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# Examining the Virtual Subculture of Johns

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## Abstract

The growth of the Internet and computer-mediated communications has enabled the formation of a variety of deviant subcultures online, particularly among sexual deviants. This qualitative study examines the subculture of the male heterosexual clients of sex workers by exploring their argot. Using a sample of posts from Web forums in ten U.S. cities, this study identifies three subcultural norms that structure beliefs and attitudes about sex work among johns: experience, commodification, and sexuality. The influence of computer-mediated communications on the formation of subcultures and argot are explored as well.

## Keywords

computer-mediated communications, sex workers, argot, johns, prostitution, deviant subculture,

A great deal of research has considered the role of the Internet in facilitating all manner of sexual deviance. Computer-mediated communications allow individuals to easily engage in sexually explicit discussions (Mills 1998), view pornography (Lane 2000; Buzzell 2005), as well as engage in more serious acts including pedophilia and child pornography (Durkin and

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Bryant 1995, 1999; Quayle and Taylor 2002). In addition, the Internet has engendered the formation of deviant subcultures that were otherwise unlikely or limited in the real world (see Quinn and Forsyth 2005). Individuals can connect with others who share their interests to find social support and information sharing (see Leiblum 1997). Virtual environments provide an opportunity for deviants to connect and communicate without fear of reprisal or scorn, though their actions may often take place in the real world (Quinn and Forsyth 2005; Holt 2007). For example, computer-mediated communications play an important role in the eunuch culture, where men seek to be castrated or find others who share their interests (Deshotels and Forsyth 2007).

Recent research has begun to document the impact of computer-mediated communications on the way people socialize and define their experiences both online and offline (see Hine 2005). These types of investigations include a line of research examining the online activities of those involved in the illicit sex trade in the real world (Holt and Blevins 2007; O'Neill 2001; Sharpe and Earle 2003; Soothhill and Sanders 2005). In fact, the Internet and computer technology have been co-opted by the illicit sex trade to offer a vast array of sexual services to individuals around the world (Lane 2000; Quinn and Forsyth 2005), including escort services (Sharpe and Earle 2003; Hughes 2003) and sex tourism (DeCurtis 2003; Hughes 2003). Similar evidence has been identified concerning traditional heterosexual street prostitution, as the customers of prostitutes utilize Web sites and forums as a means to discuss prostitution and the sex trade in cities around the globe (Holt and Blevins 2007; O'Neill 2001; Sharpe and Earle 2003; Soothhill and Sanders 2005). Computer-mediated communications allow johns to connect virtually, without the need for offline interactions that are often eschewed due to embarrassment or shame associated with paying for sex (Holzman and Pines 1982; Best and Luckenbill 1994; McKeganey and Barnard 1996). Multiple Web forums operate where johns share information about the sexual services available in a given area as well as their personal experiences with providers (Holt and Blevins 2007; Sharpe and Earle 2003; Soothhill and Sanders 2005; Weitzer 2005). Johns provide detailed information on the location of sexual services on the streets and indoors, as well as ways to identify specific providers and data on costs and practical experiences with prostitutes and sex workers.

These Web sites and forums have also fostered a virtual subculture of johns where they can connect with others interested in the sex trade (see Holt and Blevins 2007; Sharpe and Earle 2003). Few researchers have, however, explored the norms, values, and beliefs of the emerging virtual

subculture of johns and its relationship to real-world offending. This study attempts to explore the subculture of the male clients of female prostitutes through a virtual ethnography exploring the dynamic use of argot between johns online and its role in communicating the norms and values of this emerging online subculture. Examining this subculture has significant benefit, as we may begin to understand the relationships that drive traditional male-female sex work. In addition, this study can improve our knowledge of the client side of sex work, which is relatively underexamined (see Weitzer 2005). In turn, these findings may benefit future explorations of other forms of paid sexual encounters. Thus, this analysis will explore the subculture of johns through an exploration of the language and terms used in virtual interactions between heterosexual johns in a sample of Web forums from ten U.S. cities.

## **Johns, Prostitution, and the Internet**

The increasing virtual connections between johns have affected the relationships and social organization of this generally lone form of deviance (Best and Luckenbill 1994; Holt and Blevins 2007; Sharpe and Earle 2003). Most prostitution takes place offline in discrete, transitory interactions between a customer and provider (Holzman and Pines 1982; Best and Luckenbill 1994). The typically individual interactions, along with the embarrassment and fear associated with paying for sex, hinder the formation of a subculture between the customers of sex workers (Holzman and Pines 1982; Best and Luckenbill 1994; McKeganey and Barnard 1996). The Internet and computer-mediated communications have, however, enabled the creation of an online subculture of johns focused on sharing information in pursuit of sexual services while minimizing exposure to law enforcement (see Holt and Blevins 2007; Holt, Blevins, and Kuhns 2008; Sharpe and Earle 2003). Nonetheless, few studies have explored the norms and values that are espoused in this virtual subculture and the ways that johns perceive sex workers, law enforcement, and other johns.

One way to understand a subculture is to examine the unique language, or argot, used by its participants. Argots are specialized and secret languages within a subculture that serve to communicate information to others as well as highlight the boundaries of the subculture (Clark 1986; Einat and Einat 2000; Hamm 1993; Hensley et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2006; Kaplan, Flores Farfan, and Kampe 1990; Lerman 1967; Maurer 1981). Argots are composed of a variety of phrases and acronyms and language, including existing words that develop special meanings, or neomanticisms, and

completely new words, or neologisms (Clark 1986; Johnson et al. 2006; Kaplan, Flores Farfan, and Kampe 1990; Maurer 1981). Those who correctly use the argot when speaking to others may indicate their membership and status within the subculture (see Dumond 1992; Halliday 1977; Hensley et al. 2003; Maurer 1981). This specialized language also functions to conceal deviant or criminal activities and communications from outsiders (Johnson et al. 2006; Maurer 1981). Thus, argots provide great insights into a subculture and its participants.

To that end, there has been limited research on the argot of prostitutes and their customers, due in part to the individual nature of sex work (see Maurer 1939; Best and Luckenbill 1994). Providers and customers tend to operate alone and share transitory connections with others (Maurer 1939; Best and Luckenbill 1994). This lack of organization in sex work precluded the need for a unique argot for either the prostitute or client (Maurer 1939). In fact, the few special terms of the sex trade have entered popular slang due to the long-standing nature of prostitution generally (Maurer 1939). For example, several terms are used in common parlance to derogatorily describe sex workers, such as *ho* or *hooker*. Similarly, the customers of sex workers are often referred to as *tricks* or *johns* (see Milner and Milner 1972).

