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Using the stigma engagement strategy in interviews with men who pay for sex

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Abstract

The article discusses the development and application of the so-called "stigma engagement strategy (SES)" in interviews with stigmatized study populations, drawing on an interview study with Swedish men who have paid for sex. SES is a qualitative methodological approach that utilizes external sources of stigmatizing narratives, such as newspaper articles and columns, as textual probes within interviews with stigmatized individuals. This strategy can help researchers to 1) concretize public discourse on stigmatized behaviors, 2) bring the broader societal context into the interview setting, 3) create a degree of separation between stigmatizing societal narratives and the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, and 4) contrast different narratives (societal versus personal). As such, this strategy assists in the exploration of how individuals manage stigmatization, enabling researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perspectives. The article contributes to the existing body of studies on the value of deploying material methods in interview research by elucidating how these texts facilitated the data collection and analysis.

Keywords

Interviews, material methods, textual probes, elicitation tools, stigmatization, sex work clients

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Introduction

Stigmatization refers to the process by which individuals or groups are socially discredited, devalued, or excluded due to characteristics, behaviors, or identities that deviate from societal norms (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). Those who experience stigma often face isolation, unable to find solidarity or connect with others, which not only affects their well-being but also creates challenges for researchers. They may be reluctant to participate in studies due to fear of exposure and potential legal repercussions, and they may distrust researchers, fearing judgment or misuse of their information. These individuals can be categorized as "hard-to-reach, hidden, and vulnerable study populations" (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Research involving these populations include difficulties in recruitment, establishing trust, ensuring confidentiality, and preventing harm (Daniel et al., 2023; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2009; Gerassi et al., 2016; Hammond, 2018; Humphreys, 1975; Huysamen, 2015, 2019, 2022; Minichiello et al., 2014; Stardust et al., 2021).

In addition, understanding the lived experiences of stigmatized populations is further complicated by the influence of societal narratives (Lee, 1993; Lee and Lee, 2012). Stigmatizing depictions in legal frameworks and political debates (Lim and Cheah, 2020; Prior and Peled, 2022; Sanders, 2013), as well as the media (Altheide, 1997; Greer and Jewkes, 2005; Jewkes, 2004; Plummer, 2003) shape both public opinion and the self-perception of these individuals, obscuring their realities. As research participants, stigmatized individuals may withhold information or provide socially desirable responses (Adler and Adler, 2003; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Lim and Cheah, 2020; Prior and Peled, 2024). Researchers are thus tasked not only with reaching them but also with critically unpacking the societal narratives that shape their identities and actions.

To bridge the gap between public discourses and the personal experiences of stigmatized populations, this article introduces the "stigma engagement strategy (SES)". This methodological approach uses external stigmatizing narratives – such as newspaper articles and columns – as textual probes in interviews. SES aligns with "material methods" (Woodward, 2019), which incorporate tangible objects or media to engage participants and prompt reflection. SES leverages the materiality of texts to encourage participants to engage critically with societal narratives, offering valuable insights into their lived experiences. Similar approaches, such as object interviews using photos, keepsakes, or personal artifacts, have been shown to stimulate discussion and enrich dialogue, particularly when studying sensitive topics (Collier and Collier, 1986; De Leon and Cohen, 2005; Liebenberg et al., 2014).

This article draws insights from an interview study with Swedish men who have paid for sex, where participants engaged with newspaper articles and columns containing stigmatizing narratives about these activities. The study focused on men who predominately had paid women for sex, though some had other experiences. The stigma these men face may differ significantly from those who mainly pay men or transgender people for sex. Similarly, the newspaper articles and columns used in the study primarily addressed men who pay women for sex, reflecting Sweden's dominant heteronormative public discourse on paid sex as linked to gender inequality, exploitation, and human trafficking (Grönvall, 2024; Johansson, 2022; Johansson and Östergren, 2021).

The potential usefulness of SES emerged early in the study when a participant spontaneously brought newspaper articles on paid sex to an interview, indicating a willingness to reflect on societal narratives. This observation inspired the systematic incorporation of such materials into the study. SES helped to concretize public discourse, situating broader societal narratives within the interview process. It encouraged participants to critically reflect on the divergence between their lived experiences and stigmatizing narratives, as well as how these narratives shaped their views and actions. By creating a degree of separation between the researcher and stigmatizing discourse, SES fostered an open environment for participants to share their realities. Moreover, it provided a practical means to gain an emic perspective on how these men experience stigmatization, particularly in a context where long-term ethnographic fieldwork was not feasible (Johansson, 2022).

The following sections discuss the Swedish context and literature on researching men who pay for sex and other stigmatized groups. A background to the interview study and the development of SES is then provided, including the selection of newspaper articles and columns. These sections are followed by empirical examples from three interviews, illustrating the strategy's practical application. The article concludes by examining the benefits, limitations, and ethical implications of using this methodological approach in research with stigmatized populations.

Research context: Stigma toward men who pay for sex in Sweden

Sweden's repressive prostitution policy poses challenges for conducting research, yet it provides a unique opportunity to examine the intersection of stigma, legal frameworks, and public discourse surrounding the exchange of sex for payment. Under this approach, paying for sex is criminalized and sex workers' clients are subject to intervention by authorities, including social services and the police (Grönvall, 2024; Johansson, 2022). Unlike approaches in New Zealand, which prioritize harm reduction, or regulatory frameworks in parts of Europe that treat sex work as legitimate labor, Sweden's approach rests on moral condemnation (Johansson, 2022; Johansson and Östergren, 2021; Östergren, 2018, 2020, 2024). It has been described as an instance of "morality politics" (Östergren, 2024).

The criminalization and stigmatization of commercial sex has deep historical roots and is intricately linked to state policing of bodies and societal norms that extend beyond legal frameworks (Ditmore, 2010; Lister, 2021; Östergren, 2024). However, processes of stigmatization are far from uniform, as they reflect varying societal justifications and priorities. In some cases, stigma arises from a broad societal consensus on harmful or exploitative behaviors, such as child abuse, where moral condemnation is intended to protect vulnerable individuals and prevent harm (Mégret, 2013). In contrast, other forms of stigma are more contested, overly simplistic, or ethically problematic. For example, the historical stigmatization of LGBTQ + individuals and the ongoing marginalization of consensual sex work demonstrate how stigma can perpetuate harm by reinforcing

inequality and social exclusion, rather than addressing actual harm (Benoit and Unsworth, 2022; Johansson and Östergren, 2021; Östergren, 2024; Weitzer, 2018; Worthen, 2020).

