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# The construction of intimacy in long-term commercial relationships in Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research on commercial sex has described fluidity between different forms of relationships, whereby commercial sexual relationships can be both long-term and viewed as intimate from the buyer's perspective. This article explores the construction of intimacy in long-term commercial relationships. More specifically, it examines the meaning of transactions in long-term paid sexual relationships in Sweden. Interviews were conducted with 23 Swedish men with experience purchasing sex as 'regulars'. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Findings show that the emotional experience is a key focus for these men when they purchase sex. The emotions involved are not delimited in time and space but are experienced both within and outside of the actual sexual encounter. Such emotions can be understood as the very precondition for the experiences of intimacy, while at the same time they create difficulties for the men who purchase sex. Experiences of intimacy are experienced in the ambiguity between unbounded and bounded authenticity and by not drawing a clear line between emotional subjectivity and consumer subjectivity.

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## Introduction

Commercial sex is a complex phenomenon with many forms of expression, from exploitation and violent and destructive relations, to distanced paid relations, to intimate and long-term relationships (Farley et al. 2004; Joseph and Black 2012; Milrod and Weitzer 2012). A commercial sexual relationship can change over time, take various forms of expression simultaneously, and may be permeated by power at individual, relational and structural levels. Power relations in commercial sexual relationships are given multifaceted expression in the encounters between buyers and sellers (e.g. Sanders, Brents, and Wakefield 2020). Practices such as the purchase of sex, are often associated with unequal power relations (see Hammond and van Hooff 2020), and combining sex and money is commonly considered problematic and morally objectionable (Rubin 1998; SOU 2010, 49). The political and legal approach to

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commercial sex has been handled differently in different national contexts (Sanders, Brents, and Wakefield 2020). Sweden has adopted a neo-abolitionist approach to commercial sex, criminalising the purchase of sex since 1999. This approach targets the demand for sexual services and is based on an understanding of commercial sex as an expression of men's violence against women, and as something unworthy of a society that strives for gender equality (Holmström and Skilbrei 2017; Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014).

Both in political debate and among the general public in Sweden, intimacy is closely associated with non-commercial relationships (Kuosmanen 2011; SOU 2010, 49). However, previous empirical research show that commercial sex is a multifaceted phenomenon, and that non-paid romantic relationships and commercial relationships cannot easily be dichotomised (Bernstein 2007; Birch 2015; Sanders 2008b). In contrast to the dominant ideological and political view in Sweden, whereby intimacy and commercial sex are seen as incompatible, these studies suggest that commercial sex may display features that are often associated with non-commercial, romantic relationships, such as emotional connection, sexual familiarity and authenticity (e.g. Sanders 2008b).

Furthermore, non-paid romantic relationships are not free from commercial aspects, and economic transactions are present in many forms of relationships. Zelizer (1997, 2005) has argued that there is a close connection between the economy and social ties, and that money has a symbolic value in relation to social connections. This also applies to commercial sex in terms of how the role of payment for the relationship differs (Jones and Hannem 2018). In addition, emotions may become commodified, with both intimacy and authenticity becoming valuable commodities in the field of commercial sex (Bernstein 2007; Illouz 2007; Sanders 2008b). As intimacy becomes more intertwined with the commercial sphere, there is a greater fluidity between different forms of relationships (Illouz 2007). In commercial sex, boundaries can become blurred with regard to expectations and obligations, with sexual relationships becoming both long-term and intimate from the buyer's perspective (Bernstein 2007; Jones and Hannem 2018; Milrod and Weitzer 2012).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how men who have long-term paid sexual relationships perceive intimacy in a national context coloured by an understanding of commercial sex as exploitation and oppression. Drawing on data from a sample of 23 Swedish men with experience of having long-term paid relationships with female sex sellers, the article aims to explore the construction of intimacy among men engaged in long-term transactional relationships with women. More specifically, the article focuses on the meaning of transactions for intimacy in long-term paid sexual relationships in Sweden.

## **The Swedish context**

The political approach to prostitution in Sweden is based on an understanding of commercial sex as detrimental both for individuals and for society as a whole. In 1999, the so-called Sex Purchase Act (Förbud mot köp av sexuell tjänst, SFS 1962:700) prohibited the purchase of sex. Sweden took a clear ideological stand, arguing that commercial sex is driven by a demand for sexual services from women, most often expressed by men. The aim of the law is to combat prostitution, in the short-run by targeting demand with legal measures, and in the long-run by achieving normative

change in the general public (Erikson 2011; Government of Sweden 1998; Holmström and Skilbrei 2017).

