

**Tarts in the archive: A visual analysis of London sex workers'
ephemera from the 1990s**

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Abstract

This research investigates the visual culture of sex work through advertisements from the 1990s. The study analyses collections of approximately 22,000 tart cards (sex worker business cards) from London archives examining how these ephemeral advertisements for sexual services challenge mainstream narratives that either demonise or glorify sex workers as 'other'. The study employs a multidisciplinary methodology incorporating visual analysis, social art history, feminist theory, and visual criminology to decipher the bifurcated framework through which sex workers are viewed. It finds that there are tensions between the self-representation of sex workers and the perspectives of policymakers, the media and feminist groups. Policymakers have viewed sex workers as a social and environmental problem, exacerbated by the media, and feminist groups have proposed the idea of sex workers as victims or entrepreneurs. The tart cards are evidence of how the sex industry has been envisaged in a way that ignores its complexity and the agency of sex workers themselves. The cards defy categorisation, mirroring the multidimensional nature of the individuals they represent. This research contributes to broader discussions on sex work within a visual cultural and sociological capacity, offering new insights into sex workers' lived experiences and histories.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

DOWNTOWN CAROL PRICE

Stacking the cards

There is a tide in the affairs of British Telecom and the borough of Westminster which has risen to flood level over the last year, provoking much indignation and fear that our capital is, as Westminster's leader Dame Shirley Porter would put it, "sliding into sleaze". The tide in question is the proliferation of what are bureaucratically known as 'vice stickers', cards and sticky labels that plaster the public telephone-boxes of central London, most notoriously near main-line railway stations and other habitats of transient populations and tourists, and which are easily recognised, with innuendo about as subtle as a stiletto in the shin, as the calling-cards of prostitutes.

The problem is most acute in the West End, where staff from Swirlcourt, a private kiosk cleaning company employed by BT, remove up to 15,000 stickers a day from call-boxes in and around Victoria, Paddington and Soho, only to see them reappear, hours later, with cheeky and relentless persistence. Mercury kiosks, used only by card-holders, are seldom targeted.

The efficiency of the sticker-plastering campaign (sticker-fixers seem well acquainted, for instance, with the cleansing hours of different kiosks in different areas) has convinced John Newman, Swirlcourt's MD, that he is dealing with "a highly organised industry". He also

thinks the problem is getting worse.

This state of affairs, unsurprisingly, has not gone down too well at Westminster City Hall, where sleaze control has long been an urgent priority for Dame Shirley. She has recent evidence, supplied by an irate resident, that the menace is now "on the move" to areas around Baker Street and Marylebone, and that it is

and Lovely Carribean Delights, Dame Shirley concedes that "although one could laugh, this sort of thing really does upset an awful lot of people, and needs to be taken more seriously". She also believes that BT could be doing a lot more to clean up its act. If it was really serious about ridding the capital of this menace, she adds, "BT could simply disconnect every phone number that appears on each vice sticker or card, and deal with the problem at source."

BT, who claims to have allotted considerable money and man hours to curing what it sees as the seedier symptoms of "a wider problem in society", does not agree. Ideal as it may sound, says BT, it is not yet legally empowered to "just cut off the phone lines of anyone we don't like the look of, whether they are suspected prostitutes or mass murderers".

Surveillance, undertaken by BT investigators working with police officers, has revealed that the majority of sticker and card distributors are youngsters and drifters, with clean records and no connections with the vice trade, who have been approached at random and offered up to £100 a day to do the job. Even if taken to court, says BT, the most they will stand to get is a fine of around £20.

Residents apart, Westminster draws about a million visitors a day. If they are ever going to remember London more for its above-board institutions than for its efficient, if unwelcome, call-girl advertising service, then it's time, many people believe, that both BT and the law got tougher.



CALLING CARDS
litter the capital's
public places

diversifying from stickers to cards – a logical switch, as the latter carry only the risk of a minor litter offence, whereas sticker-fixers, caught in the act, could face a more serious criminal damage charge.

Solemnly shuffling through a vivid stack of around 150 cards, collected from a single visit to eight BT phone boxes in the Marylebone High Street area, featuring "reassuringly expensive" governesses, Busty Blonde models

Figure 1. Sunday Times article, *Stacking the Cards*, 1991.

'Tart cards' are paper leaflets advertising sex workers' services. They were a prolific British phenomenon in the 1990s and were highly collectable objects comparable to the craze of Pokémon trading cards.¹ These visual documents caused controversy because they were denounced as sex industry by-products. They have also gained cult status as a form of accidental art.² The above article demonstrates how non-sex working people have reported the phenomena, often undermining the efforts of sex workers, seemingly surprised by the "highly organised" production of tart card imagery enacted by sex workers.³ It shows how people disregarded sex workers as unskilled labourers and did not take the profession seriously in the 1990s and the millennium. At best, sex workers and their tart cards were considered harmless and smutty.⁴ At worst, the tart cards were used as evidence in the criminal justice system to persecute sex workers.⁵

Sex workers were targeted through a two-pronged attack in which their cards were destroyed and their phone lines disconnected. Ultimately, these actions were intended to remove the right of sex workers to advertise their services and prohibit them from receiving incoming calls from potential clients.⁶ A tirade of misinformation surrounds tart cards. A British journalist stated falsely that tart cards were illegal

¹ Jez Higgins, 'How To Play Prostitute Trading Trumps', *Jez UK* (blog), 13 July 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160914162023/http://www.jezuk.co.uk/cgi-bin/show/prostituteTradingTrump/rules>; Russell Dornan, 'Tart Cards', *Wellcome Collection* (blog), 21 March 2014,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140725040119/https://blog.wellcomecollection.org/tag/tart-cards/>.

² Chelsea Louise Berlin, *Tart Art: Telephone Box Calling Cards 1980s London* (UK: B.O.L.D, 2018).

³ Carol Price, 'Stacking the Cards', *The Sunday Times*, 10 March 1991, sec. London, The Sunday Times Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FP1802575635/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=17d646d4>.

⁴ Jill Eckersley, 'London's Callbox Eye Candy', *Belly Button Window*, 25 August 2000, https://web.archive.org/web/20250308152229/https://bellybuttonwindow.com/2000/england/londons_callbox_eye.html.

⁵ Ian Murray, 'BT Prepares to Halt Calls to Prostitutes', *The Times*, 20 September 1996, The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0501182170/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=3d49b104>.

⁶ Gregor Gall, 'Britain and Continental Europe', in *Sex Worker Unionization* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016), 115–43, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137320148_6. p.118

when they were not, yet on the other hand, applauded them for making “very good postcards”.⁷ The controversial nature of sex work and the unique look of tart cards reflect wider social problems that sex workers have raised: sex workers and their aesthetic have been consumed for entertainment purposes, whilst policies neglect the human rights of the people involved in the industry.⁸ The cards trace a tumultuous line of human rights enquiry in the 1990s and millennium, documenting the wider social implications of sex workers’ precarious livelihoods which were blighted by fines, eviction, court action, financial instability and discrimination.⁹

I have a small personal archive of material documenting my former life as a sex worker when I started dancing in clubs around Essex and London from 2008 to 2018. My nostalgia for these times informed the backbone of the project, where I yearn for connection with other sex workers’ experiences. My personal story deals with violence, whorephobia, outing, stigma, gentrification, fun, joy, abundance, friendship and connection. It provides the space to ask wider questions of these contradictory experiences, and to address these themes more formally in an academic context. Tart card collections are one of the most accessible collections of sex workers’ visual culture, yet there is little analysis of them through academic research. Applying a methodology informed by my personal praxis may reveal larger social implications of sex workers’ visual representation. The paper ephemera predate digital sex work advertisements but may reveal more intimate knowledge of sex workers’ advertising strategies that are still used in contemporary times.

⁷ Henry Porter, ‘The Diary’, *The Independent on Sunday*, 30 May 1999, The Independent Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FQ4201466309/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=b3a48f39>.

⁸ ‘JuicyPomma4.0’, TikTok, accessed 9 March 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309152638/https://www.tiktok.com/@juicypomma4.0>.

⁹ Diane Taylor, ‘Call Box Cards Used to Evict Prostitutes’, *The Guardian*, 8 July 2002, sec. UK news, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309145341/https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/jul/08/2>.

Furthermore, it may reveal how attitudes towards sex workers have changed, or stayed consistent, towards us as a marginalised community.



Figure 2. A selection of tart cards, Barnbrook collection c.1992.

The conflicting points of interest in the ephemera mean that tart cards have only been researched through a graphic design lens and a sociological framework. I argue that the two distinct ways that tart cards and sex work have been discussed are inadequate because they do not address the nuance in sex workers' image production, (self)representation and visual culture. Feminist debates on stigma and stereotypes around sex workers' identities are often cited within interdisciplinary

fields but remain to be visually analysed by art historians.¹⁰ The overarching methodological frameworks for understanding sex work imagery are prevalent within visual criminological and sociological fields but fail to examine the visual content and context of the cards as evidence of sex workers' existence. The thesis proposes a critical, art historical analysis of the archival material with an intersectional feminist perspective to acquire further knowledge of sex workers as a marginalised community and locate agency in their visual culture.

¹⁰ Mavis Maclean, 'Introduction. Sex Work in the UK: Stereotypes and Statistics in the 21st Century', *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 8, no. 8 (26 December 2018): 1123–33, <https://doi.org/10.35295/osls.iisl/0000-0000-0000-0989>.



Figure 3. Photograph of a London phone box, Tracey Thorne, 2023.

Background

The UK has a longstanding, complicated relationship between transactional sex and morality politics which is culturally significant because it affects real-life consequences for sex workers living and working in this country.¹¹ Sex work is legal in the UK, but there are restrictions that sex workers must navigate to stay within the margins of the law. The murky definitions around the legality of sex work enforce social stigma and misinformation around the sex industry which presents sex workers in a certain light. Consequently, British law interprets sex work as problematic. This disparity evokes a range of rich research interests from many disciplines around the morality politics and criminalisation of sex work. Close scholarly attention to UK policies and the decriminalisation of sex workers have been undertaken in current research, however, this thesis is driven by the low-brow and almost overlooked archival material of sex workers' visual culture.¹² This study shifts focus to the artefacts and images utilised by sex workers to gain an alternative perspective on this underground community. It is regularly critiqued that sex workers are excluded from mainstream feminist agendas, which is why an intersectional feminist reading of the material is imperative to future discourses on sex workers' agency and (self)representation.

¹¹ Jyoti Belur, Ella Cockbain, and Michele Bal, 'Policing in Relation to Sex Work and Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation in London: Exploring Police and Other Stakeholders' Perceptions', Report, *UCL Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science: London, UK*. (London, UK: UCL Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science, 21 November 2024), <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research>. p.9

¹² Teela Sanders, Barbara G. Brents, and Chris Wakefield, *Paying for Sex in a Digital Age: US and UK Perspectives* (Milton, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6124138>: Belinda Brooks-Gordon, Max Morris, and Teela Sanders, 'Harm Reduction and Decriminalization of Sex Work: Introduction to the Special Section', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 18, no. 4 (December 2021): 809–18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-021-00636-0>. p.811

The reductionist views embedded by 'pro' or 'anti' sex work debates further enforce the stereotyped way that sex workers are viewed as victims or entrepreneurs.¹³ The binary constructs of sex workers' representation are echoed in the media, in which sex work imagery portrays the conflicting ideologies around the legality of the sex industry. Overall, sex workers are portrayed in a simplistic way within British law and the media. In turn, this has affected how sex workers' imagery has been archived. Tart cards have been understood in a clinical setting. For example, the Wellcome Collection has archived sex work ephemera in a social pathology. Sex workers have traditionally been posed as a health risk in the archive, in context with medical discourses that make assumptions between transactional sex and disease.¹⁴ Tart card collections reflect societal values and the morality politics ascribed to sex workers, they have been deemed dirty, dangerous and criminalised individuals, capable of contaminating others. These perceptions are shifting, as the Wellcome's current installation *Hard Graft: Work, Health and Rights* addresses sex workers' labour with the addition of tart cards to situate the rights of labourers as the context of the exhibition.¹⁵

On the other hand, left-wing organisations focusing on social history preserve the ephemera differently. For instance, the Bishopsgate Institute embrace the tart cards as a subculture of filth and 'dirt'. Reproductions of original tart card imagery were used for the site-specific installation by the BDSM organisation *Torture Garden* for

¹³ Sadie Slyfox, 'On the Uses of the "Happy Hooker"', ed. Juliane Römhild, *Writing from Below*, Happiness, 4, no. 2 (2019), <https://web.archive.org/web/20240723183644/https://writingfrombelow.org/happiness/on-the-uses-of-the-happy-hooker-slyfox/>.

¹⁴ Heike Bauer et al., 'Visual Histories of Sex: Collecting, Curating, Archiving', *Radical History Review* 2022, no. 142 (1 January 2022): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-9397002>. p.3

¹⁵ 'Hard Graft: Work, Health and Rights', Wellcome Collection, 13 June 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309123219/https://wellcomecollection.org/hard-graft--work--health-and-rights>.

the Institute's "Kink in the Archive" after-hours, adult event.¹⁶ The problem with displaying the ephemera in this setting is that it relies on the general assumption that sex workers are a deviant collective identity who exist outside of traditional heterosexual, monogamous norms.¹⁷ Depicting sex work as a celebration of kink in a BDSM context can sensationalise the industry, whilst making generalisations of sex workers' collective experiences. Such presumptions ignore the multifaceted components of erotic labour, resulting in narratives that may not accurately reflect the diverse nature and levels of intimacy within sex work. However, it shows how sex workers are typically viewed, and how their images are appropriated. Institutions' use of sex work imagery as a form of subverting mainstream culture demonstrates that museums are aware of, and are still relying on, hegemonic definitions of sex work because they use their aesthetic to portray a certain agenda. I argue that sex work imagery is sensationalised because sex workers themselves exist in a discourse of fantasy.¹⁸ Sociologists have also sought to reclaim agency over sex work ephemera by reprinting tart cards with additional messages compiled by (female) sex workers as a form of activist research.¹⁹ Additionally, tart cards have been used in research projects as a therapeutic medium for sex workers to 'tell their story'. I argue that this approach relies on feminist ideologies which view sex workers as victims and further entrenches them as marginalised bodies. The *Our Voices* sociology project shows

¹⁶ 'Gallery: Kink in the Archive', Bishopsgate Institute, 21 April 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307151734/https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/stories/gallery-kink-in-the-archive>.