In Sweden, penalties for paying for sex have escalated over time, culminating in the possibility of up to one year of imprisonment as of 2022 (The Swedish Criminal Code, Act 2022:1043, Chapter 6, Section 11). This escalation highlights Sweden's intensified focus on punishing individuals involved in paid sex, exposing them to both legal sanctions and substantial social stigma. Sweden's strong campaign against sex for payment is also reflected in public opinion, with most Swedes viewing such exchanges negatively and many as never acceptable (Hansen and Johansson, 2022; Johansson and Hansen, 2024).

Swedish public rhetoric often conflates consensual transactions with issues of exploitation and human trafficking, leaving little room for nuanced discussions about individual motivations or experiences. Men who pay for sex are portrayed as moral transgressors, complicit in perpetuating harm, irrespective of the context or consensual nature of the exchange. This moralizing discourse intensifies the stigma faced by men who pay for sex, shaping their self-perceptions and how they understand and discuss their actions (Grönvall, 2022, 2024, Grönvall et al., 2021, 2022; Johansson, 2022; Johansson and Östergren, 2021; Östergren, 2024).

As a result, men who pay for sex face a unique form of stigmatization in Sweden: they are criminalized by law, condemned by the public, and positioned as perpetrators within a broader narrative of exploitation and gendered violence. These legal and social pressures not only heighten their vulnerability and drive them into concealment but also underscore the need for innovative methodologies to effectively explore and understand their lived experiences.

Researching men who pay for sex and other stigmatized populations

Stigma and its impact on the interview encounter

Despite growing scholarly recognition of the complex lives of men who pay for sex and their multifaceted motivations for engaging in these exchanges (Bernstein, 2007; Carbonero and Gómez, 2018; Grönvall, 2022, 2024, Grönvall et al., 2021, 2022; Hagstedt et al., 2009; Hammond, 2015, 2018; Hammond and van Hooff, 2020; Huff, 2011; Johansson and Östergren, 2021; Lennes, 2021; Prior and Peled, 2022; Sanders, 2013), conventional methodologies like semi-structured interviews may fall short in fully capturing their experiences, leading to gaps in understanding their behaviors and perspectives.

Scholars researching the sex industry have noted that men who pay for sex often struggle with emotional and moral conflicts, compounded by concerns over stigmatization and deviant portrayals (Hammond, 2018, 2008; Hammond and Van Hooff, 2020; Prior and Peled, 2022; Sanders, 2013). To navigate these challenges, they frequently engage in impression management during interviews, presenting themselves as morally justified to obscure the complexities of their experiences (Lim and Cheah, 2020;

McCallum and Peterson, 2012; Zapien, 2017). For example, Prior and Peled (2024) show how Israeli men who pay for sex construct consumerist narratives, framing their actions as rational and transactional to align with consumer norms and avoid being labeled as moral deviants. This strategy helps them manage potential judgment while reconciling their actions with broader societal norms, illustrating how stigma not only provokes impression management but also drives the reconstruction of identities to navigate emotional and social tensions (see also: Hammond and Van Hooff, 2020).

The criminalization and public condemnation of paying for sex further amplify these tensions, compelling men to navigate a divided social world. Drawing on Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, these men often separate their lives into "front" and "back" regions, concealing their behaviors publicly to avoid judgment while expressing themselves more openly in private—though under constant threat of exposure. Such dynamics parallel the experiences of other stigmatized groups, including drug users, the unhoused, and individuals living with HIV or AIDS, who may conceal their identities to evade societal rejection (Ahern et al., 2007; Morgan, 1996; Perlson et al., 2021; Reilly et al., 2022). For researchers, this secrecy presents challenges in accessing and authentically engaging with these populations.

Introducing external narratives reflecting societal stigma may help bridge the gap between public discourse and personal experience, allowing researchers to explore how individuals navigate divided social realities. Social stigma surrounding paid sex — particularly in Sweden — creates barriers for disclosure, fostering fear of judgment, social exclusion, and professional repercussions (Johansson and Östergren, 2021; Östergren, 2024). This environment complicates recruitment and limits participants' openness, particularly when discussing sensitive topics like intimacy within paid sexual encounters. Building trust and rapport through long-term contact often becomes necessary (Adler and Adler, 2003; Aspers and Corte, 2019; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998).

Researching these populations also involves navigating ethical challenges, including maintaining strict confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and safeguarding participants from harm. Methodological sensitivity is crucial to address power dynamics, emotional vulnerability, and issues of trust (Daniel et al., 2023; Gerassi et al., 2016; Hammond, 2018; Huysamen, 2015, 2019, 2022; Minichiello et al., 2014; Stardust et al., 2021). Adaptive, participant-centered approaches can mitigate power imbalances and facilitate authentic exchanges, especially with individuals grappling with fears of exposure or legal consequences (Gerassi et al., 2016; Stardust et al., 2021).

Gender dynamics further complicate interview encounters (Grenz, 2005; Hammond and Van Hooff, 2020; Prior and Peled, 2022). For instance, Mattson (2016) explores how gendered miscommunications and probing of personal questions can create discomfort in interviews with individuals involved in the sex industry. Huysamen, 2015, 2019, 2022) highlights the complexities of cross-gender interviews, particularly when female researchers engage with male participants. Male interviewees may perceive female researchers as representatives of societal judgment, leading to altered responses emphasizing care or respect for sex workers. Conversely, some men may adopt hypermasculine performances, reinforcing patriarchal norms to assert dominance in the

interaction. These dynamics underscore the need for researchers to remain sensitive to how gendered expectations influence data collection and interpretation.

Stigmatizing narratives can also have strong gendered components, framing men's involvement in paid sex in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles or stereotypes and portraying men who pay for sex as predatory (Johansson, 2022). Textual probes, such as newspaper articles or columns, provide a structured method to introduce and interrogate these gendered narratives during interviews. By systematically confronting these stigmatizing discourses, researchers can prompt participants to reflect on stereotypes and societal norms, offering insights into how such narratives shape their experiences and perceptions.

Innovative approaches for exploring stigmatized populations

Accessing and understanding the experiences of stigmatized populations, such as men who pay for sex, within criminalizing and socially hostile contexts demands innovative methodologies. These approaches must address participants' fears of judgment, legal repercussions, or social exposure while enabling researchers to delve into the complexities of their lived realities (Adler and Adler, 2003; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2009; Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Hammond, 2018; Humphreys, 1975; Johansson, 2022; Lee, 1993; Lee and Lee, 2012; Roger and Blomgren, 2019).

