Reducing front-line service providers' economic vulnerability: online customer acquisition in the sex trade

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Abstract

Purpose – The authors focus on a little-studied facet of vulnerability amongst FLEs (front-line employees) by addressing whether rising costs of customer acquisition contribute to vulnerability and exploitation. This paper aims to identify ways to reduce FLEs' economic vulnerability in a market with restrictions on the promotion of services, the sex trade, by comparing the rate of customer acquisition across different digital channels.

Design/methodology/approach – The primary data set consists of a fetish studio's customer acquisition data over a four-month period, which includes information about the channels prospects used to first contact the provider. Using a hazard model they compare the probability of acquiring a new customer across the various digital channels, which vary in how inclusive vs exclusive they are. Bayesian modeling is also used to validate the hazard model.

Findings – Of the three primary channels that prospective customers can use to reach the seller, the most restrictive channel (online forum) yields the highest customer acquisition rate. More inclusive channels that place few restrictions on potential customers produce a lower rate of acquisition of actual customers, and thus are more costly to the seller.

Practical implications – From a policy perspective, the findings show that restricting promotion can benefit sellers in a controversial marketplace as long as they carefully manage the customer acquisition channels. More restrictive channels allow FLEs in the sex-trade to lower the costs of acquiring new clients and these reduced costs in time and effort in turn reduce FLEs' vulnerability.

Originality/value – Some FLEs are vulnerable by virtue of their work in a specific market, a type of vulnerability not previously documented in prior research. Those who work in controversial markets often do so because of economic necessity. In those markets, greater costs for customer acquisition can increase vulnerability because they can lead to riskier behavior to acquire customers. Although channels that place restrictions on consumers can be exclusionary, they can benefit sellers by reducing customer acquisition costs.

Keywords Vulnerable FLE, Sexual services, Customer acquisition, Digital channels, Economic vulnerability

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Frontline employees (FLEs) in many industries experience vulnerability due to factors such as violence, emotional exhaustion or social stigmatization (Hwang *et al.*, 2022; Loh *et al.*, 2022; Raciti *et al.*, 2022; Riedel *et al.*, 2023). In controversial markets – such as the sex trade – economic vulnerability represents a distinct and pressing form of harm: inability to maintain a consistent income puts pressure on FLEs to take greater risks to secure clients. Customer acquisition costs compound this vulnerability if they increase the time, effort and resources required to attract new clients. In the sex trade, rising acquisition costs can intensify economic pressures and force providers into situations that compromise their health, safety or autonomy. As summed up in Table 1, prior examinations of FLE vulnerability have revolved around customer interactions in traditional service sector markets such as retail. This paper focuses on FLEs in the less studied controversial markets to address how to ease their economic vulnerability by reducing customer acquisition costs.

Customer acquisition is often the most resource-intensive stage of managing customer relationships (Thomas, 2001). These costs include time spent responding to inquiries, screening clients and negotiating bookings. In traditional markets, businesses can offset acquisition costs through pricing strategies or targeted advertising. However, in markets where promotion is restricted, and sellers face legal, social and economic risks, as in the sex trade, high acquisition costs disproportionately impact FLEs' financial stability. When these costs do not result in customer acquisition, the economic strain on workers escalates, increasing their vulnerability. Prior work on customer acquisition has shown that marketing channels

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Table 1 Contribution to literature on service interaction vulnerability

Study	Focus	Context	Consequences of vulnerability	Reducing vulnerability
Hwang *et al.*, 2022	Customer incivility and FLE vulnerability	New service marketplace that has been developed as a result of the COVID-10 pandemic	Lack of work engagement, job crafting to avoid incivility, resource depletion (psychological and emotional)	Mentoring, emotional support, interventions, training and coping mechanisms
Koppenhafer *et al.*, 2023	Customer and FLE vulnerability	Introduction of the service empowerment model (SEM)	Powerlessness amongst consumers, exploitation of consumers, social and economic challenges	Increased control over the service process
Leino, Davey, and Johns, 2024	Customer and FLE vulnerability	Disruptive shocks in service contexts	Compromised value creation, heightened tensions between stakeholders, reduced access to resources	Reorganizing resources amongst actors and developing novel ways of co-creating value
Loh, Khan, and Johns, 2022	FLE vulnerability	Service providers that included sales and hospitality across three countries	Emotional exhaustion and FLE dissatisfaction	Emotion regulation training and conflict management programs
Mayer *et al.*, 2022	FLE vulnerability	Grocery store workers during the COVID-19 pandemic	Mental health distress, perceived stress, economic insecurity	Implementing workplace protections, improving perceptions of safety, financial support
Mitra *et al.*, 2022	FLE vulnerability	The selling of sexual services in India	Stigmatization, economic harm, physical harm	Legal protections to front-line workers
Solnet and Golubovskaya, 2023	FLE vulnerability	Public and private sector organizations with FLE that work in service delivery	Emotional harm, psychological harm and negative service quality	Emotional support to FLE, monitoring customer behaviors to identify causes of abuse, training and development
Yagil, 2006	FLE vulnerability	Public and private sector organizations	Burnout by FLE and lower customer satisfaction	Empowering FLE to take more control over their work situations
This study	FLE vulnerability	Vulnerability that arises to sellers from the sale of sexual services	Economic harm & physical harm	Leveraging customer acquisition costs to reduce costs on FLE

Source(s): Authors' own work

can be used to screen potential customers (Majid, 2020). Our study addresses how FLEs' in the sex trade might reduce their economic vulnerability by more efficiently manage the digital channels they use for customer acquisition. Although they can reach a wide audience, digital channels differently affect acquisition costs so learning which are more effective and least costly can optimize FLE's acquisition strategies.

