

Risky Pleasures: Malaysian Male Clients Transcending the Boundaries of Commercial Sex With Foreign Female Sex Workers

SAGE Open
April-June 2016: 1–9
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244016650241
sagepub.com


Lim Soo Jin¹ and Cheah Shu Xu¹

Abstract

This ethnographic study explores the discourses and practices of male clients of foreign female sex workers (FSWs) who carried out relationships with their regular FSW. Situated in an environment that rejects and stigmatizes sex work, this study explores the paths taken by this small group of men pursuing a relationship with a FSW. Findings from a sample of 23 Malaysian men obtained from an online forum and through snowball sampling display a demand for intimacy that for some clients transcends conventions of commercial sex, while for others display a desire for consumption of commodified intimacy within the sex trade. Participants' narratives provide an insight as to how FSWs adapt and utilize emotional labor to their advantage. The resulting relationship is one of extreme inequality in power relations, resulting in both sides developing different strategies to compensate for their vulnerabilities.

Keywords

sex work, clients, intimacy, emotional labor, bounded authenticity

Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of studies focusing on male clients have shown that they are demographically diverse with a wide range of motives and behaviors. A number of studies have shown that some clients' participation in commercial sex is motivated by their desire for intimacy. Bernstein (2007) coined the term *bounded authenticity* to describe clients' experience of an authentic emotional and physical connection with a sex worker. Sander's (2008a) examination of the sexual scripts of "regular" clients of sex workers displays a mirroring of conventional relationship scripts in their interactions. Milrod and Weitzer's (2012) examination of online clients suggest the possibility for a shift toward unbounded affection and romantic relationships between clients and their regular sex workers. Milrod and Monto (2012, p. 793) define the girlfriend experience (GFE) as "... interactions with (sex) providers mirror those found in conventional non-remunerative sexual relationships." Bernstein (2010, p. 158) quoted a sex worker who described GFE sessions involving "... lengthy period of foreplay in which the customer and the escort touch, rub, fondle, massage and perhaps even kiss passionately." GFE has become a universally sought-after commodity by male clients, and a tool used by sex workers to increase their appeal and demand (Bernstein, 2010; Hoang, 2010; Joseph & Black, 2012;

Milrod & Weitzer, 2012). These intimate acts challenge the notion that clients indulge in commercial sex for the sole aim of domination and exploitation. This study examines the discourses and experiences of 23 Malaysian men who have formed a relationship with a foreign female sex worker (FSW) to understand their willingness to transcend the boundaries of commercial sex at the cost of great personal risk.

Literature Review

Feminist scholars have until recently focused their attention on the supply side of the sex trade. Feminist scholars are split in their views on the women involved in the sex trade. On one side, there are those that support the abolitionist perspective arguing that men exploit their positions of power by allowing the sex trade to continue at the expense of the suffering and victimization of the women. They argue that the unequal power relations between the men in power and the

¹Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia

Corresponding Author:

Lim Soo Jin, Faculty of Creative Industries, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Sungai Long, Bandar Sungai Long, Cheras 43000, Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: sjlim@utar.edu.my



women have allowed the commodification of women to “sex objects” (Farley, 2003; Dworkin, 1992; MacKinnon, 1989). On the other end of the spectrum, feminist scholars argue for the “right” to capitalize on their sexuality for economic gains. They argue that by restricting their freedom to choose sex work limits their freedom as women (O’Connell Davidson, 1995; Overall, 1992; Weitzer, 2010). They argue for the freedom to choose sex work, citing many legitimate “women” occupations are built to capitalize on female sexuality with the aims of maximum profit (see Oerton & Phoenix, 2001). To break the deadlock, scholars shifted their focus to the demand side of the equation which until recently has been largely ignored.