¹⁷ Teela Sanders, 'Becoming an Ex-Sex Worker: Making Transitions Out of a Deviant Career', *Feminist Criminology* 2, no. 1 (January 2007): 74–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085106294845>. p. 75

¹⁸ Sarah Hankins, "'I'm a Cross between a Clown, a Stripper, and a Streetwalker": Drag Tipping, Sex Work, and a Queer Sociosexual Economy', *The University of Chicago Press, Signs*, 40, no. 2 (Winter 2015) (n.d.): 441–66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678149>.

¹⁹ *Our Voices: Perspectives That Challenge the Stigma and Stereotypes about Sexwork* (UK: Delta, 2017), <https://web.archive.org/web/20241211191757/https://basisyorkshire.org.uk/resource/voices-perspectives-challenge-stigma-stereotypes-sexwork/>.

how tart cards have been perceived, studied, and understood in a larger social capacity, which largely ignores the production and distribution of the material as a creative medium.²⁰

Such approaches uphold and maintain ideas that sex workers and ‘normal women’ are vastly different, which is problematic in many ways.²¹ I argue that by editing the tart cards’ and inputting new information eradicates the original language used in the advertisement. This erases sex workers’ histories and accounts while making the tart cards appear ‘bad’, harmful or distasteful. The tart cards’ role in arts-based research methodology relies on the existing ideologies of sex work ephemera as items of detritus. Sex work ephemera is understood as an extension of the people to whom they are attributed; therefore, both have been viewed as dangerous, dirty rubbish. This study offers an alternative mode of reading sex work ephemera as primary source material through a visual analysis-led research paradigm.

Linking tart cards, ‘sex industry litter’ and red-light districts

The tart cards are evidence of sex workers’ physical movements, they are tangible items that were used to charge sex workers with various offences.²² The cards have been used briefly to measure trends in different geographical areas, pertaining to certain red light districts in collectors’ research practices.²³ This study is not concerned with locating red light zones, however, I am using written media accounts to supplement the information that I am analysing. The King’s Cross area of London

²⁰ *Our Voices*.

²¹ N. Persak and G. Vermeulen, *Reframing Prostitution: From Discourse to Description, From Moralisation to Normalisation?* (Antwerp, Belgium: Maklu, 2014). p.14

²² Taylor, ‘Call Box Cards Used to Evict Prostitutes’.

²³ Anne Billson, ‘Tart Cards’, *Multiglom* (blog), 7 December 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307150126/https://multiglom.com/2019/12/07/tart-cards/>.

is referenced frequently as an example of a 'red light zone' in sex work culture and has a negative reputation. "After dark, there is shouting, swearing, slamming of car doors; in the morning, condoms, syringes."²⁴ The literature around 'red- light areas' in the UK tend to follow a similar narrative, in which the sex worker is framed as the demonised figure that appears at night, leaving behind traces of their whereabouts to be discovered in the morning. 'Sex- industry litter' is political, it is weaponised by policymakers to monitor the whereabouts of sex workers and criminalise their movements.

An investigation into theoretical enquiries of disgust and social abjection situates the body of sex workers in London's red-light districts with the treatment of removing sex workers' tart cards from the public eye. The stigma of street-based sex work has been pivotal in forming whorephobic attitudes towards all people working in heterogeneous sectors of the sex industry.²⁵ The 2006 *Home Office's Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* was accused of perpetuating negative viewpoints: "At the core of the prostitution strategy is not a concern with the welfare of women and young people involved in sex work, but the need to remove the politically embarrassing problem of sex workers from the streets."²⁶

This viewpoint is mirrored by the ECP who criticised the government and its affiliated campaigns' lack of empathy with the sex-working community and their focus on displacing sex workers.²⁷ It is widely documented that the most oppressed and

²⁴ Richard Goodall, *The Comfort of Sin: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the 1990s* (Renaissance Books, 2003). p.15

²⁵ Teela Sanders, 'UK Sex Work Policy: Eyes Wide Shut to Voluntary and Indoor Sex Work', in *Regulating Sex for Sale*, ed. Jo Phoenix, 1st ed., Prostitution Policy Reform in the UK (Bristol University Press, 2009), 67–82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qgvwj.9>.

²⁶ Margaret Melrose, 'Out on the Streets and out of Control? Drug-Using Sex Workers and the Prostitution Strategy', in *Regulating Sex for Sale Prostitution Policy Reform in the UK* (Bristol UK: Policy Press, 2009). p.86

²⁷ Rory Maclean, 'Crackdown on Calling Cards', *BBC News*, 9 February 1999, https://web.archive.org/web/20100304213702/http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/275871.stm.

marginalised sex workers are trans, street-based, people of colour and are most vulnerable to everyday violence and police intervention.²⁸ The stigma ascribed to street-based sex workers typically stereotypes drug use.²⁹ The motivations behind sex workers' choices as 'junkies' sets them apart from other sex workers in the community as Melrose describes as "othering the other" a classic example of internalised whorearchy that sex workers have identified in sociological literature.³⁰ This thread of enquiry that centres on sanitation and gentrification via the physical erasure of sex workers is well-reported in socio-historical contexts.³¹ It is no coincidence then, that such longstanding attitudinal biases have been ascribed to sex workers' physical bodies, tangible items and the spaces that they come into contact with.³²

The transient nature of sex work and paper ephemera both hold negative connotations with rubbish. Scanlan's *On Garbage* theorises that "the physical state of being rootless, of being visibly outside community norms, is one thing that characterises so-called 'wasters'".³³ The association of vagrancy and 'prostitution' has historical connotations of class and capitalist production that have persisted to the modern day: women that appear to deviate from conventional norms, such as engaging with sex work are often more at threat from homelessness than those in

²⁸ Ridley, 'Imagining Otherly: Performing Possible Black Trans Futures in Tangerine'. p.482

²⁹ Anna Green, Sophie Day, and Helen Ward, 'Crack Cocaine and Prostitution in London in the 1990s: Sociology of Health & Illness', *Sociology of Health & Illness* 22, no. 1 (January 2000): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.00190>.

³⁰ Melrose, 'Out on the Streets and out of Control? Drug-Using Sex Workers and the Prostitution Strategy'. p.87

³¹ Phil Hubbard, 'Cleansing the Metropolis: Sex Work and the Politics of Zero Tolerance', *Urban Studies* 41, no. 9 (1 August 2004): 1687–1702, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098042000243101>.

³² Maggie McCandless Stone, "If He Looks Clean...": Condom Use Decisions in Prostitution', *Deviant Behavior* 41, no. 6 (2 June 2020): 718–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2019.1594584>.

³³ John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London (UK): Reaktion, 2005). p.32

other mainstream occupations.³⁴ Intersectional feminist theory suggests the margins that sex workers operate are further exacerbated by other factors such as socioeconomic and financial restraints. The street-based sex worker has been weaponised as some of the most vulnerable members of society. The stigma of street-based sex workers has been developed to involve harmful stereotypes of drug use, labelling them as 'junkies' who suffer from a double layer of 'othering'.³⁵ Fears of visible and hyper-visible transactions, via street-based sex work, drove the social anxieties around decency and health and safety, resulting in the gentrification and sanitation of certain areas in London.³⁶ "Unlike in other European countries where the 'sex as work' discourse has been evident amongst debates in parliament...the UK parliamentary discussions have been burdened by an over-emphasis on drugs, public nuisance and disorder, and the horrors of those who buy sex."³⁷ The literature shows how the tart cards embodied collective societal fears of the sex industry in the 1990s and provide a robust foundation to challenge such ideologies attributed to sex work and sex workers' (self) representation through feminist discourses.

Due to the sheer volume of 'carding' as a British phenomenon, Westminster Council outsourced and facilitated a separate "cleansing department" responsible for the removal of the cards in the area.³⁸ The tone and use of language attributed to the

³⁴ Hannah Witton, 'Sex Worker Rights with Lady Charlotte Rose', Season 3, Doing It!, accessed 27 October 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309122620/https://doingitpodcast.co.uk/episodes/ladycharlotterose>.

³⁵ Melrose, 'Out on the Streets and out of Control? Drug-Using Sex Workers and the Prostitution Strategy'. p.87

³⁶ Lucy Neville and Erin Sanders-McDonagh, 'Gentrification and the Criminalization of Sex Work: Exploring the Sanitization of Sex Work in Kings Cross with the Use of ASBOs and CBOs', in *Policing the Sex Industry* (Routledge, 2017), <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/edgesmargins/files/2021/01/Neville-and-Sanders-McDonagh-2017-Gentrification-and-Criminalization-of-Sex-Work-Exploring-the-Sanitization-of-Sex-Work-in-Kings-Cross-with-the-Use-of-ASBOs-and-CBOs.pdf>. p.162

³⁷ Teela Sanders, 'Chapter 9: Policing Commercial 'sex work' in England and Wales', in *Policing Sex*, ed. Paul Johnson and Derek Dalton (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012). p.137

³⁸ Elaine Fogg, 'Crackdown Nets 14,000 Call-Girl Cards', *The Independent*, 5 August 1994, sec. London, The Independent Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FQ4201110551/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=1d4f5f8e>.

team of cleaners hold a biblical association that feeds into morality narratives around sex workers and virtue. To 'cleanse' is to eradicate any impurities, implying that sex workers were not only physically, but also morally, dirty. The distribution of funding from the council corroborated with the voices of those against sex work advertising at the time.³⁹ The adverts were seen as damaging to the reputation of London's tourist areas and residential areas, driving sex workers into precarious working conditions to appease those in charge.⁴⁰

The government's strategy to remove tart cards from the public mirrors how they have treated street-based sex workers, physically displacing sex workers from red-light areas in the UK.⁴¹ The cards contradict policymakers' concerns because they were extensively located across London, and they were not designated or confirmed to certain areas, despite the arguments that politicians were putting forward. The concepts around the reformation of sex workers are historically intertwined with British regulations, where sex workers were viewed as a public nuisance.⁴² Sex workers faced a new type of surveillance, that criminalised their bodies further by the introduction of *Antisocial Behaviour Orders* (ASBOs) introduced by the *Crime and Disorder Act* of 1998.⁴³ The passing of legislation at local and regional levels fuelled the fire for further research into the sex industry. Sex work

³⁹ Meg Carter, 'The Anti-Porn Campaigner', *The Independent*, 14 April 1997, sec. Media+, The Independent Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FQ4200573176/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=729ce6f0>.

⁴⁰ Liz Roberts, 'Drive to Beat Prostitutes on the Numbers Game', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 28 August 1994, The Telegraph Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0702284624/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=efc8eb3b>; Sanders, 'UK Sex Work Policy'.

⁴¹ Neville and Sanders-McDonagh, 'Gentrification and the Criminalization of Sex Work'.

⁴² William Acton and Charles Planck, *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns: With Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils*, 2nd ed. (London (UK): John Churchill and Sons, 1870), <http://archive.org/details/b21309802>.

⁴³ Tracey Sagar, 'Tackling On-Street Sex Work: Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, Sex Workers and Inclusive Inter-Agency Initiatives', *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 7, no. 2 (2007): 153–68, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/crmcj7&i=143>. p.154

research in the UK has tended to favour key themes within medicine, criminology and social sciences, of risk-taking behaviours because there is a fraught history of violence, trauma and criminality associated with the industry.⁴⁴

Such research has perpetuated a binary framework for understanding sex workers' marginalised status in society as victims. This can also be read in state-violence contexts, yet contemporary feminist critiques of police brutality are challenging these viewpoints: "The idea that women need to be 'rescued' from the industry stems from a dangerous and misguided idea that the law brings salvation. Policemen are not saviours."⁴⁵ Current literature recognises the longstanding problematic discourses between sex workers and the law, yet there is little engagement with the visual culture of sex work ephemera that can illuminate further knowledge. It has been noted that some sociological approaches to academic study further exploit sex workers as subjects of research.⁴⁶ My approach seeks to humanise sex workers by locating autonomy in tart card production.

Whorearchy

The thesis aligns with contemporary sex work arguments that recognise that despite many varied and rich thriving sectors of the sex industry, certain visual tropes homogenise sex workers as a singular identity.⁴⁷ These bifurcated ideas of sex

⁴⁴ Helen Ward et al., 'Prostitution And Risk Of HIV: Female Prostitutes In London', *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 307, no. 6900 (1993): 356–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29720641>.

⁴⁵ Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (Pluto Press, 2020). p.105

⁴⁶ Lara Gerassi, 'A Heated Debate: Theoretical Perspectives of Sexual Exploitation and Sex Work', *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 42, no. 4 (December 2015): 79–100, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4730391/>.

⁴⁷ Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London (UK): Verso, 2018).

workers' representation hinge on whorearchical frameworks that sex workers and researchers have identified as problematic in the social categorisation of sex service providers.⁴⁸

The term 'whorearchy', coined by sex workers in the early 1990s, was first used in sex work scholarship by Anne McClintock in 1992.⁴⁹ Whorearchy is a socially driven model that differentiates sex workers' class and status based on their working environments and proximity to their clients.⁵⁰ This causes conflict amongst the sex working community that extends to wider social discourses, promoting the idea that full-service, street-based sex workers are at the bottom of the social hierarchy (whorearchy) whilst non-contact, indoor-working sex workers, such as escorts, are at the highest, therefore the most respected, position.⁵¹ The use of archival material to situate these prominent (and problematic) ideas in a historical and contextual analysis aims to shed light on these deep-rooted biases and offers a different perspective on the visual history of sex work. Melissa Gira Grant wrote that "prostitution is in itself a communication system" which is applied to the methodology of looking at sex work as a visual language through mixed media and semiotics.⁵²

⁴⁸ Belle Knox, 'Tearing Down the Whorearchy From the Inside', Jezebel, 2 July 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240101055923/https://jezebel.com/tearing-down-the-whorearchy-from-the-inside-1596459558>.

