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Planning for pleasure: Time patterns in the use of Internet forums of female sex workers' clients in Germany

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the temporal usage of seven sex workers' clients' (johns') German Internet forums. Data covering the years 2008 to 2010 and showing monthly, daily and hourly usage were gained through different log file analysis tools. Three different focus groups discussed the results. One focus group was made up by users of johns' forums, one group by female sex workers and another one by social workers. Data analysis revealed that johns frequent their web-forums mostly on late Monday afternoons, preferably between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. According to the focus groups' discussions, this distinct time frame appears to be substantially based on the johns' intention to plan their activities in commercial sex.

Keywords: sex workers' clients; johns' Internet forums; temporal usage; Mondays

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Introduction

Around the year 2000, people started to use the Internet in a more participatory and interactive way. New and easy to handle software programs have allowed Internet users to interact and collaborate in virtual space, to generate content and to set up virtual communities (Månsson & Söderlind, 2013). Subsequently, clients of sex workers in Germany started to set up Internet forums to communicate and report their experiences in commercial sex¹. These clients of sex workers refer to themselves as "Freier", a term that is approximately translated by the American slang expression "john". By using the term "john" or "Freier" for themselves, sex workers' clients contrast its former derogatory connotation. As the term "john" has also entered scientific literature (Blevins & Holt, 2009; Holt et al., 2008), we use it as a synonym for sex workers' client.²

For this study, we considered two types of German web-forums for johns on the Internet: commercial and non-commercial forums. Non-commercial forums, for example www.xxxforen.com, claim not to pursue marketing goals in the first place. In contrast to the non-commercial forums, commercial johns' forums, for example www.ladies.de, aim to advertise and promote sexual services.

The intention of both kinds of web-forums is to provide a platform to exchange information and to discuss activities regarding prostitution or other commercial sex. Thus the name "forum" matches with its Latin origin for "market place". According to their motto "poppen und posten" ("fuck and post"), these web-forums present and discuss reports ("reviews") in postings and threads about individual encounters between clients and sex workers and the provided services.

In 2013, about a dozen major and several minor German johns' web-forums could be found on the Internet. The first German community based johns' forum, Bordelcommunity (www.bordelcommunity.com), was established in 1999 and still has a growing number of users.

In pre-Internet times and even in the recent past, johns were often regarded as inaccessible for scientific research (Steffan, 2005). Nowadays, the above mentioned web-forums allow for new scientific approaches. Even though a head count of sex workers or johns using those web-forums is not obtainable due to the virtual nature of the Internet, it is argued that johns represent average men (Campbell, 1998; Steffan, 2005; Weitzer, 2007). Through their web-forums, johns have become more visible in their behavior and more accessible for research.

Outside of Germany, research has been done on various aspects of similar web-forums (Bernstein, 2007; Blevins & Holt, 2007; Earle & Sharp, 2007; Månsson & Söderlind, 2013; Milrod & Monto, 2012; Sanders, 2008; Scaramuzzino, forthcoming). In Germany, limited research has been done on johns in general and even less is known about their Internet use. Since the last representative study on johns in 1994 (Kleiber & Velten, 1994), relatively few scientific publications have been published about johns in Germany (Gerheim, 2012; Grenz, 2005). By using their forums, johns disclose many different aspects of how they organize their hobby. However, none of these studies revealed data of johns' web-forums. While we have some data about the use of a Brazilian web-community (Rocha, Liljeros & Holme, 2010), no data has been published to answer the question: when do johns use their German web-forums?

Investigating the temporal usage of johns' web-forums supplies us with insights to theoretical understandings of johns

and their milieu at the beginning of the early 21st century. It also offers us opportunities for providing targeted and timely information and education on sexual health.

Methods

As many forums in the Internet web-forums for johns also provide basic data about their website traffic on their public websites. For example, information about the number of users of these forums is generated automatically and advertised within the forums. Other statistical information such as most or least frequented times are not published. Which left us with the problem of how to answer our most important question: When do most johns use their forums?

The answer to this question offers potential opportunities to better understand if and how users of johns' forums organize their activities as clients of sex workers. Reflecting the reasons for their behavior with the help of focus groups could provide options for addressing certain issues. As such issues can vary, we decided to install focus groups not only comprising clients, but also persons who deal with them professionally: sex workers and social workers in health promoting positions.

For our investigation we selected a choice of German johns' web-forums. We decided to choose web-forums with a distinct number of users and which cover different regions. In order to comply with ethical questions, we only included web-forums with webmasters and administrators who offered contact to and cooperation with their community: Bordellcommunity (www.bordellcommunity.com), Rheinforum (www.rheinforum.com), Heißes OWL (www.owlforum.com), Sachsenforum (www.forum-sachsen.com), Römerforum (www.roemerforum.com), BW7 (www.bw7.com) and Ladies.de (www.ladies.de).

All forums' webmasters agreed that their forums became part of this study. Some of them (Rheinforum, Römerforum) provided access to additional traffic data. They also helped in recruiting focus group members.

In order to avoid biased data, we decided to use a dual approach. One approach was the analysis of data provided by the Internet project Sexsicher, the other approach was to review the data made available by the webmasters of the selected web-forums. Thus, the following findings are based upon log file data provided by the German Internet project Sexsicher (www.sexsicher.de) which was created in 2003 in collaboration with clients of sex workers for the promotion of sexual health. The data have been cross checked by log file data from selected web-forums in Germany. The core of the investigation was conducted in 2011 and included data from 2009 and 2010. In 2013, a review of the data of the year 2012 confirmed the previous findings.

Sexsicher is an Internet based project that has been initiated by the German Federal Center for Health Education in 2002 (Langanke & Ross, 2009). Sexsicher aims to improve the sexual health of sex workers' clients by providing information and access to individual counseling about the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and diseases (STI/STD).

Sexsicher generates its traffic primarily by being linked to johns' web-forums. One such link is a Sexsicher icon or banner (see figure 1) on a forum's homepage. Another way to link johns' forums to Sexsicher is through editorial texts or within threads.

