

Reinforcing Authentic Intimacy?

Relationships between an Escort Boy and His Male Clients in the Spectre of COVID-19 in France

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on the story of Valentin, one of the key participants of my current research on escort boys and their male clients in Paris, this article offers some reflections on the very meaning of intimacy as it is lived and experienced by this escort boy and his clients in the spectre of COVID-19. As a strict lockdown has been decreed by the French government for two months between March and May 2020, the situation has been somehow indicative of Valentin's relationship with his clients. The lockdown showed how authentic intimacy, cleared of expected escort performances, arose with even more intensity between Valentin and one of his clients. This article explores the changing nature of their relationship in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS: authenticity, COVID-19, escorting, France, intimacy, men, sex work

During the lockdown decreed by most Western European countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some attention has been paid to sex workers' situation in mainstream media. There were also numerous initiatives to raise funds and provide moral support on social networks. Indeed, as many other workers who make a living from insecure and precarious occupations where physical presence is crucial, many escorts have suddenly stopped or significantly reduced their activity without any emergency financial assistance from the government. Yet, financial insecurity is not the only consequence for sex workers' lives. The lockdown and the fear of contamination have led to new forms of intimacy and sometimes disrupted the escort-client relationship.

This article is based on interviews with Valentin,¹ an escort boy, and Félix, one of his regular clients, as well as digital ethnography, which involved observations of a male escort website and daily conversations and interactions on Facebook between Valentin and other 'regulars'. The article explores the construction and the transformation of intimate rela-

tionships – going beyond sexual contacts – between the key participant and his clients in the context of the pandemic.

In the past two decades, a range of qualitative research on escorting has been influenced by Arlie Hochschild's (2012) concept of 'deep acting' to describe the limited display of one's feelings in the services sector. Escorting, which can be defined here as the exchange of sexual services and/or companionship for money through online platforms, is an activity where 'emotional labour' (Chapkis 1997) is often discussed. Thus, American sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein (2007a, 2007b) introduced the concept of 'bounded authenticity' that she defines as an 'authentic, yet bounded, interpersonal connection' (2007b: 474) to describe relationships between middle-class female sex workers and their clients. She argues that 'authentic' intimacy, beyond sexuality per se, is sought after by more and more clients in North American and Western European post-industrial cities. A few other sex work researchers (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido 2018; Frank 1998; Milrod and Weitzer 2012;



Smith 2017; Tavory and Poulin 2012; Walby 2012) have paid attention to the complex ways in which intimacy is negotiated, performed and experienced amongst sex workers and their clients. Drawing on these explorations of intimate encounters, this article takes a deeper look at the changing nature of the escort–client relationship and the impact of the lockdown on its supposed authenticity.

Constructing ‘Authentic’ Intimacy in the Escort–Client Relationship

Valentin is one of the first men I met through the escort website that serves as the main field site of my current research on escort–client relationships. He is 29 years old and comes from a lower middle-class milieu. Valentin started escorting 18 months ago, right after he resigned as a high school philosophy teacher following a severe depression. He did not have any income, and escorting appeared to him as a way to earn money quickly and with less work time than any other available employment. When I asked him about his way of doing escorting, Valentin said:

I do my best – and I mention it explicitly on my profile – to make it like an encounter. But it isn’t bullshit; it’s really something . . . They almost become friends. A client told me once: ‘But . . . why do I keep paying you . . . because we are in love with each other!’ And I said: ‘No, we’re not!’ But it’s like a kind of unconditional love for me. It’s a way to take care of people who are in lack of love, sensuality, and I love to provide that. And it’s the most intimate way to provide a form of love. It’s not true love.² But I actually spend really good moments with them.

Valentin has no more contacts with his parents, and being an escort boy with a few regular ‘clients’³ he truly enjoys being with is a way for him to ‘create a new family’, as he said. The special bonds he creates with them are part of a new personal balance and sense of well-being for him that he has established since he broke free from depression. Valentin charges 100 euros for ‘an encounter’, regardless of the duration of the meeting and the services performed. The fact that the price is indexed neither on the client’s wealth, nor on the time spent, nor on the nature of the services exemplifies the kind of relationship that Valentin aims to construct with his regulars. The price remains equivalent for a four-hour encounter with sexual intercourse and a short rendez-vous in a café for less than an hour. This flat rate enables Valentin to ensure an additional form of authenticity for his ‘clients’, who are not charged differently depend-

ing on the various criteria mentioned above (which significantly vary for the vast majority of other escorts). This allows regular ‘clients’ to view some of the time spent with them or certain intimate exchanges that are often unplanned as ‘free’ and reciprocally undertaken in a mutually pleasurable encounter.

The Lockdown

During the lockdown that was decreed in March 2020 by the French government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Valentin stayed in his small Parisian flat. He spent between one and four hours a day with regular ‘clients’ talking on the phone and chatting on Facebook. When I asked him if he was expecting some payments in return for these services and the time spent talking on the phone, Valentin looked at me with a surprised face and smiled. It was obvious for him he would never ask for money for spending time (even hours a day) having phone conversations with regular ‘clients’. Valentin said: ‘Actually, we call each other like normal people would do in this context’. His regulars care about Valentin, and he cares about them just like family members or good friends would care about each other.⁴ Five of his regular ‘clients’ proposed to send money to him through bank transfers (they usually give him cash) to help him pay his rent, bills and groceries. He accepted their offers, but it seemed obvious that neither Valentin nor these generous regular ‘clients’ considered these donations as payment for his availability online or on the phone.