The early 20th-century view based on the natural male sexual drive and the psychopathological model proposed by Charles Winick (1962) who linked men’s desire for sex workers as a sign of mental disorder has largely been abandoned by scholars in light of current empirical literature which suggest that men who purchase commercial sex are “normal” “everyday” men spread throughout all social groups with little distinguishing characteristics (Monto & Milrod, 2013; Monto & McRee, 2005; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Serughetti, 2013). Studies relying solely on street-level sex workers have been challenged not providing a complete picture of the experiences of sex workers (Weitzer, 2005), resulting in greater interest on the less visible sectors (indoor mid-tier and high-end) of the sex trade. Studies have revealed that clients within the mid and upper tiers of the sex trade are neither homogeneous group nor specific in their motives when purchasing commercial sex (Bernstein, 2007, 2010; Frank, 2003; Mansson, 2006; Sanders, 2008a). Bernstein (2007) noted that the relationship between contemporary markets in commercial sex and the growing variety of sex services in postindustrial societies shows the difference in the expectations of clients of street-level sex workers where the exchange is impersonal and focused on physical release mid and upper tier indoor establishments who demand greater amounts of intimacy and personalization. Sex work within the mid and upper tiers has shown to require greater amounts of intimacy and emotional labor from the sex worker.

Bernstein (2007) coined the term *bounded authenticity*, meaning a genuine albeit limited sexual and emotional experience by both the client and the sex worker within the boundaries of a paid sexual encounter. What is for sale is not merely the sexual satisfaction of the client but rather an authentic emotional and physical connection felt by both parties constrained within the boundaries of commerce and time. The demand for intimacy in commercial sex is seen in the widely used term *GFE* and is understood to signify verbal and physical acts performed by a sex worker akin to that of a conventional relationship which suggest a mainstreaming and partial normalization of intimacy within the sex trade. These developments are very different from the sex services described by “career sex workers” who establish

psychological barriers delineating what is for sale and what it private (O’Connell Davidson’s, 1995), where certain intimate acts like kissing is off-limits. This is not to suggest that there are no limits enacted by sex workers performing GFE, rather the encounter is not focused on solely the sexual release of the client but one that includes mutuality and a genuine emotional experience.

The categorization of GFE in the field reports with the intention to quantify the emotional labor provided is so ingrained in online communities that it is seen in almost every field report alongside clients’ evaluations on the sex worker’s physical characteristics, attitude, and sexual performance. It should be noted that while many clients understand the meaning of GFE, what it actually entails varies from individual to individual. To some clients, GFE could represent purely intimate physical acts (kissing, cuddling, oral sex on the woman), whereas for others, it could mean the suspension of time during the encounter for conversation and other nonphysical acts. Regardless of the definition, sex workers have recognized the demand and have adapted their practice to take advantage of the demand for commodified intimacy in return for favorable reviews, which is translated into more clients and in turn better monetary gains (Earle & Sharp, 2007; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Sanders, 2008b). Integrating intimacy as part of their service has increased the expectations of the clients failing, which result in negative impression of the sex worker affecting their demand (Bernstein, 2007; Peng, 2007; Sanders, 2008b). Scholars argue that in no way is GFE separate from the economic dimensions of commercial sex (Bernstein, 2010; Zelizer, 2005), rather it provides boundaries in which men are able to take advantage of their gender privilege to satisfy their demand for an intimate encounter through monetary exchange. Bernstein (2010) has reported that sex workers who attempt to breach the boundaries of “bounded authenticity” risk driving their clients away (see Bernstein, 2010). Milrod and Weitzer (2012) also reported clients experiencing “off the clock” activities with their regular sex worker such as extended time, sex without payment and public excursions; however, their study suggests the possibility of transcending the client–sex worker business relationship into a long-term romantic relationship or even a conventional relationship. The men in previous studies have initiated relations with local sex workers, which bound them geographically thus reducing the amount of anonymity between the two parties. In this study, the impermanent state of the sex worker is a critical difference that is not examined by previous studies.