Hammond (2018), for instance, describes how the use of online methods mediated these challenges when interviewing men who pay for sex in the United Kingdom (UK), where stigma was a key issue. Similarly, in Sweden, the use of context-specific strategies is crucial for addressing challenges posed by criminalization and social stigma, especially in a research context where participants fear judgment, legal consequences, or personal repercussions.

The opportunity to engage with and counter stigmatizing narratives can be a motivating factor. This suggestion aligns with Hammond's (2015) previous finding that the prevailing political and social hostility that is directed towards sex workers' clients in many contemporary societies can serve as a driving force for certain men engaging in paid sex to participate in research endeavors. Hammond also emphasizes the importance of understanding how some men negotiate their identities in the face of political and media constructions. Employing methods that incorporate societal contexts directly into the interview process may provide valuable insights in this regard.

The use of textual probes offers a powerful means of addressing these challenges by embedding societal narratives directly into interviews. Drawing on the work of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Van Dijk (2009), I suggest that textual probes can help contextualize personal narratives within larger societal frameworks, encouraging interview participants to reflect on how societal attitudes and media portrayals influence their own experiences and perspectives. This observation further aligns with Gaskell and Bauer's (2000) argument that textual probes provide a concrete focus for discussion, enhancing the depth of interviews and facilitating more nuanced explorations of how individuals

internalize and react to social discourses. It resonates with material methods, which can be particularly effective when researching personal and sensitive topics (Woodward, 2019). The presence of a physical object can offer participants a sense of comfort or grounding, which in turn fosters more open and authentic conversations (Collier and Collier, 1986; De Leon and Cohen, 2005; Liebenberg et al., 2014). The use of objects allows individuals to externalize their thoughts and feelings, making abstract or stigmatized experiences more concrete and accessible. This technique can bridge the gap between the researcher's inquiry and the participant's personal narrative, allowing for a nuanced exploration of identity and emotion in the context of difficult or taboo subjects.

Textual probes, such as newspaper articles, serve multiple purposes. They create a separation between participants and stigmatizing narratives, reducing defensiveness and discomfort, while providing a safer space for reflection and critique. This distancing effect helps foster rapport and shifts the interview from a personal interrogation to a neutral conversation about societal contexts. Such methods are particularly valuable in studies of controversial behaviors, as they encourage participants to critically examine societal attitudes without feeling directly judged by the researcher.

Despite their potential, the application of textual probes in qualitative research on sexual and stigmatized behaviors remains underexplored. While widely used in political science to investigate attitudes via survey experiments (e.g., Campbell and Cowley, 2014; Navarro and Hansen, 2023), their integration into interview-based methodologies in fields like sociology or criminology has been limited. Expanding the use of these methods could deepen understanding of how individuals navigate the interplay between personal experiences and societal stigma, offering fresh insights into sensitive and hidden populations.

Methodological approach: the development of the stigma engagement strategy

The interview study

The methodological observations discussed here came to light in an interview study exploring the experiences and perspectives of 20 Swedish men who have paid for sex, ranging from 28 to 64 years. This research examined how they navigate criminalization and stigma, describe their behaviors, and reconcile their perspectives with public discourse. It also investigated how stigmatizing narratives shape their understanding of the exchange of sex for payment and how they reason and act when suspecting someone selling sexual services is forced, exploited, or subjected to violence by a third party (Johansson, 2022; Johansson and Östergren, 2021).

The interview process started in 2016 and continued into 2019 with several follow-up interviews. Recruitment was conducted through online platforms where sex workers and clients communicate, as well as social media sites. I made my role as a researcher explicit through posts briefly describing the study and calling for participants. These posts linked to a website where the study was described in greater detail. While the study was not restricted to any specific gender, only men participated, reflecting the demographics of

paid sex in Sweden. Approximately 10–15% of Swedish men report having paid for sex, compared to less than 1% of women (Swedish Public Health Agency, 2019).

Participants provided verbal informed consent, and ethical approval was obtained from the relevant committee. While the number of participants in this study may seem small, it is consistent with similar research conducted in Sweden, where researchers have typically interviewed 13 to 30 men with experiences of paying for sex (Grönvall, 2022, 2024; Grönvall et al., 2021, 2022; Hagstedt et al., 2009). This limited participation reflects the impact of criminalization and strong societal stigma, which discourage individuals from openly discussing their involvement. For comparison, Hammond (2018) recruited 35 men in the UK, where paying for sex is not criminalized but remains heavily stigmatized.

Participants were encouraged to use pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, which was also maintained in publications. Anonymity was crucial for many, providing a sense of safety that allowed them to discuss their experiences without fear of retribution or judgment. For the majority, this was the first time they had ever spoken about these experiences. Concerns about losing family, friends, work, and social status contributed to their prior reluctance to share their stories. Still, some participants chose to share their real names — some immediately, others after establishing rapport. For these men, name sharing created a more humanizing and personalized experience, fostering trust and allowing them to reclaim agency by being recognized as individuals with unique stories.

My experience mirrored Hammond's (2018) in that many interviews were facilitated through online methods, including Skype, encrypted chatting, and encrypted email. In addition, I conducted interviews via phone, text messages, and in-person meetings, depending on participant preferences. Some participants who initially participated online wanted to meet in person for follow-ups. Many of the men noted that their decision to participate was influenced by my association with another researcher who had publicly criticized Sweden's criminalization of sex workers' clients (Östergren, 2024). This connection helped establish trust, easing their concerns about being judged.

Some participants were interviewed multiple times through various formats, resulting in approximately 100 hours of recorded interviews and numerous written accounts. Depending on the situation, interviews ranged from semi-structured to unstructured. Long-term contact was established with several men who were willing to continue sharing their experiences. The development of these connections was characterized by multiple meetings, as well as ongoing communication through phone calls, messages, and emails, over several years. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, meaning the men's responses and the excerpts from the newspaper articles and columns that are presented here have been translated from Swedish.

The data were analyzed using ethnographic thematic content analysis (ETCA), a method combining ethnography's contextual depth with thematic content analysis's systematic approach (Altheide, 1987; Altheide and Schneider, 2012). This approach enabled the identification of recurring themes and situated participants' narratives within the criminalized and stigmatizing public discourse they navigate.