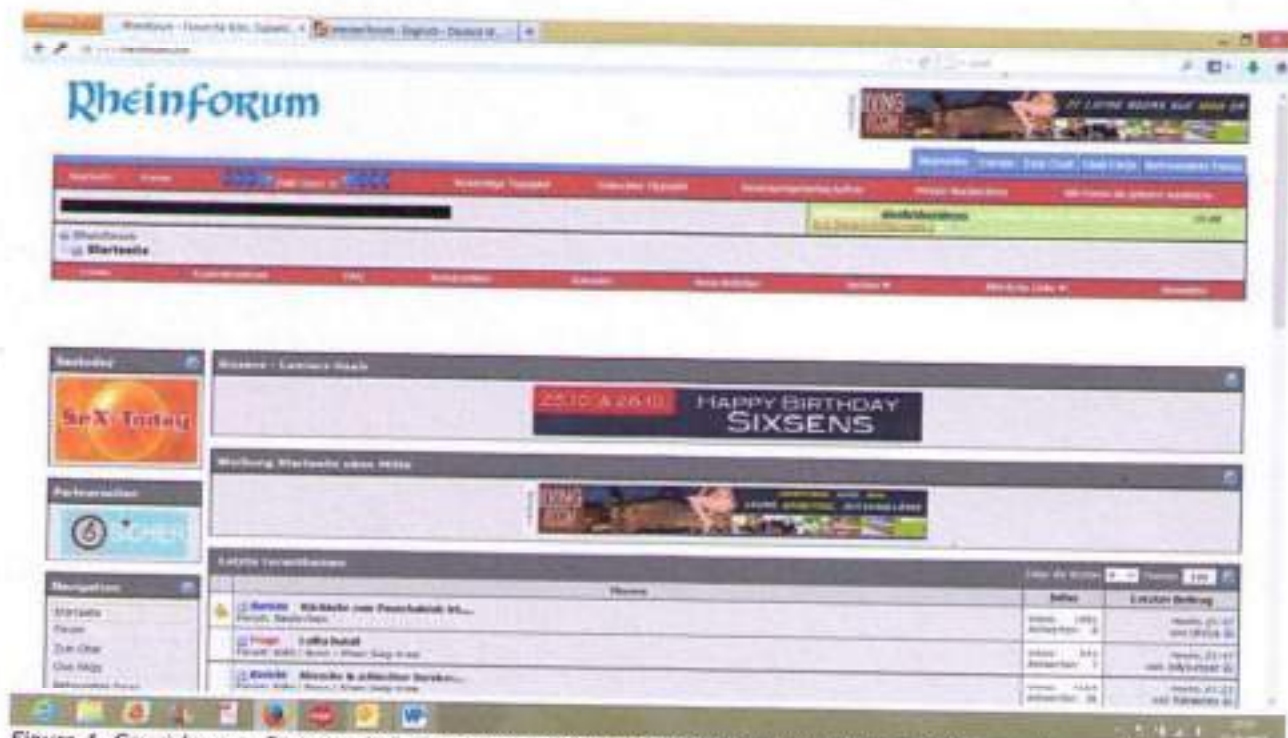


Figure 1. Sexsicher as „Partnerseite“ (partnering website) on the entry page (bottom left corner) www.rheinforum.com (October 22, 2013).

Sexsicher automatically generates continuous surveys of the traffic on its websites. Since 2003, all traffic has been monitored by Webalizer, a free web server log analysis program which produces "highly detailed, easily configurable usage reports in HTML format, for viewing with a standard web browser" (www.webalizer.org). Statistics commonly

reported by Webalizer include a summary report for twelve months as well as detailed monthly reports.

Data provided by Webalizer for Sexsicher allow a distinction of specific time frames. There are yearly summaries as well as monthly surveys with more details. An approach to examine the times when clients use web-forums is to find out whether there are certain months in which usage is higher or lower.

Therefore, the provided data were transcribed for hits by Webalizer for monthly usage of three years: 2008, 2009 and 2010 (Webalizer, 2008-2010) into an Excel sheet; cf. figure 4.

In order to gain significant and reliable data for more detailed investigation, we also looked at the monthly reports. As we found that all months show similar data, we decided to concentrate on a winter month and a summer month with their different implications on leisure activities. As March and August are months that represent distinctive seasonal attributes of the German calendar, e.g. summer and winter and the amount of public holidays, they qualify for closer investigation. March as a winter month has an average number of public holidays in Germany; August as a summer month is characterized by more opportunities for outdoor activities.

The analysis of data provided by Sexsicher allows for detecting general tendencies. This deductive method can be used to understand how johns use their forums, how they are organized and with which activities they occupy themselves.

However, we wanted to complement this method with primary data of the johns' forums. Therefore, the webmasters and administrators of johns' forums that cooperate with Sexsicher were shown the results of the log file examination.

Some webmasters and administrators agreed to share their forums' log file data. Their forums were also monitored by Webalizer. The community forums Rheinforum (Rhine area in the West of Germany), Römerforum (main topic: sauna clubs in Germany), Sachsenforum (South-East region of Germany) and OWL (short for Ostwestfalen-Lippe, Eastern and rural parts of Westphalia) provided us with data on daily and hourly usage.

In order to compare data of Sexsicher log files with those of the johns' forums we chose identical time frames: March 2010 and August 2010.

The routines of the analytic software Webalizer monitor primarily the numbers of hits on certain websites. As those can be caused by people as well as computer programs, a cross check with another log files analysis program, Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics/) was realized. This program focuses on visits rather than hits.

In order to find out why johns' web-forums are being visited in the way they are, we arranged focus groups (Morgan, 1993). Three focus groups met in person and discussed the results of the log file data and their possible reasons: A group of johns' forums' users, a group of female sex workers and a group of social workers respectively health educators. All three groups looked at the questions on when, where and how johns plan their prostitution related activities. The discussion improved our understanding of johns, as we learned more about how their behavior is organized.