Method

This study uses an ethnographic approach using face-to-face interviews and participation observations. The semistructured interviews conducted along with onsite participation observation collected data on the participant’s demographics, experiences with commercial sex, specifically their relationship

with a FSW. An online forum discussing commercial sex activities in Malaysia was used as a secondary source of data. Fifty participants were reached; however, only 23 participants fulfilled the requirement of the study, which required men who were in or had been in a relationship with a FSW. The extent of the relationships ranged from going on multiple dates in public areas, to sexual sessions that occur outside the work venue of the FSW and to living with their regular FSW. All participants reported regular face-to-face and electronic communication, unpaid sexual encounters outside the sex establishment, and had engaged in public social activity with their regular FSW. Although these factors do not necessarily constitute a conventional relationship, it indicated that these men attempted to transcend the boundaries of commercial sex. Racial composition of the 23 participants were 18 Chinese, two Malay, and three Indian; aged between 27 and 46 years of age; 13 single, eight married, and two divorced. All had a minimum diploma, professionals ranging from executive to managerial levels, from middle to upper socio-economic group. Interviews took place between 2010 and 2014, each interviewed over a number of sessions lasting between 2 and 3 hr. Participants' participation in this study was voluntary and their identities confidential; names of the men were changed in this article. They were also informed that they could terminate or withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews took place in a number of settings mostly in public areas where the men felt the most comfortable. The interviews were transcribed and emailed to the participants to review and verify its content.

The main problem I encountered was gaining access to this elusive group. Initially participants were recruited from an Internet forum where they had posted questions pertaining to having relations with a FSW. The forum chosen was a forum by Malaysians specifically on commercial sex activities in Malaysia. A thread within the forum where men were seeking advice pertaining to relationships with sex workers or women of foreign nationalities provided a starting point for this study. Request by Private Message (PM) for face-to-face interviews was unsuccessful with only three agreeing to be interviewed, and none of the three participants provided additional contacts. Forum administrators and senior members held a significant amount reputation and respect; their assistance in this study was invaluable (see Williams & Lyons, 2008) as it allowed me to participate in a gathering of forum members in a specified physical location, which provided an opportunity to gain face-to-face contact with members of this group.

Methodological Concerns and Limitations

It was common that during the fieldwork, the participants would decide on an impromptu visit to a brothel which I participated in an attempt to integrate and gain the trust of the group. "Going native" was an issue which I had to tackle with each participation observation: the dilemma between gaining

the trust of the participants versus the potential risk of compromising the study. Many times, I was misidentified as a client or urged to buy a sex worker by the pimps and participants. Prolonged contact with the group forced me to constantly renegotiate the boundaries of researcher and participant; as noted by Sanders (2006), the researchers' identities in this area are rarely clearly defined. This study forced me to constantly reevaluate my position as a researcher, my gender role, as well as my opinions on sex workers. Being male allowed me to integrate myself into the group without the sexual harassment reported by female researchers (see Marttila, 2008; Peng, 2007; Sanders, 2006). However, I encountered a different set of problems; my refusal to participate set me apart from the group, and the men would in jest question my sexual orientation and constantly test my resolve to truly understand their situation. One participant said, "if you really want to know, step into our shoes and experience for yourself." This allowed me to experience firsthand the peer pressure experienced by men visiting sex workers in a group as reported by Zheng (2006). Another problem was participant's initial instinctive reaction to maintain a masculine image and to "safe face" especially when they were in a group or during the first meeting, this resulted in initial narratives being superficial. Only in the subsequent one-to-one interview was I able to gather detailed descriptions of their relationships with a FSW along with their feelings toward the relationship.

A limitation in this study is the high ratio of Chinese men; this was due in part to the sampling method and the polarized nature of Malaysian society. The senior members and the forum administrators who lent their assistance to this study were all Chinese except for one Malay senior member, which led to a higher proportion of introductions to Chinese participants. Furthermore, some of the venues visited in this study were averse to allowing Malay clients, fearing they could be undercover authorities. While the two respondents might not be representative of the Malay community, it nonetheless allowed me to gain a glimpse into Malay mind-set.

