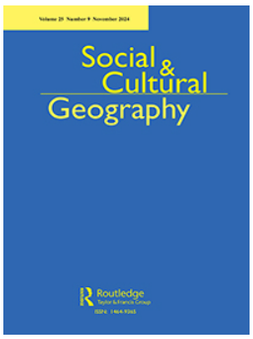

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Upmarket boudoirs and red lights: the physical environment of sex workplaces in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

The physical environment and location of brothels has been the focus of significant scholarship, although much of the literature focuses on the exterior of these businesses, leaving the interiors as yet under-examined. In New Zealand, there is a tension between decriminalization's intention that brothels are treated similarly to other businesses, and the enduring stigma which sex work is subject to. To mitigate stigmatization and public condemnation of their businesses, brothel owners sometimes mimic the aesthetic and branding of more mainstream industries. Drawing on data from media texts and interviews with brothel owners and operators, this article examines how 'mainstreaming' narratives of respectability and acceptability are produced in the physical space of brothels, particularly their interior décor and design. Media texts were analysed using a critical discourse analysis approach, and interviews using a Foucauldian discourse analysis model, allowing for an understanding of the interplay between the discursive production of the brothel sector and the physical environment of these businesses. We suggest that brothels' interiors are used as a way of indexing their class status, and explore how this may be used to communicate ideas about the workers employed there, particularly in relation to existing stigmas about prostitution.

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Palabras clave
Industria del sexo; burdeles; prostitución; análisis del discurso; marketing; de moda

Boudoirs chics et quartiers chauds : l'environnement concret des établissements de services sexuels en Nouvelle-Zélande

RÉSUMÉ

L'environnement concret et l'emplacement des maisons closes ont été l'objet de nombreux travaux. Cependant, beaucoup d'entre eux se concentrent sur leur extérieur et les intérieurs n'ont pas vraiment été étudiés. En Nouvelle-Zélande, il y a une tension entre un désir de décriminaliser les établissements de services sexuels pour les traiter comme toute autre entreprise, et les préjugés tenaces envers le travail sexuel. Les propriétaires imitent quelquefois l'esthétique et les images de marque d'industrie plus traditionnelles afin de

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limiter la stigmatisation et l'opprobre de leurs entreprises. Cet article s'appuie sur des données provenant des médias écrits et d'entretiens avec des propriétaires et des gérants de maisons closes pour examiner la production de messages « mainstream » de respectabilité et d'acceptabilité dans l'espace concret des établissements, en particulier dans les conceptions et les décorations de leurs intérieurs. Pour les textes, on a suivi une approche d'analyse critique de discours et pour les entretiens, un modèle d'analyse du discours selon Foucault, qui permettent une appréhension de l'interaction entre la production discursive du secteur des maisons closes et leur environnement concret. Nous suggérons que les intérieurs des établissements sexuels sont utilisés comme un moyen d'annexer leur statut de classe, et explorons de quelles manières cela pourrait être utilisé pour communiquer des idées sur les employés qui y travaillent, surtout par rapport aux préjugés courants envers la prostitution.

Boudoirs de lujo y luces rojas: el entorno físico de los lugares de trabajo del sexo en Nueva Zelanda

RESUMEN

El entorno físico y la ubicación de los burdeles han sido el foco de una importante cantidad de investigaciones, aunque gran parte de la literatura se centra en el exterior de estos negocios, dejando los interiores aún poco examinados. En Nueva Zelanda, existe una tensión entre la intención de la despenalización de que los burdeles sean tratados de manera similar a otros negocios, y el estigma persistente al que está sujeto el trabajo sexual. Para mitigar la estigmatización y la condena pública de sus negocios, los dueños de burdeles a veces imitan la estética y la marca de industrias más convencionales. Basándose en datos de textos de los medios y entrevistas con propietarios y operadores de burdeles, este artículo examina cómo se producen narrativas de respetabilidad y aceptabilidad 'de moda' en el espacio físico de los burdeles, en particular su decoración y diseño interior. Los textos de los medios de comunicación se analizaron mediante un enfoque de análisis crítico del discurso y las entrevistas mediante un modelo de análisis del discurso de tradición foucaultiana, lo que permitió comprender la interacción entre la producción discursiva del sector de los burdeles y el entorno físico de estos negocios. Sugerimos que los interiores de los burdeles se utilizan como una forma de indicar su estatus de clase y exploramos cómo esto puede usarse para comunicar ideas sobre los trabajadores empleados allí, particularmente en relación con los estigmas existentes sobre la prostitución.

Introduction

Brothels' physical environment and location has been the focus of significant scholarship (Crofts et al., 2013; Hubbard & Colosi, 2015; Knight, 2010; Prior & Crofts, 2012; van Liempt &

Chimienti, 2017). Brothel locations, and their control through land-use planning regulations are often subject to legal or media attention even in jurisdictions where sex work is decriminalized (Prior & Crofts, 2012; Prior & Gorman-Murray, 2014). In New Zealand, Section 14 of the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) permits Territorial Authorities to pass bylaws restricting the location of brothels (Knight, 2010; Prostitution Reform Act 2003). There is a tension between decriminalization's implicit intention that brothels are treated as 'a business like any other', and the notion they are 'inherently disorderly' and therefore incompatible with 'sensitive' land uses (G. Abel, 2021, p. 15; Knight, 2010, p. 147; Prior & Crofts, 2012, p. 131).