The Internet has, however, provided a means for johns to discuss all facets of the sex trade (see Holt and Blevins 2007; Sharpe and Earle 2003; Soothill and Sanders 2005). In fact, the customers of prostitutes use a number of Web forums and sites to describe the process of seeking out paid sexual encounters. Johns posted information on the physical appearance of prostitutes in some detail, as well as their attitude and behavior during sex acts (see Holt and Blevins 2007; Sharpe and Earle 2003; Soothill and Sanders 2005). The posters also describe the negotiation process with prostitutes and the location where any sexual encounter took place (see Holt and Blevins 2007; Sharpe and Earle 2003; Soothill and Sanders 2005), as well as detailed information on any risks or safety concerns they had, whether from the sex worker or the community at large (see Holt and Blevins 2007; Holt et al. 2008).

Though few have considered the subculture of johns, research has identified a unique phrase, *girlfriend experience*, that gives some indication of what johns value and emphasize in virtual communications with others (Sharpe and Earle 2003, 50; see also Holt and Blevins 2007; Soothill and Sanders 2005).<sup>1</sup> This term encapsulates the importance that johns place on enthusiastic sexual partners who make the experience seem a consensual, unpaid sexual relationship (see Holzman and Pines 1982; Sharpe and Earle 2003, 50). Girlfriend experiences are the ideal for a john as they represent

an experience that is not often achieved in paid sexual encounters (see Holt and Blevins 2007; Sharpe and Earle 2003; Soothill and Sanders 2005). This term provides some insight into the values and beliefs johns communicate to other subcultural participants, though it is unclear what other terms exist in the argot of johns and what this may tell us about their subcultural norms and values. Thus, this study will attempt to explore and detail the subculture of johns through their argot using data from a sample of ten Web forums from around the country. The findings can expand our knowledge of the relationships between clients and providers in the sex trade and the dynamics of virtual subcultures.

## Data and Methods

Analyses of computer-mediated communications have become common over the past decade. Scholars have begun to examine online interaction, the structure and content of this type of communication, as well as how virtual contact fits into social life in the real world (see Hine 2005). While researchers should recognize the potential differences between online and real-world communities, many of the same methods may be effectively used to analyze social interactions (Hine 2005; Lindlof and Shatzer 1998). In the case of this study, we sought out a sample of ten city-specific public Web forums run by and for male customers who visit female prostitutes.<sup>2</sup> Web forums are online discussion groups where individuals can discuss a variety of problems or issues. They are composed of posts where individuals ask a question or give an opinion. Other people respond to the remarks with posts of their own to create a running conversation. Since posters respond to the ideas of others, the exchanges present in the posts of a forum may “resemble a kind of marathon focused discussion group” (Mann and Sutton 1998, 210). As a result, Web forums demonstrate relationships between individuals and provide insight into the quantity and quality of information exchanged between johns.

The forums identified for this data set were initially identified on the basis of prostitution arrest rates. Specifically, the ten cities selected for this sample had the highest rates of arrest for prostitution based on a Scripps Howard analysis of the FBI’s 2002 *Uniform Crime Report* (Hargrove 2005). The study examined prostitution arrest rates for all agencies that reported at least one prostitution arrest in 2002. This analysis of 269 agencies compared the number of arrests against the city population and identified ten cities with the highest rates of prostitution arrests (Hargrove 2005). This is the most recent city-level analysis of prostitution arrest data available, and it identified the

following cities: Elizabeth, New Jersey; Atlanta, Georgia; Hartford, Connecticut; Inglewood, California; Dayton, Ohio; Chicago, Illinois; Fort Worth, Texas; Memphis, Tennessee; Baltimore, Maryland; and Las Vegas, Nevada. The sampling strategy provides a glimpse into prostitution across the United States, as most all regions of the country are represented.

This city sample was then used to develop a purposive yet convenient sample of Web forums from the large number of Web sites offering forums for johns in every state in the United States and around the globe. Due to the volume of online content, a Web site was sought that had active forums for all ten cities. Additionally, a site with a large number of existing or archived posts was sought since frequent posts suggest high activity and use. A publicly accessible site was also desired, because it would not require individuals to register with the site to examine posted content. As a result, anyone can access the forum without the need to interact with posters, reducing the potential for researcher contamination or bias (Silverman 2001). Thus, the research team did not interact with any of the subjects who post in these forums. Instead, we acted as strict observers within these forums. Consequently, researchers took on the role of complete observers for the analyses.

Only one site met these criteria, and all posts from each city forum for 2005 were collected to create a consistent data point.<sup>3</sup> This strategy provides a significant amount of data, though it may skew the findings due to lag effects from three-year-old arrest data. The landscape of sex work in the cities may have changed in the intervening years by law enforcement, population shifts, or other social factors. This problem is not easily rectified, yet it is important to note that most of the cities included in this sample are major population centers where illicit sexual markets would be difficult to completely eliminate. Hence, the forum posts should still illustrate the ways johns share information to identify and facilitate prostitution.

Another important potential weakness that must be addressed is that some users may have falsified posts, limiting the accuracy of the data. Yet the rules and structure of the forum reduce the likelihood of false posting. Since the forum exists as a conduit for information, individuals have little to gain by providing inaccurate information. In fact, other users were quick to note and deride posters who gave false comments. Thus, the posts appear to be generally valid and provide significant insight into the nature of prostitute and johns.

To create the data sets, the 2005 post archives for each city were copied, pasted, and saved to a Word file for analysis. This strategy generated a copious amount of data, totaling 6,899 posts, and a range of user populations (see Table 1 for details). The files were printed and analyzed by hand using

**Table 1.** Descriptive Data from Forums

City	Total Number of Posts	User Population
Atlanta	711	179
Baltimore	1,840	488
Chicago	712	208
Dayton	183	48
Elizabeth	247	78
Fort Worth	253	64
Hartford	480	84
Inglewood	763	168
Las Vegas	599	182
Memphis	1,111	332

grounded theory methodology to identify specific terms within the argot of johns and their role and function in this subculture (see Corbin and Strauss 1990). Terms and meanings were inductively derived from the repeated appearance of a specific phrase or idea in the data. The value of each term is derived from positive or negative comments of the respondents. In turn, theoretical links between these concepts are derived from the data to highlight its role within the subculture of johns.