The men interviewed in this study were either currently in a relationship or have had previously been in a relationship with a FSW; however, only seven out of the 23 men interviewed reported being currently involved with a FSW. The remaining 16 men were reiterating their past relationship experiences with FSW; these men displayed regret and resentment for their failed relationship while illuminating is nonetheless clouded with the knowledge of hindsight. Five men also reported having the relationship as long as 5 to 8 years ago; therefore, the accuracy of their recall may come into question. I was, however, purview to examine the pursuit of four participants from the beginning to the end of their relationship with a FSW.

Intimate Encounters

Majority of participants formed relations when they were new to commercial sex; their surprise at the intimacy of the

encounter and the FSW's pleasant attitude is a contrast to their stereotypical perceptions of the impersonal nature of commercial sex; Loke, a 27-year-old sales executive, recalls his first experience with a FSW:

First time . . . was quite scary but yet exciting at the same time. . . . she was really friendly totally not what I expected. I thought it was all business but she would talk to you and try make you feel more comfortable.

Sex workers who are able to put their clients at ease are able to mask the business nature of commercial sex and provide an intimate experience. This is vastly different from the portrayal by the Malaysian media of sex workers as cheap and impersonal; Mun's perception of a sex worker was changed after his first experience:

. . . the normal image of a prostitute that you see in the movies and on TV are those that are waiting by the side of the street . . . those arrested in dark and dodgy clubs . . . they [sex workers] are ugly and unclean. But the prostitute was nothing at all like what I imagined, she was friendly and cheerful and very pretty. It was great coz she knew it was my first time and she just said to relax and she sat down and talked to me and just told me about how first timers were often nervous and we would just take it slow and easy no pressure.

Participants' experience with commercial sex challenges their preconceived ideas of sex workers as victims as portrayed by the Malaysian media; Mun describes his first experience as ". . . an intensely satisfying love-making session . . . with a friendly and eager woman." First time clients tended to objectify sex workers, and their narratives focused solely on sexual and the physical traits of the sex worker. However, their thoughts after their initial encounter are conflicted. On one hand, they enjoy the pleasures and convenience of paid sex; on the other hand, the intimate encounter experienced made it difficult to completely objectify FSWs. Mun's first experience with a FSW forced him to consider the FSW as an individual and not just a sex object:

. . . I could not help but think of her as a person I just met and we were talking about stuff. I used to think that prostitutes were rude and rough but . . . she speaks well and she's happy, smiling at me all the time. It was like a real person . . . I mean I know that she is a real person but what I mean is that she is a real person that I would have liked to meet and hang out with.

Marshall (1999) noted that in commercial sex, the client is engaged in physical and emotional contact with a human being, which entails some form of mutuality making it impossible to ignore their humanity.

Beginning a Relationship

The result of the intimate encounter is the desire to repeat the experience, resulting in increased intimacy which garners

better sexual and nonsexual services (Milrod & Weitzer, 2012). These "extra" services include extra shots, postcoital stimulation and affection, body to body massages, sex toys, anal sex, and in the most extreme cases, unprotected sex. Kong, a 34-year-old executive, was introduced to commercial sex by peers and his relationship began initially because of the service provided:

Her service was good that's why I continued to visit her. After my 3rd visit she offered me a second shot which I gladly accepted. Initially it was about the extras which I got for free but after a while we would just land up talking and cuddling, kissing . . . it was like having a real girlfriend. I learnt that she came here to make some money and start a business when she returned to China, . . . of course I still took the extras, she trusted me enough to bring out her personal sex toys to play . . . that is the benefits of going back to one girl.