⁴⁹ Kimberly Fuentes, 'Sex Worker Collectives Within the Whorearchy: Intersectional Inquiry with Sex Workers in Los Angeles, CA', *Affilia* 38, no. 2 (1 May 2023): 224–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099221103856>. p.227; Anne McClintock, 'Screwing the System: Sex Work, Race, and the Law', *Boundary 2* 19, no. 2 (1992): 70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/303534>. p.76.

⁵⁰ Grace Sumner, 'Looking Up at The Whorearchy From The Bottom', Wordpress, *Street Hooker* (blog), 30 April 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240328122319/https://streethooker.wordpress.com/2020/04/30/looking-up-at-the-whorearchy-from-the-bottom/>.

⁵¹ Monique Duggan, 'The "Whorearchy"', Wordpress, *The 'Whorearchy'* (blog), 24 August 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308151929/https://moniqueduggan.wordpress.com/2016/08/24/the-whorearchy/>.

⁵² Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work* (Verso Books, 2014) p.70; Griselda Pollock, 'WHITHER ART HISTORY?', *The Art Bulletin* 96, no. 1 (2014): 9–23, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43947704>. p.11

The existing literature raises questions about how the critique of these images gives insight into the complexities of sex work, and why tart cards look a certain way. Studying the materiality of the ephemera and questioning why the object looks like this helps to establish pervasive tropes reproduced in sex work imagery and to answer what these images are trying to represent.⁵³

I argue that the tart cards play a persistent, cyclic role in the portrayal of sex workers that have been understood in binary discourses that are either a celebration or demonisation of the sex industry. The tart cards were essentially business cards for sex workers to advertise their services and were widely distributed in London phone booths from 1984 but reached their peak in the 1990s. These materials were also known as 'hooker cards', 'calling cards', 'vice cards' or 'slag tags'.⁵⁴ The cards were used to advertise the various services provided by sex workers through a range of handwritten, or graphically designed, text and imagery. These were a phenomenon throughout the UK in a time before the internet. They could be found in phone boxes in major cities in the UK but were more prevalent in central London. The business cards were mass-produced and printed by the thousands and included a telephone number to contact the sex worker. As the cards evolved, more pieces of information accompanied the phone number, such as address or an approximate location via landmarks or tube stations (5 minutes from Mayfair station, for instance) and often included a graphic design or image to demonstrate the services available.

⁵³ Dornan, 'Tart Cards'.

⁵⁴ Maurice Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator and Historian*, ed. Michael Twyman (London: The British Library Publishing Division, 2000). p.349; Anne Billson, 'Tart Cards', *Multiglom* (blog), 7 December 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307150126/https://multiglom.com/2019/12/07/tart-cards/>.



Figure 4. Spanish Babe, Háý collection, 1998.

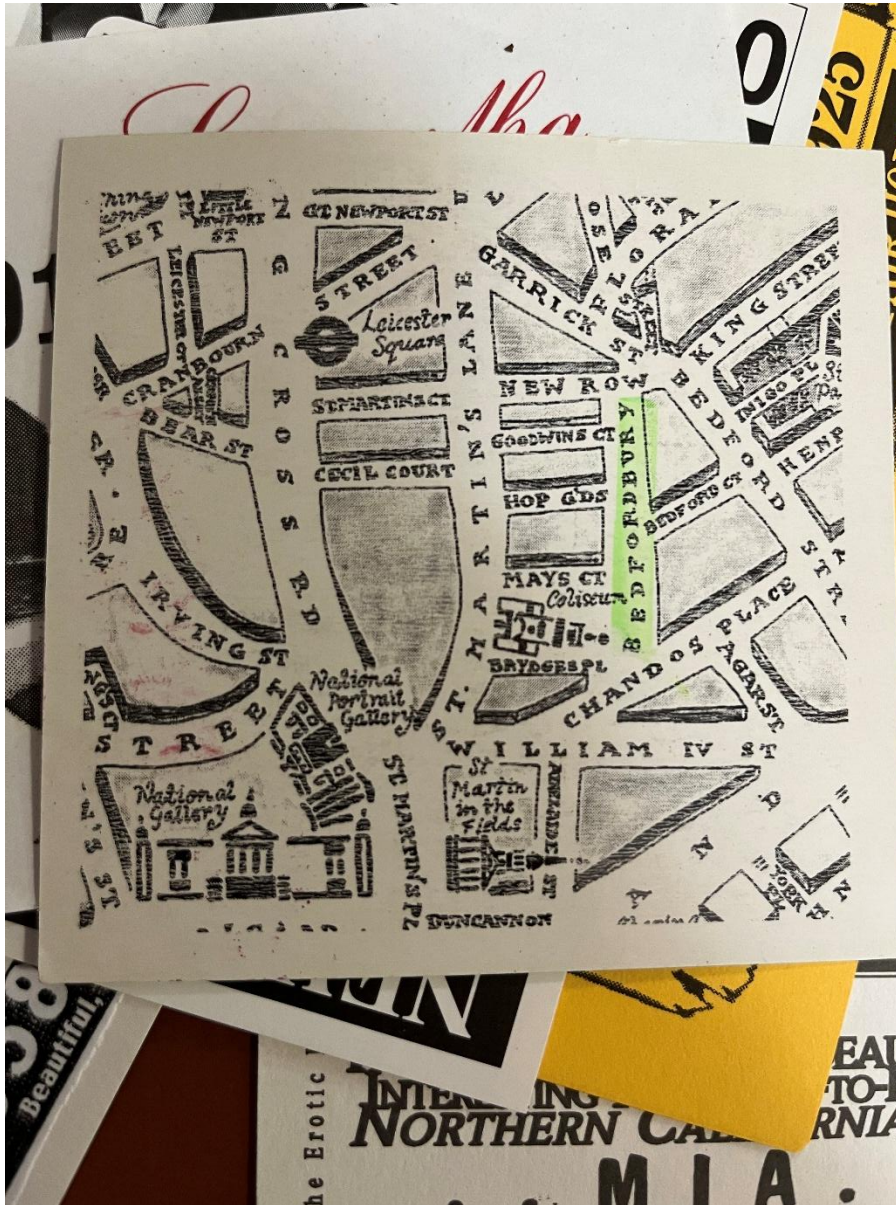


Figure 5. A map on the reverse of the *Spanish Babe* card, Háy collection, 1998.

The designs were printed on brightly coloured cardstock to catch the attention of potential clients. The tart cards were a visual embodiment of the “world’s oldest profession” and made international headlines in the *New York Times* in 1996.⁵⁵ Sex workers have a long-standing history of self-censorship of their trade, which has

⁵⁵ Youssef M. Ibrahim, ‘In Kiosks Of London, Card Game Gets Dirty’, *New York Times*, 17 August 1996, sec. International, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/109551726/abstract/D5E369452344FE5PQ/1>.

forced them to adopt innovative ways of advertising.⁵⁶ Tart cards started their lifespan as personal adverts posted in the windows of local newsagents in the UK as discreet notices. Historians speculate that British legislation implemented in the late 1950s (when it became illegal to solicit in public) spurred on the vibrant changes to the visual landscape of sex work culture.⁵⁷ Sex workers' physical visibility in the streets declined because they needed to evade the eye of the law, however, sex workers resiliently sought alternative methods of procuring business.⁵⁸ Tart cards did not appear in phone booths until 1984 because phone booths were protected by the Post Office Act (1953) which prohibited the placement of any unofficial ephemera.⁵⁹

When British Telecom (BT) privatised telecommunications there was a prominent shift in sex work culture and visibility because the British Telecommunications Act (1981) eradicated the legal protection of phone booths implemented by the former Post Office Act (1953), allowing sex workers to expand the scope of their advertisements.⁶⁰ The lifting of Governmental law meant that the Post Office did not have control anymore and sex workers began to use this to their advantage; it was now legal to put any material in phone booths, and cards quickly appeared in telephone boxes in major cities. Sex workers employed carders to distribute their advertisements in phone boxes which "began to take on the appearance of miniature pop-art galleries."⁶¹ It was not only the cards that changed the environment but also

⁵⁶ Kate Muir, 'No Sex Please, We're BT', *The Times*, 28 April 1992, The Times Digital Archive, <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0500419926/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&id=e447ea19>.

⁵⁷ 'Sexual Offences Act 1956', Text (Statute Law Database), accessed 26 February 2023, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/4-5/69/1991-02-01>; Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*. p.349; Kate Lister, 'Dial "S" for Sex', Wellcome Collection, 17 October 2018, <https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/W6NvHSoAACYA0A72>.

⁵⁸ Lister, 'Dial "S" for Sex'

⁵⁹ 'Post Office Act 1953' (Queen's Printer of Acts of Parliament), accessed 26 February 2023, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/1-2/36/crossheading/general-offences/enacted>.

⁶⁰ 'British Telecommunications Act 1981', Text, GOV.UK (Statute Law Database), accessed 4 May 2023, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/38/contents>:

Lister, 'Dial "S" for Sex'.

⁶¹ Caroline Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art* (New York, NY: Mark Batty, 2003). p.33

the spaces they occupied. The new KX series of phone boxes introduced in 1985 replaced the iconic red booths.⁶² In 1992 there were an estimated 92,000 phone boxes in the UK, whereas there are now only 21,000 booths.⁶³ Both the tart cards and the phone booth are reminiscent of a snapshot of sex workers' visual history in London.

Digital technology was a monumental feature in the changing landscape of sex work geographies in the 1990s.⁶⁴ Access to software like Photoshop and the rise of homeprinting accelerated the rate at which cards could be made and distributed. The advancement of image-making production in sex workers' visual culture is traced via the chronology of the tart cards (further discussed in Chapter 4). As technology advanced, the cards became easier to produce in large quantities and along with the increased production, their distribution escalated.⁶⁵ In the mid-90s cards were designed using Photoshop, text and images found on the internet, without sophisticated apparatus: "Printing tart cards has always been a backroom, backhanded job."⁶⁶ This underground working-class culture of the 1990s carders is rare to find in the archives. The 'tart cards' are a commercially based image so they are not anti nor pro-sex work, they are their own entity and may not have necessarily been made by sex workers themselves. Tart cards may have been commissioned by a third party, or according to a sex worker's exacting design. How these objects exist

⁶² Nigel Linge et al., 'In Celebration of the K8 Telephone Kiosk – Britain's Last Red, Cast-Iron Phonebox', *Industrial Archaeology Review* 42, no. 2 (2 July 2020): 141–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03090728.2020.1812026>. p.149

⁶³ 'BT to Scrap Half of the UK's Remaining Telephone Boxes', *BBC News*, 15 August 2017, sec. Business, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307141957/https://www.bbc.com/news/business-40934210>; 'Calling All Payphone Users: Thousands of Call Boxes Set for Protection', Ofcom, 10 November 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230602040721/https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2021/thousands-of-call-boxes-set-for-protection>.

⁶⁴ Angela Jones, *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry* (NYU Press, 2020). p.83

⁶⁵ Phil Hubbard, 'Maintaining Family Values? Cleansing the Streets of Sex Advertising', *Area* 34, no. 4 (2002): 353–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4762.00092>. p.354

⁶⁶ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.79

as cultural material can tell us about the social histories of sex workers in the UK. Tart cards reached their saturation point during this decade, where the distributors of these advertisements (affectionately known as ‘carders’ or ‘card boys’) and cleaners were in a constant cat-and-mouse game of removing and re-applying fresh cards in phone boxes.⁶⁷ The tart cards embody sex workers’ creative response to the criminalisation of their physical presence and are valuable pieces of sex workers’ visual culture.

Navigating feminist definitions of ‘sex work’

Notoriously difficult to define, the term ‘sex work’ encompasses many complex and intersecting trades that operate under one umbrella term. The ‘grey area’ of what sex work *actually* entails is one of the reasons that feminist views have such opposing standpoints. Pro-sex work feminist literature incorporates themes of capitalism and the Marxist theory of labour to bolster arguments that sex workers are active agents.⁶⁸ On the other hand, sex worker exclusionary radical feminists (SWERFs) have countered Marxist theory, stating that sex work does not count as physical labour because it is inherently violent towards women.⁶⁹

‘Pro-sex work’ accounts were formed in the 1970s and 80s as part of sex-positive feminist discourse.⁷⁰ ‘Pro-sex work’ is an antiquated terminology that is used

⁶⁷ Patrick Jewell, *Vice Art: An Anthology of London’s Prostitute Cards*, 2nd edition (Harrogate: Broadwater House, 1993); Alan Travis, ‘Phone Box Sex Cards Targeted in Clean-Up’, *The Guardian*, 19 May 1999, sec. UK news, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309124653/https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/may/19/alantravis>.

⁶⁸ Brooke Meredith Beloso, ‘Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class’, *Signs* 38, no. 1 (2012): 47–70, <https://doi.org/10.1086/665808>. p.50

⁶⁹ Andrea Dworkin, ‘Prostitution and Male Supremacy Symposium: Prostitution: From Academia to Activism’, *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 1 (1993): 1–12, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/mjgl1&i=7>.