## Findings

The analysis was conducted to critically explore the subcultural norms and values of the male customers of female prostitutes through the argot used online, utilizing passages from the data sets as appropriate. Based on the analysis, the virtual subculture of heterosexual male johns is shaped by three interconnected subcultural norms: experience, commodification, and sexuality. These norms generate justifications for behavior, affect attitudes toward prostitution and sex work, and structure identity and status within the subculture. The contours and connections of these norms are discussed in the following sections, utilizing quotes taken directly from the data. These quotes may include spelling errors common in online communications (see Mills 1998).<sup>4</sup>

### Experience

The subculture of johns online placed significant value on the notion that paid sexual encounters are normal and nondeviant. In fact, those who



visited sex workers placed significant value on their experiences and knowledge of the sex trade. This was exemplified in the variety of terms used to identify individuals who exist within and outside of this subculture. These terms reflect the key role of argot in defining the identity of subcultural participants and the general boundaries of the culture (see Einat and Einat 2000; Johnson et al. 2006; Kaplan, Flores Farfan, and Kampe 1990; Maurer 1981). For example, in American society, the customers of prostitutes are often called “johns” or “tricks” (Scott and Dedel 2006). Users in the forums, however, avoided these potentially derogatory terms entirely. Johns used one of three different terms when communicating about themselves or other individuals that seek the services of prostitutes: *mongers*, *trollers*, or *hobbyists*. For example, a user in the Inglewood forum described a successful night identifying and soliciting several prostitutes and closed by writing, “I cant wait to monger again like the sadistic one that I am.” Another Inglewood poster wrote, “Saturday morning, 10:30 am, and it was time for this dedicated hobbyist to pursue another adventure.” Similarly, the Memphis forum user cyrus wrote,

I am new to this site due to the spot, but been a hobbyist for years. I have been and still am a member of several other sites and was not aware of this site until last week. I am grateful that this site exists, and hope to contribute to the site and help the other hobbyists out there.

Thus, the terms used to describe the customers of prostitutes reflect the notion that the customers find nothing wrong in paying for sex. It is simply an interest or pastime that they enjoy. To that end, johns would describe their recent experiences in securing the services of a sex worker, stating that they were *practicing the hobby*, *trolling*, or *mongering*.

Experience played a critical role in gaining status among johns online, particularly the length of time that they had participated in the forums and in the sex trade. For example, a *newbie* or *noob* was an individual who had not been soliciting prostitutes very long. This was exemplified in a post from the Baltimore forum, where the user fistful wrote,

**Newbie Report:** Hey guys, I’m new to this board but not new to the scene. Everyday on the way home from work I travel the clix and cruise through Hamden before heading up 83.

Noobs may receive less respect and status within the forums due to their relative status.

Mongers who were very involved in discussion forums and review boards were often referred to as a *pooner*. This term was meant as a sign of respect and status and was used to identify those with clout in the forums. For example, jester from the Atlanta forum posted a question seeking information about escorts: "I was looking for recommendations about agencies from pooners who have used them . . . I don't need to know details (if you are worried about LE), only about ones that are half-way reliable." Asking for assistance from more senior or experienced members in this fashion could increase the likelihood of information sharing. Thus, active involvement in both the sex trade and online resources played an important role in indicating status among johns across the forums.

Experience also provided johns with important insights about the risks that they faced from law enforcement officers. Specifically, police personnel posed a significant threat as they may either overtly or surreptitiously attempt to arrest johns while seeking out paid sexual encounters. As a consequence, johns used a number of terms to refer to police officers, including *LE*, *elly*, or *Uncle LEO*, meaning law enforcement officer. This was exemplified by a user in the Chicago forum who wrote, "Do use caution, as from time to time Uncle LEO stops thru for a visit in these areas." Similar comments were evident across the forums, as in the following post from the Inglewood forum: "So, on the drive back towards the 405, LE has swept through and had stopped to shake down our girls in the area."

Concern over the presence of law enforcement permeated forum users' discussions and behavior while online. Posters limited the amount of information that they provided and carefully structured their conversations to minimize the impact of law enforcement surveillance. For example, an exchange between users in the Atlanta forum demonstrated how awareness of law enforcement affects online conversations:

GreekFan: We have always known LE looks at this Board and others.

But as indicated, talk is not illegal. Only trusted mongers and PM [private messaging] gets the job done. Watch your back people, always. There is no substitute for that.

Blazer: for all you newbies, elly monitors and POSTS to this board so watch yo' six. They usually ask dumbass questions that make it obvious that they are elly in the first place, like, can you tell me where to go to monger in Cobb, I mean names and numbers please, or \*\*\*\* like that. The danger is ever present, however, and we must stay aware.

Johns were cognizant of the threat posed by law enforcement while on the street and carefully monitored sex workers in an attempt to identify any covert law enforcement officers (see Holt et al. 2008). This was demonstrated in a comment by the user mongerman from the Las Vegas forum who wrote that individuals needed to carefully examine sex worker behavior to determine if they are actually involved with law enforcement:

I realize that the fact that she was “strutting down the street” makes it less likely she was an UC·LEO—but did you follow her long enough to make sure she wasn’t just pacing back & forth on the same block, in full view of her back-up??