Since the implementation of the law, support for the criminalisation of the purchase of sex has grown among the general public, indicating normative change (Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014; Kuosmanen 2008; Svedin et al. 2012). Prohibition of the purchase of sex has strong political support in Sweden and current policy is seen as adequate. In addition, the Swedish Government has recently called for stronger measures through supplementary directives to sexual crime investigations. The government has suggested more severe punishment by removing fines as a sanction for the purchase of sex (Government of Sweden 2020). In some parts of Sweden, the police report men who have children and who have been caught buying sex to the social authorities (Umeå Kommun 2019). Some politicians have suggested implementing this procedure at a national level (Fritzon, Gustafsson, and Ohlsson 2020).

### **The purchase of sex and intimacy**

A growing body of research has examined men's motivations for engaging in commercial sex (e.g. Birch 2015; Huysamen 2019; Kong 2015, 2016; McKeganey and Barnard 1996; Monto 2010). The motivation to purchase (or sell) sex can be understood in terms of push and pull factors and paying for sex involves a complex range of motivations beyond sexual pleasure and relief (Hammond and van Hooff 2020; Sanders 2008b; Vanwesenbeeck 2013). In a study on men who purchase sex, differences were identified between one-time visitors and regulars in the motivations for purchasing sex and in the dynamics of the commercial relationship (Sanders 2008a). Features such as communication, courtship rituals, sexual familiarity, and the desire for mutual satisfaction, as well as friendship and emotional connections can be important for regular purchasers (Milrod and Monto 2012; Sanders 2008a). However, the difference between regulars and one-time visitors is not clear-cut, and qualities presumed to be associated with regulars are also found among one-time visitors (Grönvall, Holmström, and Plantin 2020; Jones and Hannem 2018). Trust and safety, for example, can be important both for men who purchase sex as regulars and as one-time visitors (Grönvall, Holmström, and Plantin 2020; Sanders 2008b).

Previous studies have thus incorporated intimacy into an analysis of commercial sex (Bernstein 2007; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Lever and Dolnick 2010; Tavory and Poulin 2012). In this context, intimacy has been defined as having physical and sexual contact and sharing time and experiences, with key elements being self-disclosure and revealing important aspects of one's life (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018). An alternative conceptualisation of intimacy can be found in a study of trust and intimacy in sadomasochistic play, as an interaction based more on the sense of exclusivity or privilege that is offered, than on the 'depth' of the interaction. Based on such an understanding, intimacy is about access, which 'depends on the cultivation of a belief in the privacy of a particular experience' (Newmahr 2011, 171). In addition, previous conceptualisations of paid sexual interactions as being incompatible with dominant scripts for sexual intimacy have been questioned (Jones and Hannem 2018). It has been argued that sex sellers and buyers construct interactions drawing on

dominant cultural scripts, rewriting them in a way that set the boundaries for their encounters. This allows buyers to experience intimacy within a bounded temporal and emotional frame (Jones and Hannem 2018). Based on Newmahr's (2011) conceptualisation of intimacy and eroticism, these cultural scripts for sexual intimacy can be understood as drawing on, and challenging, cultural ideals about heteronormative sexuality with regards to features such as access, gender and power. Thus, intimacy is not free from power and patriarchal arrangements, but is intertwined with them at a relational level, where personal relationships remain strongly gendered and where intimacy and inequality coexist (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Jamieson 1999).

