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## VISUALISATION OF SEX WORK: ECONOMISATION OF “WOMAN” SEXUALITY IN THE ROMA MALE COMMUNITY IN SKOPJE

*Abstract:* Visualisation of sex work has a function to define sexuality and make it “visible” to the needs of potential customers, i.e. *clients*. In this way, sexuality, as well as the sexual/gender identity of the individual, is being economized. In the construction of a visual narrative, sexual workers use visual images that carry “messages”, whose primary role is to stress the role of the sex worker within the context of sexual services being offered.

*Keywords:* visualisation, cyber space, sex work, economization, sexuality, sex/gender identity, face book profile.

Visualisation of sex work within the public cyber space - web pages and social networks - serves to define the sexuality of individuals, but also to make it “visible” using photographs and additional written text for the needs of potential customers, i.e. *clients*. Interlocutor “Loretta”<sup>1</sup> (further in the text only L.) is from the Roma community in Skopje. In this article, we will see how the interlocutor constructs a profile of “woman” offering sexual services. Within the virtual world, she constructs her sexual/gender identity as a “woman” that has been transformed into the identity of “sexual worker” - whose sexuality takes on an economic form offering sexual services for money, or other forms of compensation. This individual approach towards sexuality shows on a micro level “the effects of the economic infrastructure of mass consumption and the values and attitudes of consumer culture” (Brents and Hausbeck 2007: 436). It may also contribute to the view of sex and sexuality as can be seen through economic aspects because “...it historicizes our understandings, situates changes in the economic contexts and the cultural meaning of sex in which sex work occurs” (Brents and Hausbeck 2007: 436).

### Basis for constructing the identity of a “sexual worker”

The basis for constructing the identity of “sex worker” in the local systems of the Roma community in Skopje is located in the “female” identity of individuals in the male community (“men” in the male community recognize them as *buljashi*). That is a crucial segment through which sex/genderness and bodiness are being set up and economised

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<sup>1</sup> Within the text, invented name is being used in order to protect the identity of the interlocutor whose life story is part of this paper.

for the needs of sexual work, and thus “identify the special properties of the relationships between sex workers and their clients” (Zelizer 2010: 156). Therefore, we can freely say that “sex workers live in a world of highly differentiated and well-marked social ties” (Zelizer 2010: 156) that provides them “work terminology” (Kulick 1998: 142) in the local economy. To find out their political importance in the local economic context, it is necessary to consider each of those terms through their practical application. It is further necessary to see how sex workers visualize their own sex work which, in a broader sense, also means the visualisation of her sexual/gender identity, or in the narrow sense, the visualisation of his/her sexuality within the local Roma and/or local Macedonian economic system. In this way, “sex” could be seen “as a product defined, marketed and consumed at specific locales” (Brents and Hausbeck, 2007: 436). Through the visualisation process, the product becomes “visible” in the public space, which is crucial for her sex work. When the interlocutor (known as “L.”) first began to engage in sex work, along with his/her friend, they tried to simulate finding customers, employing the possibilities offered through nightly programs being aired by two privately owned television channels in Skopje (Crvenkovska-Risteska 2013: 99-100). The main function of these channels was and still it is, to provide to TV viewers live communication via SMS text messaging. L.:

*“One evening, me and one of my friends were sitting at home and watching TV and SMS on going in live. Than I tell her: ‘Let send some SMS just for fun’. Than, in fact, we send SMS just for fun, presenting ourselves as girls. And than, I saw, people call us. We did not have any relation with sexual work that time. We just had fun that time. Than, I talked to my friend that it can be a good opportunity for both of us to find the clients from there. Great! I: So you used those on...? L: Yes, even nowadays those SMS still exist. Now I’ll tell you the contents of the SMS we sent: ‘Two transvestites offer unforgettable show in you cars ending with our wet tongues on your hot testicles’; so, that was the SMS content, and than, craziness! Phones we ringing, chaos. Hello... just a moment, there is a call on the second line... It was real chaos, chaos. So that was the way how we did found out clients at the beginning” (VN850124, 2013).*

Today, interlocutor L. does not use this method of finding customers, whereas s/he has permanent customers and believes that it is not necessary to publicly share her phone number. This indicates that s/he speaks for himself/herself with confidence as a realized “sexual worker” with all its own social and economic characteristics.