### Commodification

Despite johns’ belief that prostitution is an acceptable behavior, they recognized that their encounters would not occur without an exchange of money for sex. As a consequence, the argot of johns demonstrated the significant belief that sex workers and sexual acts were a commodity. For example, johns did not use common derogatory slang like *hookers* or *hos* or technical terms like *prostitute*. Instead, they used terms and acronyms for the various types of prostitutes and establishments where one can pay for sex. This language may be perceived as respectful and a way to neutralize the negative perspectives of their practices, mirroring their use of terms such as *mongering* or *hobbying*. At the same time, these terms treat sex workers as items, rather than individual human beings. For example, posters used the term *streetwalker* or *SW* to describe a prostitute who works the streets looking for clients. Posters would also use a letter to denote the race of the sex worker, including *WSW* for white; *BSW* for black; and *LSW*, *HSW*, or *MSW* for Hispanic. These combinations were evident across the forums and were a common part of the argot of johns online. This was exemplified in the following post from the Inglewood forum: “Prarie, a week & 1/2 ago I was driving by 111th & saw 5 SW’s. 3 BSW’s & 1 WSW & 1 LSW. I’ve never seen them before on Prarie much. The WSW was pretty thick & was hangin out by that new hotel near the 105 fwy.” In addition, posters in the Las Vegas forum described seeking out prostitutes inside of casinos, who they referred to as *Casino Workers* or *CWs*. A good example of this term came from the user highrollar who wrote,

A lot of casino workers who have not had all their financial needs met will head over to what used to be known as the “lamp bar” at the

Aladdin, similar to the “day old” rack in the bakery section of the supermarket where sweet delicacies are offered for a discount just before their pull date expires . . . CWs sometimes will not leave the hotel they are working, and sometimes will, but ladies from Aladdin’s lamp and obviously from the pedestrian bridges are prepared to join you for a taxi ride within the Strip.

Similar terms were used to refer to other sex workers, such as *call girl*, *escort*, or *CG* to refer to a sex worker employed through an escort service or *agency*. For example, an individual in the Dayton forum described wanting to find sexual services from escorts due to severe inclement weather:

OK gentleman, if you had not noticed lately it is cold and icy. Winter is upon us. Now the question is; where do I play? I know an escort north of Dayton that when I saw her friday, she told me that she is going to be running a special in the next week or so for 125/ hr. She is cute 22 yr old and stands 5’5 and about 130 lbs. I have seen her a few times over the last year or so and she does her job well. Infact, I think I am going to start an escort review thread for the Dayton area to help us all thru the winter. . . . There are more escorts in the dayton area than you might think. There is one that is 400/hr but the majority of them are between 200-250.

Johns also regularly described the build and physique of sex workers in a way that emphasized the view of sex workers as services or goods rather than human beings. For example, some johns used the term *spinner* to refer a petite female. This was exemplified by an exchange in the Dayton forum where individuals discussed the meaning of the term *spinner*:

Purplehead: I picked up what looked to be a young thin WSW just south of McDs . . . She looked really good, about 100 lbs, and very cute, dark hair . . . a definite spinner..

Meangene: . . . what is a spinner?

Wadd: a girl who is so tiny in proportion that you can put her on top of your bone and “spin” her like a top.

Overweight or heavysset prostitutes were often referred to using the term *big beautiful woman*, or *BBW*. This was demonstrated in a post from the Atlanta forum, where the user nutterman described a prostitute stating, “Nice girl, easy to set up with, etc. Her measurements though are way off from her

post. She is clearly BBW. Not sure how Wraith calls her thin. She was easily 200 lbs+. Cute face, great attitude, good price but a big girl.” Terms such as *girl next door* or *GND* were also used to describe sex workers’ appearances, as in this comment from the Memphis forum: “Susan is not a small woman, but she is nowhere near as large as someone reported on here. Beautiful face, great BBBJ [oral sex without a condom] . . . Like the girl next door, except with benefits.”

Johns also utilized a variety of terms to evaluate sex workers that reflect the notion of sex workers as commodities with an inherent value. Specifically, johns would also use the term *mileage* to refer to women whose appearances reflected the physical and emotional toll that sex work takes on prostitutes (see also Heigard and Finstad 1992). The use of a term like *mileage* that is typically used for automobiles is demonstrative of the perception that sex workers are offering a service. This was demonstrated in a post from the Hartford forum, where laydlaw wrote,

On my last loop thru, I passed very close, got a good look at her [a street prostitute] and she looked like she had a bit of mileage on her. Between her hi-mileage looks and her erratic behavior I thought she may have been a problematic date, so I aborted further attempts . . .

In addition to the term *mileage*, johns also utilized a *streetwalker scale* to rate prostitutes’ appearances on a scale from 1 to 10. This ratings system was used to indicate the differences between prostitutes and women not involved in the sex trade, as in the following post from the Chicago forum: “This time I come across a very nice wsw [white street walker]. She would be a 6 on a normal scale, 8 on the sw [street walker] one.” Posters gave low scores to those prostitutes who had been involved in the sex trade for many years or were serious drug users. For example, a user from the Chicago forum posted a description of a prostitute: “Cindy, WSW, face=cracky [due to drug use] 5 body=spinner thin 4.” Higher ratings were given to prostitutes that had been out on the street for a short period of time or took better care of their bodies. Thus, this suggests johns place some importance on the physical appearances of prostitutes (see also Holzman and Pines 1982).

In addition, some posters used a more inclusive ranking system in which the sex workers’ looks, attitude, and service were each ranked from one to ten. The ranking scheme, called *L/A/S*, was used across the forums as a way to inform others about a specific sex worker. A poster in the Atlanta forum provided an example of this code in action, stating,

Saw Michele, Korean provider, around late 20's early 30's. arrived at AMP [Asian Massage Parlor] around 8 30 pm and was there past 10pm.

Rating: L = 6 (nice firm figure and pretty face, nice tan, with "B" cups) A = 8 (after haggling about \$\$) S = 7 (slow start, but really ramped up quickly. She enjoyed the fun, TS was okay, did not was the privates as good as some others)

Such a system clearly reflects the importance of evaluating sex workers as any other good that can be evaluated and purchased.

In keeping with the perception of sex workers as a commodity, a regular topic of discussion in the forums concerned the costs associated with certain prostitutes and/or certain sex acts. Users would often state what they paid for sexual services. Some, however, would mask this issue by stating that they never paid for sex but rather made *donations* to the sex workers. This was evident in posts not only from johns but from escorts and sex workers who would use the forums. For example, an escort posted an advertisement in the Chicago forum:

TOPLESS EROTIC MASSAGE WITH HOT RELEASE (Incall Only)—w4m—22 . Do you love gazing & touching a college girls' boobs? I'm a cute college girl, 23, 44DD-38-42, who offers an erotic & totally satisfying massage with a VERY, HAPPY ENDING!! Donation\$ of \$150 for 30 mins/\$200 for 60 mins towards the charity of my choice.