Bernstein (2007) has argued that many men who visit escorts and erotic masseuses are looking for an authentic and genuine experience that is delimited in time, offering a form of 'bounded authenticity'. For sellers to provide this experience, they are required to make both emotional and relational investments. In addition, friendship is understood as being closely related to intimacy for men who purchased sex as regulars (Sanders 2008b). One example of bounded authenticity in commercial sex is the purchase of the 'girlfriend experience', which includes elements similar to those in non-commercial romantic relationships which render the consumer's experience more authentic. These include kissing and cuddling and engaging in partner-like activities such as having dinner, going to the cinema or sleeping together. The 'girlfriend experience' also has communicative dimensions that help to establish a unique relationship between buyer and seller (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Milrod and Monto 2012). Consequently, it has shifted the symbolic limits of bodily practice and changed the nature of emotional labour. Since activities that were previously denoted as being part of intimate, non-commodified, private life, may now be part of commercial sex, greater effort is needed on the part of sellers to maintain the integrity of their personal sphere (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018). Previous studies have shown that men who purchase sex enjoy pleasuring the seller, whether or not this pleasure is illusory, and that some women do experience sexual pleasure in encounters with buyers. However, this is a form of managed intimacy, with both parties being conscious of the importance of remuneration for the existence of the relationship, which can dissolve if the buyer develops romantic feelings or initiates a romantic relationship (Bernstein 2007; Hammond and van Hooff 2020; Kontula 2008; Milrod and Weitzer 2012).

Zelizer (1996, 1997) has argued that different forms of payment define the quality of social relations between parties. In order to make sense of the often complex social ties associated with money, people innovate and differentiate between currencies, bringing different meanings to their various exchanges. Culture, social structures and social relations mark the qualities and meaning of money, but money also serves to denote the quality of social relationships. The complex connection between payments and social ties is also present in commercial sex. Non-cash or 'gift-exchange' payments may blur the boundaries between paid and non-paid relationships, requiring additional emotional labour from sellers (Bernstein 2007; Jones and Hannem 2018). The shape of the relationship and the remuneration may also blur the boundaries between transactional sex and commercial sex (Stoebenau et al. 2016).

Emotions are not merely components of the motivational structure of the consumer, but actual commodities in themselves (Illouz 2018). Emotions are not only marketed and commodified but are shaped and created in the context of specific acts of consumption, becoming something which Illouz (2018) calls *emodities*. Consumers are actively involved in the co-production of the emotional experience, thus blurring the distinctions between consumer and producer, and between objects and emotions (Illouz and Bengier Alaluf 2019). Consequently, emotional subjectivity becomes inseparable from consumer subjectivity and ‘consumers have become increasingly involved in “emotional labour”’, which requires an incorporation of the consumptive sphere into Hochschild’s concept of emotional labour (Hochschild 2012; Illouz and Bengier Alaluf 2019, 249).

## The study

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 men who had experienced purchasing sex regularly from one woman. Advertisements for the study were placed on two different escort sites, on Twitter and Facebook, and in two local newspapers (in one metropolitan area and one small town/rural area). Interview participation was initiated by the participants answering the advertisement by email or telephone.

All participants were informed both verbally and in writing about anonymity, confidentiality and the study procedure. Interviews were conducted face to face, by telephone or via Skype, depending on the participants’ preferences. All interviews (except with two participants who declined recording) were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All quotes have been translated from Swedish to English and all names are pseudonyms. Ethical approval was granted by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Lund (Dnr 2017/983). A reflexive methodology guided both the interview process, and the thematisation and analysis of the data (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2018). The interviews, the analysis, and reading about theoretical concepts did not occur in separate steps, but as parallel processes. A social constructionist approach to storytelling constituted the basis for the analysis, and the interviews should be understood as stories (Plummer 1995). The transcribed interviews have been thematised on the basis of recurrent and dominant themes, and contradictions and slippages within the stories. Thematic analysis was facilitated by the use of the Nvivo 12 software package (QSR International, Melbourne).

The interviews included questions about sexuality, relationships and the meaning of purchasing sex. All men in the study purchased sex from cisgender women and one had also bought sex from transgender women. The period of time during which they had bought sex varied from one to thirty years and the length of the relationship with a single woman varied between a couple of months and eight years. A majority of participants had also purchased sex as one-time buyers. Most of the participants were recruited via escort sites, and a majority came into contact with sellers through online advertisements. Other means of contact included massage parlours, regular sex or dating sites, street environments in Sweden or abroad, or through friends or through business associates. The youngest participant was 24 and the oldest 73, with

the majority being between 40 and 60 years of age. Seven men were married or had a steady partner, and 16 were single. All participants were born in Sweden.