One focus group consisted of six users of johns' forums (webmasters, moderators and other frequent users). The second focus group assembled four female sex workers who actively use the Internet including johns' forums. A third group gathered five social workers and sexual health experts, e.g. an STI counselors at a public health department and two counselors at social projects for sex workers.

Each member of the three focus groups gave informed consent to participate in the focus groups. All groups were moderated by the first author, a 50-year old female journalist with more than twenty years of professional experience in interviewing and working with focus groups. The discussions were conducted iteratively according to the grounded theory approach.

Thus all groups were asked to make educated guesses about the investigated time patterns of johns' forums. Thereafter they were informed about the results of the log file data analysis. Subsequently, the groups discussed potential reasons and the circumstances that lead to certain peaks. The discussions were recorded in writing by the moderator's assistant.

The members of the focus group assembling users of johns' forums were recruited with the help of moderators and administrators of johns' community forums. Six out of nine addressed web-forum users followed the invitation; two dropped out because of other appointments, another one because of health reasons. All revealed their forums' nicknames. Thus they could be identified as active users. In this paper they are referred to by their nickname initials (B, F, G, K, P, R). All confirmed to be clients of sex workers in real life as well. They spent 2.5 hours in the discussion.

Four of the invited six female sex workers joined the second focus group meeting. They were recruited through personal contacts established by the Internet project Sexsicher. Two sex workers could not attend the focus group due to travel problems.

The participating four sex workers had a migrant background (two from Eastern Europe, one from Southern Europe, one from Latin America). In this paper they are referred to by the initials of their working names (D, L, M, Y).

All had formal education, they all spoke, read, and some also wrote German. All were engaged for more than two years as sex workers and all of them used the Internet to advertise their services. Three of the four read some clients' forums "every now and then", one (Y) does not frequent them at all ("I used to, but I got upset by the negative comments").

M, from Ukraine, worked at a sauna club. Her services were advertised online by the club, on her own homepage and on several market place websites. Y, from a Balkan country, worked at a brothel ("Laufhaus"). Her services were promoted by the Laufhaus' website. D, from Latin America, worked with some colleagues in an apartment. Her services were advertised on her own website and on two online market places; she also used printed ads in local newspapers. L from Eastern Europe worked at a private FKK³ club. Her profile was on the club's website; she also ran two homepages of her own.

They spent two hours in the focus group discussion.

In addition to the focus groups of johns and sex workers a third focus group was established. The members of this group work with and for sex workers and johns as social workers in the field of sexual health promotion.

The five members of the focus group were three women and two men, also recruited through the project Sexsicher. They are referred to by their initials. Four (BR, IS, FS, UD) had a university degree in the field of social work, ("Sozialpädagogik" or sociology) and one (JL) had a degree in philosophy. Three members worked for the department of STI prevention at local public health departments ("Gesundheitsämter"), one worked for an NGO engaged in sexual health education and one worked for a nation wide counseling hot line for sexual health. All reported frequent contact to sex workers as well as their clients.

They spent two hours in the focus group discussion.

Results

In order to estimate how many users frequent the selected forums at all, we looked at two parameters: registered users and online users at a randomly chosen point in time. Both numbers are automatically generated and published within the forums, they mark the highest possible (registered) and the minimum (online at the same time) number of users.

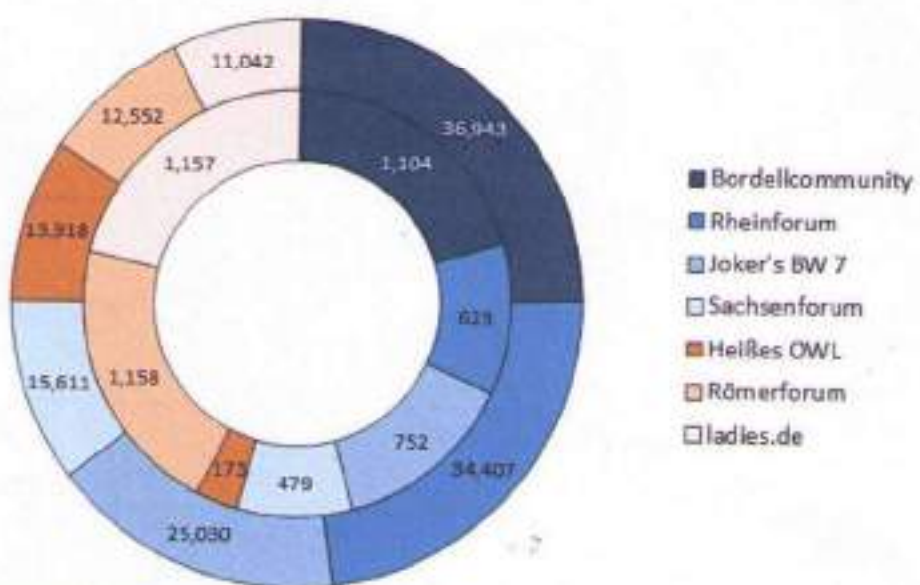


Figure 2. Total numbers of registered and online users of the seven johns' forums selected for this study (Sept 7, 2010). Outer circle: 150,503 registered users, inner circle: 5,456 online users.

Figure 2 shows a total of 150,503 registered users of which 5,456 users were online at the same time (data generated on September 7th 2010). The graph illustrates that all forums were actively used by different fractions of registered users.

Log files of the Internet project Sexsicher delivered basic data for our study. Referrer lists of Sexsicher show a ranking which gives the number of hits in absolute numbers of the top 30 referring Uniform Resource Locators (URL). The respective referrers revealed whether traffic derived from search engines, johns' forums or other URL. This allowed us to analyze in absolute numbers and percentage where users came from when entering the Sexsicher websites. The red slices in the graphs in figure 3 show that between a quarter (27%) and third (33%) of all traffic was caused by users of johns' forums.