Posters discussed relations with all types of providers with a range of prices for different sex acts. The descriptions of prices were not usually communicated in plain English but rather in a code using dollar signs or other indices. For example, a single \$ symbol meant \$100, \$\$ was \$200, \$\$\$5 was \$350, and so on. A poster in the Hartford forum described attempting to pay for sex in a strip club, but was dismayed at the cost, stating, "I tried with each girl to secure bj or fs in the champagne room, but no luck. They all wanted \$\$\$ for a half hour, which I would gladly pay, but not without the promise of bj or fs." Anything after a decimal point suggested the cost was less than \$100 and was often discussed in terms of *Jacks* or *Jacksons* (twenties). For example, a user in Chicago described an experience with a prostitute, stating, "then I asked for FS: a donation of 2 jacks." Prices for sex also varied significantly across the sample and were dependent on the services an individual sought. Escorts and strip club workers made much more than street walkers,

and this was demonstrated in a post from the Memphis forum where an individual described negotiating the cost of sex:

I said listen, I'm not an out-of-towner from NYC or LA who think that \$\$ or \$\$\$ is a normal price to pay for a service. This is Memphis, and anyone who's paying more than 2 or 3 Jacksons is getting ripped off for complete full-service in this great town of ours. By the time I hit the interstate, I could find someone just as attractive for no more than 2 Jacksons and a room." I then motioned for her to get out of the car, when she quickly said, "OK OK OK, that's fine; 40 and the room.

Since sex workers provide a service, johns used online resources to share information about sex workers who offered excellent service as well as post warnings about prostitutes, agencies, and other johns that have proven themselves untrustworthy in some way. Some posts mentioned *barracudas*, or prostitutes who sought to shortchange their customers. For example, the user chickmagnet in the Hartford forum wrote, "Anything north of Albany, I'd consider the north end. (and, sorry to say, a place I avoid, with the recent shootings & gang activity, to say nothing of a few baraccudas I made the mistake of picking up. \$1.00 down the tubes!)" Other terms, such as *Cash and Dash (C&D)*, or *Rip Off Bitch (ROB)*, all refer to a provider who takes the money and leaves without providing any services except maybe a lap dance. In fact, the forums played an integral role in reducing the likelihood of a negative experience, as demonstrated in the following post from the Inglewood forum:

Eventually, when all of the true players get sick of guys like this, and others, we will be relagated to the old days before the internet, when you end up going with 90% ROB's, for every 10% of good experiences, with no other way to exchange information.

For escort services, johns warned each other about cases of *bait and switch (BS)* and *nongenuine photos (NGP)*, which are cases in which the person that shows up is different from the one who was promised or advertised. This was evident in a post from the Las Vegas forum, where the user spankman wrote,

Answered an ad for a black provider out past the bus lines around Trop and Grand Canyon. Got to the place, thinking it was BS,

because the area's abodes were still under construction and the ones completed seemed only half-filled. Ready to turn around when she [a white woman] came out and I recognized her . . . Thought it was a bait and switch, but asked if any black provider was around per the ad. She yelled upstairs and I saw this young girl, 18 who was kinda cute and a little plump. But overall about a 6 or a 7. I figured I'd at least get some kind of reward for my labor so I stayed, and we negotiated in her room.

In keeping with the significance of sex work as a product, johns regularly communicated about the locations, resources, and publications that could be used to locate sex workers. For example, a variety of terms and acronyms were used to communicate locations and resources to find prostitutes. Users often referred other johns to *ASPs*, or alternative sex and prostitute newsgroups, to identify escorts and sex workers. A range of electronic *ASPs* were available, including craigslist (*CL*), an online classified advertising medium, to identify escorts. This was demonstrated in a post from d-boi in the Chicago forum:

**CL** . . . Craigslist is hit or miss. I try to avoid the If it looks to good it's a scam ad. The girl I saw was Emily and she was \$100. She was located in the loop. From the looks of it, she has moved and raised rates. Here's her ad from yesterday: This is her ad for sure.

One of the most salient terms in the argot of johns that suggests sex work is a commodity is the use of the phrase *mall*. In this argot, a mall was a Web site devoted to advertising a variety of different online escorts and agencies. This was exemplified by a user in the Atlanta forum:

[A web-based service] is the best for finding upscale escorts or shall I say ones that charge 200 up. There are links to the escort "malls" where window shopping is done. Reviews are a good guide, you just need to know how to decide which are true and which may not be true, 1 or 2 reviews on a lady is hit or miss, unless you know the reviewer and has a good track record . . .

Johns would also discuss real-world outlets to identify sexual providers, such as strip clubs or *SCs* where dancers would provide sexual services. Massage parlors, or *MPs*, were also commonly used. Users usually would not typically provide the exact location or name of the establishment under



discussion. Instead, they would make it clear that such places were available in the area and would often offer to give more specific information to trusted posters through *private messages* or *PMs* through the forum e-mail system.

Discussions about the locations of streetwalkers were more precise than those about business establishments. Forum users sometimes used street names and described exact locations and intersections where streetwalkers could be found. General terms were also used to describe the general areas where prostitutes could be found such as *the loop* or *the stroll*. For example, a poster in the Hartford forum wrote,

The old dutch point areas is dead . . . but beyond that the stroll is relatively unchanged for the southend in years. Relatively. This is a city, and opportunities can pop up in the oddest of places . . . There are 3 or 4 other strolls besides this through the city.

These terms referred to places where streetwalkers are known to frequent, and the users seemed to assume that experienced johns would know where these areas were located. As a whole, these phrases emphasize the perception that prostitution is an economic exchange of goods for money.

## Sexuality

The perception that sex is a commodity is also directly tied to the third sub-cultural norm: sexuality. Sex work is driven by customer demand, and the subculture of johns emphasizes the importance of sexual acts and the way that sex is experienced with prostitutes. In fact, the majority of terms in the argot of johns pertain to sex acts and sexuality rather than subcultural actors. Many of the posts in the forums were dedicated to depicting the types of sex acts and services that certain prostitutes would provide.<sup>5</sup>

When talking about their experiences with prostitutes, johns would often graphically detail what the provider would or would not do. For example, sex workers in some venues would only perform oral sex, such as strip club workers. Some johns used common sexual slang to describe sexual acts, such as *blow job* for oral sex. Others, however, preferred to use a distinct series of code words to describe sexual encounters and positions that are tied to the notion of sex work as a paid service. Regular intercourse was referred to as *FS* (full service), *CFS* (covered full service or intercourse with a condom), *BBFS* (bare back full service or intercourse without a condom), or a *full meal deal*. Anal sex was described by terms such as *Greek*,

*Mediterranean*, and *RCA* (reverse cowgirl anal). Oral sex followed by any type of intercourse was called *half and half*. For example, the terms *French without*, *southern France*, and *BBBJ* all refer to oral sex without a condom. Many users went on to describe the sexual positions they experienced with a prostitute. *Cowgirl* meant that the female is on top, *mish* is missionary position, and *delta omega gamma* is code for doggie style. A variety of terms were demonstrated in a post from beavaboy in the Atlanta forum detailing an encounter with a sex worker:

After handing over the donation she pulled a quilt out and laid it on the floor . . . On went the cover and she gave me a CBJ for awhile. This was nice . . . She then squatted down on me and rode for awhile. Next was mish and then doggie for the finish. All in all a nice time was had by all.