Since it is illegal to purchase sex in Sweden, anonymity and confidentiality were of major importance in the study. For a majority of the participants, the interview offered them to talk about their experiences of purchasing sex for the first time. Intimacy, loneliness and longing for love were sensitive topics for some participants. The interviewer was responsive to the interviewees' reactions throughout the interview, and participants were informed about possible support or counselling when needed. One important methodological aspect of storytelling when talking about a criminalised and stigmatised activity is self-presentation. In interviews about the purchase of sex conducted in a national context where purchasing sex is a criminal offence, the participants have to relate to a specific image of a sex buyer. How contextual factors impact participants' self-understandings and self-presentation (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011; Huysamen 2016) has been taken into consideration throughout the interview process and analysis.

## Findings

### *Familiarity*

Study participants perceived purchasing sex as being better and safer in various ways when they met one woman regularly. Communication was an important aspect for some and becoming familiar with a seller made it easier to meet each other's expectations and sexual desires. Knowing one another was also perceived as making the sexual encounter safer both for themselves and the woman. For some men, this was associated with the purchase of sex being illegal in Sweden, or with perceptions about the seller's vulnerability. Martin, a single man in his thirties, said:

It can of course be kind of exciting to meet a new girl. But I find that it gets better when you have met a couple of times, both sexually and socially. Both for me and for her, because she knows what she can expect, when she shows up. She doesn't have to worry or anything, since she knows what will happen. You have got to know each other a bit, and you know what to talk about - [it's] a bit more relaxed.

Some participants said that meeting one woman regularly created feelings of closeness and intimacy. The longing for a physical sexual connection with a woman that included mutual pleasure was better met when having a long-term relationship with the same seller. Some participants experienced that meeting the same person and getting to know her before a sexual encounter made the sexual interaction and pleasure feel more authentic and genuine for both parties. For some informants, this was linked to a feeling of being affirmed as a man and a sexual being. One important part of this was seeing the woman's sexual pleasure, which both enhanced men's own pleasure and provided them with acknowledgement as sexual partners. Participants were aware that the display of pleasure might be an act, but so long as it was well performed, this was sufficient to make the sexual encounter feel real. Klas, a single man in his forties, described this as follows:

So even if I have paid for their time ... , the women that I've met, at least pretend that they appreciate and like me. Then if it's a game, if they pretend or not, at least they seem to like it, and that's enough [for me].

The perceived meaning of purchasing sex changed over time, especially for participants who had purchased sex for many years. Compared to earlier, when their focus had been on sexual activities and pleasure, they were now focussed on the relational aspects and social closeness. Nils, a single man in his sixties who had purchased sex for 30 years, said: '... the first time it was more about sex, but now it's more intimacy, affection and love, that you long for'. Ola, also single and in his sixties with a 30 year history of purchasing sex, put it in a similar way: 'Over the years it turns into ... from just a desire for banging, if you excuse my language, to being more oriented towards some kind of relationship, where sex is important, but not that crucial as it used to be'. Purchasing sex from one woman regularly or for a long period of time thereby became a strategy for the participants to buy sex in a way that created closeness, familiarity and intimacy. With continuity in the relationship, the participants experienced that they got to know the woman on a more personal level. Gustaf, in his forties and with a steady partner, said this:

If you meet the same woman, it will inevitably turn into something that seems like a relationship. You get to know that person, at least partially, or at least the person that she is with you. So, maybe it's a different form of intimacy, another way of seeing each other, and even another way of having sex than if you only meet once.

For some, the reasons they purchased sex from the same person regularly were linked to aspects of intimacy other than sexual and physical closeness. For these men, purchasing sex was described as filling a social need for socialising, and for small talk and cuddling. Carl, single and in his twenties, said: 'There have been times when I've paid for sex, but then we haven't had sex, because I just wanted to hang out, and sit on a couch together, cuddling like a girlfriend and boyfriend.' Knowing one another well could also change the character of the relationship from being a delimited transactional relationship to one involving care, responsibility and obligations. Per, single and in his forties, lived in southern Sweden and only purchased sex in Denmark. He described a difference between the paid sexual relationship he had had with a woman for several years, and when he bought sex as a one-time visitor at brothels or sex clubs:

This relationship has changed in the sense that it's a lot on her terms, and that's how it should be. I feel very comfortable taking care of her and so on. But then for me, it's a bit more relaxed to just see someone once, at a club or so.