⁷⁰ Carol Queen, *Real, Live, Nude Girl: Chronicles of Sex-Positive Culture* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997), <http://archive.org/details/reallivenudegirl00quee>. p.137-8

in Julie Bindel's contemporary SWERF arguments but is rarely used by sex workers today.⁷¹ Bindel refers to campaigners and allies including the *English Collective of Prostitutes* (ECP) as "pro-sex work feminists" but this is not the case and the organisation does not identify as such.⁷² This is problematic because sex workers are not endorsing the industry, but instead, recognise that sexual labour is not a totalising empowering or positive universal experience.⁷³ Unfortunately, sex workers' voices are often missing from academia, policy, and the media.⁷⁴

Bindel's advocacy for the partial criminalisation of the sex industry is a regulatory approach implemented by most 'anti-prostitution' policies and frameworks in the UK.⁷⁵ When I started my research, I found that such 'rescue-based' and 'exit-focused' models were adopted by my hometown, and are also utilised in many policies across the country.⁷⁶ The prolific nature of such policies reflects how anti-sex work campaigns permeate law, society and the general public. The people who want to abolish and criminalise the sex trade have the most traction, whereas the sex

⁷¹ Julie Bindel, *The Pimping of Prostitution: Abolishing the Sex Work Myth*, 2nd ed. 2019 (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95947-1>. p.63

⁷² Julie Bindel and Helen Atkins, 'Big Brothel: A Survey of the off-Street Sex Industry in London' (Poppy project, 2008), <https://web.archive.org/web/20220529205956/http://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/poppy-Julie-Bindel-co-Big-Brothel-report-09-09-08.pdf>. p.9

⁷³ *The Laws That Sex Workers Really Want*, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20240731191813/https://www.ted.com/talks/juno_mac_the_laws_that_sex_workers_really_want?subtitle=en.

⁷⁴ Camille Melissa Waring, 'The Prostitute and the PhD: Navigating Academic Spaces as a Tainted Researcher', in *Student Sex Work: International Perspectives and Implications for Policy and Practice*, ed. Debbie Jones and Teela Sanders (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022). p.68

⁷⁵ Agenda Alliance, 'Evidence on Prostitution', UK Parliament, 11 May 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240814111808/https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/64627/pdf>.

⁷⁶ 'Street Prostitution Strategy for Southend-on-Sea Borough Council 2022-2023', 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230104190247/https://democracy.southend.gov.uk/documents/s48318/App%201%20-%20Street%20Prostitution%20Strategy%20final.pdf>; Amy Wiseman, 'Cabinet to Discuss Street Prostitution Strategy and Charter', Southend-on-Sea City Council, 10 January 2022, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, UK, worldwide, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220127090525/https://www.southend.gov.uk/news/article/2460/cabinet-to-discuss-street-prostitution-strategy-and-charter>.

workers who understand that the sex industry cannot be categorised as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ become silenced.

Whorearchy as a theoretical concept is a tool to demonstrate that sex work is not always a shared experience, which is a complex issue in itself. The tart cards reflect the middle ground of the whorearchical chain because they depict indoor workers who have notoriously been absent from sex industry data.⁷⁷ Street-based sex workers remain the most researched and most represented in the media.⁷⁸ This reflects the current landscape of mainstream sex work scholarship and demonstrates that policymakers have more of a say in sex workers' labour conditions than the workers themselves. In turn, this places an overemphasis on how people *think* the sex industry should be managed versus what laws sex workers would like to advocate for their rights.

The varied and complex relationships that sex workers formulate with their clients have also been researched within the parameters of a binary framework.⁷⁹ The clients' involvement in facilitating tart card production may have stemmed from various forms of labour; from providing capital, using their professional connections to physically get the cards printed or by distributing the cards manually. These roles may have overlapped in some instances, revealing that the cards were subject to input in the design features from a male perspective. The whole process from design to print was not feasible for one person to create. SWERF feminists such as Rebecca Whisnant would suggest that misogynistic imagery around women's bodies

⁷⁷ Sanders, 'UK Sex Work Policy'.

⁷⁸ Andrea Matolcsi et al., 'The Current Landscape of Prostitution and Sex Work in England and Wales', *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (1 February 2021): 39–57, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09756-y>. p.50

⁷⁹ Jerald L. Mosley, 'The "John": Our New Folk Devil', in *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research* (London (UK): Routledge, 2019).

as sexual objects of desire may have been inserted into the production of sex workers' adverts in line with the male gaze.⁸⁰ On the other hand, libertarian feminists such as Camille Paglia would understand this as an act of redistributing power imbalances typically emboldened by hegemonic masculinities.⁸¹ Dr Caroline Archer proposed another interpretation; that the tart cards were produced as a mutually beneficial 'side- hustle' to earn both parties (sex workers and printers) money.⁸²

The principle of printing the cards teetered on the margins of the law, as in the UK it was (and still is) a criminal offence for any third party, pimp or person to profit from, or receive financial gain from sex workers. In the early 90s, tart cards were understood as cheeky advertisements, though they were frowned upon, their imagery was not explicit and the accompanying text was interpreted as more suggestive than pornographic. This combination of visual and typographic information was very much reminiscent of the early examples of sex workers' adverts in the *Yellow Pages*. The cards from 1984- 1994 are unanimously the most valued and aesthetically pleasing examples of tart cards for visual culture and ephemera collectors.⁸³ The reality of tart card production is that the ambiguous morality politics around the sex industry affected the visual output of sex workers' advertisements. It may be too far of a stretch to suggest that sex workers and professional printers were working collaboratively, however, it is crucial to identify the significance of their partnership in the overall design of the tart cards. The sheer number of printed ephemera demonstrates that there was an abundance of willing agents to assist in

⁸⁰ Christine Stark and Rebecca Whisnant, *Not For Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography* (North Melbourne, Vic: Spinifex Press, 2004). p.342

⁸¹ Camille Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps: New Essays* (USA: Vintage books, 1994), <http://archive.org/details/VampsTrampsNewEssays1994ByCamilleAnnaPaglia>. p.59

⁸² Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*.

⁸³ Berlin, *Tart Art*.

the production of the cards. This reveals that there may not have been such stark opposition to the tart cards and the sex industry as put forward in anti-sex work debates.

Feminism, sex work and labour

Though feminists had been discussing sex work as a form of labour since the early 1970s, sex worker activist Carol Leigh a.k.a 'Scarlot Harlot' coined the term 'sex work' in 1980.⁸⁴ Leigh was motivated to recognise people working in the sex industry as legitimate labourers and envisioned the 'sex work as work' mantra.⁸⁵ The emergence and significance of this term in the 1990s mirrors the social effects of the visibility of the sex industry, which can be traced via the tart card 'boom' and the subsequent prolific narratives about transactional sex. The cards were part of a more general assumption that sex work advertisements evidenced human trafficking.⁸⁶ Victim narratives and ideas around different ethnicities of sex workers ramped up in the 1990s because of the diverse, multicultural demographic in London, however, these ideologies were also voiced in other cities in the UK.⁸⁷

The way that sex workers' labour was discussed was in keeping with unfair racialised profiles that asserted that 'foreign' sex workers were victims of sex

⁸⁴ Elena Jeffreys, 'Sex Worker Politics and the Term "Sex Work"', *Global Network of Sex Work Projects: Research for Sex Work*, no. 14 (September 2015), <https://web.archive.org/web/20241204143040/https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/Sex%20Worker%20Politics%20and%20the%20Term%20%E2%80%98Sex%20Work%E2%80%99,%20Research%20for%20Sex%20Work%2014%20-%20August%202015.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Jill Nagle, ed., *Whores and Other Feminists* (London (UK): Routledge, 1997). p.230

⁸⁶ Tony Thompson and Nicole Veash, 'Britain's Sex Slave Trade Booms: Behind the Ads, Foreign Women Are Being Trafficked into Prostitution across the UK', *The Observer* (1901- 2003), 14 March 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/478048804/citation/14DEB8432B014524PQ/12>.

⁸⁷ Fionnuala Bourke, 'How Birmingham's Balsall Heath Won Its Streets Back from the Prostitutes and Pimps', *BirminghamLive*, 11 August 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307153506/https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/how-birminghams-balsall-heath-won-7595137>.

trafficking and 'British' sex workers were at risk of having their labour exploited.⁸⁸ These narratives enforced the idea that white, British sex-working women were "forced to do it cheaper" thus adding another layer to the victimised trafficking victim: they were inadvertently harming English sex workers.⁸⁹ Though intersectional perspectives on sex work have shed light on sex work as a legitimate form of labour, these are not adequate in quantifying the lived experience of migrant sex workers or sex workers of colour.⁹⁰ These points ask wider questions about sex workers' status and labour conditions in the social and political landscape in the UK at that time, which are explored further in Chapter 6.

The tart cards' shift from depicting single sex workers to advertising threesomes, or lesbian services was outside of heteronormative social boundaries about what constituted 'normal' sex. This additional layer of stigmatisation acted as a further irritant to SWERF collectives that classified the imagery as pornographic and/ or degrading material. The inclusion of two sex workers on one card in Figure 6 also treads on a fine line of legality. It is not illegal to be a sex worker in the UK, however, it is not legal to operate with any other party. This includes working with another sex worker, something that sex work activists vehemently argue diminishes their safety and support networks.⁹¹ The cards featuring two (or more) sex workers were controversial because they depicted an illegal act. Despite sex workers' fight for the

⁸⁸ Jo Doezema, 'Loose Women or Lost Women? The Re-Emergence of the Myth of White Slavery in Contemporary Discourses of Trafficking in Women', *Gender Issues* 18, no. 1 (1 December 1999): 23–50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-999-0021-9>. p.25

⁸⁹ Archer. p.27; Doezema, 'Loose Women or Lost Women?'

⁹⁰ Ariane Cruz, 'Encore: A Note on Repetition', in *The Color of Kink*, Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography (NYU Press, 2016), 213–20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bj4qr0.9>.

⁹¹ Mathilda Mallinson and Helena Wadia, 'Byline Times: Sex Workers Fear "Disastrous" Labour Government Plan "That Would Put Us Much More at Risk of Violence and Arrest"', *English Collective of Prostitutes* (blog), 6 December 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250122211353/https://prostitutescollective.net/byline-times-sex-workers-fear-disastrous-labour-government-plan-that-would-put-us-much-more-at-risk-of-violence-and-arrest/>.

decriminalisation of the sex industry to work in safer conditions, the restrictions imposed on sex workers' movements remain to be challenged in British law.

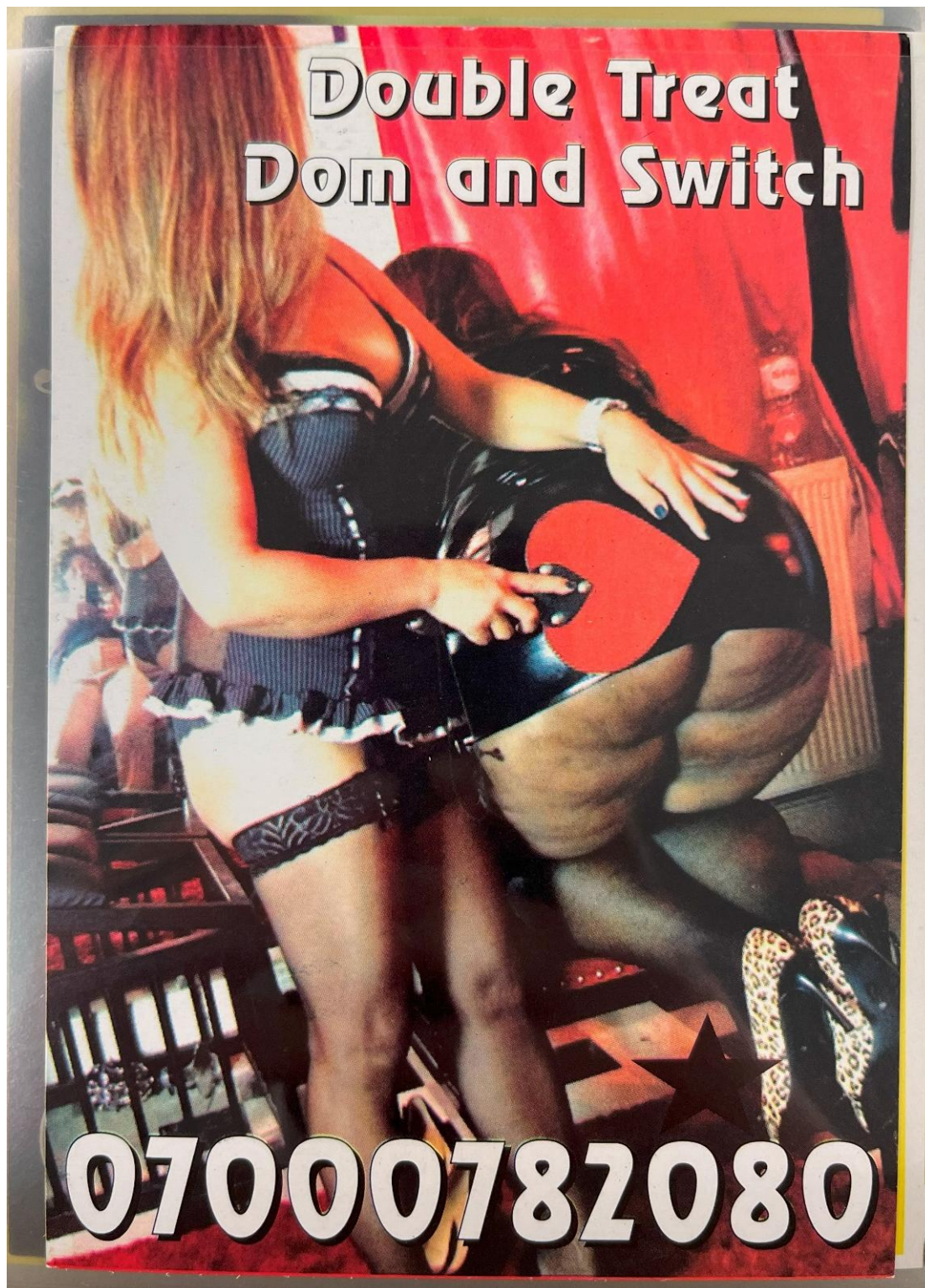


Figure 6. *Double Treat: Dom and Switch*, Wellcome collection, 01/12/2013.