*“Today I do not use (this method) because I do not want to announce publicly my number. Do not want to be absolutely public, understand? There are all kinds of fools. I’m telling you that again, it is not accepted here, so anyone could set me up, to call me, and me to go there and then to be beaten there. Do you understand? That is why I use mostly e-mail, e-mail ... my phone number has no validity for me anymore, understand? You can break it, throw it or to be purchased in your name, this name, that name ... So, the address, for example, if something happened to me, will lead towards him, I do have his email address, and, in fact, you can find who is via email address” (VN850124, 2013).*

## Economisation of Sexuality

The interlocutor regards him/herself as “gay”, which was confirmed during the early days as a sexual worker when, as a “boy”, engaging in sexual intercourse he got the receptive position (being penetrated by others) and started requiring money from his/her sexual partners.

*“We talked together and she asked me: ‘Why you are dressing yourself like that?’, so I tell her: ‘I’m dressing like that, because, at the moment, I feel myself just like that. So, at the moment I’m doing that, but in the background I’m gay”* (VN850125, 2013).

Amongst the male population in the Roma community, “men” refer to these “boys” using the local term in the Romani language, *buljāshi*, which is offensive to the interlocutor. In sex work, depending on the *customers’* needs, within the position in intercourse, interlocutor L. sometimes defines him/herself as “man”, and sometimes as “woman”. However, in terms of outer appearance, especially regarding clothing, she perceives herself as a “woman”, giving the opportunity of easy earning for everyday living. The main reason why interlocutor L. started doing sex work “as a woman” is based in the idea that women are those who earn more money in this business.

*“We have seen at the beginning that is easy, that all come, that they require it, and then, in fact, we thought that we can earn a much more money, as women, because it is normal that every woman earns more money than men in this job, in a sex work. And we came up with the idea to start ...to do that as cross dressers (‘krosdreserki’); we began to dress ourselves as girls from the age of 17, and began working as cross dressers till nowadays. In fact, we did it for greater earnings* (VN850124, 2013).

In sexual work, L., entered with a sexual experience with boyfriends or with sexual partners: L.: “Did you offer sex for compensation previously”? L.: “No, previously, we had sex just normal, without compensation and money” (VN850124, 2013). The interlocutor, in narrative, develops a personal sexual/gender identity which can be clearly separated period from when the “sex work” has become important and connected with his/her feeling as “woman” as compared to the ones before - when s/he developed his/her own identity as “gay”.

*“... my beginnings are, in fact, from the age of four or five years, when I put on my mother’s heels, than put some make-up, female dresses ...At the age of 14, in fact, I had the first contact with a man, and then I perceived myself, who I am, that, in fact, that I’m more attracted by men and not by women. Since then I realized who I am, I sat down, I thought, I saw myself in the mirror, and told to myself: yes, I am that one, and that’s it. So I solved it since I was small kid...”* (VN850124, 2013).

After the construction of the interlocutor’s “gay” identity, in a context of work, s/he transformed his/her identity in the context of the work as a “woman”, and either, identity of a “sex worker”.

*“Well it was, in fact ...together with my friend, stay out of money, when we decided to have sex for money... So we finished the job, we’ve got the money ... So we*

were gay, homosexuals, and then, we have become sex workers, getting money. Before that we did not have money for anything, without cigarettes, hungry. Then we came up with the idea of why I am going to have sex with someone without of money, when I can earn, saying to someone: Sorry, I'm selling myself for money. So we went out on the street, that time there was a prominent street "...where gay people gathered there..." (VN850124, 2013).

From the interlocutor's narratives, it may be noted that, according to their use of practices associated with sex work, the importance of "gay" identity intersects with the meaning of "sex worker's" identity. Therefore, it can be understood that the sexuality/gender-ness, and the sexiness are a "...complex range of human phenomena, not only somatic practices but also cultural and personal signs of sexual practices and desires" (Middelthon, 2002: 182). The interlocutor got the idea that sexual/gender identity can be economised throughout sexual work from his/her more experienced friend:

"...it is my school from one of my old friends ...She said: "You're gay, so you fuck with all of them without money that is how you can earn". So, even if I would have 40 or 50 years, I tell them: "Sorry, give me money." With everyone I have ...everyone to show my body, so what for? That is how I can use, for example, someone" (VN850124, 2013).

That is how the interlocutor started to develop his/her identity as "woman" in practice. It can be noted in the narrative that s/he speaks for herself/himself as an already realized "sexual workers".