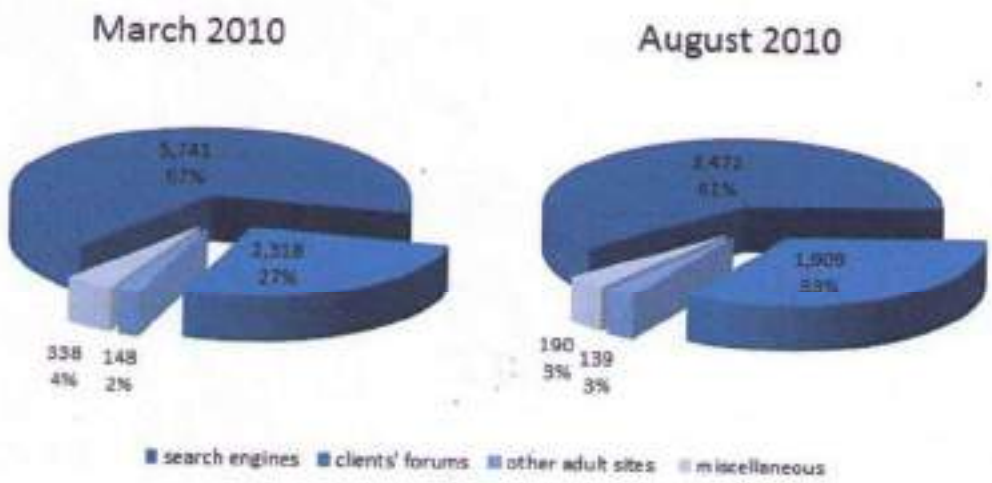


Figure 3. Top Referrers to Sexsicher.

When we started to evaluate the question when Johns' forums are frequented, we first looked at the different months of the year. The graph in figure 4 shows traffic data generated by Webalizer for Sexsicher for the years 2008, 2009 and 2010. The lines illustrate that traffic varied among the months; they show no consistent pattern or trend.

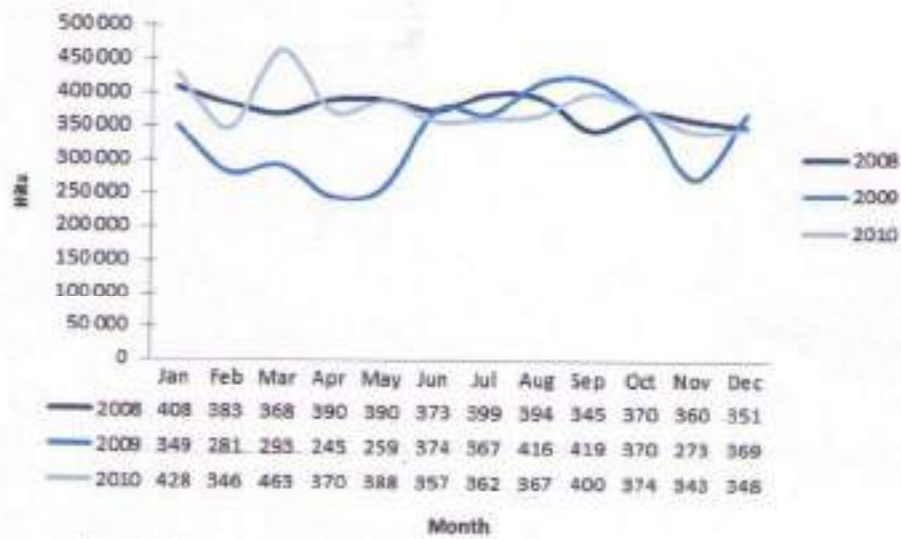


Figure 4. Monthly usage of Sexsicher by years (Webalizer, 2008-2010).

A month with a fairly high usage in one year (April 2008) can be a month with comparably little usage in another year (April 2009). A month with the least hits in one year (May 2009) can be a month with an average use during another year (May 2008 and May 2010). Figure 4 shows that users of web-forums did not favor or avoid any certain months.

Evaluating Webalizer data for daily usage we discovered that Mondays were the most frequented days of the week.

Webalizer creates three rows of columns for each day. The top row shows the number of pages (bright blue), files (dark blue) and hits (green) that have been requested. The middle row shows how many sites (orange) and visits (yellow) have been counted. The last row (red columns) shows the amount of requested data transfer in kilo bytes.