As core-stigmatized businesses, brothels often hide 'in the sage brush' to evade public scrutiny (Blithe et al., 2019; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). Brothel owners and operators can achieve this by mimicking aesthetics more commonly associated with mainstream businesses (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43; Crewe & Martin, 2017, p. 591). Post-decriminalization, brothel operators in New Zealand often produce narratives dividing the industry into 'professional' or 'unprofessional' based on where a given sex worker works, or 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' based on characteristics such as the number of clients a worker sees, or how much they charge (G. Abel, 2021; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). Drawing on data from media texts and interviews, we examine how these mainstreaming narratives of respectability and acceptability are produced in the physical space of brothels. Prior work has found people living near brothels sometimes take their exterior appearance to convey information about the working conditions within (Cooper, 2016; Cooper et al., 2018). Building on this, we suggest brothels' interiors too are used as a way of indexing their class status, and explore how this may communicate ideas about the workers employed there, particularly in relation to existing stigmas about prostitution. While there is a body of work which considers the interior physical environments of sex shops and erotic boutiques (Crewe & Martin, 2017; Evans et al., 2010; Sanders McDonagh & Peyrefitte, 2018; Tyler, 2012), when it comes to brothels, much work has focused on the exterior appearance, with consideration of interior décor often limited to what can be seen from the street (Cooper, 2016; Cooper et al., 2018). In this article, we extend this analysis, adding to the presently slim body of work which theorizes the constitutive role which interiors of sex workplaces play in shaping knowledges about the sex industry.

The moral geography of brothels

Research has examined how brothels are culturally situated to reproduce stigmatizing narratives of disorder, disease and deviance (Crofts, 2010; Crofts et al., 2013; Hubbard, 1999; Hubbard & Colosi, 2015). Scholarship has also considered how brothels and their operators seek to position brothels as mainstream businesses by adopting culturally acceptable aesthetic markers intended to reduce social censure (Blithe et al., 2019; B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007; B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015).

Brothels in and out of place

Brothels in suburban or urban environments are often criticized for detracting from the 'character' of the area. Prior and Crofts note that in local government planning processes, participants tend to describe '*predicted* and *assumed* impacts in relation to proposed sex

premises' (italics in original) adding, 'processes tend to attract participation by those who are negative towards a proposed land use' (2012, pp. 131–132). Hubbard argues that municipal laws push Sexual Entertainment Venues (SEVs) from 'valued to less valued spaces', saying 'planning and licensing have been implicated in the removal of sexual entertainment from specific localities on the basis it is "out of place"' (2015, p. 6). Industrial areas are often considered the only suitable location for commercial sex premises (Steinmetz & Maginn, 2014, p. 132). Prostitution is sometimes positioned as 'antithetical to the reinvention of city centres as safe, middle-class, family-oriented consumption spaces' (Hubbard, 2004, pp. 1688–1689). Similarly, in Amsterdam and Zurich, red-light districts have been zoned out of areas where they had been established for decades, giving the impression that '[c]ertain bodies and embodied practices like sex work . . . are considered "dirty" or not "fit"' for gentrified spaces, while 'moral arguments often play a prominent role' in justifying the removal of sex work from a given area (van Liempt & Chimienti, 2017, pp. 1570–1571).

Some expressions of commodified sexuality are deemed more permissible than others, particularly those which 'can be marketed as part of a diverse package of urban entertainment' (van Liempt & Chimienti, 2017, p. 1575). Labelling a venue as a 'brothel' or 'sex service premises' influences how it is regulated (Crofts & Prior, 2011, p. 257). Where SEVs can be socially coded as leisure spaces for discretionary spending by successful men, they may be less problematically integrated into the local geography (B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007; Prasad, 1999). Brents has found 'a morality of individual rights' invoked in support of brothels, reflecting a 'market logic', where brothels and sex workers were justified as legitimate neighbours partly through their profitability (2016, pp. 407–410).

Most of New Zealand's sex workers work indoors, although the small but more visible street-based sector has faced opposition in some parts of Auckland and in Christchurch, with attempts to pass by-laws restricting where they can work (Armstrong, 2021). Post-decriminalization sex work in New Zealand is still stigmatized, although this has reduced to a limited extent, albeit unevenly (G. M. Abel, 2014; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). New Zealand's legislation was created in consultation with a local sex workers' advocacy organization, who have received government funding since the late 1980s and arguably occupy a position of some limited mainstream recognition and authority (G. M. Abel, 2014). Across the years covered by the material for analysis in this paper, there was a slight shift to sex work being understood as a kind of labour, backed up by high profile legal tests such as a sex worker successfully winning a sexual harassment case against her employer (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). In many large cities brothels sit within entertainment districts near clubs, bars, and restaurants. However, because the PRA allows territorial authorities to rule on where brothels can be located, private workers in suburban areas may be, in Abel's words, 'effectively recriminalized' through by-laws (G. M. Abel, 2014, p. 584).

Perceptions of place are constructed: Gieryn proposes place is both physically fashioned and interpreted, carrying information about 'danger or security' and identity (Gieryn, 2000, p. 465). Armstrong notes media reporting 'reinforced stigmatizing narratives by positioning street-based sex workers as outsiders of the communities in which they work', highlighting the role which media plays in constructing sex work in relation to place; belonging or not in a specific location (2021, p. 31). The stigma to which sex workers are subject is not static: New Zealand's legislative framework has shifted its

manifestations in ways that nevertheless reflect the exercise of stigma as power as inherently relational (Armstrong, 2021; Link & Phelan, 2001; Nencel et al., 2021). Although sex work stigma is sometimes experienced via attempts to render sex workers 'out of place', strategic uses of place can also have integrative or productive effects, a way to resist stigma. Sitter et al. found 'participants identified the geographic context of sex workplaces as a protective factor against sex work stigma', and Grittner, using critical place theory, has similarly suggested that sex workplaces hold the possibility for resisting stigma (Grittner, 2023; Sitter et al., 2024, p. 256).