### ***Emotional involvement and longing for closeness***

A recurring theme in the interviews was how commercial sex helped men escape from feelings of loneliness and longing to feel closeness and intimacy. Some participants expressed the wish to feel both physically and emotionally close to a woman and wanting this feeling to be mutual. This provided them with an illusion of not being alone. As Carl described it, '... Yes, sometimes sex has also been a part of it, but never anything like "porn star sex" or so. For me it's more about fantasising about



not being alone.' For others, it was more about feeling close to someone and receiving emotional affirmation, as Klas described it, '... I'm rather lonely, and I've difficulties meeting women. Paying for sex gives me intimacy, and not surprisingly sex, and I get recognition from someone.' Participants reported how various circumstances made it difficult to achieve closeness and intimacy without paying for it. For a few, there was difficulty meeting someone when living in a rural area. For others it was about perceived deficiencies in their own personalities, such as being shy, boring or not socially outgoing. Nils, a single man in his sixties, said:

The reason [for me buying sex], well, where should I start? I'm a boring person, a quiet person, with low self-esteem, and a bit shy. I've never had a girlfriend, and neither do I have friends so socialise with. And, I shouldn't say unfortunately, but I do long for intimacy and affection.

Nils longed for closeness and tenderness and when asked whether he felt he got this when he purchased sex, he answered:

No, not really, I don't get that, since they are more into, if you see that type of woman, they sell sex, they don't sell love, so to say. And that's what I long for. But sometimes the desire [for love] is so strong that you... you long for a hug or to be intimate with someone and things like that.

A recurrent theme in some accounts concerned the fluidity of the boundary between paid sexual relationships and other forms of relationship, such as friendship or love. For some, the relationship started out as a paid sexual encounter and later turned into a friendship. This was the case for Jesper, a single man in his forties: 'I've quite a lot of female friends actually, that I socialise with. And one of my best friends I happened to meet when buying sex from her'. Some participants talked about this change as a natural development of the relationship, due to both interest and the emerging closeness. Björn, a single man in his forties, described the change from how he bought sex when he was younger, when his principal focus had been on the sexual activity, to how he purchased sex at the time of the interview:

It could be a full evening, when I treat her dinner, we hang out, and the woman stays the night, and then leaves the next morning, and she simply gets a small amount of money for that. It's even so that I've visited one of the women's house, I've met her grown-up children.

For others, the relationship changed due to the growth of feelings for a specific woman. One participant had met the same woman for eight years and continued to meet her because he liked her as a person. He felt their relationship had developed into a friendship, and they also met without him paying and without having sex. For others, the paid relationship had developed into a romantic relationship, as was the case with Jesper (and a different woman from the one previously mentioned):

... and one of them I almost hooked up with. And well, we had damn good sex, nothing more than that, and she obviously liked it a lot, and she liked me a lot. I taught her how to ride a motorbike. We went for walks in the woods, and we even had sex without payment.

For some participants, what started out as friendship turned into paid sexual meetings. This is how Ulf, a single man in his thirties, described what happened when he bought sex from a friend, an experience that was later reframed by the woman, who later considered the money a loan that she would pay back:

I had a female friend, a good friend of mine, and she knew that I had bought sex abroad, and when I once contacted her for casual sex, she responded; 'and what do I get?' And I didn't know if she was joking or what to respond; 'Well, what do you want?' 'A thousand crowns,' she said. 'Ok, let's go for it,' I said.

The fluid boundaries surrounding long-term paid sexual relationships could create awkward feelings for some participants. Closeness could create feelings of exclusivity, which led to discomfort if the woman met someone else. Klas described a relationship he had with a woman from whom he regularly bought sex:

The woman I used to meet quite often, she hooked up with someone last fall, but kept on seeing me anyway. They're getting married this summer, and he doesn't know that she's still seeing someone else. He has some idea of what she has been doing, but she sees me secretly, and that feels a bit difficult for me. But it's kind of exciting as well, since she seems to like me so much that she keeps on seeing me, even if she now has a partner. But I'm still not totally comfortable with it.

Changes in the relationship and the emergence of intimate emotions were not always easy for participants. Several men reported feeling rejected and left out when the woman ended the relationship. Edvard, single and in his thirties, described an episode when he had fallen in love with the seller, and explained how the break-up had made him feel used and betrayed: 'I said I loved her, but she was making fun of me ... it still hurts when I think about it'.