This image is indicative of the benefits outlined by sex work organisations such as the ECP who advocate for policy change around brothel laws. The tart card shows multiple sex workers' labour conditions and also reveals the collaborative nature of the sex industry that sex workers and allies have identified as support systems. The tart card also demonstrates how sex workers have utilised technology to their advantage, to the left, the mirror reflects the camera operator who is capturing the image on their mobile phone. The image suggests that this group of people were working in a brothel setting as four individuals can be identified.

The photographer is leaning back in a chair with their negligée pulled upwards, exposing their stomach. The person appears relaxed whilst they capture the picture of the two female-presenting sex workers engaging in a role-play scenario. As the viewer, we are offered a glimpse into the everyday lived experience inside the brothel, an environment that is steeped in stigma and secrecy. This viewpoint is rarely documented in sex work imagery, not only is the viewer offered a glimpse into the activities of the sex workers, but they are invited into the space and are transported into the mirror image as the photographer. This tart card is an extraordinary and atypical example of sex workers' visual culture that tells a multifaceted account of sex workers' day-to-day existence within a London brothel.

SWERF theorist Bindel may interpret the image as an illegal act of brothel-keeping that promoted sexual slavery.⁹² On the other hand, Annie Sprinkle's pro-sex work lens may infer that the photograph shows sex workers having fun and enjoying their collective workspace.⁹³ Here lies the problem: most sex work imagery is

⁹² Roger Matthews et al., *Exiting Prostitution: A Study in Female Desistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). p.88

⁹³ Annie Sprinkle, 'My Body Is a Temple for a Multimedia Whore' (USA, 1992), http://archive.org/details/my_body_is_a_temple_for_a_multimedia_whore_1992.

neglected by academic investigation. A critical visual analysis of the image considers that both polarised feminist viewpoints may exist in the image to some extent. My methodology acknowledges that the tart card existed as an advertisement yet finds value in the ephemera as objects.

The card humanises sex workers as legitimate labourers because the image is taken from the sex workers themselves, offering a different perspective of the sex industry, one that is removed from the outsider's lens. Ultimately finding a more nuanced account of the photograph that depicts an intimate portrayal of sex workers situated at their place of work. The card is in contrast to many mass-produced cards which featured images of repurposed photographs of models, sex workers and pornstars. The sex workers are still staged and are performing a pose, but the environment in which they are depicted contextualises the feminist 'sex work as work' rhetoric.

I argue that a pro or anti-sex work narrative is not an exhaustive way to view the image because it does not account for nuance in sex workers' collective experience. The image is exemplary because it captures an authentic snapshot of sex workers' day-to-day lives from the people themselves. This also further contextualises the social landscape that sex workers were experiencing in London in the 2010s. This methodological approach is conducted throughout the thesis. I have studied amateur productions of tart cards because I feel they add more to the conversations about sex workers' labour, rights and history. The example of my visual analysis of Figure 6 sets the tone of the project, in which I seek a more personal and intimate account of sex work.

Problematic language

The terminology around the ‘tart card’ may read as an insult or derogatory word for sex workers which was problematic in the early stages of the research.⁹⁴ On reflection, and after investigating the linguistic heritage of the word ‘tart’, the thesis adheres to the sole, distinct term ‘tart cards’ for clarification. Defining someone as a “proper tart” in the 1990s held two meanings that could be used interchangeably between a slur and a compliment towards a woman’s sexual performance or the sexually appealing way that she presented herself.⁹⁵ This viewpoint demonstrates how misogyny was normalised, and that the word ‘tart’ was applied in a heteronormative context as an ordinary, or flattering term to refer to women in the context of the research timeframe.⁹⁶

Historically, it is rumoured that the word ‘tart’ came from an abbreviation of ‘sweetheart’ as a term of endearment within the English language.⁹⁷ Some feminists and scholars believe that in its early use, ‘tart’ was a gender-neutral term that only gained negative connotations when ascribed to the ‘promiscuous’ female body.⁹⁸ The original context of ‘tart’ became gendered when it was applied to overtly feminine sexuality, thus conflating the word with prostitution.⁹⁹ Anti-sex work feminists find the

⁹⁴ Due to negative connotations with ‘tart’ my personal feeling was to initially refer to these items as ‘call cards’ however, with the development of this research I chose to use the colloquial term ‘tart card’.

⁹⁵ Goodall, *The Comfort of Sin*. p.6

⁹⁶ Marietta Rusinek, ‘On the Contiguity of the Semantic Fields “CAKES” and “HUMAN BEING”: The Case of Tart’, *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 60, no. 05 (2012): 101–12, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=85642>.

⁹⁷ ‘Tart, n. Meanings, Etymology and More’, Oxford English Dictionary, accessed 17 March 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20250321145202/https://www.oed.com/dictionary/tart_n?tl=true.

⁹⁸ Caitlin Hines, ‘Rebaking the Pie: The Woman as Dessert Metaphor’, in *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*, ed. Mary Bucholtz, A.C. Liang, and Laurel A. Sutton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 145–62. p.148

⁹⁹ Deborah Cameron, *Feminism And Linguistic Theory* (Springer, 1985). p.77

term ‘tart’ dehumanising but pro-sex work feminists argued that it is a part of British culture that women sought to reclaim in the 1990s.¹⁰⁰

Prostitution, as a term, has been complicated by anti-sex work feminists who weaponised the word to explain their views of the sex industry as a rigid patriarchal design that incites violence against women.¹⁰¹ In contemporary literature *Revolting Prostitutes* Mac and Smith acknowledge historical, negative connotations and reclaim the agency of offensive words as an act of advocacy for sex workers.¹⁰² This thesis exclusively uses Leigh’s neutral term ‘sex worker’ (unless specified) and refers to the material as ‘tart cards’ throughout, firstly as an act of solidarity and secondly for clarity.

Thesis statement

I argue that the critical analysis of tart cards is pivotal in revealing information about the sexual landscape of London in the 1990s. The ephemera gained a cult status as iconic examples of subculture but remain to be examined through an art historical and intersectional feminist perspective.

Further, I argue that people construct an idea about sex workers and the sex industry without consulting the actual images made by the workers themselves. There are very distinct binary codes in the social imprinting of what a sex worker looks like.¹⁰³ In British popular culture and the Western imagination, sex workers’ bodies have been represented as oppositional symbols of glamour or victimhood,

¹⁰⁰ Dworkin, ‘Prostitution and Male Supremacy Symposium’. p.6; Jenny Kitzinger, “‘I’m Sexually Attractive but I’m Powerful’: Young Women Negotiating Sexual Reputation’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 18, no. 2 (1 March 1995): 187–96, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(95\)80054-S](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(95)80054-S).

¹⁰¹ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution* (Australia: Spinifex Press, 2008).

¹⁰² Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights*.

¹⁰³ Slyfox, ‘On the Uses of the “Happy Hooker”’.

contradicting their everyday lived experience.¹⁰⁴ There are steadfast stereotypical impressions in the general populace's imagination of what sex workers are presumed to look like, how they are perceived, and how they are demarcated from the rest of society.

Often, the narratives around finding how these entrenched ideas came to be are overlooked or are absent from discussions around the sex industry entirely. Sex workers are viewed as passive agents who are not in control of their image or representation, this is partly due to the surveillance and criminal eye cast over their movements, which dilutes their agency. Sex workers' advertisements, colloquially referred to as 'tart cards' have the potential to enrich feminist discourses about the sex industry, however, they are yet to be studied in a critical academic capacity. The cards have been analysed loosely in art historical and visual culture studies, with a specific focus on the typographical qualities of the medium as a means of marketing, (self)branding and communication.

Sex workers remain uncredited for their involvement in creating the iconic 'look' of tart cards, yet the cards were used as evidence of criminal activity.¹⁰⁵ Sociologists have subverted themes on the cards to use them as holistic qualitative research methods, however, this further entrenches binary thought processes that infer the cards as misogynistic portrayals of sex workers, further alienating the workers from their creative practice. Dr Caroline Archer's work on the tart cards is the sole study into the ephemera at present that sought to address this problem.¹⁰⁶ The research was conducted through the lens of an outsider perspective who gained

¹⁰⁴ Maclean, 'Introduction. Sexwork in the UK'. p.1126

¹⁰⁵ Alun Phillips, 'Report of the Director of Legal Services Prostitutes' Cards', The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Planning and Conservation Committee (London (UK), 29/06 1999).

¹⁰⁶ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*.

access to sex workers and built a rapport with their subjects through a series of interviews and qualitative sociological data acquisition methods. Though the study is the only comprehensive piece of literature on the British phenomenon of carding there are knowledge gaps that require scholarly attention.

Research Questions and Rationale

Sex workers are often seen as a threat.¹⁰⁷ The anxieties around sex workers' actions, (self)representation, and physical proximity from the rest of society are well-documented within popular culture and academia.¹⁰⁸ Despite the prevalence and scope of sex work research, studies have not directly engaged with the ephemera of sex workers' visual culture in the form of tart cards (advertisements). Sex work ephemera has broadly been understood in polemic areas that are tethered to 'anti' or 'pro' sex work debates.

This study contributes a different methodological framework to address the void in the existing literature and goes beyond oversimplified, bifurcated views. The project does not seek to dismantle sex industry law and policy but proposes an alternative, feminist reading of sex work ephemera that provides a more nuanced account of sex workers' lived histories. Instead, the primary research question asks: How can the critical visual analysis of archived sex work ephemera provide agency and a nuanced account of sex workers' lived histories? This is then followed by a

¹⁰⁷ Julia Gregory, 'The London Phone Boxes That Are Being Used "by Prostitutes and as Toilets"', My London, 14 November 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308155723/https://www.mylondon.news/web/20250308155723/https://www.mylondon.news/news/west-london-news/london-phone-boxes-being-used-15409623>.

¹⁰⁸ Hubbard, 'Cleansing the Metropolis'. p.1695

secondary enquiry: How does an intersectional feminist analysis of London's tart cards disrupt bifurcated narratives that demonise or glorify sex workers as 'other'?

Aims and Objectives

The substantive aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of sex workers' self-representation. Though attempts have been made to investigate tart cards as a bygone communicative system between sex workers and clients, the cards and their legacy remain polarised. Knowledge on tart cards has been funnelled through this bifurcated view, either demonising or glorifying the sex industry, and are seen and understood in oversimplified ways. I propose that this reading can be interrupted by a critical visual analysis from an intersectional feminist perspective, highlighting the project's theoretical aim. This alternative reading of the ephemera will shine a light on the nuanced lived experience of sex workers in London in the 1990s.

Sex work research is often conducted from an outsider's perspective, resulting in a large body of academic research that is framed from this positioning.

Criminologists theorise that an individual without personal experience in the sex industry "constructs the face of prostitution through the images that are mediated through various channels of communication."¹⁰⁹ Tart cards are a visual means of such communication, and I argue that the way sex workers are represented in the media has an impact on wider structural concepts of sexual commerce. This means that how society has synthesised information about the sex industry has been formed by these socially derived and constrained viewpoints.

¹⁰⁹ Persak and Vermeulen, *Reframing Prostitution*. p.13

I argue that by visually analysing sex work ephemera, we can learn more about the sex industry and the workers who chose to represent themselves. Sex workers are not credited for their contribution to visual culture in an academic capacity, and they are often stereotyped as passive agents who exert little control over their self-image. My methodological aim is to use a visual critical research paradigm informed by feminist theory to disrupt these typical narratives embedded within sex work research to show that sex workers had agency in their marketing, promotion and self-representation. In turn, this evidence will demonstrate the interconnecting roles and services provided by sex workers, thus giving a more holistic and well-rounded understanding of visual communication in the sex industry. The thesis seeks to break down the barriers that posit sex work in oppositional categories, the 'trafficked victim' or the 'glamorous entrepreneur'.¹¹⁰ I argue that the typical readings of tart cards as detritus equate the people working in the sex industry to rubbish, and the subversion of the 'sex workers as filth' narrative fetishises this position. Contemporary sex work feminist viewpoints subvert the traditional gaze, which then further marginalises sex workers as a vessel for the reclamation of dirty, or abhorrent sexual practices which is not helpful or progressive in the 'sex workers' rights as human rights' activist discourse.¹¹¹

My study builds on the objectifying gaze that has come to light in the analysis of the existing literature and takes it a step further, relating the gaze to the human rights of sex workers. The argument challenges the dehumanisation of sex workers and aims to identify how this narrative has been informed by social constructs which

¹¹⁰ J. Phoenix, 'Prostitute Identities', *British Journal of Criminology* 40, no. 1 (1 January 2000): 37–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/40.1.37>.

¹¹¹ Teela Sanders et al., *Internet Sex Work: Beyond the Gaze*, 1st ed. 2018 edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

manifest in the imagery of tart cards. Sex industry ephemera can offer insight from detailed visual observation, the graphic design, handwritten information and the physical uses of the paper as a tangible item reveal pertinent information about sex workers' experiences.¹¹² The careful consideration of ephemera in sex work culture prompted a wider investigation that can benefit the community. Tart cards as objects tell a story of conflicting ideologies on the censorship of sex workers' bodies that are still relevant in contemporary society.¹¹³

The politics and human enterprise of carding are something that has been lost in history; the carders served as a critical component in the distribution of sex workers' visual culture.¹¹⁴ Despite the prevalence of carders in the 1990s and accounts that sex workers paid competitive rates to dispense three hundred cards daily, there is little evidence of card boys' existence.¹¹⁵ The misinformation around carding and sex work as an industry is reflected in the way that the collections of sex work ephemera have been curated and displayed to the public.¹¹⁶ This thesis argues that this does not give a full picture of the sex industry in the UK. It is rare to gain insight into the relationship between sex work ephemera and the affective nature of its visual content. This is a crucial foundation to elaborate on as it underlines the lack of investigation undertaken in this specific area and situates the work with a feminist positionality in visual culture studies. The sparse publications that have been written

¹¹² Maurice Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*, First Edition (London (UK): Phaidon Press, 1988).