"L. is a communicative person, cheerful, sociable ...a woman, a girl who do, in fact, sex work, she has her own certain clients, so she lives normal life, like any normal person. Only when her customers call, she is being transforming as a woman, not at home, but transformation happens at the customer place, whether it is a hotel or apartment. That is in a due to the fact that here, going outside dressed as woman, is has still not been accepted publicly as somewhere in the West. So L., is afraid, there is a fear that someone might attack or humiliate her on the street. I. So, what does it mean, to transform yourself? L. It means, from male into female. Cross dresser. I. All right, but what does it mean, cross dresser to you? L., I'm dressing myself as female, meaning, 100 per cent female dresses, I do have wig, make-up, heels, everything; right woman" (VN850124, 2013).

This policy in constructing personal sexuality/gender-ness has been directed into the realization of the desire for greater economic income as the main reason for which the interlocutor started engaging in sex work. The second reason that contributed to the development of the identity in that way is the need for experiencing sexual pleasure. That is why, from the very beginning, this "work" is seen as an "easy job". "We saw at the beginning that it is so easy to do, everyone is coming, everybody asks for you..." (VN850124, 2013)

The interlocutor's main idea was to create and maintain his/her own network of regular and permanent customers. In his/her examples, it is a network between his/her as "sex worker" and the *clients* from the Albanian, Turkish and Macedonian community both within the city and outside the city limits of Skopje in the Macedonian context. L: "Previously I had customers from Strumica, Stip. Most often customers coming

*in Skopje are from Strumica, Stip, Tetovo, Gostivar, Ohrid, Bitola. Those are six cities...*” (VN850126, 2013). He avoids clients from the Roma community in the city of Skopje, especially from his neighbourhood, as he fears of possible detection. Since he entered the world of sex work - an “open” scene - over time, the interlocutor has changed his/her basic strategy and began to work in a “closed” scene. “...in Macedonia [I work] only in the apartments. In a closed circle, meaning here in Macedonia (VN850124, 2013) (...) or ... on the street ...or somewhere in nature or in a hotel or at home with them” (VN850126, 2013).

The interlocutor finds his/her customers primarily advertising themselves on Macedonian websites, or contact with potential customers via Skype or Facebook profiles; where they would leave her/him messages.

*“Here in Macedonia I use only Facebook, I have my own Facebook page. I mean, profile, a fake profile ...right, and use that account often. I use Skype because I let the announcement of our Macedonian site and hence I find customers from there. I just open an announcement, not leave a phone number, but in my inbox they are sending me a message via email. So we are negotiating via e-mail, for example, if they ask for photos, so if I see, that the man is interested, I’m giving him my telephone number to arrange for more detailed information. If he is agree, I prepare myself and go, otherwise nothing”* (VN850124, 2014).

He is developing the profile of a “sex worker” through photos that help the construction of a personal visual narrative, which is in accordance with his/her needs. One of the important details within sex work, which is defined by the construction of a visual narrative, is contained in what is on the table in sexual offers. These visual essays include the body or its specific parts, especially “body region of the anus, rectum and prostate” (Middelthon 2002, p.181), which are clearly defined within the “cultural and social benefits ... of the act - to be penetrated...” In the context of what was said, the primary role is the intercourse position, which corresponds to the self-image as a “woman”. This can be illustrated in the narratives about sexual practices: *I.: How do you feel better? L.: As a woman. Passive. Then I feel beautiful* (VN850124, 2013). It is also visible in the constructed visual “messages” from the photos of his/her Facebook profile<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The photographs used in the text are taken from the “sex worker” Facebook profile with his/her permission.



Interlocutor L. perceives him/herself as “woman” who “works” sex work for pleasure “that strengthens confidence and encourages sexual pleasure” (Kulick, 1998: 183); confirming, in that way, his/her “position” in sex work; s/he also defines and confirms his/her sexual/gender identity of “woman” in the Roma male community.



## Globalisation of the identity of a “sex worker”

The construction of the identity of a “sex worker” is in relation to the experiences that the interlocutor faced during his/her sexual work. In his/her case, the three-month work experience as “a woman on the street”, a “transvestite on the street” (i.e. his work as a “cross dresser” in “open scene” in the city of Zurich, Switzerland) had a great influence on him/her. “...*So as a woman I just went out only abroad. I was in Switzerland, Zurich where I worked for three months as a woman on the street, I think like transvestite on the street, as a cross dresser...*” (VN850124, 2013). In L.’s narrative, this experience gets high importance because s/he learned a lot about sex work in Zurich. Later, these lessons became more stabilized through his/her work in the “closed” scene in Skopje. Once interlocutor L. started sex work, one of the ways of finding potential customers was through advertisements. L.: “... *(I) often find customers through advertisements, sending advertisement on Internet. I: “Do you have a special...”? L.: “No, it is one page, in fact it is a web page for all other”* (VN850124, 2013). What is important for these websites is that they are offering opportunities for individuals to find online friends who help each other.