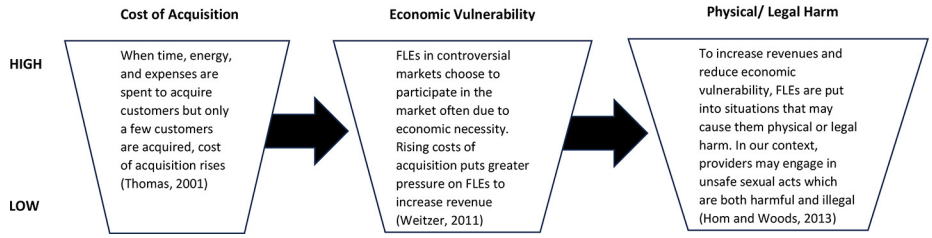
A key contributor to high acquisition costs for FLEs is the asymmetry of information. While prospective clients know their own intentions when reaching out, FLEs have limited information about whether these prospects might ultimately book and pay for services. This asymmetry forces FLEs to expend resources – time and effort – responding to inquiries that may not convert to actual bookings. For workers in economically precarious situations, such wasted effort can increase vulnerability by consuming limited resources and income opportunities. As Figure 1 illustrates, higher acquisition costs can exacerbate economic instability, which may push FLEs into riskier or more harmful situations.

There are many industries where workers' economic vulnerability can cause them physical or legal harm. Undocumented labor has little legal recourse from customers and employers (Webb *et al.*, 2009). For example, undocumented FLEs cannot claim back wages, overtime or minimum wages as documented workers can (Webb *et al.*, 2009). In the context of the sex trade, economic vulnerability is often at the root of the physical and legal harm FLEs encounter in the sale of sexual services (Hom and Woods, 2013; Scoular *et al.*, 2023). The FLEs participate in the market out of economic necessity which places them in situations where they experience additional forms of harm. Globally, it is estimated that between 14% and 54% experience sexual violence from clients (Scoular *et al.*, 2023). Numerous cases exist where clients committed violent acts against providers [1]. Two of the most prolific serial killers in Canada (Robert Picton) and the US (Gary Ridgeway) targeted sex workers and may have killed upwards of 49 and 71 respectively. Providers are reluctant to report physical crimes because they fear prosecution for their work in the market for sexual services (Platt *et al.*, 2018).

Given these harmful work conditions, any practice that can ultimately lower FLEs' economic vulnerability could also reduce other forms of harm. Given the connection between cost of customer acquisition, economic vulnerability and physical/legal harm illustrated in Figure 1, this study assesses how to reduce the cost of acquisition. Insights from this market can inform policy and marketing practices that could reduce providers' vulnerabilities in other controversial markets.

Note that our research is not advocating for or against legalizing markets such as sexual services. We are neither promoting the sale of sexual services nor encouraging lawmakers to take stricter measures to eliminate it. Instead, we acknowledge that sellers in controversial markets are vulnerable because of the nature of these markets as well as the power imbalance between buyers and sellers. Whereas buyers can freely enter and exit the market, sellers must maintain a presence in the market and are often unable to exit the market, which can make them a target to unsavory customers (Weitzer, 2011). Providers are sometimes physically assaulted and abused by customers who remain

Figure 1 Connection between customer acquisition and Front-Line employees' (FLE) vulnerability



Source: Authors' own work

largely anonymous or by handlers who force them into dangerous situations (Weitzer, 2011).

Focusing on the costs of customer acquisition expands the theoretical underpinnings of FLE vulnerability by examining a new form of asymmetry between consumers and sellers. Unlike traditional asymmetric situations where sellers have more information than buyers, in the context of customer acquisition it is sellers who have less information than customers (Thomas, 2001): sellers, the FLEs in our context, have less information on the true intentions of buyers. Expending resources on prospects who may not ultimately purchase their services increases FLEs' acquisition costs. This cost increase raises the FLEs' economic vulnerability as sellers in these markets experience pressure to acquire customers, both from their basic need to make a living as well as from those who exert control over them (Weitzer, 2011). Sellers of sexual services often do so out of economic necessity and spending resources (time, effort, expenses) acquiring customers increases their costs (Thomas, 2001). The risk of not earning sufficient income creates economic vulnerability.

We structure the paper as follows. First, we briefly review customer acquisition through online channels, specifically as they relate to the sex trade. We integrate theories of asymmetry to explain the negative externalities produced when sellers' incur higher costs when acquiring customers. Specifically, we elaborate on how online channels can act as a screening mechanism. We then advance testable propositions and report the findings of our research in the context of the sex-trade in Canada. Our primary study uses a unique data set from a fetish studio in Canada to test the propositions empirically. A discussion of our findings follows along with both policy and marketing implications.

Literature background

Acquiring customers online

Customer acquisition is often the greatest expense in customer relationship management (Blattberg and Deighton, 1996; Reinartz *et al.*, 2005). For example, in a study of professional memberships, Thomas (2001) estimated that a professional services organization spent $26.94 to acquire a customer versus $2.15 per annum to retain a customer. The high cost of acquisition is largely attributed to the expense of reaching prospects who are ultimately not converted. For instance, traditional marketing communication channels such as signage or television offer a large reach of potential customers but a small percentage become customers.

The cost is particularly damaging for FLEs in the market of sexual services. The time FLEs spend responding to consumer inquiries is wasted when potential customers fail to follow through with appointments, thereby limiting the time FLEs have available to generate income. Unlike sellers in traditional markets, FLEs in sexual services cannot simply absorb increased costs by raising prices or increasing marketing; the need to quickly offset the cost of acquisition exacerbates their vulnerability.

