

Prostitution in the digital age: a case study for Spain

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Extended Abstract

In the last decade, prostitution has undergone a deep transformation resulting from the widespread use of smartphones and ubiquitous internet access [1]. This is not just a case of moving some of the aspects of interaction and contact (advertising and communication, telephones, services, payment, etc.) to the online world but, rather, a reorganization of the entire practice, with different times and places and with encounters taking place in a different way.

Despite this transformation, prostitution must be viewed as an institution, i.e. as a system with regulated behavioural guidelines that remain unchanged over time. Prostitution cannot exist without third parties being involved in it, organizing it and profiting from it. We are not dealing with a less organized form of prostitution, as if all its intermediaries (rings, pimps, families, madams, etc.) had disappeared and its workers had become independent freelance professionals. Rather, it is a conflict between various forms of prostitution with the addition of new intermediaries (platforms and agencies). Is this new prostitution model a space for equality and sexual emancipation?

In this contribution, by extracting and analysing metadata from 6 contact websites, 2 forums and Google Maps data, a massive exploration of advertisements and reviews of prostitution on the internet has been made [Tab. 1]. A study of close to 443,151 prostitution advertisements and 20,904 reviews has shown that inequalities of gender, age, class and ethnicity clearly affect the online version too.

The use of digital technologies has caused a large proportion of prostitution to move from streets and brothels to other places such as advertisers' or customers' homes, hotels, agencies' premises, or erotic massage shops, which are more likely to go unnoticed by local residents and escape police control. The difference now is the dissociation between the initial contact (digital marketing) and the actual encounter, which is more based on the customer's preferences.

People offering prostitution services have had to learn new languages and a new type of sexual presentation marketing in which full details are provided so that prospective customers can refine their search based on physical aspects, special offers, distance, origin, services offered, and even the availability of free parking or a free drink. This ability to refine their search leads to encounters that match the customers' preferences better and therefore leads to prostitution venues becoming spread out all over the city instead of leaving it [Fig. 1]. Here is where the rising phenomenon of apartments comes in.

In the 1990s, cities had dedicated prostitution neighbourhoods. A number of public policies chased this practice out of cities, leading to rows of neon-lit, out-of-town roadside brothels known as "clubes de alterne". This model is now becoming less prevalent, and opening hours are also changing as a result. The brothel business model is more focused on groups of customers on Friday and Saturday nights. Online advertisements leading to sexual encounters in apartments are used more during the working day and its breaks from Monday to Friday [Fig. 2].

However, the main question is still whether this form of prostitution is nothing more than new forms of subordination and exploitation of women and, therefore, an example of the capitalist patriarchy, or a mere business transaction. The results of the processing of the surveys

carried out in Spain [2,3], added to an analysis of online reviews, shows that 99% of the people seeking prostitution services are men, whereas most parties advertising prostitution services are women (78%-94%), transgender (5%-17%) or male (2%-6%), depending on the contact website concerned.

The age distribution between prostitution seekers and advertisers stands out as a clear mismatch [Fig. 3]. The age range of advertisers spans only a few years, mainly between 18 and 30 years of age, with a peak at 25. The age distribution of customers, on the other hand, is more dispersed, with a median age of 37 or 38 depending on the forum concerned. This age asymmetry logic becomes most worryingly apparent in the exploitation of minors, a practice that is on the rise [4].

In a globalized economy, native women (domestic migrants to cities from rural areas) are displaced and replaced by immigrants from other countries who, in addition to coming from clearly socially disadvantaged areas and families, also have to bear the stigma of being ethnically and culturally different. This distinctive feature clearly shows and reflects ethnic inequality. Médecins du Monde estimates that 80% of the people they treat in Spain are foreign [5]. Our contribution refutes this process of foreignization and replacement of locals with foreign immigrants. Although the percentages reported by Médecins du Monde's report are computed for prostitution carried out in streets and brothels, they are a good proxy to gauge the extent of the online counterpart. The websites studied suggest that between 68% and 75% of these women are foreign [Fig. 4].

The boundaries between buying any item and buying sex are entirely blurred and trivialized on platforms. What type of social relationship is a prostitution-related interaction? Is it simply a sexual encounter in a world in which sexual emancipation has finally been achieved? Is it not just one of many types of sexual encounter? Is trade liberation the same as emancipation? Whatever the answer, in any case, exploring what happens online is going to be key to the detailed analysis of prostitution in the coming years.