### ***Conditional exclusivity***

Another factor linked to the experience of intimacy and closeness when purchasing sex was the importance of feeling special to the seller. Several participants expressed that they wanted to feel that they were the only one, or at least the first one that day. For some, this was linked to the quality of the sexual encounter. Klas said:

It's probably a bit naïve to say, but I do want the woman I meet to have a good time as well, and as I said before, it turns me on to see her having a good time. But if I'm her fifth customer that day, then it can be quite fake and instrumental.

Feeling special to the seller was for some participants associated with the duration of the encounter. This could involve getting more time than they paid for, how the time together was spent, or time becoming less important. Lennart, a single man in his fifties, expressed it like this:

Since I met her several times, it felt like, you know two hours, but she stayed for four. We fell asleep and slept together for two hours. It was really like, it was somewhat like GFE, you know, girlfriend experience.

In terms of money, feeling special to the seller was about getting a special price or the price changing when they became a regular buyer. For one participant it was about not being considered a buyer of sex. As his relationship with a woman

developed, she started to call him a friend instead of a client. A recurrent theme in some participants' stories was the experience of getting different benefits compared to one-time visitors. This perhaps involved meeting at the woman's house or knowing her real name or occupation. It could also involve knowing personal things about her life and her background. For some participants, condom use changed as the relationship developed. While condom use was almost universally a rule on the first visits, it was less common in long-term relationships with the same seller. Some participants were careful to point out that it was the woman's decision to not use a condom, while this was associated with feelings of exclusivity.

Even if participants felt special to the seller, they were aware of the meaning of money in the relationship. Ola was clear in pointing out that he did not see his long-term paid relationships as purchasing sex, and he paid in the form of restaurant visits and gifts. He was still clear however that the relationship was conditional on money:

'But clearly, it's about money when it comes down to it. If I wouldn't pay it wouldn't happen. Then there would be no relationship.' He was also clear that this was something both he and the woman he was seeing were aware of: 'But on the other hand, I'm aware of the fact, and she's too, that if I stop paying, the relationship will end.'

Although purchasing sex linked closely to intimacy and closeness for some participants, there was a clear difference between having a long-term paid relationship and having a non-paid relationship with someone they were in love with. Dan said: 'I do think that I don't really like having sex with someone that I'm not in a relationship with. I long for, like a deeper relationship with someone, actually.' Robert, single and in his thirties, expressed a similar view of the differences, but with a focus on the meaning of the transaction:

Of course, it can reduce feelings of frustration, and give relief. But it's by far not to compare with what it's like to meet someone that you really like and are intimate with and have sex with. That's a totally different thing! When it comes down to it, it's a transaction anyhow.

As indicated, some participants did not pay with money but with gifts, restaurant visits, hotel nights and vacations. One gave a monthly allowance to a woman in exchange for sex and intimacy. At the same time as it was clear to most participants that money framed the relationship, this could also create some unexpected difficulties. For some participants, remuneration as regular or monthly allowance led to feelings of responsibility for the seller's financial situation and standard of living. Per, for example, said that regular payments made it difficult for him to end the (paid) relationship with a woman he was seeing regularly, and also excluded the possibility of (non-paid) relationships with other women:

I find this really hard. I somehow feel like I really want to keep on seeing her, and I've told her that I want to see her as long as she wants to. But on the other hand, I do feel that I don't really have a choice. Somehow, it would be like pulling the rug from under her.

Per, who lived on investment income, also talked about how the woman's difficult financial situation and his perception of her being dependent on his financial support, affected how he planned his finances:

I've made a budget for a year, and I've calculated on how much money I need to set aside. And somehow I feel like, sometimes I give up other planned activities, when I feel like seeing someone else or so, then I think, 'She will probably need a little extra here', or 'I think I'll wait with that,' just to see how things turn out.

For other men, providing financial support in a long-term paid relationship led to a wish to control how the money was spent in a wise and responsible way, such as on rent instead of luxury products.