Participants were asked about their backgrounds (e.g., age, education, gender, occupation, hobbies, political orientation, and region), experiences of paying for sex,

encounters with law enforcement and social services, perceptions of sex workers, and views on public debates, prostitution policy, and stigma. At the time of interviews, the men had diverse relationship statuses, economic backgrounds, and experiences paying for sexual services. Most had relatively recent experiences with female sex workers at the time of the interviews. A few also had experiences with men and transgender people. The majority had at some point paid for sex in Sweden and about half had experiences both from Sweden and at least one other country. Only a few had only paid for sex abroad. Besides Sweden, the countries where the men had paid for sex included Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Panama. The motivations for paying for sex varied, including seeking alternative or complementary relationships, specific sexual activities or physical features, novelty, excitement, straightforwardness, and emotional intimacy. For some, payment was seen as the only feasible way to access sex. The interviews highlighted the complexity of motivations, with desires for physical pleasure, emotional connection, and companionship intertwining and evolving over time and in different contexts.

The men I interviewed also expressed a desire to nuance the public discourse pertaining to their experiences (see also: Hammond, 2015). However, many noted they had not had the opportunity to do so prior to the interview. Using newspaper articles and columns containing condemning narratives about paid sex provided a structured and concrete way to facilitate engagement with participants' experiences of stigmatization.

As with any research involving hard-to-reach, hidden, and vulnerable study populations, there is a self-selection bias among the participants (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Those who chose to participate were willing to discuss their stigmatized and criminalized experiences, and it is important to acknowledge that not all men who pay for sex share this predisposition.

Navigating methodological challenges

Early in the interview process, I observed that questions about public debate and stigma elicited somewhat vague and simplified responses. The reason is likely because the men had never discussed their experiences before. While no one refrained from answering, it became evident that the discussion could benefit from further concretizing the public discourse to deepen reflection. For instance, when I asked, "Do you think there are specific perceptions about people who pay for sex in Sweden — ideas about what a 'typical sex buyer' is like, how they live, and behave? If so, what are those perceptions? What do you think of them?", my first interviewee, Bill, responded with, "It's black and white". Another participant, Axel, replied, "There's probably a lot of prejudice", but did not offer substantial elaboration despite follow-up questions. These answers, while not unhelpful, remained somewhat vague. In these instances, the introduction of textual probes, such as newspaper articles or columns featuring stigmatizing narratives, could have enriched the conversation. Such probes might have encouraged the participants to engage more thoroughly with specific societal portrayals. My interview with Anders, who was more reflective, also illustrates this point:

Anders: [laughs] If you look at these feminists, there's definitely a clear type.

Isabelle: Yeah, what do you think? What does that type look like?

Anders: Well, it's a fat, male pig who exploits women to the max.

Isabelle: Mm, yes, right.

Anders: There's really no middle ground here.

Isabelle: So you mentioned this fat, male pig who exploits women, what do you think about that idea, that image?

Anders: Well, it's someone who sees it more like a machine, or that you're buying a woman, like I'm buying someone. But that's not how I feel. I feel like I'm buying a service.

Isabelle: Mm, you feel like you're buying a service?

Anders: Yes. I'm not buying a woman.

In this interview, Anders immediately resorts to the stark image of a "fat, male pig who exploits women to the max" — an interpretation he attributes to how Swedish feminists portray men who pay for sex. This image exemplifies how Anders believes certain critics see people like him. After my follow-up question, Anders reflects more on this stereotype and expresses that he does not identify with it. Instead, he frames his experience as one where he is "buying a service", as opposed to "buying a woman". Although my follow-up prompted more reflection, the discussion could have been further enriched by introducing concrete stigmatizing narratives from external sources such as newspaper articles or columns. Presenting these materials as probes would have allowed us to engage more directly with public portrayals, to explore how they intersect with Anders' own experiences and perceptions.

Drawing on my previously described experience with the man who had brought newspapers addressing paid sex to our meeting, I developed SES with the aim to concretize and elicit richer responses regarding the men's reflections on public debate and stigmatization. This strategy was implemented across several interviews. These texts helped to ensure that participants' experiences were contextualized within the broader socio-cultural landscape.

Selecting stigmatizing narratives

The process of selecting newspaper articles and columns for the interviews was approached with careful consideration to ensure their relevance and effectiveness. Each selected piece underwent scrutiny based on its clarity, alignment with prevailing public discourse, and its potential to resonate with participants' experiences and perceptions. The selection process relied on contextual knowledge and a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in the interview setting, including the interplay between interviewer and interviewee, the sensitive nature of the topic, and the participants' likely familiarity with

or resistance to public narratives about paid sex (Altheide, 1987; Seymour, 2001). This understanding was critical for identifying narratives that reflected common societal portrayals of paid sex while creating a safe, engaging space for participants to respond. Selected articles and columns were chosen for their ability to clearly convey dominant ideas about paid sex (Altheide, 1997; Greer and Jewkes, 2005; Jewkes, 2004). Clarity was especially important, as it facilitated comprehension and enabled participants to connect these external narratives to their own experiences. This process aimed to foster meaningful dialogue by providing participants with accessible, concrete representations of public discourse, thereby encouraging reflection and critique.

The selected articles and columns convey dominant narratives about paid sex in Sweden. Headlines such as "Important to hunt sex-buyers" (Sandin, 2013); "All sex purchases should lead to prison" (Svensson and Holst, 2014); and "There is a big problem with sex buyers" (Linder Lindberg, 2015) illustrate the criminalization and moral condemnation surrounding the act of paying for sex. Others, such as "He oversees the police's hunt for Johns" (Nilsson, 2016) and "I remember all the sex-buyers I've arrested" (Häggström, 2017), highlight law enforcement's active pursuit of these individuals, framing men who pay for sex as both deviant and culpable within the legal and societal framework. Articles like "That's why men buy sex" (Johansson and Wikén, 2017) reflect attempts to explain their motivations, framing them in psychological or moralistic terms (see Appendix A). Meanwhile, pieces such as "The police: 'One is never safe as a sex buyer'" (Urborn, 2021); "Taxi driver convicted of purchasing sex has license revoked" (Eriksson, 2023); and "He should know that getting caught is a risk" (Rung, 2023) emphasize the risks and repercussions for individuals involved, alluding to their stigmatized and precarious position in Swedish society. Across these pieces, as well as in the interview excerpts above, terms like "sex-buyer" and "buying sex" are employed. These are common in Sweden and carry specific connotations. The term "buying" underscores the commodification of sex, framing it as a transactional good or object, as opposed to a service for which one "pays". This framing, pervasive in Swedish media, aligns with broader societal narratives that condemn the commodification of sex while positioning those who pay for sex as morally and legally transgressive. That said, the term was also used by the study participants. It is important to note that different terms describing the exchange of sex for payment reflect the societal context and carry distinct connotations. Research shows that "prostitution" is associated with stigma and more negative attitudes than "sex work" (Hansen and Johansson, 2023).