A key contributor to high acquisition costs for FLEs is the asymmetry of information. While prospective clients know their own intentions when reaching out, FLEs have limited information about whether these prospects will ultimately book and pay for services. This asymmetry forces FLEs to expend resources responding to inquiries that may not convert to actual bookings. For workers in economically precarious situations, such wasted effort can increase vulnerability by consuming limited resources and income opportunities. As illustrated in Figure 1, higher acquisition costs exacerbate economic instability, potentially pushing FLEs into riskier or more harmful situations.

Online channels and screening mechanisms

There is a large body of research on customer acquisition online (Reinartz *et al.*, 2005; Srinivasan *et al.*, 2015; Verhoef and Donkers, 2005; Villanueva *et al.*, 2008). Online channels such as search engines or social media sites allow consumers to interact with the medium before contacting the seller (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2015; Stephen and Galak, 2012). This enhanced interactivity acts as a screening mechanism where prospective customers can ascertain their fit with the seller ahead of time (Florenthal and Shoham, 2010). For example, prospects can learn about the quality of a professional contractor through the company's website and assess whether the firm fits their needs before reaching out to them directly (Florenthal and Shoham, 2010). As a result, prospects from online channels have higher acquisition rates than prospects from traditional channels such as outdoor signage or direct mail (Chan *et al.*, 2011).

Online channels help reduce the information asymmetry between sellers and buyers by enabling the screening of prospective customers. Resources expended to market to consumers who ultimately do not convert increase the costs of customer acquisition, as evidenced in the phenomenon of showrooming where customers visit physical retailers to test a product only to purchase it online (Gensler, Neslin, and Verhoef, 2017). Sellers can mitigate this form of asymmetry by

targeting specific customers based on signals of likely purchase (Verhoef and Donkers, 2005). Being able to identify the most likely converts would allow sellers to focus their resources on those customers and reduce their acquisition costs accordingly.

The sale of sexual services is a vastly different marketplace, and online channels may be more nuanced in terms of customer acquisition. The legalization of sex work while maintaining restrictions on promotions has largely moved providers online (Argento *et al.*, 2018; Bernier *et al.*, 2021; Kille *et al.*, 2017). Online channels allow sellers to promote their services explicitly or implicitly (Cunningham *et al.*, 2017). For example, a provider might post an advertisement on an online marketplace for sexual services outside of the legal jurisdiction of the municipality in which they operate (Cunningham *et al.*, 2017). Or a provider's social media account and/or a website might promote its legal sexual services, such as stripping or fetish services, but imply the availability of services that would be considered illegal to purchase (Machat *et al.*, 2021).

Online channels allow providers to implement risk strategies for screening clients (Bernier *et al.*, 2021). Sellers can compile and share screening tools such as bad-date lists (lists of clients who have been violent in the past; Campbell *et al.*, 2019). Sellers can also list their restrictions/limits in the online advertisement so that prospects know before contacting the provider what they will not do. Further, online channels allow for screening through an electronic communication exchange whereby providers ask prospects questions before committing to a meeting in person (Kille *et al.*, 2017). Overall, the shift toward online channels has allowed providers to be more cautious by screening clients. At a macro level, the screening that online channels provide has corresponded with subsequently lower rates of homicide and rape (Cunningham *et al.*, 2017).

Propositions

Channel strategy is one of the biggest elements in customer acquisition strategy (Neslin and Shankar, 2009). Identifying the marketing channels that bring the most profitable customers can inform a seller's strategy on how to "right-channel" customers (Neslin and Shankar, 2009). This study examines which online channels have the greatest conversion rate of prospective customers.

This research focuses on customer acquisition in the sex trade, a context in which some channels may be more beneficial to the sellers than other channels. This market is fundamentally different from traditional markets because conventional channels such as television or direct mail are restricted (Rossi *et al.*, 2021). Asymmetry is also greater in this market as consumers face more uncertainty in their purchases because sellers cannot offer the signals of quality such as refunds or warranties that traditional sellers offer (Kirmani and Rao, 2000). Due to restrictions on advertising in both markets, the primary forms of marketing occur through digital channels. Prior work on the customer journey suggests that prospects who are earlier in the decision-making process use more inclusive channels but rely on more exclusive channels as they get closer to conversion (Fulgoni, 2014). Large scale, more inclusive channels such as social media or video sharing are useful for developing prospects' awareness and interest (Fulgoni, 2014; Nisar and Yeung, 2018). As prospects get closer to making a decision, they may seek further information to determine the compatibility between their wants and what the seller offers and these exchanges are more likely on the more exclusive channels that require registration and creating a member profile.

Sellers use four primary channels for customer acquisition: clearinghouses, websites, social media (digital profiles) and online forums. These digital channels differ both in terms of their audiences and the level of interactivity. A clearinghouse is a website that allows users to post advertisements such as the popular website *craigslist*.org (Cunningham *et al.*, 2017) – it is in effect a digital classified advertisement. The clearinghouse allows customers to see pictures and read information but the clearinghouse format limits the amount of information that sellers can communicate. Personal websites allow sellers to communicate a much larger array of information and customers can read through the website and determine their fit with the FLE (Machat *et al.*, 2021).