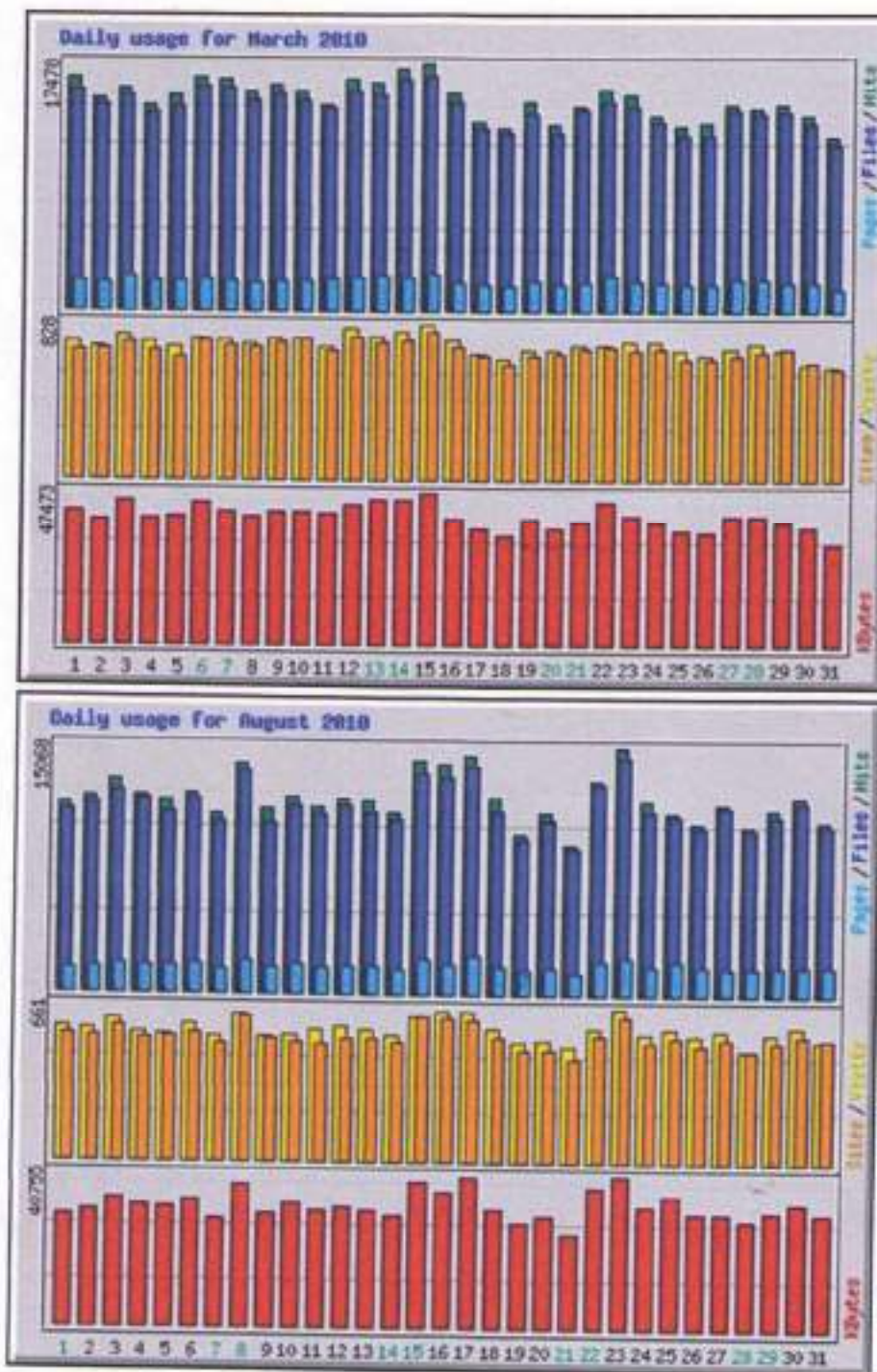


Figure 5. Daily usage for March 2010 and August 2010.

The graphs in figure 5 (Webalizer, 2010) show variations among the days of the months with a pattern that reveals highest peaks for Mondays.

Monday 15th March 2010 was the day with the highest number of reported hits, 17,478 compared to an average of 14,943 hits per day. Monday 23rd August 2010 showed 15,068 hits in comparison to the average of 11,858 hits per day.

All Mondays in March and August showed high and above average numbers of hits and rank first. Sundays ranked second with high numbers of hits on March 7th with 16,334 hits and March 14th with 17,107 hits as well as 14,002 and 14,207 hits on August 8th and August 15th.

Least traffic was found on Fridays and Saturdays. Saturday 20th March 2010 gained 13,159 hits, Saturday 21st August 2010 was the day with least traffic: 9,094 hits.

While log files of the different sex forums varied in some way, they all showed peaks on Mondays.

The OWL forum also showed most hits for each Monday in March and August 2010. Top ranks were reported for March 8th (699,704 hits) and August 16th (782,507 hits). Least frequented days were Sundays. Similar results were presented by the log files of Rheinforum: All Mondays in March and August 2010 showed top values. March 15th showed 2,249,802 hits and August 23rd showed 2,146,235 hits.

Römerforum presented 274,028 (March 15th) and 401,609 (August 23rd) hits. Sachsenforum presented 574,088 (March 22nd) and 689,004 (August 9th) hits.

In general, there was no significant difference among the selected forums. They all showed similar allocations for peaks on Mondays and dents on Saturdays. The indication of the selected Sexsicher log files was confirmed.

Sexsicher log files also report data regarding hourly usage. The graphs in figure 6 (Webalizer 2010) show that Sexsicher was mostly visited in late afternoons. The bulk of traffic was reported between noon and midnight with a peak around 5 p.m.

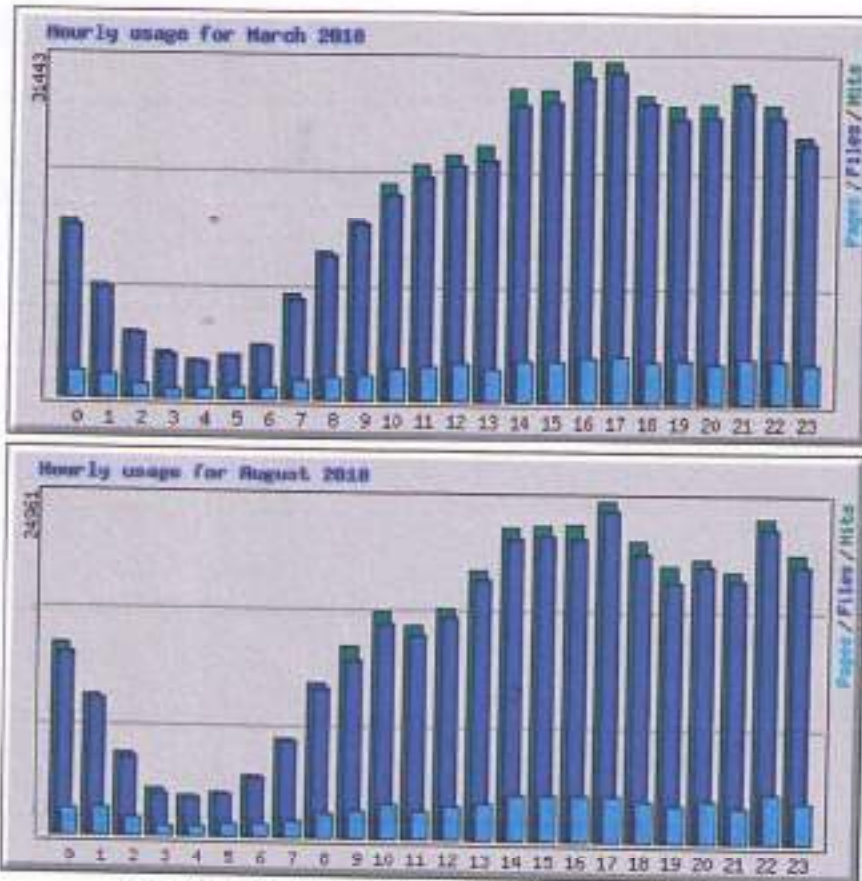


Figure 5. Hourly usage for March 2010 and August 2010.