The mainstreaming of brothels

When objections to brothels in urban areas are based on a notion they are 'out of place', one approach to skirting public objection is to alleviate potential offence by being 'relatively invisible' and thus able to 'fly under the radar of moral indignation' (G. M. Abel, 2014, p. 587; Blithe et al., 2019; Hubbard & Colosi, 2015, p. 6; Prior & Gorman-Murray, 2014). Where sex work is not decriminalized tolerance of brothels by neighbours and authorities can depend on their ability to remain visually discreet (Cooper, 2016; Cooper et al., 2018; Laing & Cook, 2014). Brothels, stripclubs and lapdancing clubs increasingly 'mainstream' their marketing and branding as a 'conscious attempt to mimic aspects of non-sexual products and services' (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43). Brothel owners sometimes tailor the appearance of their businesses to appear 'hardly recognizable as brothels', fearing increased visibility 'could motivate a community backlash' (Blithe et al., 2019; B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007, p. 432).

Objections to brothels and other SEVs on the basis that they affect the character or tone of an area results in business decisions being 'over-ruled by local decision-making processes' which favour the 'values of middle-class, middle-aged property owners and developers' (Hubbard et al., 2015, p. 6). Objections to brothels, spaces *identifiable as brothels*, or other spaces where sex work is carried out, are almost invariably classed, and frequently linked to gentrification, with complaints made by gentrifiers often considered more weighty owing to their social capital (Künkel, 2017). The pre-emptive or preventative response of mainstreaming is also 'coded with class – upscaling in order to move away from traditional working-class sexual codes' (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43). This attends an increased emphasis on middle-class clients and workers in sexual industries (Bernstein, 2007), creating 'a subtle shift in the perceived respectability of those involved in the industry' (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43).

Elevating some spaces as more acceptable is a zero-sum game, in which erotic boutiques are contrasted with the unacceptable (working- or lower-class) sex shop; or professional-appearing massage parlours compared with 'inappropriate' ones (Cooper et al., 2018; Crewe & Martin, 2017, p. 593). Linking the acceptability and class of the goods or services sold within the space and the space itself can also be usefully applied to an analysis of SEVs. The branding and mainstreaming of SEVs, and, as we argue in this article, of brothels within that category, is 'embedded within a social class hierarchy, where certain displays of sexuality are seen as more legitimate or sophisticated than others' (Edwards, 2010, p. 156). This hierarchy is conveyed to potential customers, sex workers and the broader public through branding and marketing (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 51).

Methods, material for analysis and aims

Existing research into the geography of sexually oriented businesses has explored questions about how zoning and other local government regulations influence the location and operation of these businesses. Discussion of the décor and interior features of brothels, including functional elements such as the layouts of parlours, features in some research which addresses the mainstreaming of SEVs (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010; B. Brents et al., 2009). The physical locations of brothels and other sex workplaces have been studied, but little research explicitly addresses the décor, styling, maintenance and interiors of brothels as its key point of inquiry.

This article contributes to understandings of the interior physical environments of brothels, taking New Zealand's decriminalized environment as a case study and drawing on commentary in 14 news media texts about sex work from 2012 to 2018, and a series of 31 semi-structured interviews carried out with sex workers and brothel operators between 2019 and 2020. The possibility of combining these two sources came to light when the authors identified a shared theme in data they had collected for separate research projects, which fell outside the scope of each project but merited further investigation. Combining these data sets allows overlapping themes to be identified from comments made in two different contexts. News media texts are an important site where the general public learn about the sex industry, and prior research has found sex workers perceive media coverage as a marketing opportunity (Farvid & Glass, 2014; Fitzgerald & Abel, 2010; Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006). Media comments are made with an imagined audience and the advertorial possibilities of such coverage in mind, highlighting links to work examining décor and mainstreaming within the realms of marketing and branding (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010; B. Brents et al., 2009; Crewe & Martin, 2017). Interview data offer an insight into how brothel operators articulate the working environment, allowing deeper consideration of how brothel operators consciously use aesthetic markers to situate their businesses.

The broader project for which media texts were collected concerned how sex workers who carry out their work in different ways were constructed in media. Texts were gathered via the NewzText database, initially using the search terms 'sex work*' and 'prostitut*'. Hand searches were carried out of outlets less reliably indexed by NewzText, such as *Radio New Zealand*. The texts are representative, not exhaustive, and data collection ceased when a point of saturation was reached. 'Text' here refers to written, audio, and audiovisual material. The larger project encompassed 62 texts; the strand concerning indoor managed sex work included 27 texts. An initial thematic analysis was carried out, with discourses about the interior spatialities and materialities of brothels identified in 14 texts. Identifying narrative themes within media coverage of sex work, and the commonalities in discourse clustered around these themes is an approach used in much of the existing literature on this topic (Farvid & Glass, 2014; Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006). Discourses in the analysed texts were considered individually and as part of a broader corpus, addressing the interdiscursivity of them and how they functioned in relation to existing stereotypes and knowledges about sex work and brothels (Fairclough, 1992).

Interviews were conducted as part of a doctoral research project and took place between late 2019 and the first part of 2020 in four main centres across New Zealand. The broader project included interviews with conducted with brothel-based sex workers (18), brothel operators (8) and sex worker/operators (5), with the latter group consisting of sex workers who also worked as managers or shift supervisors, usually in the brothel where they also did sex work. The study was conducted in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and approval was granted by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (Ref 19/149). Participants were provided with information sheets and asked to sign consent forms and elect a name or pseudonym. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants received a copy of the first transcript, allowing them to expand on, amend, or clarify comments, providing ownership over their data. The transcriptions formed a corpus that informed problematization and analysis of workers' and operators' experiences of managing and being managed in brothels. Table 1 details those participants.

The transcripts were analysed using Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). A Foucauldian approach focuses explicitly on how power relations are produced and reproduced in their socio-cultural contexts. This informs our understanding of the interplay between the physical environment and how the brothel sector is produced as responsible and respectable.