¹¹³ Camille Waring and Scarlett Redman, 'Visual Violence: Sex Worker Experiences of Image Based Abuses' (Manchester (UK): NUM, 10 February 2022), https://web.archive.org/web/20240317003459/https://nationaluglymugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NUM-Visual-Violence-Report-FINAL_10022022.pdf. p.46

¹¹⁴ 'Getting Tough on Phone Box Vice Cards', *BT Today*, September 1996, Sex ephemera : sex worker phonebox cards. Box 12, Wellcome Collection, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307155656/https://wellcomecollection.org/works/v2498a6q>.

¹¹⁵ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.54

¹¹⁶ Paul Bracchi, 'Nasty Card Tricks of the Call Girls', *Evening Argus*, 16 September 1992, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307154421/https://wellcomecollection.org/works/rf3qrm8w>.

about tart cards have been neglected by academic analysis and have not been conducted with a focus on the visual affective nature of sex work imagery.

Significance of the Study

My contribution to sex industry research sits in an interdisciplinary framework that benefits visual culture studies, sociology and cultural criminology. I provide a visual analysis-driven methodology to further knowledge of sex workers' lived experiences. The justification for my argument is that the representation of sex workers is a human rights issue. The politics of looking at sex workers is a symptomatic feature in the violence towards them.¹¹⁷ It matters because harm against sex workers is a breach of human rights that extends to wider discussions of violence towards marginalised groups. My findings may potentially impact participation action research and social justice work, opening broader discussions of sex work and representation in the current literature. Generally, and more prolifically in 1990s British culture “prostitutes were commonly assumed to be women.”¹¹⁸ Academics have been criticised for enforcing a “female sex-worker, male client” typography, however, the overarching evidence in my primary source material reflects this socially derived discourse.¹¹⁹ I acknowledge that sex workers’ rights discourses are steeped in a gendered framework that requires further attention. My findings reveal that there are examples of male, queer and trans service providers, however, the overarching archival material evidences a predominant heteronormative standard of female

¹¹⁷ Jane Pitcher, ‘Intimate Labour and the State: Contrasting Policy Discourses with the Working Experiences of Indoor Sex Workers’, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 16, no. 2 (1 June 2019): 138–50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-018-0323-3>.

¹¹⁸ Sarah Kingston, *Prostitution in the Community: Attitudes, Action and Resistance* (Routledge, 2014). p.57

¹¹⁹ Kingston. p.57

presenting bodies aimed at a male clientele. This is an interesting observation in itself, as there are histories of queer sex workers' histories, however, these examples are rare, accounting for a marginal fraction of the collected and preserved ephemera to date.

Methodology

In the early stages of research, I tried to acquire quantitative data on tart card imagery by using tally charts to obtain geographical, and chronological data like other independent researchers before me.¹²⁰ This approach was unsuccessful, proving to be an inadequate way of processing such diverse and image-rich data. This is the most common method implemented by tart card researchers but it does not work sufficiently because the cards are not easy to compartmentalise, they defy categorisation, much like individual sex workers depicted.¹²¹ Therefore, existing research is unsatisfactory, as quoted by criminologist Ronnie Lippens' "to put this somewhat cheekily: if, as a criminologist, you want to be ahead of the game of social and interpretation, maybe you want to become an art historian or an art theorist first?"¹²²

I argue that the foundations of visual cultural enquiry are absent from current tart card literature which is a vital element in understanding their socio-historical context. My methodology stems from an intersectional feminist lens that situates the male gaze in context to the visual tropes associated with sex work. The binary

¹²⁰ Alison Barnes, 'Geo/Graphic: Newsagents' Windows', *Geo/Graphic* (blog), 28 June 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307141422/https://geo-graphic.blogspot.com/2010/04/newsagents-windows.html>.

¹²¹ Brian Salter, *Tart Cards of England: Complete Collection* (Philippines: Simbacom.com, 2021).

¹²² Ronnie Lippens, 'Using Visual Methods in Criminological Research', in *Doing Criminological Research*, ed. Pamela Davies and Peter Francis, Third edition. (London (UK): SAGE, 2018). p.444

construct of the victimised or glamourised sex workers' visual identity has been investigated through stigma frameworks outlined in sociological research, however, this thesis uses sex work ephemera as a primary source to claim that a more nuanced story of sex work culture from the 1990s can be told from the literature alone.¹²³ Despite established research on sex work and stigma, the 'iconic' tart cards of 1990s London remain academically unexplored in relation to these social conventions.¹²⁴ The language and conventional modes of communication via the tart cards reveal hidden social histories and problematic views of sex workers in the 1990s that also speak to broader, contemporary feminist discourses. Analysing the visual elements and symbolic language of tart cards involves specialised methodologies such as critical visual analysis and feminist theory. These approaches require expertise in interpreting visual culture and understanding the power dynamics and discourses surrounding sex work. Capturing the intersectional aspects of sex workers' identities and experiences through ephemera requires a nuanced approach that considers factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status. The study is informed by intersectional feminist theory that underpins the methodological framework. However, I have had to proactively reflect on my positionality as a white, British, cis-female academic address privileged and power imbalances.

To analyse the tart cards, critical visual theory was combined with feminist theory and porn studies to give a critique of the underlying power structures that

¹²³ Gail Pheterson, 'The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness', *Social Text*, no. 37 (1993): 39–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466259>.

¹²⁴ Cherry Bomb, 'London Calling: A Look at Vintage "Tart Cards" Used by English Prostitutes', *DangerousMinds*, 5 July 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20250307152552/https://dangerousminds.net/comments/london_calling_a_look_at_vintage_tart_cards_used_by_english_prostitutes.

have resulted in a misunderstanding of sex workers' lives. The research paradigm was informed by critical theories of social art history and social abjection by key scholars; Clark and Tyler.¹²⁵ The rationale for selecting these theoretical positionings in the study is that they confront power dynamics between marginalised groups. This is applicable for two reasons, firstly because sex workers are viewed as a subculture or underclass and secondly because they are also viewed in a hyper-sexualised way that is attributed to the male gaze of viewing female bodies.¹²⁶

My research addresses what is being communicated on the tart cards through a feminist positioning revealing another perspective on the language, context and socially- constructed ideas around sex work imagery and the messages that sex workers were conveying visually. Engaging with the textual information presented on tart cards in tandem with the imagery was imperative in formulating new research on sex work imagery, as it enriches enquiries into (self)representation, autonomy and power. The theoretical enquiry of feminist debates on sex work is crucial in the research paradigm because it is traditionally accepted that others have autonomy over sex workers, and this is how the sex industry has been understood in a wider context. This project seeks to redistribute power and autonomy to the research subjects themselves; sex workers, as an act of resistance, allyship and collaboration. A critical visual analysis of sex work ephemera seeks to address heteronormative modes of viewing. The perspective of a pro-sex work activist, and post-modern feminist standpoint was initially adopted, in line with my positionality, however, this

¹²⁵ T. J. Clark, 'On the Social History of Art', in *Modern Art And Modernism* (Routledge, 1982); Imogen Tyler, *Revolt Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London (UK): Zed Books Ltd., 2013).

¹²⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Language, Discourse, Society (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 14–26, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_3.

shifted markedly to a more nuanced ideology in line with contemporary debates of the sex industry.

An investigation of tart card imagery across different institutions in London was undertaken to form a critical perspective on the range of sex work imagery in circulation between 1990 and 2015. The data was collected from private and public capacities through numerous museum, collection and archival visits. The critical visual analysis of tart cards (sex work ephemera) comprised first-person data collection, this was then supplemented by engagement with academic and sex worker-led literature. Close visual analysis of the cards was informed by feminist theory, and the ephemera and sex work imagery were the primary source data to which visual critical theoretical frameworks were applied. Across various collections, the project has closely engaged with approximately 22,000 tart cards.

The extent of archival research

I have analysed sex workers' tart cards from the following sources:

Bishopsgate Institute:

- Ágnes Háy collection, approx. 10,000 items from 1992 - 1999.
- Sex Worker Cards (SWC) 2,500 items from 1990 – 2010.
- UK Leather Archives (UKLA/M93), 65 items from 1985 - 1995.

Wellcome Collection:

- Stephen Lowther collection, approx. 4,500 items from 1990 – 2016.

Private Collection:

- Jonathan Barnbrook collection, approx. 200 items from 1992 – 2000.
- Brian Salter collection, approx. 5,000 items from 1986 – 2021.

A significant strength of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of diverse archival sources, enabling a multifaceted analysis of tart cards across varied geographical locations in London and timeframes from 1990. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of sex work ephemera, transcending the limitations of single-archive research and offering a more holistic perspective on the evolution and significance of these visual artefacts in different contexts.

Ephemera

I conducted a critical visual analysis of the tart cards to discern significant visual trends and patterns, treating the objects as primary sources of information as they “mirror exactly the graphic fads and fancies of the day.”¹²⁷ At first it was difficult to date the cards due to the sheer volume of material but in time, I could begin to pinpoint undated archival material and tart cards by the numerical format of the advertised phone numbers. I have included an infographic that can be a useful tool for identifying undated archival material based on London phone numbers. The image below summarises how London telephone numbers evolved and gives an approximate timeline of how developments changed the appearance of telephone numbers. This can extend to many other interdisciplinary areas of ephemera.

¹²⁷ Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*. p.34

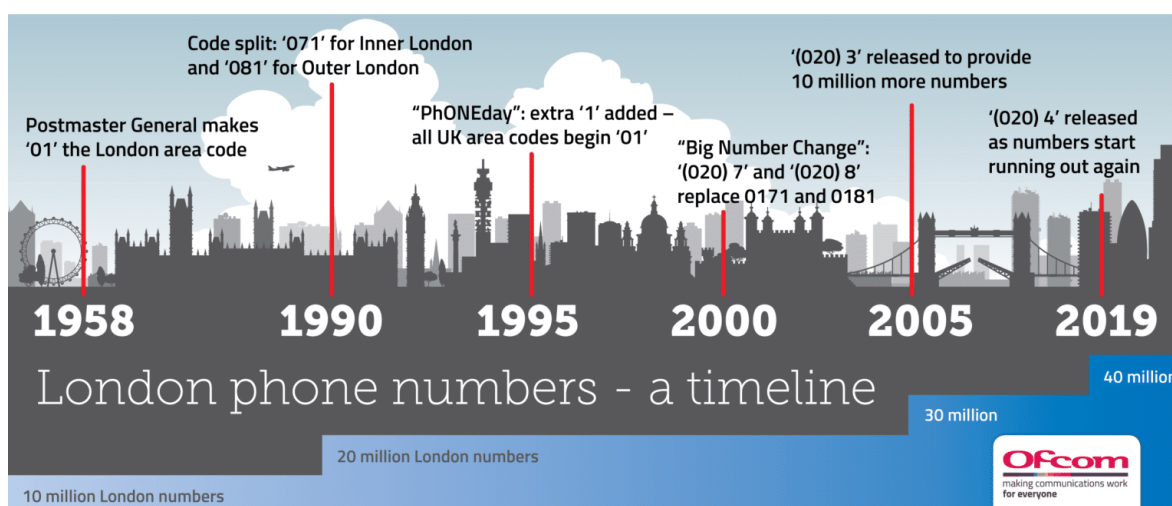


Figure 7. London phone numbers – a timeline, infographic, 2023.¹²⁸

As outlined in Chapter 4, I can trace and date undated cards effectively, due to cross-referencing phone numbers and trace patterns and trends in the cards. This is not the primary goal of the research, but helps to gain a better socio-historical timeline. The growing demand for telephone numbers in the 90s and millennium meant that there was a continually evolving shift in the construction of phone numbers, as Salter identified: “With the ongoing trends in design, content, printing technology and the phone numbers used, a card expert can date one within a year simply by looking at the visual clues.”¹²⁹

Critical visual analysis

The visual analysis of tart cards as a methodology stipulates that a wider investigation into the dynamic partnerships between sex workers and clients will further a more holistic and nuanced understanding of sex work. The tart cards as

¹²⁸ ‘A Little History of London Phone Numbers’, VIP VoIP, 19 March 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308133336/https://vipvoip.co.uk/london-phone-numbers/>.

¹²⁹ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*. p.6

primary source material are evidence of pre- and post-internet images of sex workers' visual culture. Tart cards and their production via desktop publishing software trace both London's social history and sex workers' unwavering creativity, adaptability and resilience in a changing digital industry. This study of tart cards reveals nuanced information about the sexual landscape of London in the 1990s and challenges binary representations of sex workers.

As a visual researcher, with interpersonal knowledge of the sex industry, these strengths and unique skills allow for a different engagement with the ephemera from other academic enquiry. The research uses images and objects as primary resource material to thematically observe patterns that emerged through visual analysis as identified in Prown's material culture theory.¹³⁰ The approach uses a foundation of evidence in sociological literature, which demonstrates the oversimplified, binary narratives of sex workers' identities highlighted in sex work research.¹³¹ By using sex work ephemera as a primary source, the research questions the affective production of this imagery in contemporary British culture. Archival studies of sex work and sexuality are prevalent within existing art historical literature that centres on nineteenth-century France, however, research into the recent history of British sex work in the archives is absent from art historical and visual culture studies.¹³² Although contemporary studies of sex work culture are being conducted within the archives globally, the tart cards as a medium remain to be fully investigated.¹³³

¹³⁰ Jules David Prown, 'Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method', *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1–19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1180761>. p.2

¹³¹ Sanders, 'UK Sex Work Policy'.

¹³² Andrew Israel Ross, 'Sex in the Archives: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and the Archives de La Préfecture de Police de Paris', *French Historical Studies* 40, no. 2 (1 April 2017): 267–90, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-3761619>.