Social media have a high level of interactivity as consumers can comment, share and like posts by the sellers, but entry and exit into these channels are easy, so they likely attract a diversity of potential customers from the curious to the more committed. In addition, while prospects and customers can interact on these inclusive channels, neither can verify the authenticity of the other. For instance, either customers or sellers could create a digital identity that differs from their actual identity. In members-only online forums, members share a common interest and use the forum to meet likeminded individuals. The forum requires that members register and create a profile where they describe their interests, and upload photos. The effort required to join an online forum – such as registering and creating a member profile – acts as a commitment device, ensuring that prospects engaging via this channel are more likely to convert to actual customers. This aligns with the theory of asymmetry reduction, where imposing effort on buyers screens those with genuine purchase intent (Verhoef and Donkers, 2005). Because of the effort required to join the forum, we argue that the more exclusive channel will likely lead to higher conversion than the more inclusive channels (online search of clearinghouses, personal websites and social media). This differs from traditional markets where more exclusive channels limit the potential for customer acquisition (Majid, 2020).

We advance the following proposition pertaining to the rate of customer acquisition via the three digital channels. Note, the studio from which we obtained customer acquisition data does not post ads on the clearinghouse so the model tests three digital channels (online search, social media and online forum):

P1. The acquisition rate of prospects who approach the seller through the more exclusive online forum is higher than those who approach the seller through the more inclusive channels, such as online searches or social media.

Up to this point, our argument has focused on marketing channels without regard to the services that the prospective customer is seeking. Customers in the early phase of decision-making may focus primarily on price while others may be focused on quality (Gao *et al.*, 2020). Price conscious consumers are more likely to seek deals and less likely to consider a higher priced seller (Ailawadi *et al.*, 2001). In contrast, customers focused on the quality of the experience are less price sensitive (Gao *et al.*, 2020). In a context such as our where traditional signals like warranties or refund policies are

not possible, the seller's asking price become a more diagnostic signal (Morwitz *et al.*, 1998). Higher prices often serve as signals of quality in marketplaces where direct evaluations are limited (Morwitz *et al.*, 1998). In the absence of any other signal in the context of sexual services, price serves as a critical indicator of the seller's quality and professionalism. Based on theories of signaling and consumer behavior, we therefore hypothesize that higher prices reduce uncertainty and attract more committed customers (Gao *et al.*, 2020). Stated formally:

P2. Age group, gender, CIDB grading, qualification, and professional affiliation of SMEs, do not predict the intention for future use of BIM by SMEs for H&S management on their projects.

Research context: sex trade in Canada

It is important to note the challenge of studying a market where sellers are stigmatized for participation (Mitra *et al.*, 2022). The selling of sexual services is one of the most controversial industries in history. Mitra and colleagues refer to sellers as those who "perform services in a libidinal marketplace that exists on the edge of society and labels them as 'prostitutes" (pg. 3, Mitra *et al.*, 2022). Globally, the sex trade is largely illegal and yet still widely available in various markets (Weitzer, 2011). According to the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP, 2024), only certain regions in one country (Australia) have decriminalized the sex trade. Nine countries [2] have regions that have legalized the selling and purchasing of sex. The rest of the world has either criminalized the sale, the purchase, or both. Selling sex is often termed prostitution (Weitzer, 2011); however, selling of sexual services varies from pornography, erotic dancing and fetish services. Laws vary widely in terms of which parts of sexual services are legal or illegal and, while prostitution is largely illegal around the world, lesser versions of sexual services such as pornography are regulated and largely legal (Weitzer, 2011). We study the Canadian market because the market has legalized the selling of sexual services and thus we were able to capture data on a legal activity.

This research focuses on the purchase of fetish services (also referred to as bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism or BDSM). In Canada the purchase of sex is illegal since 2013 but fetish services are legal both to sell and purchase. The legality was initiated in the case of Canada (AG) v. Bedford 2013 (SCC 72). The applicants, one of whom was a professional dominatrix, appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada under the argument that current laws outlawing prostitution were unconstitutional. In a 9–0 decision the Court concurred with the applicants and struck down existing laws and decriminalized the selling of sex. Over the next year, the government at the time introduced new legislation that criminalized the purchase and promotion of sexual services but not the sale (Department of Justice Canada, 2014). The revised law legalized some previously illegal commercial sexual activities but placed constraints on the marketing and customer acquisition process. The move to criminalize buyers is intended to reduce demand and has experienced growth over the last two decades across diverse countries (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). Yet, research on the impact of end-demand criminalization on sex workers has yielded mixed findings (Chu and Glass, 2013; Levy and Jakobsson, 2014). One review found that it led to increased enforcement on sellers and customers in public spaces which has subsequently led to both buyers and sellers moving their activities indoors. Another study when similar legislation was introduced in Sweden found very little change in the number sellers (Levy and Jakobsson, 2014).

Sex work involves the exchange of sexual services for material compensation as well as the selling of erotic performances for products (pg. 3, Weitzer, 2011). The sex trade is a diverse market in which some services are legal but regulated, whereas others are simply illegal. Based on the laws regulating or outlawing the selling of sex, the delineation appears to occur based on contact between the seller and customer (Weitzer, 2011). On the legal but regulated side are services that do not involve contact and are regulated both in terms of what sellers can provide and the conditions governing the employees. For example, in Canada, pornography is legal but restrictions exist in terms of the age of performers, their consent, who is allowed to consume the content, and how the content can be disseminated (Wolak *et al.*, 2007). In Canada, fetish services, popularized by the best-selling novel "50 Shades of Gray", can be considered legal in terms of both sales and consumption [3]. Canada maintains laws where it regulates "obscene" material and restricts dissemination of the material to anybody under the age of 18 (Section 163.1 Criminal Code of Canada). Those in violation can be charged with a federal crime.