All participants had relationships with FSWs working in the mid-tier sector. The mid-tier sex sector in Malaysia consists mainly of indoor establishments operating behind the façade of legitimate businesses such as hotels, karaokes, and massage parlors in an attempt to avoid attention from the authorities (Lim, 1998). Each establishment had different operating procedures aimed at deterring authorities, many hotels used health spas as a cover for commercial sex activities, while other hotels had designated floors where FSWs lived and serviced their clients. FSWs would be given their own rooms in the hotel; participants reported that the rooms contained FSW's personal artifacts, which according to the participants made the experience more "real." The four participants whom I had followed from beginning to the end of their relationship began their relationship with their regular FSW in such a setting. This setting also provided FSWs some flexibility to extend their sessions during low peak hours, which allowed for the possibility of more intimate encounters. Milrod and Weitzer's (2012) reported that men start out without expecting anything from their encounters with their sex worker but gradually develop intimate connections akin to a conventional relationship. Many participants reported being motivated by the "excellent" service; however, with each subsequent encounter, they began to develop unexpected emotional ties to their regular FSW. Chris, a 30-year-old Malay executive, developed a relationship with his regular because of the combination of highly sexual and nonsexual intimate acts:

. . . her service was amazing. She really loved having sex. . . . very different from my ex. And it was not like she was slutty, she was actually quite shy. You could see this after sex where she would just cover up and cuddle. People say that prostitutes are whores who just love sex but she was different . . . she spoke softly and was gentle. . . . before I knew it I was visiting her over and over . . . she suggested meeting outside, which I agreed.

Client's desire for more intense displays of intimacy makes them susceptible to believing the affections displayed by

FSW is genuine, and the sessions become what Milrod and Weitzer (2012) called “quasidating” where the client and their regular sex worker act out relationship scripts of an actual date, such as learning about each other’s background through prolonged verbal and physical intimacy. Wan, a 33-year-old Malay executive, reported increased interest in his regular’s personality and background after a number of visits:

At first it was good service with cuddling then it became “When am I going to see you again?” . . . at the peak I was visiting her twice, three times a week . . . sometimes for double sessions. . . . you can’t be having sex all the time. Of course I try to have as much as possible but we would talk during the breaks . . . the breaks became longer and longer. . . . she was a really nice person, very witty and interesting, what surprised me was despite all the hardship she experienced she still managed to keep a positive outlook on life.

The men who have become regular clients had obtained their FSW’s phone number, Wechat, or Whatsapp number; making communication with their regulars is no longer solely dependent on physical visits, allowing for greater freedom and more personal connections to be formed beyond the physical constraints of the FSWs work establishment.

Dissatisfaction and Placing Blame

Scholars have suggested that clients are attracted by intimacy provided by sex workers because of lack of affection in their personal lives, whether it is because of their inability or unwillingness to form conventional relationships (Mansson, 2006; O’Connell Davidson, 1995). Majority of the participants’ narratives center on the willingness of their regular FSW to provide boundless sexual and nonsexual affections that they compare with their current partners, revealing their dissatisfaction with their partner as well as their conservative, misogynist mind-set:

Foo: My wife could learn a thing or two from these women . . . like how to treat a man so that he feels like he matters. . . . women always talk about men doing their share. It is ironic that they do not do their share.

Rosh: My girlfriend makes me work for her affections, it is totally different with Fann [FSW], she is always willing. . . . I think that is the problem with Malaysian women they are becoming like Singaporeans.

Participants’ narratives on the materialistic and demanding nature of Malaysian women stem from their reluctance to adapt to changing gender roles brought on by the rapid social and economic development. Malaysian Chinese women have benefitted most significantly from these changes resulting in higher education and better jobs, coupled with their adoption of feminist ideals and a focus on career coupled with their adherence to ingrained traditional dictates of

“suitable partners” has led to a trend in delayed and nonmarriage (Jones, 2007; Tey, 2007). Chinese participants’ reluctance to adapt to these developments has made it difficult for some of them to obtain “suitable” partners, increasing their scorn for Malaysian Chinese women. Their problem in finding a suitable partner is made more difficult by racial fencing legislation in Malaysia that prohibits Muslim–non-Muslim marriages (Mohamad, 2010), thus limiting potential partners to non-Malay women. The desire for more feminine and submissive partner has some participants falling for FSWs believing they are “untainted” by modern society (Mansson, 2006).