In March 2010, the highest number of hits (31,443) was reported between 5 and 6 p.m. In August, the highest number of hits was counted between 5 and 6 p.m. as well. A second peak was identified between 9 and 11 p.m. (29,520 hits in March 2010) and 11 to 12 p.m. (23,643 hits in August 2010).

Least frequented hours were those in early mornings: from 2 to 7 a.m.: 9,751 hits in March 2010 and 7,171 hits in August 2010.

Hourly usage figures of OWL, Rheinforum, Römerforum and Sachsenforum revealed that most hits are reported between 5 and 6 p.m. OWL showed in March 2010: 1,159,681 and August 2010: 1,399,998 hits. Römerforum presented highest rates, 411,638, in March between 7 and 8 p.m. in August 2010 between 9 and 10 p.m. Sachsenforum showed its peaks one hour earlier: from 4 to 5 p.m. with 836,769 hits in March 2010 and 1,058,274 hits in August 2010.

In order to further cross check the data, we used Google Analytics as an additional tool for examining one of the most frequented forums, the Rheinforum, specifically. We also decided to check whether our findings for 2010 would correspond with data from the same months one year later.

Figure 7 shows access rates on two Mondays, March 21st (8,111 visits per day) and August 15th 2011 (8,508 visits per day):

www.rheinforum.com

Zugriffszahl für alle Besucher

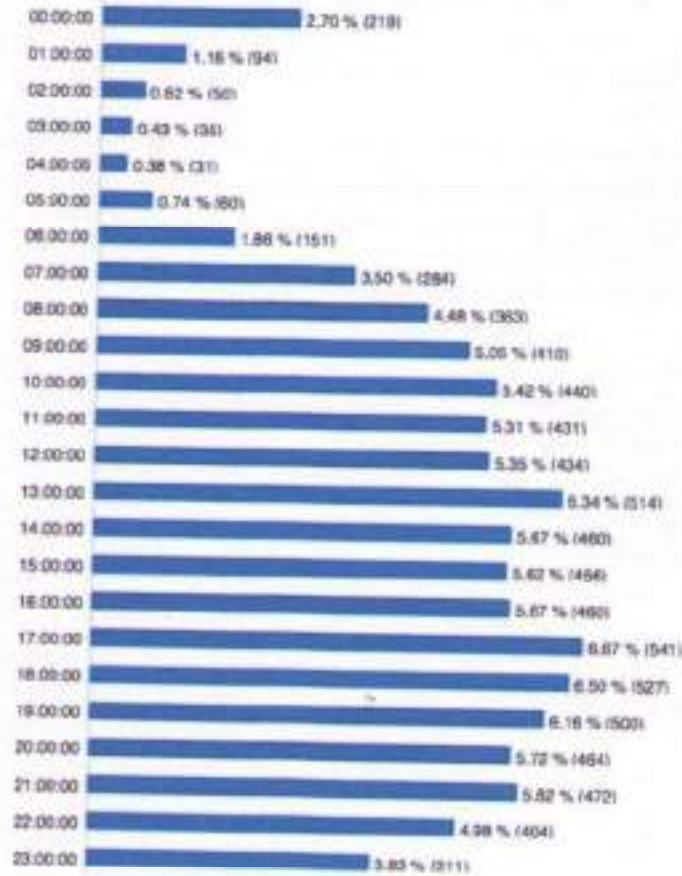
21.03.2011 - 21.03.2011

Vergleichen mit: Website



8.111 Besuche

8.111,00 Besuche/Tag



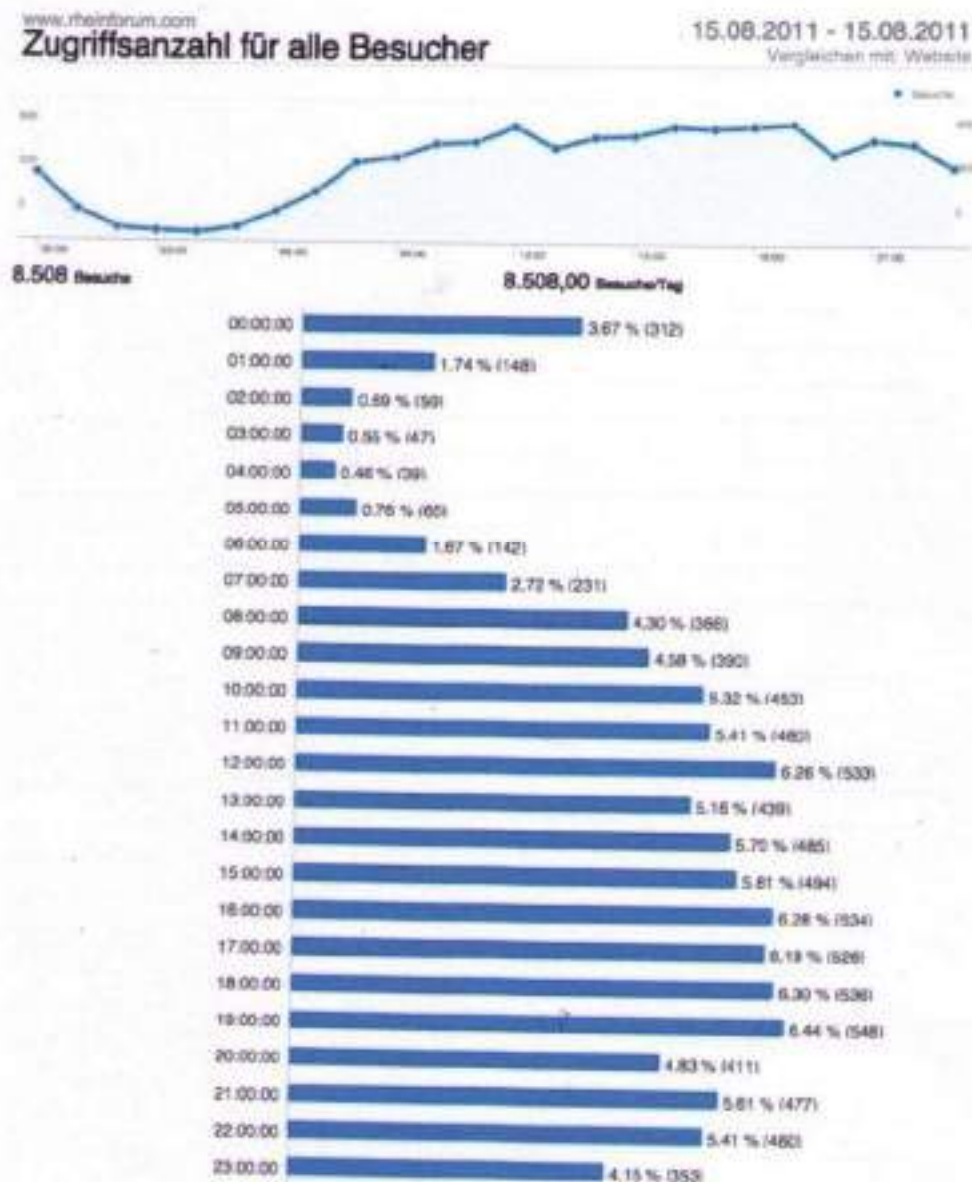


Figure 7. Access number for all visitors ("Zugriffszahl" für alle Besucher) to Rheinforum (Google Analytics, 2011).

As figure 7 shows, most visits to Rheinforum were reported for the late afternoon and early evening hours. The lowest numbers of visits were at night. Visits increased around noon, peaks occurred around 5 and 7 p.m.

Webalizer and Google Analytics data showed conformity. In addition, both programs confirmed the data which had been revealed by those of Sexsicher: German johns' web-forums were frequented mostly on Mondays between 5 and 6 p.m.

All data showed that Mondays were preferred by johns to visit their forums (highest count in hits and visits). Second most frequented days were Sundays. Least frequented days were Saturdays followed by Fridays. The peak of the hourly usage of johns' forums occurred on Mondays between 5 and 6 p.m.

In order to better understand the results of the log file analysis we invited three focus groups to discuss the findings, a group of users of johns' forums, a group of sex workers familiar with the forums and a group of social workers, also familiar with the issue.

In the group of johns' forums' users each focus group member favored one particular forum, although all of them also regularly frequented several web-forums. All but one ("I'm a regular customer to only two clubs and therefore can rarely report any news") focus group members used the forums actively by posting content. They all stated that their average retention time for remaining in their forums depended on whether or not they wait for reactions to their own postings. They agreed that the average length of time using their forums would not be less than 15 minutes.

When asked why they were using johns' forums they named:

- Community aspects: "making contact with other forum members", including real-life meetings for leisure time activities,