For both legal and illegal sexual services, all marketing channels are restricted and the proprietors of these channels can be fined and their operations shut down if they are found to have knowingly promoted the purchase of sex (DeLateaur, 2016). The most prominent example of this occurrence was the website "Backpages.com," known to promote the purchase of sex from escorts (Cunningham *et al.*, 2017). In 2018, the US Department of Justice seized the domain and charged seven individuals with the crime of facilitating prostitution (U.S Department of Justice, 2018). Traditional channels of marketing communication such as television or print are unable to adequately screen customers based on age and prevent the dissemination of such material by minors (Boddewyn and Loubradou, 2011). Since Canada made the promotion of sexual services illegal, sellers have turned to online channels which are based in jurisdictions that enable them to avoid prosecution. These online channels have experienced tremendous growth despite the legal maneuvering they use largely because of the steady demand for sexual service (Cunningham and Kendall, 2011). The move to legalize selling of sexual services led many sellers to increase their promotional efforts via online channels (see supplemental materials).

Methods

Study context

The study context is a studio in the Canadian city of Toronto where several providers offer bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, sadism-masochism (BDSM). When we first embarked on this project, we sought to gather market data from sellers in the marketplace. We initially reached out to the studio by e-mail to introduce ourselves and explain that we were interested in applying research on marketing channels to customer acquisition in a market in transition. The nature of this topic and the information required made it difficult to find

a willing partner. We reached out to over two dozen different providers in markets where the sale of fetish services is legal. Only four providers replied and only one responded positively to our request. The studio coordinator (also a front-line worker) requested a proposal that she could share with the other FLEs who worked in the studio. We first vetted this formal proposal through our Institutional Review Board and then secured the partnership. The proposal clarified our interest in tracking customer acquisition rates based on marketing channels and asked the studio partner to compile a list of all prospective customers (new customers only) along with the date they contacted the studio and when they made an appointment if at all. Because Canada had decriminalized the selling of sexual services, our request for such data did not legally compromise the studio.

The studio is located in a large metropolitan city in Canada and has been in operation since 2012. Data were collected in 2019, six years after the selling of sex became legal but prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of data collection, the studio had eight different FLEs, seven female and one male. Appointments were available for customers 24 h a day seven days a week. Though costs varied based on the services requested, the standard charge was hourly with one hour priced at $350 (CDN) for the hour and up to $950 (CDN) for three hours. A session could be longer but these rates would have to be negotiated with the specific provider. The studio made clear that they do not offer sexual intercourse of any kind, any violation of this rule will result in forfeiture of any payments and immediate dismissal. The studio communicates that it is a fetish provider and that providers will always be clothed.

In terms of marketing communication, the studio primarily markets through three different digital channels: a website, presence on an online forum for those with an interest in BDSM activities, and a Twitter account. In line with prior work on marketing channels, we consider the website to be an extension of a search engine (Florenthal and Shoham, 2010). The firm does not leverage any search engine optimization and relies on organic search. The studio's website would appear amongst the sites whenever consumers search for terms such as "BDSM", "domination" or "fetish" In the studio's geographic region. It should be noted that cross pollination may occur between the website and the social media channels, the studio lists its website on its Twitter account and vice-versa. A potential customer may view the website and then seek more information by viewing the studio's Twitter account. However, the third channel, the online forum is unique because of its members-only access. A prospective customer who came through the forum would have had to register and create a profile. The effort on the part of the prospective customer to engage through this channel makes it likely that this channel has a more salient impact than an online search.

To assess the competitive landscape, we had exchanges with the studio proprietor and conducted our own online searches: most competitors were individual operators who provided similar services but had less longevity than this studio. Many were individuals who traveled to the city to provide their services before traveling to another city. One competing studio had four providers but had consistently changed from sole operator to others who join the main operator from time to time.

The data were collected over four months, March – June 2019. Customers contact the studio, not the FLEs directly. The prospect completes a questionnaire including a section to list the preferred provider as well as the proposed date and time of the session. The "headmistress" then replies to discuss particulars. After the initial interaction, an employee of the studio records the date of the contact and assigns the individual a unique identifier, a random number along with the initials of the name they provided. The studio provided us with a deidentified data set that included responses to the questionnaire in exchange for $500 (USD) and a report outlining the primary findings.

Our sample contained a total of 158 potential new customers who contacted the studio during the four-month period. For a linear regression with seven covariates, we calculated the sample size necessary to detect significant effects when the p-value is held at 0.05 with a statistical power of 0.95 is 153. Prospects indicated on the questionnaire how they heard about the studio. Thirty-nine customers-initiated communication via the studio's Twitter account, 76 customers arrived at the website from a search engine and 28 via the fetish online forum Fetlife. The remaining customers either listed other or referral as the channel through which they came. Our study was only focused on customer acquisition so we did not have any information on returning customer or customer retention. All the potential customers were men, in line with prior work in this context (Weitzer, 2012). The average cost of the session for those who booked was $478 and the highest amount a new customer paid for an initial session was $1,550 for a five-hour session.

Probability of acquisition based on marketing channel

Per our earlier theoretical development, marketing channels can be a method of screening customers and, as such, channels may vary as to the likelihood of generating customer acquisition. Our research context was restricted to digital channels only, two of the digital channels were all inclusive and did not screen potential customers before the prospect contacted the seller. The third channel required all prospects to register as a member of the forum which imposes a cost on potential customers before they contact the seller. This context allows us to test Proposition 1 since those who came from the forum incurred a greater cost through the effort of registering than those who relied on the other two digital methods.