Columns authored by influential figures in the public debate were intentionally included, such as a prolific police officer who frequently appears in the media. With this choice, I sought to introduce narratives that participants were likely familiar with, fostering responses grounded in their pre-existing awareness of these figures. The overall aim was to present narratives that resonated with participants. While some selected narratives carried a provocative tone, the effort was made to ensure a level of representativeness in terms of public discourse. This selection process was essential for creating interview situations that encouraged participants to engage openly and

reflectively with the stigmatizing narratives, turning an initial interview challenge into a productive strategy.

Ethical considerations were at the forefront of the interview process, including when participants were invited to actively engage with stigmatizing newspaper narratives. Participants were asked whether they wanted to explore these news pieces collaboratively, allowing them agency in deciding the extent of their engagement with potentially stigmatizing material. Participants were also provided with clear explanations regarding the intent behind using stigmatizing narratives. Generally, throughout the interviews, participants were encouraged to express any concerns or discomfort regarding the selected narratives. This continuous dialogue aimed to ensure that participants felt supported to withdraw from the interview if they found it emotionally taxing, but it never occurred.

Empirical application: Illustrating the stigma engagement strategy through interviews

Overall, the men uniformly described the Swedish public debate and media narratives about clients and sex workers and the paid sexual encounter as generally overly simplistic. However, their individual responses to these narratives diverged. Some greeted the stigmatizing narratives with an almost humorous ridicule, perceiving them as preposterous and laughable. Conversely, some experienced anger, stirred by the narratives' portrayal of their experiences and identities. Others exhibited a more ambivalent response, grappling with the complex interplay between societal perception and their own lived reality. In these latter cases, the stigma seemed to have been personally internalized to a greater degree. As such, the interview study underscored the importance of acknowledging the diversity of experiences within this population.

Below, two in-person interviews and one in the form of an email correspondence exemplify differences in the participants' responses to the stigmatizing narratives from the newspaper articles and columns. These examples also illustrate different ways of deploying SES.

During our third in-person interview in a hotel room in Copenhagen, Roland and I looked at a newspaper article in the free Swedish newspaper *Metro* presenting a typology of so-called "sex-buyers" including: 1. The bored family-father, 2. The traveling businessman, 3. The successful power-seeker, 4. The sex-tourist, and 5. The insecure" (Johansson and Wikén, 2017, p. 8, see Appendix A). In the more detailed descriptions of these different types, there is one common thread: they are all depicted as sexually frustrated men with an unquestionable sense of entitlement and peculiar ideas about sex and women. After I finish reading the types out loud, I ask Roland what comes to mind when he hears condemning narratives about paid sex like these. Roland responds: "They sound a bit condescending, but I guess I'm the last and second last". Meanwhile, Roland finds the emphasis on "sex" somewhat misleading and points out that "sightseeing is as much a part of the reason for traveling as meeting escorts". Moreover, Roland describes how his appointments are about more than sex. Roland enjoys the sexual aspect, but it is not his favorite part. Roland explains: "You want that close contact, to sense the warmth of

another person when cuddling. It's not only about intercourse. It's also the touch, the conversations, the feeling of being loved".

Roland and I also looked at a column from the same newspaper entitled "I remember all the sex buyers I've arrested" (Häggström, 2017), authored by a prolific police officer who is frequently invited to speak about the sex trade in Swedish media. Roland responded to column somewhat exasperatedly: "It's like a witch-hunt and it's not a fair portrayal, but you can't really say anything because then you end up disclosed". Roland further explained that sometimes he feels "like a homosexual man in the 1950s′ Sweden". Roland's impression is that, nowadays, Swedish authorities treat men who pay for sex "as mentally ill".

The interview with Roland provides insights into the effectiveness of SES. As Roland engages with the newspaper article detailing the sex-buyers typology, he identifies to a degree with elements in the described types but also critiques the condescending tone. As such, Roland acknowledges certain parallels between the stigmatizing narratives and his own experiences. This response aligns with SES's intent to bring societal discourse into the interview situation, allowing participants to reflect on and challenge prevailing narratives. Roland's emphasis on the broader motivations for his engagement with sex workers, beyond mere sexual aspects, highlights the strategy's potential to unveil nuances and counter stereotypical portrayals.

The contrast between my interview with Roland, who engaged with textual probes, and my interview with Anders, who did not, highlights the impact of introducing concrete examples to discussions about stigma. Without textual probes, Anders relied on his subjective impression of the stigmatizing narratives surrounding men who pay for sex. By contrast, in my interview with Roland, textual probes concretized the discourse and invited him to engage directly with specific examples of how men who pay for sex are depicted in Swedish media. He was able to articulate not only his reaction to these portrayals but also how they intersected with his personal experiences. This comparison underscores the added value of using textual probes in interviews to foster more nuanced discussions.

Roland's exasperation and the "witch-hunt" analogy in response to the police officer's column underscore the importance of creating a space where participants feel they can discuss and process their experiences with someone. His comments, including his perception of being treated as "mentally ill" by authorities, reveal the weight of societal stigma faced by some men who pay for sex. Overall, the interview situation highlights the strategy's ability to encourage multifaceted reflections by providing participants with a chance to engage critically with stigmatizing narratives, emphasizing the need for a sensitive and supportive approach to foster open dialogue.

Another participant, Tim, expressed a strong negative sentiment towards the same police officer during our first interview at my home when shown an article describing how the officer "oversees the police's hunt for Johns" (Nilsson, 2016). In the article, the officer states: "Many believe that sex buyers are men who are struggling, very lonely, handicapped, ugly, or just generally find it difficult to meet women. This is the biggest myth, which unfortunately creates an acceptance as in what do we do with all those poor men who can't get closeness" (Nilsson, 2016, para 20). Tim's responds angrily:

> He is terrible, he is disgusting, really. I saw an interview with him where he said that people often praise him and say, "No, we're not heroes", he said. But by saying that, he kind of makes himself one. I've had dealings with the police, and I know what damn bastards they can be. I remember sometimes when I was using drugs, I thought that narcotics officers could twist things around. I mean, the police are necessary, and there are probably decent cops, but him, he's disturbed in some way. I think he's sick, I mean [...] I saw that he claims everyone he has met is a victim or something, but I saw someone wrote that he had stormed into her apartment and ensured that she got evicted and such. I find him creepy.