¹³³ Chelsea Shi-Chao Liu, 'Fashion and Transgression: Apparel in the Private Practices Asian American Pacific Islander Sex Worker Archive', *InVisible Culture*, no. 35 (2 May 2023), <https://doi.org/10.47761/494a02f6.cc42174b>.

Scholars recognise that sex workers as marginalised groups have been eliminated from historical discourses within archival collections, and contemporary research has been undertaken to reclaim agency over sex workers' voices in British archival studies.¹³⁴ This opens the scope for a more nuanced and thorough investigation of sex work ephemera and the material produced by sex workers that may be 'hidden' within the archives. Academics note that visual material has an important role in how sex workers have been framed as fantastical characters in the media but have not investigated sex work ephemera through an art historical lens.¹³⁵ The thesis visually analyses tart cards as material objects (i.e., 'sex industry litter') because they held legal consequences which affected sex workers in real life.¹³⁶

In some capacity, sex workers' paper-based advertisements exist(ed) in various cities globally and the different types of sex workers' visual culture have been recognised in sociological fields but are yet to rouse in-depth academic interest from a critical, and visual analysis lens.¹³⁷ Sex worker's paper ephemera as a medium is designed for public consumption, but it is aimed at a certain type of person, the client. As Teela Sanders noted 'the John' has been demonised as the perpetrator of violence against women according to the Nordic model of partial criminalisation on

¹³⁴ Vicky Iglikowski-Broad, 'The National Archives - Reclaiming the Records: Sex Work and the State', text, *The National Archives Blog* (blog) (The National Archives, 16 July 2020), <https://web.archive.org/web/20240417004958/https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/reclaiming-the-records-sex-work-and-the-state/>.

¹³⁵ P. J. Starr and Sonyka Francis, "I Need \$5 Million": What Sex Workers Making Media Tell You That No One Else Can', in *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research* (London (UK): Routledge, 2019).

¹³⁶ 'Prostitutes Hail Their Friends in the Lords', *The Times*, 15 July 1992, The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0501940731/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=cd2ff264>; Nina Lopez-Jones, 'Prostitutes' Case', *The Times*, 23 July 1992, The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0503331508/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=7dfa45a7>.

¹³⁷ Alexander Kondakov, 'Spatial Justice: How the Police Craft the City by Enforcing Law on Prostitution', in *Understanding Sex for Sale: Meanings and Moralities of Sexual Commerce* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 199–214, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315107172-12>. p.205

the buyer's behalf.¹³⁸ This reading of the adverts made assumptions that the women were appealing to the 'criminal' buyer, and crucially, only told one side of the story.

Sex workers' visual culture has been historically researched in a sociological capacity, leaving sex workers to grapple with issues of (self)representation. Sex work histories are often tethered to themes of health, whereby narratives of disease, and venereal sickness have dominated the strands of academic enquiry.¹³⁹ I identified key areas in London (Stamford Hill, Streatham, Mayfair, Euston, Kings Cross, Hackney) that featured heavily in derogatory media references to tart tards.¹⁴⁰

Contemporary feminist activist movements have sought to advocate for sex workers' rights and are becoming more mainstream within museum collections, however, they are subject to a certain narrative in their mode of display. For example, the Wellcome collection contains sex work ephemera where pro-sex work feminists like Amber Rose sought to reclaim agency over gendered slurs in their 'Slutwalk' campaign. The sensationalism of such political and social movements maintains the oversimplified ideologies of 'pro' and 'anti' sex work debates. The reductionist argument of pro and anti-sex work feminists is well-documented at the helm of sex work politics. This is also apparent when sex workers are represented in the archives, images of sex workers are acquired from emotive standpoints from such protest movements, causing the rift between pro and anti-sex work discourses.

This study is different in its aims because the visual qualities of sex work ephemera are observed as primary data. The project adopts a critical theoretical

¹³⁸ Teela Sanders, 'Moral Panic: The 'punter' as Danger', in *Paying for Pleasure: Men Who Buy Sex* (Willan, 2008). p.176

¹³⁹ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, 'Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities in Documenting the History of Sexuality', *The American Archivist* 57, no. 3 (1994): 514–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40293850>.

¹⁴⁰ Nicci Gerrard, 'Sex to Dial For', *The Observer*, 12 May 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/477820214/citation/9ACFE910668046E5PQ/4>.

research paradigm to investigate sex work ephemera through the visual analysis of tart cards, interwoven with threads of visual criminological, semiotics, and intersectional feminist perspectives. These different lenses in which the ephemera are interrogated have been selected to construct an effective methodological framework that offers an alternative rendering of sex workers' visual culture. Research within the context of the museum presents an alternative reading on the phenomenon of 'carding', shedding light on how sex workers' bodies are criminalised in the UK.

Oral History

Secondary source material, such as Wendy Rickard's research on sex work in British culture in the 1990s provided a foundation to discuss kink in the archives in Chapter 6.¹⁴¹ Rickard's study on the *Oral History of Prostitution* consists of interviews with different people operating within the sex industry, from maids, pimps, DJs, managers, and (male and female) sex workers in the UK between 1996- 1999. The audio tapes of Rickard's interviews with sex workers are held at the British Library, to obtain access to these materials, researchers are required to attend a screening appointment before they are issued with a library card. It is highly improbable that many people have accessed these recordings; firstly due to the screening process implemented by the institution, secondly, most recordings have been embargoed to protect the identity of the interviewees (due to the sensitive nature of sex work), and

¹⁴¹ Wendy Rickard, 'Been There, Seen It, Done It, I've Got the T-Shirt: British Sex Workers Reflect on Jobs, Hopes, the Future and Retirement', *Feminist Review*, no. 67 (2001): 111–32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1395535>.

thirdly, recent cyber-attacks on the British Library have impacted how archival material can be accessed.

Rickard's *Oral History of Prostitution* interviews have been recognised as archival mediums subject to unstable conservation by the *National Lottery's Unlocking Our Sound Heritage* (UOSH) campaign which identified the need to prolong the life of these recorded histories as a matter of urgency.¹⁴² The collection's longevity demonstrates a marked societal shift in the way that sex workers' histories are beginning to be understood as valuable assets to future scholarly enquiries. This denotes that in the near future, the archives may become freely accessible to the public. Currently, it is difficult to obtain this information which further raises questions about sex workers' autonomy over their own lived histories.¹⁴³ Rickard's audio research complements this visual study of sex work ephemera, as the interviews provide evidence of the reality of many sex workers who worked in this industry, as opposed to many anti-sex work feminist groups that maintain beliefs that sex work is a form of trafficking and slavery. The rationale for this project lies in the way that sex work ephemera has been interpreted, or largely ignored.

Visual criminologists have looked at images of sex work in a certain way that pertains to deviance, however, this study addresses the ephemera as objects that have impactful meaning in sex workers' social and visual histories. The thesis builds on critical research methods connecting personal problems to wider social issues. The methodological framework anchors the visual aspects of the research including perception, (mis)representation, style, design and stereotypes of sex workers. The

¹⁴² A large-scale project aimed at digitising and preserving oral histories.

¹⁴³ In a conversation with 'Leila' she asked for assistance obtaining recordings of her content from the British Library for an upcoming memoir.

study has involved a large participatory effort from contact with academics, artists, folklorists, sex workers and graphic designers to gain a well-rounded understanding of the tart cards as a social phenomenon.

Methodological and Ethical Challenges

Many challenges arose throughout my PhD journey, which can be broadly categorised into two areas: methodological and ethical. Obtaining access to sex work ephemera can be difficult due to the sensitive and 'throw-away' nature of these materials and their often informal distribution. Archival collections of tart cards are typically curated by the original collector, meaning that their personal biases in collecting the material may result in scattered or incomplete collections that come with their own challenges.

I have considered these limitations and mitigated them by communicating with collectors and sourcing as many collections as possible to cross-reference research material and build conclusive evidence. The process of collecting data from paper ephemera requires careful handling and preservation techniques, which can be resource-intensive and time-consuming. I navigated physical and digital spaces where these materials are stored, which are not always accessible. To address the challenges posed by limited archive accessibility, particularly due to the British Library's ongoing recovery from a cyber-attack, I employed strategic data acquisition methods. These included meticulous note-taking and, where permitted, photographic documentation during on-site visits. These proactive measures proved invaluable, enabling continued analysis and reference to materials that subsequently became inaccessible. This approach not only mitigated potential research disruptions but also

enhanced the robustness of the data collection process, ensuring a comprehensive foundation for the study despite unforeseen institutional constraints.

As Melissa Gira Grant critiques: “It would be a mistake to read such advertisements and other marketing as complete representations of sex workers. They are not meant to convey life off the clock.”¹⁴⁴ In light of this point, I acknowledge that the tart cards are a singular facet of an individual's representation that offers a glimpse of their occupation. In defence, my research is not about sex workers' artwork and creative personal endeavours but about what we can learn from the images produced by sex workers in their professional capacities. I address this directly in Chapter 5. My position as a researcher with a background in art history allows me to observe the lack of visual inquiry into sex work ephemera as a research subject. By looking at and engaging with the imagery made by sex workers, a different reading of sex workers' self-representation can be addressed in future feminist discourses.

Limitations

The inability to contact and secure more first-hand- raw data from sex workers who worked directly with the ephemera (primary material) may be considered a weakness in the project. This limitation is partly due to the criminalisation of sex workers, meaning that they operate(d) under strict measures to protect their identities, further to that, the contact details on the cards are likely redundant. Due to the continued stigma associated with sex work, it can be difficult to engage openly with sex-working communities. Attempts were made to procure an interview with a sex worker

¹⁴⁴ Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*. p.21

who designed and distributed tart cards, however, correspondence was abandoned as it was not safe to pursue further.

Ensuring that the voices and experiences of sex workers are represented ethically and accurately is a significant challenge. I did not want to 'out' any sex workers and chose to work with secondary source material. The historical element of the ephemera means that most of the telephone numbers and contact information included in the advertisements are obsolete which protects the anonymity of the sex workers depicted because they are at no significant risk of being identified, 'outed', or harassed. Protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of sex workers was crucial to avoid potential harm or legal repercussions. I have liaised with sex workers but have not exclusively interviewed them, it is not necessary for the scope of the research because it is a visual analysis of sex work ephemera with the primary focus on the self-representation and imagery used by sex workers.

Thesis Structure

The thesis has seven chapters, five of which discuss research findings and outcomes. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive literature review of the academic and substantive existing publications on the phenomena of tart cards. It is crucial to add the historic examples of literature around sex work to contextualise the argument. Therefore, a consolidated analysis of feminist literature around sex work debates, history and culture is explored within the review paying close attention to academic and sex worker-led literature. The literature review establishes the sex workers' body as the marginalised body, to give evidence of sex workers' status. This further contextualises how sex workers have been perceived, rather than given autonomy

over their imagery and bodily representation. This lays the groundwork for the rest of the investigation and situates the reader with problematic histories and discourses towards sex workers.

Chapter 3: *Criminalisation and the Policing of Sex Work* situates the existing ideas of sex workers as demonised and marginalised bodies, providing evidence from archival documents such as newspaper articles. Using cultural and visual criminological methodologies I analyse how tart cards are linked to wider issues of sex workers' visual representation. Theories of social stigma and disgust are explored to further contextualise how prevalent mainstream visual stereotypes of sex workers have been informed. I argue that sex workers have been viewed in an oversimplified way from an outsider's perspective so I am using documentation from councillors, police and policymakers, as well as media reports. These show how sex workers have been framed as criminalised bodies. I then propose a different angle of interpreting the cards from a sex worker's perspective.

In Chapter 4, I explore the *Evolution of Tart Cards* through a chronological visual analysis to show how sex workers adapted their marketing strategies. This will trace developments in technology, home desktop publishing and social history. The critical visual analysis of technological changes in tart card production shows how sex workers had more opportunities for agency in their self-representation. An in-depth discussion on pornography and obscenity debates provides the theoretical backdrop for this enquiry.

Most art historical readings of images of sex workers are situated in nineteenth-century discourse because these are typically the only images that we have of sex work in an art historical capacity. The relationships between figures in the brothel are

often speculated in their closeness, their proximity, and their nakedness.¹⁴⁵ Art historians have tried to make sense of the visual representations of sex workers, but it is important to note that these images have been created from an outsider's perspective. They are designed from the male gaze and they are imbued with fantasy. I will try to move away from such emotionally charged and repetitive enquiry, however, my personal experience within the industry means that I have an additional layer of knowledge that goes beyond pure visual analysis. In alignment with social art historians Clark and Elsner, I engage with the image to unearth hidden nuances in the everyday realities of sex workers' lives.¹⁴⁶

Chapter 5 takes the form of a case study, *Marble Arch Kitty*, to provide evidence of sex workers' autonomous decision-making in their self-imagery. This evidence counters arguments built in the previous two chapters by offering an alternative reading of the tart cards. The theoretical enquiries roused by porn studies scholars such as Linda Williams and Kelly Dennis have aided my examination of feminist debates on censorship issues and the representation of sex workers.¹⁴⁷ I researched the visual analysis of centrefold porn magazines because these are the resources that sex workers had access to when curating and designing their image on tart cards. These considerations also have wider implications that can be explored through visual culture and porn studies.

¹⁴⁵ Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women* (UK: Thames & Hudson, 1999). p.176; Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (London (UK): Yale University Press, 1991); Mary Hunter, 'The Waiting Time of Prostitution: Gynaecology and Temporality in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's Rue Des Moulins, 1894', *Art History* 42, no. 1 (2019): 68–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12414>.

¹⁴⁶ Jaś Elsner, 'Art History as Ekphrasis', *Art History* 33, no. 1 (2010): 10–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00720.x>; Clark, 'On the Social History of Art'.

¹⁴⁷ Linda Williams, 'Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction', in *Porn Studies* (Duke University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131ffn.4>; Kelly Dennis, *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2009).