In addition to the marketing channel, the data set contained three additional pieces of information about the prospects: the restrictions they listed, the amount of time they requested and the price of their session. Restrictions refer to limits that the buyer requested for the session. The two other pieces of information, the time requested and the price, are related, as longer sessions are more expensive, but not perfectly since prices are also affected by the complexity or difficulty (for the provider) of the session. Potential customers could select from a set of activities and some of these activities required an extra fee due to their complexity and the limited number of providers that could perform these activities. Selection of any of the activities associated with an additional fee was measured as a nominal variable (1 for yes, 0 for no). The signaling through price allowed us to test Proposition 2: if higher prices signal higher quality, they should alleviate uncertainty as it pertains to quality, and acquisition rate should improve accordingly.

Empirical analysis

We used two different methodologies to test the propositions, hazard modeling and Bayesian analysis. Hazard modeling is the most appropriate analysis when analyzing the probability of occurrence over time. We also used Bayesian methods to enhance the validity of the analysis and uncover probability without the element of time. Each channel was dummy-coded as a binary variable (e.g. 1 for forum; 0 otherwise).

Hazard model

The first proposition argued that the acquisition rate for those who approach the seller through the forum is higher than for those who approach through other online channels. The hazard model allows us to test the impact of the different marketing channels on customer acquisition. A hazard model reveals the probability of a prospect converting to a customer given that prospects enter the prospect pool at different times. It accounts for the likelihood that a prospect did not become a customer within the period of analysis because data collection ended before they could book an appointment. For example, several prospects had reached out to the studio just before data collection ended. Including these prospects would skew the probability analysis because it could misattribute their non-booking to reasons other than simply falling outside the data collection period. Time was measured as the number of days between initial contact and booking: a prospect who contacted the seller on Monday and attended an appointment on Wednesday was counted as taking three days to book a session.

We used an accelerated hazard model with an exponential distribution to assess the probability over time of acquiring a new customer after first contact. Per Proposition one, the forum should increase the probability of turning a prospect into a customer over time. To demonstrate this conversion, we had to relax the assumption that the differences in acquisition rate over time from all channels were the same across time. The exponential distribution had the best fit, our scale result was only 1 and the plotted hazard did not reveal a significant amount of variation with respect to time. To ensure the appropriateness of the exponential distribution, we also compared the log likelihood of the exponential distribution model with a Weibull distribution model and found that the former produced a better fit (Exponential, $-2\text{LL} = 594.359$ versus Weibull distribution, $-2\text{LL} = 809.423$). Each of the studio's marketing channels identified earlier was included within the model (see Table 2 for abbreviations).

We also included the impact of restrictions, length of session and cost of session on each channel. The accelerated hazard model is as follows:

$$H(t) = 1 - \begin{pmatrix} \beta_0(-1)(t) + \beta_1(OS) + \beta_2(SM) + \beta_3(OF) + \beta_4(R) + \beta_5(Lgth) + \beta_6(\text{Price}) \\ e \quad + \beta_6(SE) * (R) + \beta_7(SE) * (R) + \beta_8(SM) * (R) + \beta_9(FetL) * (R) + e_i \end{pmatrix} \quad (1)$$

The first contact with the customer in the model – time zero – was recorded as the date when the customer completed the online questionnaire. After an appointment was confirmed and the customer attended the appointment the event was recorded as having occurred. If the customer did not book an appointment, did not attend the appointment or canceled it during the period of analysis, the customer was right censored and the event was recorded as not having occurred. In other words, the customer may have chosen to make an appointment, but we did not capture it because we ended our data collection before this could be recorded. Same day inquiries and sessions were counted as one day between inquiry and session.

Results

The results reveal that all channels increase customer acquisition over time but the forum has the greatest positive impact on customer acquisition. The increase in probability of acquiring a customer after one day through the forum was approximately 30% over those acquired through others sources holding the covariates (restrictions, length, cost of session) constant. This supports Proposition One which posits that the more exclusive digital channel attracts customers more likely to purchase because they are further along in their customer journey. Acquisition rate increased by 24.758% above the other channels and covariates when the customer originated from a web search. Acquisition rate through the social media channel increased by 20.331% above the other and covariates. The expected time for booking was also the shortest for the forum channel at 8.565 days, compared to 21.613 days for the web search and 22.148 days from social media. From a seller's standpoint the shorter time is preferred because it signals greater prospect commitment. Price does not have a significant impact on the likelihood of customer acquisition unlike Proposition 2 argued. Table 3 displays the full results.

Bayesian analysis

In addition to the accelerated hazard model we conducted a Bayesian analysis to calculate the probability of customer acquisition via marketing channel without consideration of time. A Bayesian analysis can compensate for the small sample size (McNeish, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible

Table 2 Abbreviations for variables

Abbreviation	Explanation
OS	Online search
SM	Social media
OF	Exclusive online forum
R	Client expressed restrictions to the provider
Lgth	Length of session requested from provider
Price	Price of session

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3 Parameter estimate of customer acquisition over time using hazard model

Parameter	Estimate	SE	χ^2	Pr (χ^2)	Increase in Probability at Time (1)	Expected time for booking (in days)
Intercept	6.555	0.268	80.28	<0.001		
Online search	1.396	0.276	25.66	<0.001	24.758%	21.613
Social media	1.593	0.359	19.70	<0.001	20.331%	22.148
Forum	−3.404	1.499	5.16	<0.05	30.084%	8.565
Restrictions	−0.572	0.309	3.43	0.064		
Length	0.361	0.748	0.43	0.192		
PriceofSession	−0.002	0.002	0.77	0.379		
Forum*PriceofSession	0.008	0.004	4.98	0.086		
Scale	1					
Lagrange multiplier, $\chi^2 = 49.812$, $p < 0.001$						

Source(s): Authors' own work

to collect more data as the province where the studio is based instituted strict social distancing restrictions a few months after the initial data collection. The sellers were restricted from seeing clients and at the time of writing (two years after initial data collection) the fetish studio saw a significant decline in clients.