Tim's response and detailed critique of the police officer's actions suggest that the strategy stimulated emotional engagement and contributed to the creation of a space for participants to engage with, reflect on, and challenge societal stigmatization. The negative sentiment expressed toward the officer indicates the potential effectiveness of SES in challenging dominant narratives. Tim's broader critique of the police reflects a loss of faith in authorities when they are perceived as moralizing or acting unjustly. His personal history with narcotics officers adds another layer to his distrust. His response underscores the power of participatory research methods, such as incorporating stigmatizing media narratives, to evoke critical reflection and provide participants with an opportunity to counter these portrayals.

In another instance, Eric also responded to the newspaper article describing the sex-buyer typology (Johansson and Wikén, 2017, p. 8), which he received via email. Eric is someone with whom I have maintained long-term contact. Over the years, we have spoken on the phone and met in-person numerous times. Additionally, he has sent me many messages and emails to share updates on recent events and his reflections. As part of this specific online interaction, he was provided with several newspaper articles and columns along with the following questions: 1. How do you think sex for payment is portrayed in the text? 2. How do you think individuals involved in this type of sexual relationship are portrayed? 3. How does the image presented relate to your own experiences? 4. How are you affected by the text? 5. What feelings and thoughts arise when you read the text? 6. If you were to write a brief response to the text, what would you say?

These questions were similar to those I asked during in-person interviews. Eric's response provides valuable insights into how men who pay for sex interpret stigmatizing societal narratives but also highlight the flexible applicability of SES. His response also illustrates how SES encourages participant to provide long and detailed responses. This approach proved effective both in-person and in digital formats, showcasing its adaptability in facilitating rich discussions regardless of the mode of interaction.

> The different "profiles" of sex buyers are so exaggerated that I can't help but smile. However, the underlying reasons described for buying sex could be very real and occur in various combinations among different sex buyers […] I recognize my reasons for buying sex from three of the different profiles. In the beginning, I was very uncertain and shy and eventually realized that the only opportunity for sex was to go to a sex worker. To see sex workers as "kind-hearted consolers" might be an exaggeration, but I have experienced some almost therapeutic aspects in the encounters with sex workers. I know that, in the beginning, I expected a rather "cold and

clinical" experience but instead encountered warmth and care. I can also recognize some of the "rational" thinking in the "traveling businessman" who sees sex as an experience that can be scheduled.

However, I don't agree that it would be a "right" to release arousal by buying sex. Such formulations (the perceived right of sex buyers to sex) seem to be something that is often sneakily inserted into texts to make a potential sex buyer appear unsympathetic.

Like the "bored family man" I have occasionally had the desire to try something new and exciting. I can recognize that I have fantasies I have thought about trying in reality, but when the opportunity arises, it still becomes "the same old".

Even though I have mainly bought sex abroad, I don't recognize myself in the "sex tourist's" negative view of "annoying" Swedish women and gender equality. The only real reason for choosing to buy sex abroad is that it can be done legally. The fact that it is legal also makes the offer easier to oversee.

I think there is a missing alternative profile to the "sex tourist" that one might call the "connoisseur": a man who places great value on attractive women and erotic experiences and is willing to both pay and travel a bit to experience what he dreams of. He joyfully reminisces about all the exciting encounters and dedicates much time to planning and dreaming about his next experience. For the connoisseur, the environment in which the sex purchase takes place is important for the overall experience.

I'm not sure what to say about "the successful power-seeker". Reasoning referring to something as vague as "complex mechanisms" feels quite suspicious. However, it is established that there are significantly greater risks for sex workers in street environments than in more organized indoor environments. But I am skeptical about the idea that successful men would be overrepresented among those who commit offenses (which they would be if they don't pay), and it also feels strange that a sex worker in a street environment would only charge after having had sex. I find the entire profile somewhat constructed.

I am not much affected by the text. After all, it's a lightweight text from a tabloid intended to be read on the bus or similar. However, the text has a certain connection to reality (albeit heavily edited), which one is not always spoiled with when it comes to Swedish texts on paid sex. Just that makes me a little happy!

I'm not sure what I would write as a response, but I generally wish that texts on paid sex could focus a bit more on the positive aspects and how buying sex can enhance the quality of life for customers. Perhaps I could have written a description of the "connoisseur" as a kind of response?

In his response to the article, Eric provides a nuanced perspective, highlighting the discrepancy between personal experiences of those involved in paid sex and the dominant public discourse, but also intersections. He critiques the article's portrayal of women and expresses a desire for more positive and balanced representations of paid sex encounters. While Eric identifies with some elements of the narrative, he emphasizes the diversity of reasons for paying for sex, challenging oversimplified stereotypes. Notably, his

engagement with the material demonstrates that participants were not merely trying to construct a favorable narrative about themselves. Instead, they engaged sincerely with the textual probes, pointing out both inaccuracies and truths within these representations.

This interaction highlights a broader pattern across the interviews. Many participants described their experiences in paid sex as rewarding social interactions, often rooted in intimacy and companionship. These accounts stand in stark contrast to prevailing narratives that depict men who pay for sex as sexually frustrated and entitled. By sharing their perspectives, participants sought to counterbalance the overwhelmingly negative portrayals in public discourse while presenting themselves as multifaceted individuals with complex motivations. Their willingness to engage with both the stigmatizing and relatable aspects of the narratives underscores the diversity of their lived experiences and provides valuable insights into how stigmatization operates.

These are a few examples of how the use of stigmatizing narratives from Swedish newspaper articles and columns as textual probes in this study proved instrumental in revealing how societal discourse shapes the lives of men who pay for sex. These probes allowed participants to reflect on their experiences within the broader social and political context, highlighting the ways in which public stigma influences their behaviors and self-perceptions. By integrating external narratives into the interview process, SES created opportunities for participants to articulate how stigmatizing discourses affected their lives while also fostering discussions that contextualized their perspectives within Sweden's socio-legal and cultural framework.

Unlike conventional qualitative methods that rely primarily on self-reflection or interviewer guidance, SES distinguishes itself by encouraging participants to engage directly with tangible societal portrayals. This approach elicited richer and more nuanced responses that initial interview questions, uncovering how participants navigate and resist public stigma. Through SES, participants challenged one-dimensional portrayals of paid sex as wholly negative, instead framing themselves as complex individuals with diverse motivations and experiences. By bridging personal and public narratives, SES offered a deep understanding of this stigmatized population, illustrating how individuals position themselves in relation to dominant societal discourses and how these discourses shape their lived realities.