Malaysian policies that focus on Muslims, seen in the case of Wan who’s attraction for local Chinese women, has resulted with constant failure, due in part to the prohibition of Muslim–non-Muslim marriages. Unlike the Malaysian Chinese community that has largely been ignored, the Malaysian government has placed great interest over the Malay community’s sexuality, primarily as a political tool to consolidate and maintain their power (see Mohamad, 2010). This has most significantly affected the Malay women where conflict arising from their education and exposure to modern ideals clash with the religious doctrines preached by the Malaysian authorities. A study by Ong (1990) shows the immense social pressure experienced by Malay women to conform to their expected roles has resulted in many Malay women succumbing to the pressure. The Malaysian government emphasizes on Islamic teachings and values that emphasizes the Malay women’s central role in the family (Ong, 1990). Hence, there is a greater desire for marriage and a fear of being priced out of marriage because of their higher education and career among the Malay women, which is noticeable because Malay women are more willing to marry downwards compared with their Chinese counterparts (Tey, 2007). This has resulted in Malay women conforming to expected gender roles, which has led to less friction between genders in the Malay community, as seen in the Malay participants of this study who did not display the level of resentment toward Malay women compared with the Chinese participants.

Risky Relationships

Most of the participants and forum members recognize the slim chance of success in forming long-term relations with FSWs. Warnings by forum members revolve around the interest of FSWs in monetary gains, believing that the intimacy is manufactured performances to eliciting favorable response from their clients:

. . . man is trading money for sex & warmth & the [FSW] is trading sex for money, simple as that. There is no such thing as love with a [FSW]. The moment the money ends, the so-called love also ends!

Studies have shown that sex workers do manufacture separate identities as part of their strategy to illicit positive reviews

and to cope and control their work environment (see; Brewis & Linstead, 2000; O'Connell Davidson, 1995; Sanders, 2005). Participants report that FSWs use tragedy and misfortune to gain sympathy from their clients. Studies have shown that while some FSWs do enter the sex trade because of poverty and lack of choice, not all come from improvised or uneducated backgrounds, some sex workers come from middle-class families with no financial problems (see Hoang, 2010; Liu, 2012). Their choice to participate in sex work is not solely because of poverty or the lack of jobs but rather a lucrative economic choice (Davin, 2005; Liu, 2012; Mu, Li, Han, & Zhao, 1996). Forum members claim that these women choose to work in Malaysia because of lesser competition and the ability to resume a "normal" life back in their home country (see; Davin, 2005; Scambler, 2007).

Despite the warnings, some men willingly enter into a relationship with a FSW; findings from this study indicate that men who are new (involvement in commercial sex is less than 6 months) to the sex trade are the most susceptible to forming emotional attachments to their regulars. Analysis of postings on the online forum reveal that not all forum members are totally against the idea of forming relationships; common themes of being human and second chances feature regularly:

[FSW] is also a woman and I am sure she has her own reason of joining the flesh trade. She deserve a second chance . . .

. . . a lot of us have bad impression about [FSW] . . . However, they are still human, they have feelings as well. When the feeling developed, they are no other than ordinary woman who wants to be loved and cared for.

Participants were aware of their risky endeavor and used conventional courtship rituals as a tool to gauge the sincerity of their regular FSW; gifts and "dates" instead of cash is used to profess their romantic intentions as well as to gauge their FSW's interest in material gains. Participants rationalize that FSWs who are overly interested in monetary gains are insincere, whereas displays of concern over the men's financial welfare are proof of genuine commitment, as seen in the case of Ray who formed a 6-month relationship that continued for another 3 months after his regular FSW left Malaysia:

. . . she never asked for anything. She always just said that it was enough that I spend my hard earned money visiting a girls like her and that she was happy with the time we were together. . . . when I did give her extra she would not refuse but just take it and look away. It was those little things she did that convinced me of her sincerity . . .