References

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Website Name	Count of Ads
Sustitutas	4,691
Slumi	17,192
NuevoLoquo	158,755
Pasion	258,604
Hotvalencia	426
Comunidad69	3,483
Total Ads	443,151

Forum Name	Count of Reviews
Forum PutaLocura	7,455
Forum SexoMercado	13,449
Total Reviews	20,904

Table 1: Table of online ads and reviews of prostitution for Spain

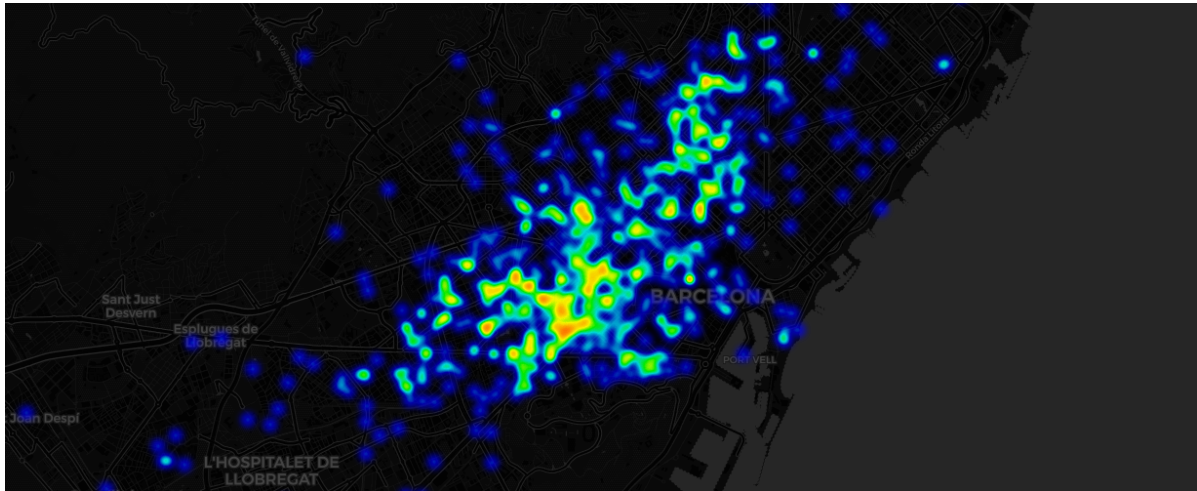


Figure 1: HeatMap in Barcelona generated from the ads on Slumi and Comunidad69. The ads on these websites give the exact coordinates for the meeting place (apartments)

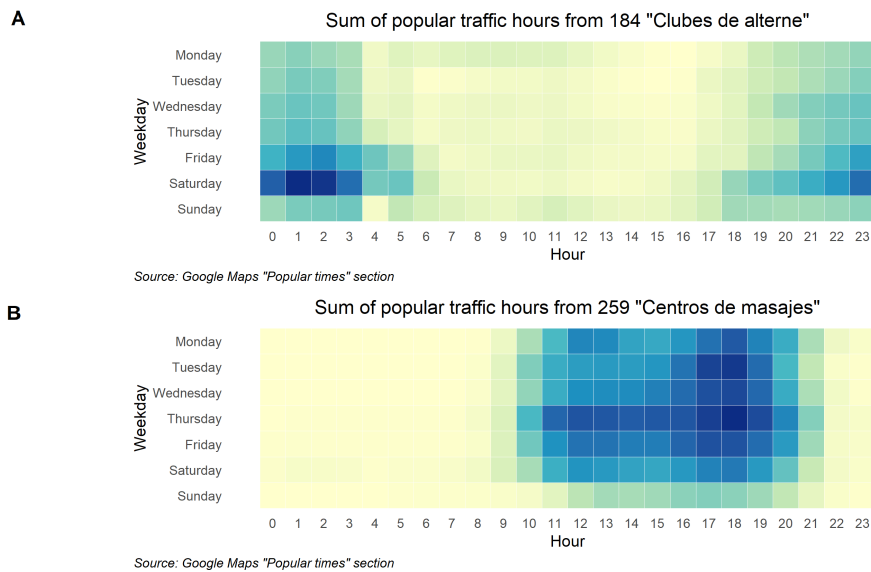


Figure 2: CalendarHeat plot. The dark squares show peak hour traffic in a sample of 184 brothels [A] and 259 erotic massage establishments [B].