- Information and fun: "infotainment" - enjoying reports of well-known authors because of "literary" interest and information search,
- Consumer care: "ensuring good quality in sexual services"; especially G read and wrote reports in relation to quality control and transparency of sex workers' services;

- Special interest issues: due to his disability as a wheelchair user, R also served as a contact person for other johns with disabilities as well as for sex workers who were or wanted to get in contact with disabled clients.

Discussing the authors' findings about the time patterns in the use of their forums, all focus group members confirmed that they also regularly visit johns' forums at early evenings on Mondays.

When asked why they used the forums on Monday afternoons/early evenings, they discussed retrospective and prospective aspects.

The retrospect aspects correlated with the johns' reflection of the weekend after having visited sex workers (G, F, R). The prospective aspects correlated with the clients' planning of their forthcoming week (G, K, P, R).

It turned out that the focus group members saw two predominant options for the afternoon or early evening time they visit the forums: Some users said being at the johns' forums is "the last thing before I leave the office". Others, especially those who did not have opportunities to use the Internet at work for private purposes, claimed their forum visits to be "the first thing I do when I get home".

All members of the focus group were either employed or self-employed. Mondays were important week days for those who have to plan their appointments – work related or private. "Usually I'm learning about my professional obligations on Mondays. When I know my official time table, I can start to arrange my private life and dates accordingly."

When the moderator asked the female sex workers of the second focus group if they would make a guess about when their clients would frequent their forums, all agreed instantly that it would probably be on Mondays. "During the weekend, they are either busy with us or with their families and therefore wouldn't be online".

D said that she received most phone calls from clients on Mondays. "This could also be due to the printed ads that are published in the weekend issue of the newspaper." L said that her own homepages were also highly frequented on Mondays. "Traffic to my sites comes through the club's website mostly." Y assumed that the forums are frequented on Mondays because some locations for sex work – like the brothel she worked at – were closed then: "So the clients have the time to explore the virtual world instead of the real." M stated to receive most requests for appointments on Mondays and Tuesdays: "Clients call or text me at the beginning of the week to find out when we can meet."

In addition to the focus groups of johns and sex workers a third focus group with five members was established. They all work with and for sex workers and johns as social workers in the field of sexual health promotion.

After the introduction and a short discussion, the group agreed that Mondays would be the favorite day for online time for users of johns' forums. When the moderator revealed the actual log file data showing Mondays to be most frequented, the group continued to discuss possible reasons.

Those of the group who were involved in telephone counseling pointed out that in their routines Mondays also were the days with most phone calls.