In addition, some sexual acts with sex workers were considered unique or special and enhanced the overall experience. Specifically, giving oral sex to the prostitute was commonly referred to as *Dining At The Y*, or *DATY*. The unusual act of kissing sex workers on the mouth was also referred to as *DFK*, or *Deep Full Kissing*. Such behaviors, coupled with the attitude and behavior of the prostitute, made customers feel as though they were not paying for the encounter (see Holzman and Pines 1982). Those prostitutes who could provide a sexual encounter that felt like a normal consensual relationship with the customer were said to give a *Girlfriend Experience* or *GFE* (see also Sharpe and Earle 2003; Soothhill and Sanders 2005). This term was well defined by a poster in the Baltimore forum who described an encounter with a prostitute named Trish:

She turned out to be one of the best SW experiences I've ever had. Real GFE. Lots of kissing, DFK, making out kind of thing—it's like we were in jr. high school again . . . She was nice and wet and it seemed like she came twice as I rubbed her. She told me later that I was the first guy to ever "touch" her like that and make her cum. Got down to business, BBBJCIM, lots of moisture- she went to town and I loved it.

These comments all point to the important role that the attitude and demeanor of the prostitute play in the quality of the sexual experience (see also Holzman and Pines 1982).

Aside from narratives concerning the specific sexual activities, johns also depicted the type of experiences they had with certain providers. Some johns were happy with, and often seeking, some type of sexual service and nothing more. For example, the term *no strings attached* or *NSA* was used to describe sexual encounters where no ties were made between the prostitute and the customer. For example, an individual in Atlanta described the value of craigslist providers by stating, "At least with escorts, 'No Strings Attached' really means 'No Strings Attached'!" Furthermore, some johns described seeking out specific sexual sessions at certain times such as *nooners*, where sexual services were sought at lunchtime or early afternoon sessions. This was exemplified in a post from the Chicago forum, where the user jimhat described an interaction with a street prostitute:

[had a] Nooner . . . Picked up a blond SW near Lawrence and Central Park yesterday before noon. 5'8 in her 40's, 6 on the 10 scale. BBBJCIM for .40. Above average technique, but I probably wouldn't repeat.

Based on their preferences and experiences, many johns would recommend their *ATF* (all time favorite) provider to others. Occasionally, they would make statements such as *Your Mileage May Vary (YMMV)*, indicating that the sexual encounter may not be as enjoyable for others. The user jojo in the Fort Worth forum demonstrated the use of this phrase in the following description: "the Maria I mentioned is a short med build HSW who works everywhere from Riverside to Rosedale to Lancaster. She is worth a stop for head but is kind of flaky personality so ymmv." Thus, sex workers play a critical role in the ways that sex is experienced and affect a john's perception of the encounter.

## Discussions and Conclusions

This study sought to explore the subculture of johns online through their unique argot to understand the norms and values that structure the virtual social world of the customers of prostitutes. The findings suggest that the subculture of johns is driven by the interrelated norms of experience, commodification, and sexuality. These norms shape the attitudes, actions, and relationships of johns online and define identity and subcultural boundaries. They also provide justifications for behavior, shape the interests of johns, and emphasize values that can be used to gain status and respect among their peers.

In the context of the subculture of johns, experience plays an important role in structuring the relationships between forum users as well as the boundaries of this subculture. Specifically, johns seemed to judge each other based on their use of the forum and overall knowledge of prostitution. Individuals who spent little time in the forums were referred to as *newbs*, while those with a strong understanding of the sex trade were referred to as *pooners*. In addition, law enforcement officers were clearly outside of the subculture as they sought to arrest or eliminate the sex trade. Thus, these labels indicate the importance of experience to influence the ways others define and view a john's actions (see also Einat and Einat 2000; Hensley et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2006).

In addition, johns placed significant value on sex work as a commodity that is readily available for purchase. Johns regularly discussed the locations and resources at their disposal where sex workers can be found, including various Web sites such as craigslist. The terms used by johns to discuss sex workers also emphasized the perspective that sex workers were viewed as a product. In particular, phrases like *high mileage* conveyed the notion that a prostitute was older, unattractive, or in some way affected by her life in the sex trade. Johns also utilized a unique language to refer to pricing for sexual acts with prostitutes, again reflecting the notion that sex is a product.

The importance of commodification is also tied to the norm of sexuality, as demonstrated through the variety of sexual phrases and terms utilized in discussions through the forums. Traditional sexual acts were commonly referenced by johns, though they used terms such as *full service* to indicate both oral and vaginal sex in one encounter. In addition, the importance of the sexual act experienced with a prostitute provides one of the most critical terms: *girlfriend experience*. Sex workers who could make a sexual exchange feel less like a paid encounter could elevate the experience and increase the likelihood of repeat customers. Thus, the subcultural norms of johns had significant intersections and structure perceptions of sex workers, sexuality, and subcultural norms.

The findings from this study also demonstrate that the argot of johns fulfils several roles within this subculture (Clark 1986; Einat and Einat 2000; Hamm 1993; Hensley et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2006; Kaplan, Flores Farfan, and Kampe 1990; Lerman 1967; Maurer 1981). They used their secretive language to confer about virtually every domain of the illegal sex trade, including where to find streetwalkers and escorts, their appearance and performance, and costs associated with sex. Their unique vocabulary was made up almost entirely of acronyms and neomanticisms, unlike other

deviant argots that utilize neologisms (see Johnson et al. 2006). Furthermore, the argot was consistently applied across the ten different cities, even though there was some variation in the available sexual services. Thus the argot of johns online appeared to be common across the United States based on offline experiences.