Parameter estimates using Bayesian modelling are highly sensitive to model specifications which would overcome the challenge of extrapolating from a small sampled model that relies on asymptotics (McNeish, 2016). The model is as follows:

$$y_i \sim Normal\left(Probability\ of\ Customer\ Acquisition_i,\ \sigma^2 Probability\ of\ Customer\ Acquisition_i\right)$$
$$= \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 OS_i + \gamma_2 SM_i + \gamma_3 OF_i + \gamma_4 R_i + \gamma_5 L_i + \gamma_6 P_i + \gamma_7 (OF_i * P_i) + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Results

The Bayesian analysis results reveal that only the forum increases the rate of acquisition over time ($\beta_3 = -3.404$, $x^2 = 19.70$, Pr (x^2) < 0.001). Both the online search ($\beta_1 = 1.396$, $x^2 = 25.66$, Pr (x^2) < 0.001) and social media ($\beta_2 = 1.593$, $x^2 = 19.70$, Pr (x^2) < 0.001) have a comparatively negative impact on customer acquisition over time. Both findings support Proposition 1 and confirm the Hazard model results.

Per the second proposition, a higher price should lead to greater probability of booking. Although the effect is in the direction hypothesized, it is not significant and thus Proposition 2 is not supported. A possible explanation for the lack of significant impact of higher prices on booking may be the limited variance in sellers' prices. All of the FLEs were part of the same studio and prices were set by the studio, thus resulting in limited variation between sellers. Interestingly, when we explored the simultaneous impact of price and online forum, we found that a higher price and coming from the forum reduced the probability of customer acquisition over time ($\beta_7 = 0.008$, $x^2 = 4.98$, Pr (x^2) < 0.10). This may indicate that the most discerning customers are those who come from the online forum and are looking for complex, more pricey sessions. The combination of a restrictive channel (online forum) and high prices could mean that the most profitable customers are acquired early. The remaining prospects might either not perceive the value or be unwilling to pay the price, leading to a diminishing acquisition rate over time.

The Bayesian analysis confirms the hazard model results (Table 4): the negative regression estimates for both the website and social media indicate that these channels have lower probability of customer acquisition. By contrast, the positive estimate for the forum supports the view that a more restrictive channel of communication can increase customer acquisition, in line with proposition 1. The price also has a positive effect.

Discussion

This study advances the services marketing literature by introducing customer acquisition costs as a critical yet underexplored dimension of frontline employee (FLE)

Table 4 Parameter estimates of customer acquisition using Bayesian modeling

Parameter	Estimate	Std error	Wald 95% Confidence Limits	
Intercept	0.258	0.656	−1.027	1.543
Website (via web search)	−1.464	0.442	−2.331	−0.598
Social media	−1.647	0.535	−2.695	−0.599
Forum	4.281	2.298	0.224	8.786
Restrictions	0.841	0.418	0.022	1.660
Length	0.008	0.739	−1.441	1.456
CostofSession	0.000	0.002	−0.004	0.005
Forum*CostofSession	−0.010	0.005	−0.019	−0.000
Scale	1			

Note(s): DIC = 209.410; pD = 8.226
Source(s): Authors' own work

vulnerability, particularly in controversial markets. Previous research has primarily focused on customer-facing aspects of service delivery, such as consumer vulnerability and service quality (e.g. Yagil, 2006; Koppenhafer *et al.*, 2023). Our findings expand this focus by highlighting how the economic costs of acquiring customers can exacerbate the vulnerability of FLEs, particularly in contexts where traditional marketing strategies are restricted. Markets such as the sale of recreational drugs or sexual services are opening up around the world but FLEs in these markets will continue to be vulnerable as the markets transition from illegal to legal. They are still likely to suffer from stigmatization and have to navigate regulations that restrict their open promotion. By demonstrating that more exclusive digital channels (e.g. online forums) can mitigate these costs and improve customer acquisition efficiency, we provide novel insights into how marketing strategies can directly influence FLE well-being in precarious service contexts.

This contribution is particularly significant for the services marketing literature as it reframes customer acquisition not only as a managerial challenge but also as a critical factor influencing employee vulnerability. While much of the existing research explores consumer-facing vulnerabilities, our work underscores the need to consider how marketing decisions, such as channel selection, impact employees' economic and physical well-being in service exchanges.

Our study is, to the best our knowledge, the first empirical in any discipline to examine customer acquisition via different online channels in the selling of sexual services. It shows that the forum, which imposes the highest cost on potential customers, also led to the highest rate of customer acquisition. We find that online search and social media are linked to lower customer acquisition largely because they are more inclusive and therefore attract a wide variety of customers. Neither of these digital channels screen customers or impose any cost on them to gauge their level of sincerity. By contrast, the costs imposed by a forum where consumers have to register and create a profile seemed to filter prospects who were less sincere about booking a session, hence reducing customer acquisition costs for the sellers.

Contribution to front-line employees vulnerability

A controversial market such as that of sexual services is unique because both customers and FLEs face the prospect of harm. The FLEs face economic, social and physical harm from customers. Our findings suggest that FLEs can reduce economic harm through acquisition channels.