Analysis and themes

Analysis of media texts and interview data suggested two broad themes: the arrangement of brothels' physical environment as a response to stigma, and operators' use of the physical environment of brothels as a marketing tactic.

Brothels' physical environment and responses to stigma

Crewe and Martin argue the appearance of sex shops was often used as a proxy for their negative reputation. They quote customer reviews of erotic boutiques which compare them favourably with their perception of sex shops which they imagine as 'dark and sleazy establishments with perverts at the counters' (Crewe & Martin, 2017, p. 586). Darkness is associated with sleaze and disrepute, the physical environment linked to stigmatizing stereotypes. Hubbard notes attempts at geographic segregation of sexual sites works to 'map dreams and anxieties onto bodies and spaces' (Hubbard, 2002, p. 371). In the case of brothels, media coverage and interviews with brothel managers alike instead use the appearance of their brothels to directly or indirectly challenge stereotypes.

Discourses of cleanliness

Brothels have historically been subject to assumptions that they are sites of contagion, and sex workers themselves have been stigmatized as vectors of disease (Farvid & Glass, 2014; Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006). Objections to the presence of a brothel or other SEV are sometimes couched in ideas about moral or literal dirtiness (Crewe & Martin, 2017; Hubbard, 2004; Hubbard et al., 2015). Correspondingly, the most straightforward counternarrative is operators' discourses

Table 1. Research participants – subset: operators.

Name	Occupation	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Length in industry	Business model
Dee	O	45+	M	NZE	>20 years	Club
Leanne	O	45+	F	NZE	>30 years	Parlour
Pam	O	50+	F	NZE	>20 years	Agency
Ruth	O	41	F	NZE	15- 20 years	Agency
Sapphire	O	30-35	F	NZE	5–10 years	Club; agency
Selena	O	40+	F	NZE	>20 years	Agency
Sharon	O	44	F	NZE	>30 years	Parlour
Tina	O	45+	F	Asian	>20 years	Agency
Jazz	SW/O	30	NB	NZE	5–10 years	Agency
Mimi	SW/O	26	F	Māori	1–2 years	Parlours; independent
Niamh	SW/O	24	F	NZE	5–10 years	Parlours
Ripley	SW/O	28	F	NZE	5–10 years	Agency; club
Valentine	SW/O	29	F	NZE	5–10 years	Clubs; parlours; agency

SW/O = sex worker/manager; O = operator.
F = female; *M* = male; NB = non-binary.
NZE = New Zealand European.

about the physical environment of brothels which emphasize their cleanliness. At its most elemental, this begins with a discussion of the domestic elements of the brothels being cleaned, partially also serving to showcase the mundane aspects of the job.

A video accompanying an article titled 'Sex, Conditions Safer but Prostitute Stigma Remains' surveys a higher-priced agency and specifically focuses on the cleanliness of the linen, and the highly polished bathroom floors (Cooke, 2012). A video of the same agency, accompanying a different article, comments on the 'clean shower', 'clean premises' and shows the owner making a bed and folding freshly washed laundry (Parsons-King, 2016b). A radio text profiling a different highly priced brothel also describes the churn of laundry, the owner tidying a room, and leaving it 'all ship shape', ready for the next appointment (Tolley, 2016b). Shift supervisor Mimi described her working responsibilities as centring on laundry and tidying, saying,

> I come in, I fold towels. I put more towels in the machine. I put up notes to remind people to put towels in the machine.

The prosaic task of doing laundry and, as operator Jazz described it, 'sprucing the rooms' discursively produces a morally charged counter to the idea that brothels are unhygienic and those within them are careless vectors of contagion. Similarly, sex worker and operator Niamh described spending significant time cleaning and arranging the brothel to reassure clients. She said,

> I want it to look nice [. . .] It's about making them feel like they've come in somewhere that's not horrible or dirty. It's not scary, we're not going to, you know, be skank.

The term 'nice', in this context, is both neutralizing and reassuring. It explicitly differentiates the brothel from stereotypes of unhygienic venues that are 'dirty' or 'scary'. The cleanliness of the brothel signifies the virtue in the sex workers inside. In some instances, discourses shifted from discussing more prosaic parts of the job into more explicitly sexual aspects:

> ' … sheets must be washed after each booking, and anything used in the booking (for example sex toys) must be cleaned properly. Ultimately, the escort industry is hoping to remove the risk of spreading sexual diseases, which is a massive plus for the industry's reputation'. (Bones, 2015)

By moving directly from discussing clean sheets to considering the risk of transmitting STIs, this example makes plain what is elsewhere left to subtext. The emphasis on the cleanliness of a brothel can rebut the 'vector of disease' stigma, subtly rejecting some of the justifications for arguing for the removal of brothels from urban or suburban spaces.

Invisible yet inviting

A second narrative thread apparent in discussions of brothels is the tendency to present them as polished, groomed, and located within the recognizable realms of either upper-class domesticity or professionalism. This emphasizes the relative invisibility of brothels, so effectively mainstreamed that they no longer draw attention to themselves in a manner likely to produce moral offence or 'lower the "tone" of the area via association' (Cooper et al., 2018; Hubbard et al., 2015, p. 10). In one text, an owner explains landlords frequently reject lease applications from brothel owners, saying their perception is of 'strip bars, neon lights, drugs, girls, drunken men' but adding '[y]ou don't see people like us, we trade on discretion' (Meadows, 2014). Conscious of their vulnerability to being driven out or declined for a lease if their neighbourhood experiences gentrification or (if located in an already gentrified space) if their presence as an SEV becomes noticeable, brothel owners are sensitive to the appearance and perception of their business (Blithe et al., 2019; B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007). Comments on this theme often centred around interior or design elements visible from the street – doors, signage, and lights.