The terms and phrases used by johns also appeared to serve multiple subcultural functions, particularly secrecy. The open nature of the forums, coupled with their discussion of illegal and possibly immoral behavior, led johns to carefully manage and disguise their discussions. The use of a distinct argot served to disguise many aspects of their activities from outsiders, much like the argot of marijuana users (Johnson et al. 2006) and prisoners (Einat and Einat 2000; Hensley et al. 2003). In turn, the argot may help johns and sex workers to avoid legal sanctions as well as any social stigma associated with participating in the sex trade. Johns also used argot terms to communicate subcultural values to others (see Johnson et al. 2006; Maurer 1981). Participants in these forums clearly recognized that their actions are illegal and not accepted by larger society. The argot of johns, however, served to express their own beliefs that participation in the sex trade was not wrong (see also Johnson et al. 2006).

Taken as a whole, this study illustrates the significant role that the Internet and computer-mediated communications play in enabling the formation of deviant subcultures. Johns engaged in deviant behaviors in the real world and utilized a unique argot to define their online subculture, suggesting there is a possible overlap in the experiences of individuals in cyberspace and the real world (see Holt 2007; Wilson and Atkinson 2005). At the same time, the data for this study consisted of information obtained only through online forums, making it unclear how this argot is applied in offline environments. It is possible that johns who do not use these types of Internet forums would not be familiar with the argot. Further research, using data from interviews and observations with johns, is needed to explore how frequently johns use the Internet and other sources to obtain information about prostitution and the role that this argot plays in offline environments.

In addition, this study focused exclusively on heterosexual male-female dynamics in the sex trade. Research is needed to explore the online communications of customers of homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered sex work to better understand the subcultural dynamics and relationships that drive this behavior. Such research can improve our knowledge of the overall dynamics of the illegal sex trade, the characteristics and motives of johns, and their communication patterns.

Researchers should also continue to explore and understand the role that the Internet plays in creating online communities that can support, promote, and justify all manner of deviant behavior offline (see also Holt 2007). A great deal of research has considered the ways that computer-mediated communications engender sexual deviance, including pedophilia (see Durkin and Bryant 1995, 1999; Quayle and Taylor 2002; Quinn and Forsyth 2005), transsexual lifestyles (Gauthier and Chaudoir 2004), and computer crimes (Holt 2007). These findings may not, however, be applicable to traditional types of street crime and deviance. Additional investigations are needed to understand the ways computer-mediated communications enhance more serious forms of deviant and criminal behavior offline, such as drug use and gang activity. These types of studies will improve our knowledge of the ways the Internet facilitates deviant communication and crime in the new millennium.

### Appendix *Argot of Subculture of Johns*

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\$	One hundred dollars; every appearance is another \$100, thus \$\$ is \$200
1/2 and 1/2	Sex act involving both oral and vaginal sex
Agency	A company that manages calls, bookings, and advertising for a group of providers
AMP	Asian Massage Parlor
Amazon	A tall and sometimes strong woman who may be masculine in appearance
Analinus	Oral stimulation of anus
Around the world	Anilingus and oral sex; may also include oral, vaginal, and anal sex in one session
Asian	Refers to anal rimming
ASP	Adult Service Provider
ATF	All Time Favorite
ATM	Ass to Mouth
Babyback	A petite, young, attractive Asian sex worker
Bait and Switch	A sex worker whose picture or advertisement is different from their actual appearance
Bareback	Any sort of sex without a condom
Barracuda	An untrustworthy or dangerous sex worker
BBBj	Bare Back Blow Job, or oral sex without condom
BBBJTC	Bare Back Blow Job to Completion, or oral sex without a condom to orgasm

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(continued)

**Appendix (continued)**


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BBBJTCWS (see also Birdwatching)	Bare Back Blow Job to Completion With Swallowing
BBBJWF	Bare Back Blow Job With Facial
BBFS	Bare Back Full Service, or vaginal sex without a condom
BBW	A heavyset or overweight woman
BDSM	Bondage, Discipline, Sado-Masochism
BJ	Blow Job, or oral sex on a man
Blackhole	Anus
BLS	Ball Licking and Sucking
BS	Body Slide, a sexual service offered in massage parlors where woman may slide her body on yours using oil
BSW	Black Street Walker
Butterface	A sex worker who has a seemingly attractive body but unattractive face
Call Girl	An escort who may work for a specific agency
Cash and Dash	A sex worker who takes money from a john but does not provide sex
CBJ	Covered Blow Job, or oral sex with a condom
CC Rider	A full service sex worker who charges \$200 or less
CDS	Covered Doggy Style
CG	Call Girls or escorts
CFM	Come Fuck Me, a look that is given by sex workers
CFS	Covered Full Service, or sex with condom
CG	Casino Girls, or sex workers who operate inside of casinos
CIM	Cum in Mouth, orgasm to completion in a sex worker's mouth
CL	Craigslist, a popular classified ad Web site where escorts have been known to advertise and otherwise promote their availability
Clockwatcher	A sex worker who complains and seemingly keeps time until the session is over
Collar and Cuffs match	A sex worker whose pubic hair matches their natural hair color
Completion	Orgasm, e.g., She gave a bareback blowjob to completion
Cover	Condom
Covered	Sex using a condom or dental dam
Cowgirl (CG)	Sex with the sex worker on top facing the customer
Cruising	Looking for prostitutes while driving
Cups of Coffee	Orgasms with a sex worker
CW	Casino Worker, or a sex worker who works inside of casinos