UD said: "It's clear that a lot of sex work happens during the weekends. And after the weekends, clients reflect what their experience. They call us on Mondays – even though the hotlines could also be reached during the weekend and on Sunday evenings." BR reported that some users did not have real questions regarding health issues. "They state they are afraid of an infection or disease but it often turns out that they have a bad conscience and ask for 'absolution' rather than for seeing a doctor." FS claimed: "If a client belongs to the economically active population ("zur erwerbstätigen Bevölkerung") he might need to check his professional obligations first on Mondays, then takes care of the rest." JL, who worked with female sex workers, reported that Mondays are popular for fixing appointments: "When we do outreach work we avoid to contact the women who work by appointments on Mondays as they are busy with being called by clients." IS, who worked for a large area of sex work establishments, said: "Peaks in the demand for real life prostitution vary widely depending on many reasons like weather conditions, pay days, trade shows or else. Outdoor prostitution for example is frequented more when it's not raining. But being online to interactively reflect their hobby as clients appears to be quite regularly – like Monday early evenings."

Discussion

The temporal structure of the use of johns' forums is defined, confirmed and fleshed out by the focus groups. The Internet data coincide exactly with the guesses and reports of the focus groups of johns, sex workers, and associated professionals who work in the area.

The log file data analysis shows no distinctive months during which clients visit their forums regularly. No evidence was found to demonstrate any preferences in monthly use. However, all data on daily usage show that Mondays are highly preferred by johns to use their forums. Mondays show the highest numbers of hits and visits. Hourly statistics show a distinct peak of usage between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. Log file data analysis as well as focus group discussions reveal consistently that German johns' forums are frequented mostly on Mondays between 5 and 6 p.m.

Understanding this distinct time frame helps us to learn more about the on- and off-line behavior of johns. The clear pattern shows how they organize their activities as clients of sex workers.

Discussions in the focus groups about the reasons for this time pattern show a close relation with the clients' work and leisure time conditions. On Mondays, johns appear to follow up weekend experiences with commercial sex. They read about their peers' weekend experiences, comment on reports and write about their own experience. Also on Mondays, some – employed and self-employed – men get to know their working schedule for the week. Therefore they also arrange their "time off" on Mondays ("planning for pleasure") for which they consult johns' forums. This is essentially an equivalent of "Monday morning quarterbacking", a term used by sports fans to describe discussion and analysis of Saturday football or basketball games at work (www.thefreedictionary.com). The analogy is perhaps more pertinent since johns describe their activities in prostitution as a "hobby" (Milrod & Monto, 2012).

Due to the findings of this study, clients of sex workers use johns' forums preferably on late Monday afternoons mainly for planning their encounters with sex workers. Even the retrospective "quarterbacking" benefits johns' "planning for

pleasure".

Such planning is integrated into the johns' work week in much the same way as planning for business obligations or short term rest. Thus, seeing a sex worker is organized very much like other leisure pursuits like going to the movies or out for dinner. In much the same way as these men organize their working week appointments, they also appear to organize their recreational appointments.

Arrangements for encounters with sex workers are demonstrably not solely following the clients' spontaneous spur of the moment. According to the peaks in the log files and the large number of johns' forums users, planning for pleasure is not anything particularly unusual. As all three focus groups came up with the same temporal patterns matching the log file data, we gain a fuller picture of the dynamics, logistics and motivations of clients of sex workers.

Our data confirm and coincide many of the important findings made by other researchers in the field. With the Internet, sexual commerce has become more diversified and easier to approach (Bernstein, 2007; Dekker, 2012; Milrod & Monto, 2012). As the Internet allows access to plan for sexual services almost everywhere, it abolishes the distinctions of private and public life. On the Internet, spaces and locations for arranging sexual services appear integrated in mainstream entertainment industry.

As Ross (Ross, 2006) has commented, the Internet allows for the normalization of activities previously considered deviant, and our data appear to bear out this normalization: The nature of sex work for johns is rather a regular hobby instead of something that used to be considered a deviant activity. Thus, this study supports the idea of a shift in the meaning of sex work. Our data suggest that clients of sex workers organize their commercial sex encounters to a great extent and very structured. It would need further investigation whether this structured organizing matches the furtiveness and deviance that previously characterized sex work.

How much our findings are due to the German legal conditions for prostitution⁴, the role of the Internet in facilitation planning, the professionalization of sex work as a service industry, or the changing mores about sex work cannot be determined. Our contention is that it may be a combination of all of these factors. The relationship between these factors needs to be further explored.

Further investigation has to reveal how employment conditions influence the way johns use their forums. Our findings about the time patterns could prove to be useful, especially when it comes to tailor education or intervention for sex workers' clients. For example, health educators could reach out for johns at their forums' real time communication ("chat") at specific times.

Limitations of these data are the non-random nature of the focus group participants, the specific national location (Germany) of the data, and the fact that johns who use the Internet forums may not be typical of johns in general. Nevertheless, our findings point to a new understanding of being a sex workers' client by using johns' forums in planning for pleasure.

Notes

1. The term "commercial sex" (or "pay sex" as it is called in the forums) is being used to indicate that johns' forums do not only focus on common prostitution but also cover different sexual services such as erotic massages, pornography or bizarre services.
2. By using the term „john“, we refer to male clients of female sex workers. Even though there are male johns asking for sexual services by male sex workers and there are some female clients of male sex workers, those have not yet set up relevant internet forums in Germany.
3. FKK: "Freikörperkultur"; a club in which sex workers are naked; their clients wear bathrobes or towels.
4. Legal Frame Work for Sex Work in Germany: Contracts between sex workers and their clients are comprehensively acknowledged as legal acts in Germany. The currently effective federal Law on Prostitution (ProstG), enacted in 2002 (www.gesetze-im-internet.de), ended the status of prostitution being deviant or "contra bonos mores" (against public policy, immoral) by which any agreement between sex workers and johns could be regarded as null and void. The ProstG's intention was to improve and empower the legal situation of sex workers. It is supposed to be one of the most modern and liberal laws on prostitution in Europe and has further decriminalized commercial sex services for both, sex workers and their clients. Even though prostitution in Germany is still regulated by a number of provisions, e.g. criminal law, state law or administrative instructions, men do not have to fear prosecution for being a sex workers' client.

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