The FLEs in controversial markets are often highly reliant on the income from the services they provide and must cope with the risks outlined above. If time and effort must be spent interacting with potential customers without converting these consumers to paid clients then the FLEs incur costs without the subsequent income. Our focus is on the sex trade but parallels can be drawn with other controversial markets such as undocumented labor. Undocumented labor is also in a vulnerable position because of their precarious position and are compelled to try to get as many customers as they can. If a seller must take the time and effort to reply to each inquiry but does not see a corresponding amount of revenue the seller has to absorb these costs. They can either pass this cost on to legitimate customers or lower their prices in the hope of attracting a greater volume of customers. The latter approach lends itself to sellers making riskier choices to attract more clients. For sellers in controversial markets this can further their economic vulnerability. A seller may take greater risk in terms of their health or safety to appeal to more customers. For example, shortly after Canada legalized the selling of sexual services, sellers who did not move to an online channel were forced to compete for fewer customers and were more likely to engage in riskier practices such as unprotected sex (Machat *et al.*, 2019). Further, many of the front-line employees in the sex trade are undocumented which can cause them to work for low wages and often have their wages withheld (Marcus *et al.*, 2016).

The findings reported in this paper suggest that sellers should adopt a more restrictive approach to acquiring customers through marketing channels. Rather than allocating resources to any channel available to them, sellers should focus on the most efficient channels that attract their most likely users. Better channel strategy could reduce economic vulnerability of workers in the sex trade and those that are undocumented by allowing them to be more independent.

Extrapolating these findings further, many FLEs in controversial markets are managed by others and are dependent upon them. In the sex trade this has been referred to as the "pimp", in the market for undocumented labor this can be the foreman or manager (Marcus *et al.*, 2016). In this state of dependency, the FLEs manage the supply of customers, often without consideration of the needs or capabilities of the FLEs. Our findings that a more restrictive channel that requires a registration can improve customer acquisition rates suggest that providers could gain more independence by more efficiently marketing themselves or being more discerning in identifying and screening prospects. For instance, providers could impose restrictions or engage with others online to gain control over the supply of customers and reduce dependence on others.

Contribution to marketing regulations and consumer vulnerability

This study provides novel insights into how marketing regulations and customer acquisition strategies can mitigate vulnerabilities faced by FLEs in controversial markets. The findings have broader implications beyond the sex trade for other controversial markets, such as the sale of alcohol, marijuana, gambling services and even undocumented labor. These markets' common characteristics, including legal restrictions, social stigmatization and economic precarity among workers, heighten FLEs' vulnerability.

In markets like alcohol and marijuana, restrictions on promotions often aim to limit access to vulnerable populations while ensuring regulatory compliance. Similarly, in gambling, advertising limitations aim to reduce the risk of problematic behaviors. However, these restrictions often increase the costs of customer acquisition for sellers who operate legally. Our findings suggest that selective and restrictive marketing channels – such as those requiring user registration or imposing effort on potential customers – can improve customer acquisition rates but also reduce economic strain on FLEs. This approach could be adapted to these industries to help sellers identify and engage more committed customers while minimizing wasted resources.

By focusing on marketing channels that impose costs or effort on prospective customers, businesses in controversial markets can screen for higher-quality prospects who are more likely to convert. For instance, gambling service providers could implement member-only platforms requiring upfront

commitment, which would help attract serious participants while reducing the risks associated with problem gambling. Similarly, in the marijuana industry, platforms that require verification of age and intent could improve acquisition efficiency and regulatory compliance. From the perspective of prior research this finding answers the question of which channels should be employed (Neslin and Shankar, 2009), prospective customers can be encouraged to go through a more restrictive channel ("right-channeled"). The added cost to customers would help screen customers and increase acquisition rate.

This study's findings can inform the design of regulatory frameworks. Blanket restrictions on promotion often push sellers to rely on more inclusive channels, which may attract a high volume of insincere inquiries, increasing acquisition costs and economic vulnerability. Regulators should consider allowing or encouraging restrictive channels that align with the goals of protecting vulnerable consumers while supporting legitimate sellers. Channels that require authentication, effort or membership could serve as a middle ground, balancing consumer protection with economic efficiency for sellers.

Limitations and future research

The sex trade is a difficult market to study due its legality and controversial nature. It was a significant challenge to collect data to analyze customer acquisition. We had reached out to multiple providers and were only successful in collaborating with one. This challenging data collection situation limits the generalizability of the results across different markets or even different providers of sexual services. Another limitation lies in the focus on a unique form of regulation, end-demand criminalization. Aside from the sex trade (Canada, Sweden, Norway, etc), this approach has only been regularly applied to undocumented labor (Webb *et al.*, 2009). In other controversial markets, such as recreational drugs or gambling, a more common approach is to legalize both selling and consumption, although with restrictions on advertising as the end-demand approach.

Future research may follow the path of prior research on customer relationship management (Verhoef and Donkers, 2005) and track the profitability of customers via different channels. Does higher customer acquisition in the exclusive channel corresponds to customers who are willing to pay more? Alternatively, the greater acquisition costs from inclusive channels could be passed on to those customers arriving from the exclusive channel.

Conclusion

Controversial markets are unique because all FLEs are vulnerable to different forms of harm. The FLEs in these markets have a heightened need to achieve income while reducing their costs. This research attempted to identify the most efficient method of acquiring customers and revealed that exclusive channels lead to greater acquisition rates than more inclusive channels. This is beneficial for sellers because the exclusive channel limits who can participate (by imposing a cost on users) while also reducing sellers' cost of customer acquisition. We hope that our approach to reducing FLEs' economic vulnerability can motivate further inquiries on other forms of FLE vulnerabilities.

Notes

1 To read more about these cases please visit the sexworkersproject.org

2 The countries that have regions with legal prostitution are: Netherlands, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, Austria, Switzerland, Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom

3 Since Terri-Jean Bedford (a professional dominatrix) brought legal action that led to the strike down of existing prostitution laws we could not find an instance where a dominatrix was charged with selling sex. Provided that sexual contact does not occur nor is promoted.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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