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*(continued)*

## Appendix (continued)

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Date	A man who patronizes prostitutes
DATY	Dining At The Y, or performing oral sex on a woman
DDF	A sex worker who is Drug and Disease Free
Deep Throat	Oral sex where the whole length of the penis is "swallowed."
Deposit	A provider requires an upfront payment in advance of a session
DFE	Dead Fish Experience, or an unenthusiastic sex worker
DFK	Deep French or Full Kissing
Doggie (see also Doggie Style or DS)	Intercourse where the man inserts his penis while the girl is on her hands and knees
Donation	A payment to a sex worker
Doubles	A threesome with two girls and one male
DSL	Dick Sucking Lips
Ellie	LE, or Law Enforcement
English	Spanking as part of sexual relations
Enhancements	Breast implants
Envelope	Placing a cash payment for a sex worker in an envelope that is left for them
Escort	A woman who is paid for her companionship, usually an upscale prostitute
Face painting	A man ejaculating on woman's face
Facial	Ejaculating on partner's face
Five-O	A police officer (uniformed or undercover)
FJ	Foot Job, where the sex worker stimulates the penis using feet and toes
FL	Free Lance, or a sex worker who does not work for an agency or pimp
Flake, Flaky	Errant behavior where providers do not show up or have scheduling issues
FOB	Fresh Off the Boat, or an Asian immigrant recently arrived in the United States
French	Oral sex on either party
French Kissing	Kissing on the mouth with tongue contact
French Without	Oral sex without condom
FS	Full Service, or complete vaginal intercourse
Full Meal Deal	Vaginal intercourse to completion
Get Comfortable	A saying with sex workers referring to the customer removing their clothes
GFE	Girl Friend Experience, or an encounter with a sex worker that does not seem like a paid relationship, but rather consensual sex in a relationship

(continued)



**Appendix (continued)**


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Glove	Condom
GND	Girl Next Door, or a wholesome-looking sex worker
Greek	Anal sex
Half and Half	Oral sex followed by vaginal or anal intercourse.
Hardwood Floors	A sex worker with little to no pubic hair
Hat	Condom
HJ	Hand Job, or manual stimulation of the penis
HM	High Mileage, or a sex worker who looks old or sickly
Hobby, The	The patronizing of prostitutes
Hobbyist (see also Monger, Troller)	A man who patronizes prostitutes
HSW	Hispanic Street Walker
Incall	An encounter where the customer meets the worker at their location
Independent, Indie	An escort who has no agency affiliation, and manages her own business
Interpreter	A condom
Italian	Rubbing the penis between a sex workers' buttocks
Jack Shack	An establishment that does not offer full service sex, but leads clients to believe that they may be able to purchase such sexual acts
Jimmy Hat	A condom
L/A/S	Looks/Attitude/Service: a subjective ranking system used by johns to evaluate the overall services offered by a sex worker
LBFM	Little Brown Fucking Machine
LE	Law Enforcement
LEO	Law Enforcement Officer
Madame	Female operator of an escort service
Mamasan	Female manager of a massage parlor
Mall, Escort Mall	A Web site that advertises escort service providers of all sorts
Mediterranean	Anal sex
MIB	Man In Blue, or a law enforcement officer
Mileage	A subjective term that describes the appearance and quality of the sex worker
Mish	Sexual intercourse in the missionary position
Monger (see also hobbyist, troller)	Whoremonger, or one who frequents sex workers
MP	Massage Parlor
MPA	Massage Parlor Attendant
Multiple Pops	Having more than one orgasm during a sexual session

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*(continued)*

## Appendix (continued)

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Newbie (see also noob, newb)	A novice provider
NGP	Non Genuine Photos, referring to pictures posted on an escort Web page
Nooner	A lunch-time or afternoon sexual session
NSA	No Strings Attached
Off-the-clock	Activities with a provider that she does not charge for
Outcall	A sex worker who comes to the customer's location
Pearl Necklace	Sex act where a man ejaculates on woman's neck and/or chest
Pooner	An individual who is deeply involved in the pursuit of paid sexual encounters and very knowledgeable and active in prostitution Web forums
Provider	Prostitute or sex worker
Raincoat	Condom
Raw	Sex without a condom
RCA	Reverse Cowgirl Anal, or anal sex where the female is on top facing away from the male
Reverse Cowgirl	Vaginal sex where the female is on top facing away from the male
Reverse Half and Half	Vaginal or anal intercourse followed by oral sex to completion
Reverse Oral	Male performs oral sex on the provider
RMP	Russian Massage Parlor
ROB	Rip Off Bitch, or sex worker who either steals from a customer or takes money without completing the sex act
Russian	Stimulating the penis between the female breasts
Sandbag, Sandbagger	A subjective term for posts that provide unnecessary praise for a sex worker
SC	Strip Club
Self-post	Posts in a forum where a provider or agency poses as a hobbyist to provide a highly positive review of herself to increase business
Shill	A john who provides unwarranted positive reviews for a provider in exchange for discounts or special favors
Sixty Nine, 69	Partners perform oral sex on each other simultaneously
Southern France	Oral sex without a condom
Spinner	An especially petite, thin girl
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
Streetwalker Scale	A scale used to indicate the overall looks of a street prostitute

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(continued)

**Appendix (continued)**


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Stroll	The path or locations frequented by street walkers
Sunshine, Sunny	Sex without a condom
SW	Street Walker
Take care of business	Making a payment to the sex worker
Tipping required	A sex worker who demands more than the advertised price in order to perform a sex act
TOS	Take Out Service, referring to sex with a stripper or other sex worker
Trolling (see also hobbyist, monger)	The act of driving around looking for a prostitute
Umbrella	Condom
Uncle LEO	Law Enforcement Officer
Uncovered	Sex without a condom
VFM	Value For Money
Water Sports	Urination play
Weeklies	Alternative weekly newspapers that provide sexual service listings, including massage and escort advertisements
WG	Working girl, or sex worker
Whoremonger	An individual who habitually patronizes prostitutes
YMMV Girl	Your Mileage May Vary, referring to the different experiences that may be encountered when interacting with prostitutes
Working Girl	A prostitute or other sex worker
WSW	White Street Walker

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**Notes**

1. All argot terms identified in this study are highlighted in italics in the text and detailed separately in the appendix.
2. The Web addresses and names of the groups and users of all sites and forums used are not provided in this analysis in an effort to maintain some confidentiality for the johns groups and forum users.

3. The Web site selected for this research maintained an archive of posts for each city, though each forum had been operating for a different length of time. This made it impossible to use data from 2002, as some of the cities had no posts until 2004. Thus, posts from 2005 were used to ensure a consistent data point across all cities.
4. Johns use some of the same terms that are part of the larger lexicon of general computer-mediated communications (see Mills 1998). For example, forum users commonly abbreviated words or phrases online because it is quicker than typing out entire words. For example, *lol* stands for *laughing out loud*, *r* abbreviates *are*, and *imho* means *in my honest opinion* (Mills 1998).
5. A large proportion of the terms in the argot of johns relate to sexual behavior, though most were used infrequently. Thus, only the most common and regularly appearing terms are discussed in the body of the article, and less frequent phrases are provided in the appendix.

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