Concluding discussion

This article has explored the utility of incorporating textual probes into interview research, using newspaper articles and columns that contain stigmatizing narratives about men who pay for sex. Referred to as SES, this approach aims to concretize public discourse, contextualize interview discussions, and juxtapose diverse narratives about paid sex. SES offers a promising alternative to other methods, such as long-term ethnographic fieldwork or conventional semi-structured interview, for gaining emic understandings of how societal discourses and socio-legal and cultural frameworks shape the lived realities of stigmatized individuals. By providing participants with material for reflection and

fostering a comfortable interview environment, this strategy made it possible to delve into the nuances of stigmatization and its effects on individuals' lives.

SES provided a valuable space to explore participants' agency, motivations, and the impacts of stigmatization. The contrast between stigmatizing media narratives and participants' personal accounts in this study revealed significant discrepancies and intersections between public discourses and lived experiences. This approach helped uncover the complexities of participants' perspectives on paid sex, which might not have been fully captured through traditional interview questions alone. The use of external narratives allowed for a concrete engagement with stigmatizing discourses and enhanced the rapport between interviewer and interviewee by creating a degree of separation between stigmatizing societal narratives and their interaction, making it possible to discuss sensitive topics with depth. SES, thus, offers a useful tool for exploring the relationship between societal narratives and personal experiences, which may be especially relevant for studying other groups facing societal condemnation or stereotypical portrayals.

Nevertheless, the implementation of SES does present several ethical challenges. Engaging participants with stigmatizing texts requires careful attention to potential harm and the risk of reinforcing existing stereotypes. Ethical reflection throughout the research process is essential, as researchers must balance the desire to capture authentic perspectives with the need to protect participants from emotional distress. Ethical considerations go beyond adherence to standard procedures and require ongoing reflection about the broader impact of research methods on vulnerable populations.

Another key consideration is the issue of generalizability and the potential for researcher bias in the selection of textual probes. Allowing participants to bring their own texts offers advantages in terms of personal relevance and engagement but may introduce variability in the quality and relevance of the texts. In contrast, researcher-selected texts provide greater consistency, allowing for systematic comparisons across participants. A hybrid approach, in which participants select some texts while the researcher introduces others, may offer a balance between personal relevance and research control, depending on the research goals, ethical considerations, and dynamics of the study population. Researchers should weigh these factors carefully when deciding which approach to use.

While SES provides a time-efficient alternative to more resource-intensive methods like ethnographic fieldwork, it also has limitations. For instance, SES relies on participants' ability to reflect critically on societal narratives, which may not be equally accessible to all participants, depending on their experiences or cognitive resources. Moreover, the approach may not fully capture the richness of lived experiences that might emerge from long-term, participant-observed interactions in naturalistic settings. Despite these limitations, SES presents a valuable method for engaging with stigmatized populations and understanding the interplay between societal discourse and individual experience.

Moving forward, researchers should continue to refine and expand SES as a methodological tool for studying stigmatized populations. As no single approach can fully capture the complexity of lived experiences, combining SES with other qualitative methods — such as ethnography or longitudinal interviews — may provide a more

comprehensive understanding of stigmatized behaviors and their societal implications. Through a combination of methods and a focus on ethical sensitivity, researchers can contribute to a nuanced understanding of controversial social issues, such as paid sex, while avoiding further harm or reinforcement of stigma.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained by Regionala Etikprövningsnämnden (EPN), Lund, Dnr 2016/192.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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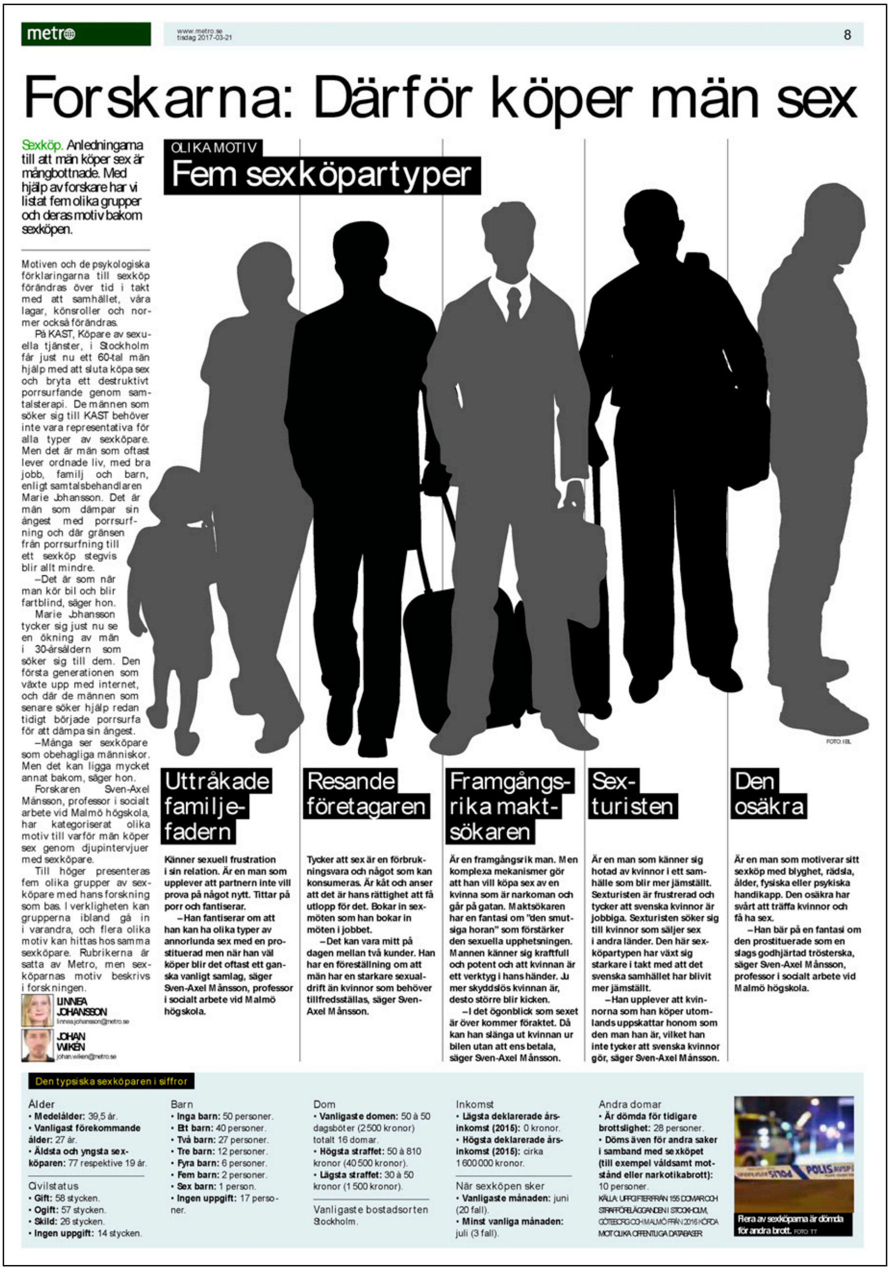
Appendix



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8

Forskarna: Därför köper män sex

Sexköp. Anledningarna till att män köper sex är mångbottnade. Med hjälp av forskare har vi listat fem olika grupper och deras motiv bakom sexköpen.