Whilst relative invisibility and discretion is part of the marketing strategy of many higher priced agencies, it is not an option available to clubs and parlours reliant on 'walk-in' customers (Cooper et al., 2018). Some of these businesses are located near other nightlife (G. M. Abel, 2014), and many retain the aesthetic codes of more traditional brothels with neon signs and open street-level doors to entice customers. However, even here, operators are attentive to eliminating markers of deviance. Describing his purchase of a brothel, owner Dee recounted that,

> When I first took it on I knew that it was going to take some work … I ripped out the front doors and replaced them, it looked like a fucking fortress. No one in their right minds, you know. Graffiti. The name had to change. It was just about making it a place that was, more, more, what's the word? Inviting.

Dee acknowledges the conscious effort to reposition the image of the brothel as less threatening and more 'inviting' to the clientele he wished to attract. Agency operator Selena was similarly attentive to curating the brothel's clientele, although for her it was about appealing to what she perceived as a more attractive sector of the market. She said,

> It's not like a walk-in place where men see the lights and go, oh I'll have a shag. Or where everyone knows what you are. So it's pretty private.

Here, Selena reproduces the stereotype of brothels as seedy, but confers this discrediting attribute onto other brothels. By accessing a repertoire of stigma, she positions her target

clientele as more discerning: not Pavlovian dogs salivating at 'the lights', but private men who appreciate discretion.

One journalist describes a higher-priced and upscaled brothel, explaining that behind 'ordinary doors' are 'groomed and enticing rooms', contrasting this with 'the flasher face of the industry . . . lit up signs' (Tolley, 2016a). In the same text, the journalist visits a small owner-operated brothel, described as operating out of 'a smart suburban home'. Again, the invisibility of the brothel *as* a brothel is emphasized, with the journalist saying 'I could be popping in to catch up with a friend', adding: 'the client room is immaculate . . . you could be looking at a styled home shoot' (Tolley, 2016b). A text from a different outlet also foregrounds the invisibility of a 'boudoir' from the outside, accessed via 'a long corridor, then through another two sets of locked doors', adding the dungeon space 'looks more like a dance studio' (Chang, 2015). The interior is described using quasi-architectural terms: minimalist, separated by partitions, adorned with large mirrors, and heavy curtains (Chang, 2015).

In a text, a sex worker at one of the mainstreamed brothels explains the surroundings at her workplace create an emotional division between work and personal life, saying 'it's not my house, it's very beautiful' (Tolley, 2016a). A brothel owner links the 'light and airy décor' of her brothel to her desire to 'bring prostitution into the open' (Miller, 2017), while a different brothel is discussed in similarly complimentary and domestic terms, described as 'cosy and inviting' and the journalist remarking that '[p]hotographs of the girls who work at the agency adorn the walls of the corridor. They are tasteful and alluring' (Dominion Post, 2012).

Emphasising the relative invisibility of brothels as locations where sexual services are sold and provided pre-emptively addresses and allays fears their presence will affect a location's reputation, and by extension property values, through the phenomenon of 'stigma nuisance' (Hubbard et al., 2015, p. 10). Brothels profiled in these media texts are frequently positioned in explicit comparison to older ideas about what a brothel is and how it can be identified – in a contemporaneous text discussing 'nuisance' suburban brothels, a neighbour complains about noise carrying through 'blacked out but open windows' (Bay of Plenty Times, 2018).

Objections to stripclubs in specific locations sometimes highlight a different stereotype about the sex workers employed there, and their clientele: that the workers are 'vulnerable and exploited women' and the male clients anti-social, with the club feared to 'attract criminal elements' (Hubbard & Colosi, 2015, p. 7). Emphasising the relatable domesticity functions, partly, to address these concerns. Brothels which resemble cozy, well-maintained homes can be distinguished from ideas about criminality and exploitation: relocated into the domestic sphere. In media texts, owners and workers are positioned within normative frameworks of middle-class femininity. This positioning is evident from the emphasis on 'tasteful' rooms, and this sector of the sex industry is made consciously more approachable in a manner similar to that noted in gentrified sex shops (Sanders McDonagh & Peyrefitte, 2018; Taylor, 2012). The term 'tasteful' anoints one sector of the industry as taste*ful* and by extension, another as taste*less* (Crewe & Martin, 2017). That the décor described as 'tasteful' is photographs of the workers further suggests the interiors of brothels are sometimes taken as an indication of their treatment of workers: in contrast to ideas about exploited sex workers, these workers are instead depicted in 'tasteful and alluring' images.

The brothels discussed here straddle a line between the slightly old-fashioned domesticity of many rural Nevada brothels described by Brents, Jackson and Hausbeck, and the glitzy mainstreamed and upscaled strip-clubs of Leeds (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010; 2009). They effectively present themselves as upper middle-class homes, comfortable and professional, but not so finely engineered that they highlight too overtly the transactional nature of the relationships within them.

Reinforcing normative femininities

A third prong of the overlapping stigmatizations which sex workers are subject to is the notion that their femininity is transgressive or representative of the dangerous Other (Farvid & Glass, 2014; Laing & Cook, 2014). Some objections to SEVs relate to their status as sites which attract men who are perceived negatively, dangerous or anti-social (B. G. Brents, 2016; Crewe & Martin, 2017; Hubbard & Colosi, 2015). Some descriptions of brothels presented as relatively more acceptable emphasized the feminine nature of the rooms and décor, but an unthreatening middle-class femininity, not an excessively sexualized or transgressive one.