Ironically, once participants were convinced of FSW's sincerity, monetary exchange played a larger role in their narratives. Ngah says that his "girlfriend" never directly asked him for money, rather he volunteered to help out with her financial problems because he did not want to see her

working so hard; Chris felt his relationship with his regular improved greatly after he helped her with her family's financial problems; Mun gave RM10,000 to help his FSW's mother's medical bills; according to him, she did not ask for the money, rather she said that she had to work doubly hard and could not take time away to be with him; Ray continued to send money to his regular after she returned to China with a promise to return as soon as her family affairs was in order; according to Ray, she decided to enter the sex trade to help her family especially her mother who struggled to support her family because of her "useless" father. Hoang's (2010) study on mid-tier Vietnamese sex workers suggest that deep acting by sex workers allowed them to capitalize on their origins to create an imaginary fantasy world where their clients live in as heroes or saviors to these poor, unfortunate women.

Conflicting Emotions

All participants anticipated problems arising from family, peers, and society; while they initially thought they were prepared for the repercussions, findings from this study showed that they underestimated the amount of pressure experienced because of their highly stigmatized relationship; approximately half of the participants reported intense pressure by family and peers as a cause for the termination of the relationship. Leong's relationship with a FSW lasted only 3 months; when he ignored the advice from friends, his friends informed his family members about his relationship with a FSW which led to heated argument and threats to disown him if he continued with the relationship:

My friends thought I was just crazy. They continuously pointed out the problems with the relationship and how it would never work . . . I began avoiding them. . . . I knew I had to choose between my friends and my "girlfriend" and I choose her. . . . the real problem came when my family got word of my "girlfriend's" background. . . . friends can ignore. Family cannot. . . . she understood my situation she's Chinese too. . . . until now I feel that it was my lack of courage that ended the relationship.

Leong's case is unique because of the involvement of his family; all other participants kept their relationship with their FSW away from their families, only revealing their relationship to like-minded peers believing that they would better understand their situation; this, however, was not the case. Ngah's peers felt that he was being irrational and illogical to risk his marriage for a relationship with a FSW and they began avoiding him to distance themselves from the fallout of the inevitable failure of the relationship. However, Ngah continued his relationship with his FSW until she left him to return to China; for some participants, their voluntary isolation from family and friends leave them little choice but to pursue the relationship to its bitter end, leaving some like Chris regretful of their decisions: ". . . savings gone, and nothing to show for it. . . . Never will I fall for the trap of

these women, . . . it is true what people say it is all about how much money they can get.” Not all participants regret their relationship, instead they report positive personal development as a result of their failed relationship; Ngah’s fulfillment of his deeply rooted desire for his “ideal” woman justified his relationship:

You must understand I was living the dream that I never had when I was younger. It felt fantastic walking with a hot chick in the shopping mall, going for movies and stuff. You feel like a total stud. My friends were laughing at me but I’m the one fucking this hot ass.

Ngah’s relationship served to boost and reinforced his masculine self-image. Ray was disappointed by the sudden loss of contact even though he knew it was unlikely to go the distance; his narratives attempt to justify his “poor” decision through his monetary contributions and playing up his role as her savior in time of need:

. . . friends say I’m stupid. Sometimes I feel they are right but I also know that I helped her in her time of need. . . . at least I know I did some good.

Others like Wan who was involved with a FSW for 3 months viewed his experience in a positive manner even though his relationship with his regular FSW ended when she returned to her home country:

Firstly I would not be married now . . . I realized [through my relationship with my FSW] that all women are in it for the money. . . . she made me realize that to a woman security is what matters, in the past I would have never thought that I would agree to marriage setup by my parents. . . . but if I can love a FSW I’m sure that I can learn to love my wife.