Motiven och de psykologiska förklaringarna till sexköp förändras över tid i takt med att samhället, våra lagar, könsroller och normer också förändras.

På KAST, Köpare av sexuella tjänster, i Stockholm får just nu ett 60-tal män hjälp med att sluta köpa sex och bryta ett destruktivt porrsurfande genom samtalsterapi. De männen som söker sig till KAST behöver inte vara representativa för alla typer av sexköpare. Men det är män som oftast lever ordnade liv, med bra jobb, familj och barn, enligt samtalsbehandlaren Marie Johansson. Det är män som dämpar sin ångest med porrsurfning och där gränsen från porrsurfning till ett sexköp stegvis blir allt mindre.

–Det är som när man kör bil och blir fartblind, säger hon.

Marie Johansson tycker sig just nu se en ökning av män i 30-årsåldern som söker sig till dem. Den första generationen som växte upp med internet, och där de männen som senare söker hjälp redan tidigt började porrsurfa för att dämpa sin ångest.

–Många ser sexköpare som obehagliga människor. Men det kan ligga mycket annat bakom, säger hon.

Forskaren Sven-Axel Månsson, professor i socialt arbete vid Malmö högskola, har kategoriserat olika motiv till varför män köper sex genom djupintervjuer med sexköpare.

Till höger presenteras fem olika grupper av sexköpare med hans forskning som bas. I verkligheten kan grupperna ibland gå in i varandra, och flera olika motiv kan hittas hos samma sexköpare. Rubrikerna är satta av Metro, men sexköparnas motiv beskrivs i forskningen.

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OLIKA MOTIV

Fem sexköpartyper

FOTO: IBL

Uttråkade familjefadern

Känner sexuell frustration i sin relation. Är en man som upplever att partnern inte vill prova på något nytt. Tittar på porr och fantiserar.

–Han fantiserar om att han kan ha olika typer av annorlunda sex med en prostituerad men när han väl köper blir det oftast ett ganska vanligt samlag, säger Sven-Axel Månsson, professor i socialt arbete vid Malmö högskola.

Resande företagaren

Tycker att sex är en förbrukningsvara och något som kan konsumeras. Är kåt och anser att det är hans rättighet att få utlopp för det. Bokar in sexmöten som han bokar in möten i jobbet.

–Det kan vara mitt på dagen mellan två kunder. Han har en föreställning om att män har en starkare sexualdrift än kvinnor som behöver tillfredsställas, säger Sven-Axel Månsson.

Framgångsrika maktsökaren

Är en framgångsrik man. Men komplexa mekanismer gör att han vill köpa sex av en kvinna som är narkoman och går på gatan. Maktsökaren har en fantasi om "den smutsiga horan" som förstärker den sexuella upphetsningen. Mannen känner sig kraftfull och potent och att kvinnan är ett verktyg i hans händer. Ju mer skyddslös kvinnan är, desto större blir kicken.

–I det ögonblick som sexet är över kommer föraktet. Då kan han slänga ut kvinnan ur bilen utan att ens betala, säger Sven-Axel Månsson.

Sexturisten

Är en man som känner sig hotad av kvinnor i ett samhälle som blir mer jämställt. Sexturisten är frustrerad och tycker att svenska kvinnor är jobbiga. Sexturisten söker sig till kvinnor som säljer sex i andra länder. Den här sexköpartypen har växt sig starkare i takt med att det svenska samhället har blivit mer jämställt.

–Han upplever att kvinnorna som han köper utomlands uppskattar honom som den man han är, vilket han inte tycker att svenska kvinnor gör, säger Sven-Axel Månsson.

Den osäkra

Är en man som motiverar sitt sexköp med blyghet, rädsla, ålder, fysiska eller psykiska handikapp. Den osäkra har svårt att träffa kvinnor och få ha sex.

–Han bär på en fantasi om den prostituerade som en slags godhjärtad trösterska, säger Sven-Axel Månsson, professor i socialt arbete vid Malmö högskola.

Den typsiska sexköparen i siffror

Ålder
- **Medelålder:** 39,5 år.
- **Vanligast förekommande ålder:** 27 år.
- **Äldsta och yngsta sexköparen:** 77 respektive 19 år.

Civilstatus
- **Gift:** 58 stycken.
- **Ogift:** 57 stycken.
- **Skild:** 26 stycken.
- **Ingen uppgift:** 14 stycken.

Barn
- **Inga barn:** 50 personer.
- **Ett barn:** 40 personer.
- **Två barn:** 27 personer.
- **Tre barn:** 12 personer.
- **Fyra barn:** 6 personer.
- **Fem barn:** 2 personer.
- **Sex barn:** 1 person.
- **Ingen uppgift:** 17 personer.

Dom
- **Vanligaste domen:** 50 à 50 dagsböter (2 500 kronor) totalt 16 domar.
- **Högsta straffet:** 50 à 810 kronor (40 500 kronor).
- **Lägsta straffet:** 30 à 50 kronor (1 500 kronor).

Vanligaste bostadsorten
Stockholm.

Inkomst
- **Lägsta deklarerade årsinkomst (2015):** 0 kronor.
- **Högsta deklarerade årsinkomst (2015):** cirka 1 600 000 kronor.

När sexköpen sker
- **Vanligaste månaden:** juni (20 fall).
- **Minst vanliga månaden:** juli (3 fall).

Andra domar
- **Är dömda för tidigare brottslighet:** 28 personer.
- **Döms även för andra saker i samband med sexköpet (till exempel våldsamt motstånd eller narkotikabrott):** 10 personer.

KÄLLA: UPPGIFTER FRÅN 155 DOMAR OCH STRAFFÖRELÄGGANDEN I STOCKHOLM, GÖTEBORG OCH MALMÖ FRÅN 2016 KÖRDA MOT OLIKA OFFENTLIGA DATABASER

Flera av sexköparna är dömda för andra brott. FOTO: TT

Appendix A. Example newspaper article.