Adult retail outlets which operated with a more feminized aesthetic are more able to 'evade being labelled sex shops' and in doing so, could occupy more mainstream and suburban locations (Sanders McDonagh & Peyrefitte, 2018; Steinmetz & Maginn, 2014, p. 4). Crewe and Martin highlight that sex shops had 'traditionally been perceived as masculinised consumption spaces' and in contrast upscaled erotic boutiques often included overtly feminized décor (2017, p. 584). The mainstreamed boutiques were thoughtfully lit and airy, and often used more traditionally feminine colour schemes: 'pink . . . unthreatening and playful' (p. 589). A similar aesthetic is described in some texts about mainstreamed brothels: a text introduces a brothel by noting it has 'a distinct boudoir feel. Feminine, soft and embracing' (Tolley, 2016b). This physical environment is presented as conspicuously non-threatening, described in tones which suggest warmth and safety. In an interview, operator Ruth said she had designed the brothel to look like 'a girl's bedroom', to avoid the overtly sexualized aesthetic of other brothels. Parallels to this mainstreaming impulse to neutralize overtly sexualized aesthetics have been noted in research into sex shops, while community perception of brothels as 'law abiding' can rely on them not being 'overtly sexual' (B. G. Brents, 2016, p. 410; Taylor, 2012). Some brothels in Nevada utilized an aesthetic intended to evoke a home away from home for travelling men (B. Brents et al., 2009, p. 103), using linkages between femininity and home-making to relocate the unacceptable Otherness of the sex worker back into more respectable, domestic, realms.

An alternative, but still mainstreamed, version of femininity hews more closely to ideas about women's empowerment. A text profiling one worker at a higher-priced agency opens:

> 'On a recent sunny Saturday afternoon, Bella lounges on a couch in the tiled office of Bon Ton founder Jennifer Souness. The two sip rosé. A large mood board with pinned images and buzzwords takes up one wall. Souness sits on a chair beside Bella, holding a book in her lap: *Feminism Unfinished*'. (Olds, 2016)

The mise-en-scéne described here loaded with markers of contemporary postfeminist empowerment, locating the owner and the worker within a version of femininity which is

business minded. During this period, sex work in New Zealand was increasingly conditionally framed as a kind of work, with texts like this reflective of some dimensions of this shift (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). The professionalism here relates to the self-actualization and empowerment of the women in the scene though, carefully shifting the focus away from stigmas and unease about the transactional nature of sex workers' interactions with clients. Again, the femininity being profiled here is one which is middle-class, familiar, and acceptable. The description of the office interior opens with a mention of natural light, a subtle nod towards the way airiness is sometimes used as an environmental cue that an SEV is distinct from the dark and polluting nature of 'sex shops' (Crewe & Martin, 2017; Evans et al., 2010). A video text of another brothel includes multiple lingering shots of lamps and lights as a significant feature of the environment, golden and inviting (Parsons-King, 2016b). The physical environment here is presented as feminine, centred around the women who work there and own them, deflecting associations as masculine sites of consumption, and instead producing feminine sites of creation or empowerment.

Brothels' physical environment and marketing

One intention behind the mainstreaming of SEVs is accessing broader or different markets than those which might be traditionally available (B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007; B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010; B. Brents et al., 2009). Mainstreaming can allow SEVs to use the tools and mechanisms available to promote mainstream businesses, giving access to tourism markets or using marketing tactics developed, for example, in tourist industries (B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007, p. 427). Sometimes this is achieved by marketing to a different audience than might traditionally use its services – appealing to women in the case of erotic boutiques, or adventurous couples, in the case of Nevada brothels (B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007; B. Brents et al., 2009, p. 110; Crewe & Martin, 2017; Sanders McDonagh & Peyrefitte, 2018). A relatively recent shift in how service sector offerings generally present themselves sees them selling promises of 'experience, spectacle, fantasy, adventure, escapism and personal interactions', rather than clearly delineated services (B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007, p. 426). Some discourses about the physical environment of New Zealand brothels appear to serve partially as marketing for specific brothels, with media coverage's advertorial possibilities having been identified by brothel owners and sex workers locally and internationally (B. Brents et al., 2009, p. 102; Fitzgerald & Abel, 2010, p. 204).

Advertorial language

Brothels in New Zealand are restricted in terms of where they can advertise: the PRA stipulates that commercial sexual services may not be advertised on radio, television, in cinemas, or in newspapers or periodicals aside from the classified advertisements section. Additionally, brothels may be restricted from other kinds of advertising by section 12(1) which allows a territorial authority to make bylaws regulating or prohibiting signage for commercial sexual services. Brothel operators must consequently find creative ways to draw attention to their businesses, being limited primarily to classified advertisements and online directories to attract clients (G. Abel, 2021).

A journalist describes their initial impression of the premises of a brothel, writing:

> 'Aromatic oils and smooth cafe-style tunes waft quietly through the air. The establishment we walk into has five rooms, each named after classic cars, and rivals any five-star boutique hotel'. (Parsons-King, 2016a)

The text extends the comparison with a hotel room, noting the drawers contain condoms and lube, rather than 'the Holy Bible and free pens', then describes the dungeon where the interview is conducted as having 'dark modern walls' (Parsons-King, 2016a). The description is complimentary, likening it to mainstream tourism-based businesses – a five star hotel – giving potential customers reading the article an insight into the comfort of the surroundings. The same text mentions the brothel owner is a 'self-confessed control freak' and outlines rules which the author is given as a journalist in the space (Parsons-King, 2016a). Elsewhere, the owner has said she 'would only be interviewed on the guarantee that I had some say over what they [reporters] published' (Madam, 2014). To at least some extent then, the representations of brothel interiors in media texts by journalists are curated by owners. Operator Valentine discussed the design of the brothel she managed, similarly highlighting the comfort of the space.

> It's meant to feel like a luxurious space. Somewhere they come to treat themselves. It's not just about the booking [. . . but] the whole experience here, it's meant to make them feel special, feel like it's a sexy place where [. . .] they're going to have a sexy time and feel looked after.