Félix, one of Valentin’s most regular ‘clients’, called him three to four times a week, much more frequently than he usually does. He felt lonely (Félix is divorced and now lives alone) and needed Valentin’s virtual company. Contrary to most other regulars, phone conversations with Félix were rather ‘substantial’, according to Valentin. Discussions often focussed on ‘important matters’, which might have strengthened the complexity and therefore the authenticity of the intimate relationship that both parties already had. By the end of April, as the country was still under lockdown, Valentin made the only exception to the rules imposed during these two months and welcomed Félix at his place as it was his birthday. Félix was therefore the only regular Valentin met during the lockdown, which was evidence of the uniqueness of their relationship. Félix sent money to Valentin several times during these two months in order to support him during this period with no income coming from escorting. But again, these do-

nations were not viewed as payments, as Félix confirmed to me later in an interview.

The Changing Nature of the Relationship

After France abolished some of the lockdown measures in May, I got introduced to Félix by Valentin. Félix is 61 years old. He is a retired banker from a bourgeois milieu. Félix has seen various escort boys since 2013, the moment he had his first 'homosexual experience'. He divorced his wife in 2014 and, at that time, he aimed to experience sex with other men. Escorting then appeared like the only way to meet younger men without having to negotiate encounters through online devices or in gay venues. Félix describes money – which is not an obstacle for the wealthy retiree he is – as a simple means to avoid too many other complications he could face in the context of non-paying relationships. After some years exploring same-sex sexuality, Félix now tends to look further for intimate companions rather than sex partners. He now sees a few escorts and describes their relations as intimate and emotional and as involving a form of reciprocity. As he was describing his relationship with Valentin, Félix said:

It's actually quite funny, he asked me about doing this interview with you, the way he underlined the fact that our relationship was one between an escort boy and his client. We met exactly like that, but now, I . . . Because I know he is in a difficult financial situation, I keep giving him money every time I see him, but this has nothing to do at all with the nature of our relationship, it's just in order to . . . Now, it's very free, for both of us. . . . Giving him money, for me, it's a way of showing him . . . that I like him very much. If I can help him a little bit, I'll do it. If he wants to relate this to escorting, as I think it protects him, why not. . . . A few weeks ago, he told me: 'You don't have to give me anything, you know', but it's precisely because I don't have to that I keep giving him money.

Félix *gives* money to Valentin: he does not *pay* him anymore. The verb 'paying' would imply the concretisation of the exchange. It would define the relationship as 'one between an escort boy and his client', and Félix does not view it this way anymore. Even though Valentin considers his relationship with Félix as a very unique one, the blurring of the boundaries confuses him a little bit more. Indeed, during our last interview, after the lockdown, Valentin told me that he does not always receive money from Félix after their encounters. Félix sometimes gives him money, sometimes does not, and there seems to be no logic

behind it from Valentin's point of view. Valentin told me about a recent encounter with Félix with sensuality and physical contact (which is not always the case), and he remembers that Félix did not give him any money. Valentin confessed that he felt a little angry at the time. I asked him why, and he answered: 'because I needed it'. Interestingly, it is not the changing nature of the relationship with Félix (the fact that *giving* money had become optional) that troubled Valentin, but rather the fact that the financial situation he is currently facing requires him to receive donations.

Valentin's relationship with Félix widely echoes the 'sexual-economic exchange' as theorised by Italian anthropologist Paola Tabet (1987, 2005). In Tabet's framework, sexual-economic exchanges are forms of transactional sex that go beyond prostitution or sex work. Individuals are involved in intimate transactions in ordinary sex as well because such relations are not free from power dynamics, in which money undoubtedly plays a role. Then, the way Félix *gives* money (or does not) to Valentin exemplifies Tabet's model of sexual-economic exchange precisely because the role of each actor is not clearly defined: it is no longer a simple escort–client relationship. When Félix *gives* money to Valentin after they meet, he sometimes pretends it is intended to help him buy something specific or to support his ongoing professional transition. This kind of oral clarification during recent encounters illustrates the changing nature of their relationship from Félix's point of view. To him, their relationship is no longer simply that between an escort and a client.

Conclusion

As I am writing these lines, Valentin and Félix are in Rome for a five-day trip. All travel expenses are obviously being covered by Félix, but Valentin's 'payment' for his companionship and his time remains very uncertain. After two months of strict lockdown without any clients, Valentin is in a difficult financial situation. Since the release from lockdown, he already travelled with another regular he is very close to for a short trip. These days, leaving Paris means a lack of income for Valentin, who must therefore meet more new clients when he is home in order to compensate for this free time that he is giving to clients he travels with. Like the weekly phone conversations they had during two months of strict lockdown, the time spent travelling with Félix is part of the blurred relationship that both men have with one another.

It is difficult to understand to what extent the lockdown has had a real impact on the transformation of their relationship, but this event seems to have revealed the ‘authentic’ intimacy between the escort boy and his regular (ex-) ‘client’. The crisis situation that Valentin and his ‘regulars’ faced during the lockdown has revealed the mutual support that both parties are willing to provide to each other, even in a context of affective-economic exchange.

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Notes

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Some details of the participants’ stories have been modified to further protect their anonymity.
2. ‘*Amour amoureux*’ was original term from the interview. All translations are my own.
3. In this article, the term ‘client’ is always mentioned with quotation marks when referring to Valentin’s regular ‘clients’ because both participants expressed reservations about its use (even though they frequently mention it for ‘lack of a better term’).
4. Valentin often refers to family relationships and friendships when describing his relationships with regular ‘clients’.

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