Wan’s deference to the selection of a partner by his parents suggests a greater compliance with familiar pressures and traditional marriage arrangement although highly uncommon but still accepted by the Malay community.

Pushing the Boundaries

Although all participants use the personal information they have obtained from their regular FSW as proof of their intimate relationship not all are genuinely interested in pursuing a long-term relationship (see Mansson, 2006; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012). Huang, a 42-year-old business owner, reported having relations with two FSWs, and his narratives began with themes revolving around affection and intimacy; however, when his regular began demanding more time and commitment, he committed to the role knowing that it would eventually end. Huang’s strategy takes advantage of the impermanent nature of FSWs: “It was like a real relationship except the sex was better. . . . It ended when she returned to China. . . . now I have another

‘girlfriend.’ One leaves another arrives, that’s the beauty of [FSWs].” For Yann, the excitement of the relationship with his regular FSW is how far he can push the boundaries of commercial sex while still operating within the provision of “bounded authenticity”:

. . . when you have gotten their trust it is easy to get better service. By service I don’t just mean more “action” but it is the personal connection. . . . something you cannot get by just visiting a spa, let me put it this way have you ever had a girl iron your clothes in the nude.

When queried about whose idea it was to get her to iron his clothes, his reply was that she wanted to do it herself seeing as how they had intercourse with their clothes on and he had to go for a meeting later on. Yann’s relationship with his regular FSW leaves him feeling virile, attractive, and powerful; “. . . no one knows she is a [sex worker] for all anyone else knows she is my girlfriend. . . . considering what we do and what I know about her she is my ‘girlfriend.’” Yann uses his relationship as a playground where women not only conform to traditional gender roles but also are highly sexual.

Conclusion

The conditions that exist in Malaysia varies greatly from other studies where legislation that drives sex trade underground and transitory nature of FSWs has resulted in greater inequality in power between FSWs and clients making a “genuine” long-term relationship highly unlikely. Although Sanders (2008b) suggested commercial sex does not necessarily result in corruptive, abusive, exploitation of either party, in this study, the sex worker–client relationships often end with the exploitation of one or both parties.

Clients who involve themselves with FSWs suspending their positions of power take great risk for a chance at “love.” It is unsurprising that participants report they do not feel that their position offers any form of privilege when dealing with FSWs. They feel that they are exposed to similar, if not more vulnerable, situation as their FSWs; their role as client is illegal and is not afforded any form of protection if caught. Participants’ narratives attempt to project an image of being “victimized” as a means to deflect their relationship failure with FSWs which would result in ridicule and negative self-image (Worchel, 1984). These findings are parallel to that reported by Bernstein (2010) where sex workers attempting to transgress the preset boundaries are met with negative repercussions; in this study, it is the clients who are “punished.” Findings in this study are similar to that reported by Milrod and Weitzer (2012) where participants in a relationship with FSWs struggle to gauge the authenticity of the intimacy and commitment of their regular FSW to the relationship. Some participants adopt a strategy which takes advantage of the limited time FSWs have in Malaysia pushing the boundaries of “bounded authenticity” by having

short-term relationships that mirror conventional relationship, which suggests a commodification intimacy that lies somewhere in between “bounded authenticity” and the boundary-breaking relationship suggested by Milrod and Weitzer. The conditions which FSWs operate in Malaysia is significantly different and while participants display cues of a conventional relationship, the relationship is constrained by the transitory nature of the FSWs which prevents it from manifesting into a truly genuine long-term conventional relationship.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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Author Biographies

Lim Soo Jin has just completed his thesis for his PhD in Social Science from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (Malaysia) where he is also working as a lecturer in the Department of Media.

Cheah Shu Xu is working as a lecturer in Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (Malaysia) in the Department of Corporate Communications. Her area of specialisation is in New Media Technology.