The design of any business functions as a shorthand of the sorts of products and services it offers and the market it caters to (or aspires to). In some respects, the discourses described previously – about anticipating and responding to stigma – can also be read as advertorial. A separate text blends narratives of acceptable and non-threatening femininity, with advertorial discourses. Titled 'High Fliers who Turn to Escorting', signalling the focus on middle-class women in sex work, it opens:

> 'Late afternoon sunshine streams into The Bedroom. The furniture looks antique, beautiful artworks line the walls and French music plays quietly. A silk dressing gown hangs from a stand. From luxurious bed linen to ornate mirrors and gilded tissue boxes, the attention to detail is exquisite'. (Dominion Post, 2012)

Later in the text, the brothel owner says she 'wanted to offer men the opportunity to be intimate with a lovely woman in an upmarket boudoir setting' adding 'men don't want to be reminded they are paying for an escort. I wanted a place that wouldn't feel like a brothel or hotel room but would feel more like their mistress's bedroom' (Dominion Post, 2012). One of the workers at the brothel characterizes the service being provided like this: 'for a negotiated time, there's openness, honesty and uninhibited fun . . . And it takes place in luxurious surroundings with a beautiful, attentive woman' (Dominion Post, 2012).

The opening sentences of the text are reminiscent of marketing copy – terms like 'boudoir' appear on the brothel's own website, and their website similarly includes descriptions of the rooms which mention the soundtrack and linen. Although lacking direct comparisons with tourism businesses, this text mimics upscaled marketing which focuses on authenticity and personalization of experiences (Bernstein, 2007; B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007). The descriptions of the physical environment of the brothel here move beyond rejecting existing stigmas about the sex industry and position the premises and the services provided as a luxury.

Marketing and class

The brothel owner in the previous example doesn't want her brothel to feel like a hotel room *or* a brothel. Here, a kind of stratification emerges between different indoor sex workplaces. Prior work has examined how sex workers communicate class position to clientele, with Abel noting that 'the emergence of middle class sex workers has … reinforced a hierarchical system within the commercial sex industry' (2021, p. 3; Bernstein, 2007). Negotiation of class hierarchies and methods of indexing class status can be signalled through the décor of SEVs. Within sex shops, this is sometimes achieved through offering goods which are highly priced, within 'tastefully' decorated spaces, marking themselves as respectable spaces which do not cater for the working class (Sanders McDonagh & Peyrefitte, 2018). Similarly, some Nevada brothels make a concerted effort to move away from homey or chintzy interiors, and towards 'more upscale, stylish, and even elegant aesthetics' (B. G. Brents & Hausbeck, 2007, p. 432). Owner operator Jazz said that when she bought her business,

> it was very chintzy, boudoir bordello kind of um, kind of like chaise longue with a horrible pattern and twirly whirly details and like, words … there was even like, a four poster bed here at one point.

The use of terms like 'chintzy boudoir bordello', 'horrible pattern and twirly whirly details' highlights the sense that these sorts of features are seedy, tacky and outdated. The working-class markers of what manager Leanne described as 'dark corridors and red velvet curtains' were dismissed as 'dodgy' and 'long gone, darling'. In these ways, traditionally coded brothels are discursively abandoned to a distant and sordid past.

Broadcasting of class position is often overtly comparative, delineating upscaled brothels as distinct from their competition. One owner explained the difference between her business and others, saying 'there's brothels where girls just sit around in their lingerie and anyone can walk in off the streets and they chuck down a towel … it's the same as the Warehouse versus Smith and Caughey's[1]' (McAllen, 2015). In another text, the author indicates that: '… the industry is changing; women are more inclined to work for high-end agencies than the low-end establishments society is most aware of… The Bedroom boasts only two rooms, which makes for a much more intimate feel' (Bones, 2015).

A third example, discussing the range of prices in the sex industry, offers the comparison between '$150 an hour for a romp in a student flat to $1200 for a luxury liaison in a penthouse hotel suite' (Chang, 2015). At the root of these comparisons, whether implicit or explicit, is the price difference between various establishments. The discourses here position them as appropriate for middle-class or upper-class clientele, distinguished by their pricing, but also, it is implied, offering services in an upscaled environment which justifies the higher price tag. Comparisons with other brothels are dismissive, often hinting at stereotypes about the sex worker as indiscriminate, placing the exclusivity of their brothel in comparison to the presumed high-volume of others, as in Selena's comment about walk-in brothels where men 'see the lights' and go in 'for a shag'. This occurs overtly, as in the claim that 'anyone can walk in', and in more subtle ways, in the mention of a brothel only having two rooms, which is 'intimate' but presumably also exclusive, conferring a luxury value.

These discourses position upscaled brothels as different from their competition, with reassurances they do not look seedy or sleazy. They are located in a 'fancy apartment', or look like a 'five star' or 'expensive' hotel, without a trace of the neon lights commonly conjured as an example of what a brothel 'looks like' (McAllen, 2015; Parsons-King, 2016a; TVNZ, 2015).

The thrill of sleaze

The intention behind mainstreaming and upscaling of brothels seems partly to distance them from stereotypes about the sex industry as disrespectable, and the locations where sexual goods or services are sold as 'sleazy' or 'seedy' (Crewe & Martin, 2017). Their marketing intimates they offer a space for the exploration of sophisticated, private, and acceptable sexuality, and dismiss their competition who continue to market and decorate in ways more traditional to the sex industry. This framing overlooks the possibility that the décor of brothels which speaks to 'showbiz opulence', in the form of gilded frame mirrors, velvet drapes, low lighting, leather couches, and neon lights, serves a useful purpose (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 59). By being distinctive, so apart from the mainstream, they symbolize 'something different' and perhaps unobtainable in 'real' life, places associated with sexualized experiences and deliberately sought out (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 59; Tyler, 2012).

