection and referring to the dimension of common sense, the matter of female “citizenship” is constantly in a precarious balance. Different interviews remark (partially at least) on an invalidation and de-legitimateness of the role of the man in “official” couples. According to this idea, in fact, the domain of stable couples would consist, from the men’s point of view, as a system of expectations and responsibilities that do not leave space for moments of “disengagement” and erotic and playful sharing. This aspect seems to be even more meaningful if one considers the fact that the majority of the interviewees declared that they were not searching - through commercialized intercourse - for an occasion to experiment with special sexual practices, because the same practices had already been tried with their own partners. As shown in other research (Monto, 2001; Di Nicola et. al. 2009; Mornioli, Oliviero, 2013; Serughetti, 2013), clients usually ask for “normal” sexual practices. It is not therefore a confrontation between repressive and uninhibited sexual habits typically guided by the dichotomy “holy love vs. profane love”, but rather a search for evasion from a married life in which the conflict is always behind the corner. Therefore, talking about married clients, paying for sex is generally thought of as causing less troubles rather than a love affair.

Going back to married ones, I mean not married ones, maybe those married that don't have to demonstrate anything... I mean he doesn't have to demonstrate to be able to find a girl, on the contrary, at this point if you say that once in a while you go for prostitutes is as symptom of... that you are one that fucks, or that anyways, how they say to fool around, “keeps on liking the pussy”... you're married and you cannot mess up, with a lover etcetera... It takes time, money, investments, to go out lying... whereas if you go for

whores every once in a while you eliminate all this, and you put your lust away. [Giovanni; 40 y.o.; heterosexual]

Some of the interviewees particularly stress this aspect, representing a “risky” female world full of mermaids ready to attract the most *naïve* to satisfy their desires (which most of the times have to do with economic matters rather than erotic ones). Functional to this theme is a further reversal building stereotypes on prostitutes: with this logic the sex workers become once again an idealized image of purity, honesty and transparency expressly to contrast with the “others” therefore women hiding their actual intentions with whom it is necessary to negotiate their own manly authority.

After what I experienced with my wife [that betrayed him] and the separation... I consider more... more honest a girl that does it [the job of the sex worker]. Mainly because they have to, many that are at home do it because they do it. Right? Because it's a remarkable source of money, and after all let's be clear, once the economical is there, you do it independently from the income, you put yourself in it you don't ask anything in return... I think they are much more respectable than wives that comes back home and pretends that nothing happened, and a lot of these things happen right? [Gennaro; 38 y.o.; heterosexual]

In this frame the offer of commercial sex assumes the characteristics of “social subsidiary service”, functioning as a decompression valve considered necessary for the maintenance of “official” relationships.

When my cousin was in a huge crisis with his wife, and it all turned around the lack of a sexual relationship, and he said “I know that if I betray her we mess our whole family up” and I ironically answered all the times “for this purpose they offer a huge service”, because physically you say you have a strong and unexpressed sexual power, for this purpose they are a good social alternative... whereas he messed up his family instead with a person that has always

betrayed her men, she always messed up, then after all..  
[Giovanni; 40 y.o.; heterosexual]

## 5. Conclusions

This article was constructed in order to maintain one main orientation: to abandon the “truth of the matter” concerning clients' practices and habits and to focus on their representations. Making reference to the grammars used by different clients to tell their stories – both in the form of a “direct” relation during the interviews and the “anonymous” and “amplified” one on the forum (not directly analysed here) – enables us to reflect on those aspects, that more than others, determine a certain type of masculinity, the one that in different passages of this work has been defined as the “hegemonic” masculinity [Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005]. Some cultural conditioning seems in fact to involve, in a transversal way, types of people socially located at very different levels. The group of men interviewed, for instance, were characterized by a certain lack of homogeneity in terms of status: very different ages and educational levels (from secondary school degrees to postgraduates), dissimilar professions (from the barman to the teacher) and different sentimental situations. But overall, the men involved gave different profiles of themselves as clients, marking a shade going from regular to sporadic, to cases for which the experience of purchase of commercial sex is equal to a couple of episodes. Despite this lack of homogeneity, it has been possible to determine connections between the visions reconstructed through the interviews, and the shared stereotypes that are very likely to be the same, interviewing some representatives of the “non-clients” (as shown in Navarini, 1999). It is, in particular, by referring to the female “population” - and their desires - that cultural conditioning intervenes levelling the visions transmitted through common sense, because an erotic imagery is part of everyone, men and women, clients and non-clients and constitutes that *humus* in which individuals grow into men and women, and it's in this domain that ideas

such as male sexuality as an outlet and female sexuality as service one (Tabet, 1994) strengthen.

So if sex markets appear to be embedded in the society and its cultural models, in its processes of social construction of male and female identities and in standard erotic imageries, then in order to fight trafficking and sexual tourism it seems appropriate to deconstruct these models and reflect on the grammar of pleasure – declining male desire as an impulse – relieving the “hegemonic male” of his responsibility and legitimating some of his practices.

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