## Discussion

For some men in this study, becoming a regular client was a strategy that enabled them to purchase sex in a context in which it is criminalised, and yet the Sex Purchase Act was of minor significance with respect to how they purchased sex. Ideas about intimacy and commercial sex were more prominent than the legal context. Intimacy and authenticity were of central importance to participants' experience of their paid sexual encounters. The importance of closeness and intimacy in participants' stories may be seen as a form of bounded authenticity (Bernstein 2007). This theme in the participants' stories is supported by previous research on purchasing sex in other national contexts, indicating that relational practices are more complex than would be suggested by structural understandings of commercial sex alone (Bernstein 2007; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Milrod and Monto 2012; Sanders 2008b).

However, how participants purchased sex to feel intimacy, or to avoid feelings of loneliness, may be interpreted as a means of obtaining certain emotions and avoiding others. In participants' accounts, it is not sex in itself that becomes the primary commodity, instead it is the emotional experience associated with being close to a woman sexually or physically. Drawing on Illouz's (2018) ideas, commercial sex may therefore best be understood in terms of emodities, with the emotional experience itself being a focus for these men when they purchase sex. The difficulty of separating emotional subjectivity from consumer subjectivity leads to them doing emotional labour as consumers (Illouz and Bengier Alaluf 2019) and rewriting the script for the paid sexual relationship (Jones and Hannem 2018). The relaxation in condom use can be understood as being associated both with perceptions of exclusivity and notions of trust and intimacy (c.f. Newmahr 2011; Stoebenau et al. 2016).

Thus, participants' stories about longing for love or trying to escape feelings of loneliness cannot be fully captured by the concept of bounded authenticity. Findings indicate that the relationship and its emotions and obligations spread beyond the commercial relationship into the private sphere of participants' lives, making the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial relationships blurred and the experienced authenticity unbounded, albeit ambiguously. Men's stories suggest that even if the relationships were similar to non-paid forms of friendship or love, the relationships' commercial aspects were an ever-present restriction which affected feelings of intimacy and companionship. Even if participants experienced the relationship as

intimate, they had reservations, noting that the seller might be acting and that the emotions involved in the commercial relationship were not real (cf. Bernstein 2007; Hochschild 2012). As one participant expressed it, the women 'sell sex, they don't sell love'. The relationship would not exist if clients did not pay for it, indicating a clear frame for the relationship based on money.

The ambiguity between bounded and unbounded authenticity required both navigation and negotiation by the participants. Consequently, participants used different tactics to change the meaning of money in their relationships with sellers. Different currencies were invented, and by paying for sex with restaurant visits, hotel nights or a monthly allowance allowing payment in some instances to be seen as gifts or allowances. When payment for sex was made in these alternative hidden currencies, power relations and experienced inequality could change (Zelizer 1997). Further, using such currencies in the commercial relationship drew on cultural scripts related to courtship rituals associated with non-commercial heterosexual relationships (cf. Jones and Hannem 2018). This was negotiated by the participants in relation to feeling unique or special to the seller. On the basis of Newmahr's (2011) conceptualisation, feeling special or privileged in relation to another person may be understood as central to the experience of intimacy. By using currencies other than cash to purchase sex, participants tried to reduce the relationship's commercial aspects, creating intimacy through a negotiation between feeling special and the valuation of currencies in relation to intimacy (cf. Zelizer 1996). The blurring of payment in participants' stories in some cases made it difficult for them to define the relationship's obligations and responsibilities, as different payment methods were associated with different forms of inequality in the relationship (Zelizer 1997). Along with 'romantic' courtship rituals borrowed from non-paid heterosexual relationships, other patriarchal arrangements associated with heteronormativity were also followed, such as the desire to be in control of the woman's spending. The rewriting of heterosexual scripts was not bound to sexual encounters but affected other aspects of participants' lives (c.f. Bernstein 2007; Sanders 2008a) and required navigating in relation both to commercial sex and heteronormative ideals, where intimacy and patriarchy coexist at a relational level.

## Conclusion

For men in this study, in purchasing sex as regulars, the boundaries between delimited paid sexual encounters and non-commercial heterosexual relationships became blurred. Hidden currencies both reduced the commercial aspects of the paid relationship, and made the expectations, obligations and boundaries of the relationship unclear. Perceptions of intimacy and trust, expectations of the relationship and perceived obligations came to be experienced as permeating the private sphere of the participants' lives, constituting an ambiguously unbounded form of authenticity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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