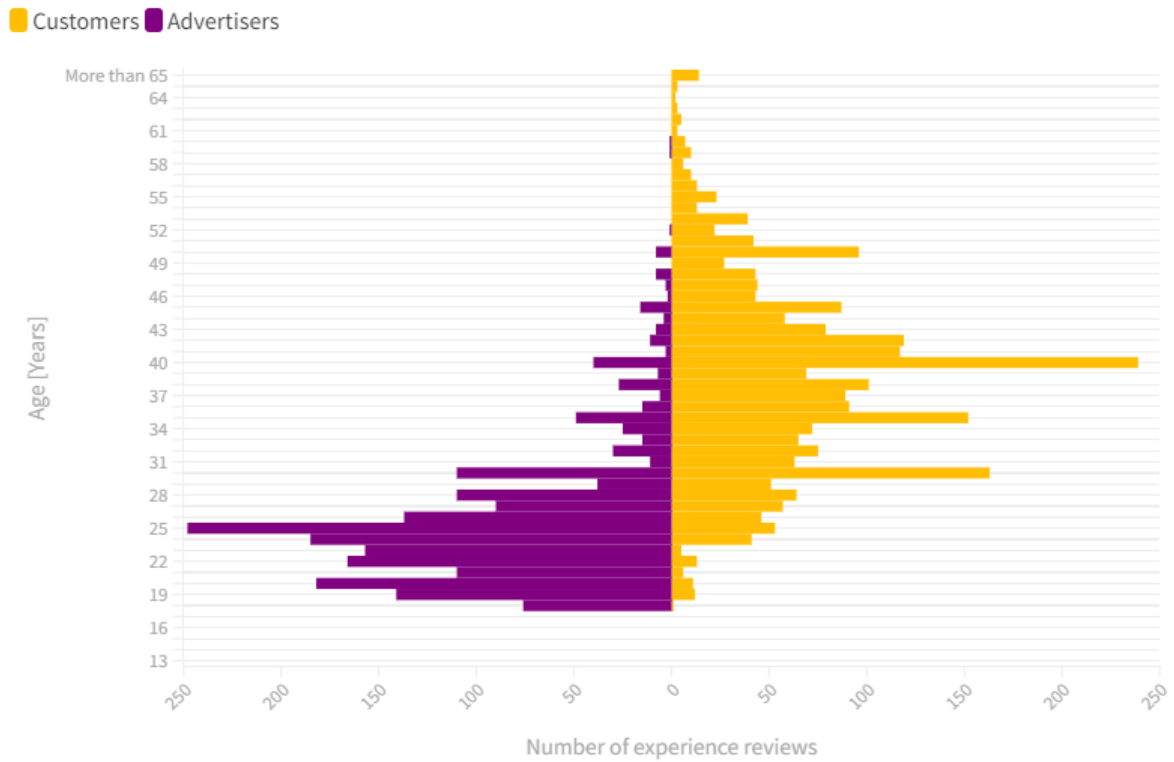


Figure 3: Age pyramid for women in prostitution and prospective clients (data from SexoMercado forum).

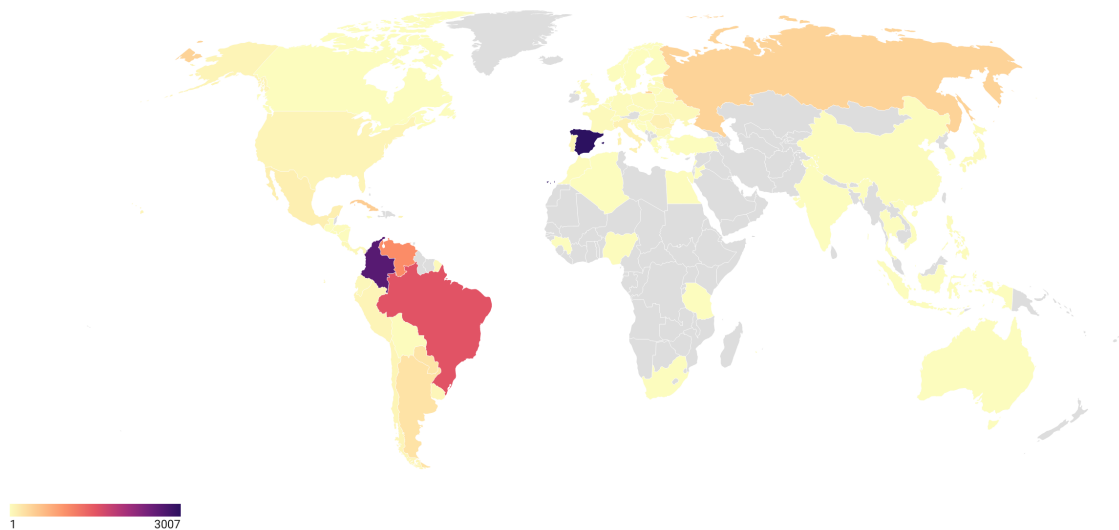


Figure 4: Advertiser countries of Origin Heat Map. Data from the Slumi, Sustitutas, Comunidad69 and Hotvalencia websites. <https://www.datawrapper.de/csndU/>