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Ethical Consumption? Normative Consciousness by Prostitution Clients

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In the past two decades, some fundamental changes occurred on the demand side of commercial sex work. Clients in prostitution markets before the 1990's were dependent on their own experiences for information and exchanges of ideas and experiences. Given the stigmatized nature of consumption of commercial sex, this was and is a matter only discussed in quite confidential personal relationships. From the end of the 1990's on, a number of impressively popular user-generated websites have arisen with reviews and discussions of exchanges with sex workers. This changed the information, the power balance, the socialization and norm construction in prostitution fundamentally. This contribution attempts to document this important shift of the internet as a new locus of socialization for contemporary clients in prostitution in the Netherlands and Belgium. The analysis is based upon a qualitative analysis of websites with discussions and reviews of sexual encounters, the major aspects of prostitution exchanges are discussed: searching and information, bargaining, price formation, types and diversity of sexual services and prostitutes, fraud, abuse and exploitation, policy. This way the constitutive elements of the social construction of norms about these exchanges are reconstructed.

Prof. Stef Adriaenssens holds a PhD in Social sciences, and teaches at the University College Brussels. His main, research area is the informal economy.