Few media discourses focused on low-priced brothels, those more likely to have a street-frontage, and to openly advertise their location. In one of the only examples, the text is accompanied by images of one of the brothel's '12 Egyptian-themed rooms' one showing a woman reclining on a vinyl bed, illuminated by soft red lighting (McAllen, 2015). The text describes the daily staff meeting where the manager reminds workers about cleaning routines (McAllen, 2015). Despite the insinuations in discourses about higher-priced brothels that their cleanliness is exceptional, it is evident that in at least some cases lower-priced brothels also attend to the physical environment with an eye to the impressions of their customers. Niamh, who worked as a supervisor in a traditional walk-in parlour she did not herself own, had taken the time to add thoughtful and decorative touches to the brothel. She said,

> I want it to look nice. I want it to look like the girls who are here take pride in it, I don't want it to, oh you know, look like we just come in and don't care.

The suggestion that clients don't want a brothel which looks like a brothel, or which resembles a neutral space like a hotel room, is therefore unlikely to reflect the desires of the entire market. In some cases, groomed and manicured spaces risk 'killing the thrill of participating in sexual communities that are absorbing and alluring precisely because they are taboo' (B. G. Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 58). The pornographic thrill of SEVs is produced partly by their appearance as unreal and exaggerated, drawing on notions of spectacle and novelty. This point is frequently ignored or disregarded in discourses about what a brothel does or should look like (van Liempt & Chimienti, 2017, p. 1572). In practice, many more traditional brothels in New Zealand retain some aesthetic codes of the past, with neon signage and street-level doors leading to dimly lit, steep staircases. Many of these brothels had impersonal or quasi-erotic names signifying the transience of the promised encounter and their signage often included depersonalizing symbols such as a single shoe or a stylized female bust. This mirrors media representations of the sex

industry as dehumanized, figuratively dissecting the sex worker body into neutralizing parts (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). Here, the subject of the sex worker is reduced to non-confrontational segments of the anatomy: ethical dilemmas about exploitation are eliminated in the production of sex workers as neon legs or a sweep of flickering pink hair. Whilst this aesthetic differs markedly from the hyperfeminized codes of bedrooms or the airy feminism of agentic sex workers, all work to counter any possible ethical conundrum in potential clients. The promised sexual encounter is marketed as morally unproblematic and, often, enthusiastically welcomed.

Conclusion

This article has explored discourses about the interior environment of brothels in New Zealand, drawing on interview data and media representations, adding to presently limited data on this topic. Existing work considering the physical environments of SEVs has focused primarily on the exterior, stopping at the front door, as it were. This article makes it clear that the interior décor and design of brothels also helps to produce understandings of specific SEVs. It is evident from the breadth of narrative themes that brothel interiors and the physical environment of SEVs are understood in multiple overlapping and sometimes conflicting ways. The interior of a brothel is sometimes indexed as an indicator of the 'cleanliness' of the staff within it, deflecting stigmatizing discourses. This occurs particularly through emphasizing that specific brothels are run and occupied by women whose femininity is middle-class, respectable, and non-threatening. In this, we see echoes of the brothel's interior as a threat to normative society, needing to be hidden, obscured, out of sight and out of mind. Elsewhere, the physical environment functions as a marketing tool. This applies to upscaled brothels which are compared to expensive hotels and whose tasteful décor is highlighted, but also to brothels which have a more traditional style, where associations with seedy opulence are part of the appeal of accessing something transgressive and taboo.

Attempts to read the space through these multiple lenses concurrently produce difficulties. The physical environment of the brothel is expected to offer proof of various explicit or implicit claims about the sex industry, as well as being a safe and functional workplace. An analysis of media texts and interview data makes it apparent that two primary considerations when maintaining and designing the physical environment of the brothel are managing stigma and attracting clientele, with functionality as a workplace sidelined. When claims about the more mainstream/upscaled brothels centre around highlighting their class location relative to other brothels, this distracts from the needs of the workers within them.

The interiors of contemporary decriminalized brothels reflect a desire to render brothels' physical space as more socially and culturally acceptable. Brothels are treated as potential sites of disorder and criminality in planning and zoning policies, with some brothel owners consequently attempting to offer a more neutralized exterior appearance. Our findings indicate the interiors of brothels can also be put to use in this way, particularly when made strategically visible through media coverage. In both mainstreamed brothels which foreground polished domesticity and walk-in brothels which retain some traditional markers of commercial sex while remaining, in Dee's words, 'inviting', the underlying impetus is managing the stigma of the brothel as unhygienic

and 'inherently disorderly' (Crofts et al., 2013). Correspondingly, brothels' physical attributes function as shorthand, indexed as interchangeable with the qualities of their workers. The monoculture of the agency brothel conveys a message of responsible and pleasant sex workers whose company men may enjoy, whilst the glitz and kitsch of clubs and parlours reflect both the temporary nature of the encounter and the heightened sexuality that purportedly characterizes it. The promised outcomes are predictable and, as such, reassuring.

The interplay between the physical environment of the brothel and those within it thus becomes more visible. The class markers of the agency aesthetic reflect, and are reflected in, the quietly cultured, anodyne presentation of the sex workers selected to work there. Similarly, where brothels retain traditional, working-class codes, sex workers in those businesses are aligned with a cultural shorthand that requires different standards of presentation. In this, sex workers are neutralized as individuals, produced instead as objects within the geography of the brothel. This has clear implications for the extent to which sex workers can exercise their subjective autonomy or position themselves as rights-bearing subjects whose identities are separate from that of the physical space of the brothel.

Note

1. The Warehouse is a big-box retailer, while Smith & Caughey's is a department store.

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