*“There are special pages for gay people “Gay Romeo” and “Gay Royal”, they are, in fact, worldwide web pages. “Gay Royale” is, in fact, mostly German oriented, from Germany. There are mostly Germans, Swiss and Dutch people. There are people from the countries surrounding Germany. Well, you can find, in fact, people there, to find a partner there, to get accommodation, so you can work out of that apartment or that room”* (VN850124, 2013).

Thus, the interlocutor L. got help from one of his online friends, who live in Zurich, Switzerland. This is how his/her desire to start working abroad was realized along that way. “*In fact, we met over the Internet, and he wanted to help me, get me out of here in Macedonia, me to go to Switzerland”* (VN850124, 2013). His friend did not know about his “work”; he knew only that L. was “gay”.

*“...for three days I was just sitting home, and after three days I became crazy. When the Serb saw me as cross dresser he almost fall unconscious because he knew me only as gay, but not as cross dresser ... So, for three days I was walking with him in the city, not telling him, “please, let’s go together there, and there...”; I was just telling him that would like to see the city. Actually, I was already looking for appropriate places where I can live and work; that I work, in safety. So I told him who am I in fact. He was totally shocked when he saw me as a cross dresser. Then he asked me, “Are you this”? I said to him, “Yes, I am. Let’s go into the cafés where such people coming... in a club where people gather...”* (VN850124, 2013).

Once his friend found out that L. works as a sex worker, he helped L. to find an appropriate place to work, but allowed him to use his guest room as a space for sexual favours as well.

*“The man told me, “no problem”, meaning, “you can bring people to my apartment, you’ve got your own room, I will not ask you to pay money for this because you are my guest, and you’ll be my guest...”* (VN850124, 2013).

After L. saw the whole situation, he started sex work in “gay” clubs, where he met his first clients.

*“I went to a club, it was a gay club, I met a man, in fact, he offered himself to me to go to the hotel. I told him that I’m doing this, but I’m doing this for money, so I am going in a hotel with you, but you will pay me 150 Franc an hour. It was not a problem for him. Well, there is how the whole thing began”* (VN850124, 2013).

Once he started sex work, s/he created the virtual profile of a “sex worker” located the city of Zurich in order to more easily find potential customers from the city and surrounding towns. *“Then, through “Gay Romeo”, I made it known that I am in Zurich, so people from Zurich and the surrounding area could contact me”* (VN850124, 2013). After two and a half months of sex work in Zurich, L. returned to his/her home country and continued to engage in sex work, using similar ways of communication with potential customers in the Republic of Macedonia.

*“My friend in Switzerland wanted, in fact, to help me, but I saw that I cannot live without Macedonia, without my company, without parents, so that is why I decided to come back in my born country. There I worked like ... two and a half months as a sex worker”* (VN850124, 2013).

As it is seen in the example of the interlocutor, s/he accepts the fact that s/he sees himself/herself as a “sex worker”. When s/he wants to emphasize the “female” segments in the sexual work, and also intending to show and to confirm its double body features within the local Roma concept as “a male and a female”. At the same time, s/he considers him/herself as a “cross dresser” – an identity that aligns him/her with the global sex/gender identities of “cross dresser”, as well as “transvestites”, “women on the street” - in regards to the importance of body aesthetics seen through “long hair” and “big breasts”. In support of *pro*-globalist identities offered in the “scene”, not removing the “male” bodily features seen throughout the male sex organ, contributes to the existence of the concept of “a male and a female” in all its variations in continuation.

## Conclusion

The visual narrative plays a significant role for the sex worker and his/her work. This paper depicts how one individual constructs a profile of a “woman” who does sexual work and how within the virtual world, sexual/gender identity of a “woman” is being constructed into an identity of “sexual worker”, whose sexuality takes on an economic form. Through the visual narrative, s/he confirms “the position” in sex work; s/he defines services offered. Moreover, s/he confirms the sexual/gender identity of a “woman” in the Roma male community. The identity of the *sexual worker* within the *pro*-globalist scene in the Roma community in Skopje is being formed in regards to experiences faced during the work, but mainly in order to support the local concept “a male and a female” in all its variants.

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