Chapter 6 addresses *Intersectional Feminist Perspectives* extending the scope of the research by offering a feminist approach to understanding sex work ephemera, subverting themes of misogyny and race in sex work imagery. This enquiry extended to queer and trans representation, followed by an investigation into kink subcultures. An intersectional feminist framework underpins the theoretical framework of the chapter. I visually analyse a selection of images to argue that sex workers used their marked difference, whether that was ethnicity, sexuality, or niche services to take ownership of their representation as shown in their tart cards as evidence.

Tart cards have been situated in a hegemonic feminist lens, meaning that second-wave feminism, traditionally understood as 'white' feminism has been the dominant tool in understanding the cards as a social phenomenon.¹⁴⁸ This exacerbates ideologies of victimhood toward 'less-fortunate' women, where white middle-class feminists have sought to rescue victims of trafficking.¹⁴⁹ Themes of oppression and autonomy drive the debates on the 'sex work as work' model which has been deeply contested by some radical feminists.¹⁵⁰ Marxist feminist frameworks provide counterarguments when discussing migrant sex workers, race and representation. The methodology incorporates post-colonial feminist activisms and theory to analyse racially stereotyped images of sex workers in the UK, providing alternative readings of sex workers' visual culture. Tart cards have been researched in traditional gender-conforming, heteropatriarchal contexts, which have contributed to the oversimplification of viewing sex work ephemera in binary ways.¹⁵¹ Queer

¹⁴⁸ Jo Doezeema, 'Ouch!: Western Feminists' "Wounded Attachment" to the "Third World Prostitute"', *Feminist Review*, no. 67 (2001): 16–38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1395529>.

¹⁴⁹ Carolyn Zerbe Enns, Lillian Comas Díaz, and Thema Bryant-Davis, 'Transnational Feminist Theory and Practice: An Introduction', *Women & Therapy* 44, no. 1–2 (3 April 2021): 11–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2020.1774997>.p.18

¹⁵⁰ Gerassi, 'A Heated Debate'. p.3

¹⁵¹ Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*.

theory and Trans exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) perspectives are also implemented to discuss the representation of gender-diverse sex workers to provide a different reading of the cards outside of heteronormative methodologies.¹⁵²

Building on pro-sex work feminist theory, such as Gail Pheterson's literature on the congress of whores, whorephobia and whore stigma undergirds the methodological framework and situates the ephemera in context to historical social advocacy and resistance movements, which this thesis draws on as an act of allyship and activism.¹⁵³

In Chapter 7, the findings from the research are synthesised in the conclusion. The discussion revealed that the visual analysis of tart cards finds hidden nuances in the representation of sex workers, thus illuminating themes of agency which are absent from current literature. This structure combines art historical analysis of tart cards with visual and cultural criminological perspectives and feminist theoretical frameworks to deconstruct objectifying narratives and centre sex workers' experiences and agency. These chapters build my argument for locating agency in the visual representation of sex workers' advertisements and imagery by challenging socially contrived ideas of sex workers.

The following chapter covers a comprehensive literature review of existing knowledge of tart cards, sex workers' social histories, ephemera and archival studies to situate my research contribution.

¹⁵² Lua da Mota Stabile, 'Sex Work Abolitionism and Hegemonic Feminisms: Implications for Gender-Diverse Sex Workers and Migrants from Brazil', *The Sociological Review (Keele)* 68, no. 4 (2020): 852–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120934710>.

¹⁵³ Pheterson, 'The Whore Stigma'.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction: Sex Industry Research

This literature review of publications focuses on UK perspectives in keeping with the scope of my research objectives. Key scholars in UK sex industry research are Teela Sanders (criminology), Maggie O'Neill (criminology), Raven Bowen (sociology), Jane Scoular (law), Rosie Campbell (politics), and Mary Laing (sociology).¹⁵⁴ I am aware that an extensive global catalogue of sex industry research exists in many multidisciplinary fields; I am, however, not addressing cultural or societal worldwide perspectives in the study. International publications have informed the basis of my research interests over the years and inevitably have served as contextual, background research in the study. The scope of the thesis is centred on the phenomenon of tart card production in London and therefore, the literature reflects these parameters set in place.

The breadth of contemporary sex industry research is becoming more interdisciplinary, as researchers seek to include sex workers' perspectives at the forefront of ethical research practices.¹⁵⁵ Current research calls for a more collaborative approach to acquiring data, including arts-based strategies, yet the fundamental enquiries remain tethered to sociological, criminological, and legal

¹⁵⁴ Sanders, Brents, and Wakefield, *Paying for Sex in a Digital Age*; Maggie O'Neill, 'Crime, Culture and Visual Methodologies: Ethno-Mimesis as Performative Praxis', in *Cultural Criminology Unleashed*, ed. Jeff Ferrell et al. (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 219–29, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=220292>; Raven Bowen, ed., "Don't Judge Us as Different from You", in *Work, Money and Duality: Trading Sex as a Side Hustle* (UK: Bristol University Press, 2021), 145–56, <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447358831.009>; Sanders et al., *Internet Sex Work*; Rosie Campbell, 'Not Getting Away with It: Linking Sex Work and Hate Crime in Merseyside', in *Responding to Hate Crime: The Case for Connecting Policy and Research*, ed. Chakraborti Neil and Garland Jon (Bristol UK: Policy Press, 2014); Mary Laing and Teela Sanders, eds., *Policing the Sex Industry: Protection, Paternalism and Politics* (London (UK): Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315196893>.

¹⁵⁵ Helen Hester and Zahra Stardust, 'Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary: On Abolitionism, Careerism, and Respectability', in *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, ed. Jennifer Cooke, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 69–82, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108599504.006>.

frameworks.¹⁵⁶ Recent publications on sex industry research include a multitude of co-editors and authors who engage with sex workers, activists, organisations, allies and independent researchers opening more scope for creative and arts-based research methodologies.¹⁵⁷ This progression in sex industry research highlights a trend in more intersectional methodological frameworks that seek to diminish the typical power dynamics between researcher and research subject.¹⁵⁸ Though sex industry research is an ever-evolving, expansive and diversely rich field, there are gaps in the literature that require attention from a visual cultural and social art historical perspective.

In existing research outputs such as Phil Hubbard's work, the tart cards have been researched via cultural geographical methodologies.¹⁵⁹ Many others have tried to investigate tart cards through similar methodologies that bound them in a geographical context.¹⁶⁰ I argue that these investigations are not rigorous enough, the results are inadequate and do not reveal any new knowledges of sex workers' experience, nor do they locate agency in the images. This is an interesting approach but not the focus of this project. My thesis is concerned with a more nuanced exploration of sex workers in London and is not geographically specific. In my research, I find the revelations in the archival evidence that explain how tart cards were dispersed within other contexts of everyday life more substantial than gathering

¹⁵⁶ Angelika Strohmayer and Janis Meissner, *The Red Umbrella March: Crafting a Living Activist Archive*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15889.74086>.

¹⁵⁷ Waring and Redman, 'Visual Violence'; *The Laws That Sex Workers Really Want*; Sanders et al., *Internet Sex Work*; Molly Smith, 'Sex Worker Rights and Abolition', *Northern Police Monitoring Project Magazine*, 14 August 2020, <https://www.flipsnack.com/npmp2020/northern-police-monitoring-project-magazine-2020.html>; Pitcher, 'Intimate Labour and the State'.

¹⁵⁸ Susan Dewey, Isabel Crowhurst, and Chimaraoke Izugbara, 'Sex Industry Research: Key Theories, Methods, and Challenges', in *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research* (London (UK): Routledge, 2019). p.18

¹⁵⁹ Hubbard, 'Maintaining Family Values?'

¹⁶⁰ Barnes, 'Geo/Graphic'.

data based on location. It was not important to 'group' sex workers' services within a specific area code, as this is not as interesting or useful in exploring nuance, something that I identified as missing within the current literature.

The thesis situates itself within feminist debates around sex work to further understand the phenomenon of 'carding' in British history. Over time, tart cards were seen as offensive and degrading towards women, however, they became culturally significant pieces of British history and were highly collectable, resulting in the form of 'accidental art'.¹⁶¹ The tart cards remain understudied and are part of a wider social problem that ignores the nuances of sex workers' lived realities.

The discourse around sex workers' visual representation is an emerging and relevant topic in sex work research that is developing in sociological and activist studies.¹⁶² Camille Waring's research into sex workers' self-portraits is another area in digital visual culture that scholars are investigating.¹⁶³ Jones identified how advances in technology opened other creative outlets for sex workers to exist and how these online spaces allowed people to reclaim agency over their bodies.¹⁶⁴ Teela Sanders gives artistic merit to the pioneering 'camgirls' of the 1990s, relaying that camming "is an artistic practice, a form of performance, self-portraiture and production of the self, which accentuates issues of surveillance, community, the merging of domestic and public spaces, intimacy, self-image and pornography."¹⁶⁵ Though these articles are highly centred around the image and ownership of sex work, there is little research into what these images are, how they are produced and

¹⁶¹ Berlin, *Tart Art*. p.11

¹⁶² Kaitlynn Mendes et al., 'Commentary and Criticism', *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 1 (1 March 2010): 99–116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770903457469>; Waring and Redman, 'Visual Violence'.

¹⁶³ Camille Waring, 'Feminist Art Activisms and Activisms (Chapter 16) - Visual Activism and Marginalised Communities (Women Full Service Sex Workers) in Online Spaces.', 2020, 199.

¹⁶⁴ Jones, *Camming*. p.108

¹⁶⁵ Sanders, Brents, and Wakefield, *Paying for Sex in a Digital Age*. p.163

for what purpose. My research acts as a precursor to the investigation of digital sex workers' imagery and advertising strategies.

I prove that the approaches to understanding the ephemera exist in binary frameworks that are not representative of sex workers' histories. In British law, sex work is not illegal but sex workers operate in dangerous ways imposed by policymakers who are removed from and lack first-hand experience within the industry and are often detached from sex working communities.¹⁶⁶ As a result, sex workers are highly stigmatised and criminalised because they have been researched and comprehended in binary frameworks that do not address the nuance in the lived realities of sex workers' experiences.¹⁶⁷ Methodologically speaking, sex work research has been conducted with an overarching emphasis on qualitative research methods within sociological and criminological means of acquiring data. However, the plethora of existing sex work literature teases out problematic interdisciplinary discourses that require further scholarly attention with a critical visual analytical lens.¹⁶⁸

Prominent feminist literature written by Mac and Smith in 2018 proposed researching the sex industry in social justice frameworks that give agency to sex workers, yet to date, there are few methodological academic underpinnings to address sex workers' social histories and justice from an art historical perspective. "Sometimes people who support sex workers' rights attempt to show their support by

¹⁶⁶ Dilara Yarbrough, "Nothing About Us Without Us": Reading Protests against Oppressive Knowledge Production as Guidelines for Solidarity Research', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 49, no. 1 (1 February 2020): 58–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241619857134>. p.62

¹⁶⁷ Samantha Majic and Carisa R. Showden, 'Redesigning the Study of Sex Work: A Case for Intersectionality and Reflexivity', in *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research* (London (UK): Routledge, 2019). p.45

¹⁶⁸ Emily Cooper, Ian R. Cook, and Charlotte Bilby, 'Sex Work, Sensory Urbanism and Visual Criminology: Exploring the Role of the Senses in Shaping Residential Perceptions of Brothels in Blackpool', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 3 (2018): 373–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12581>.

arguing that the sex industry is not actually a site of sexism and misogyny – an argument that is, in our view, misplaced. The sex industry is both sexist and misogynist.”¹⁶⁹ This sentiment establishes contemporary sex work research discourses that have moved beyond the binary framing of ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ sex work feminists, calling for more nuanced methodologies that address the complexities within the industry. I propose that critical visual analysis of sex work ephemera situates problematic debates within feminist discourses needed to address how the agency of sex workers still has a long way to go. My visual methodology will help bring an alternative and broader to sex industry research because it looks at multifaceted perspectives from within the archives. The archive as the primary research tool provides evidence of the stigmatising narratives that feminists were outlining ten years ago, for example in Melissa Gira Grant’s, *Playing the Whore*, (2014), demonstrating that there is still a great deal of research to be done with alternative and visual culture methodologies to understand sex workers’ social history.¹⁷⁰ This builds on decriminalisation debates implemented by pro-sex work feminists that were established in the literature over twenty years ago.¹⁷¹

Literary scholars have theorised that sex workers are portrayed a certain way in popular culture, stating that: “prostitutes are both ‘animals’ and ‘Magdalens’; both subhuman and sacred” which feeds into the polarising visual characteristics that represent sex workers’ bodies.¹⁷² There is a sufficient void in contemporary visual

¹⁶⁹ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights*. p.11

¹⁷⁰ Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*.

¹⁷¹ Jacqueline Comte, ‘Decriminalization of Sex Work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research’, *Sexuality & Culture* 18, no. 1 (March 2014): 196–217, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-013-9174-5>.

¹⁷² Clive Bloom, *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996). p.175

culture studies that needs to address sex workers' nuanced realities and lived histories which is where my research contribution sits.

Literature review structure

The review has been formulated into three main sections; covering substantive, theoretical and methodological enquiries to undergird the project and define knowledge gaps in the current literature. I address the existing and current research regarding the primary topic of the tart cards. This expands to the wider research area of sex work through an exploration of feminist literature. Lastly, an investigation into art historical, visual culture and archival studies situates my research contribution and outlines my methodological frameworks.

A comprehensive study was undertaken of the existing literature on tart cards as a phenomenon in order to gather all the information on the material. Resources directly linked to tart cards are evidenced first and a review of Archer's academic literature takes precedence followed by other miscellaneous texts that inform broader knowledge of tart cards.¹⁷³ These publications are analysed chronologically from the most recent then ascending.

As the study of tart cards is an emerging research area, there is a limited pool of material on the theoretical frameworks for undertaking this investigation. Dr Camille Waring's photographic and auto-ethnographical approach, or whoretography is the closest existing framework to the methodology that I am undertaking.¹⁷⁴ Waring also

¹⁷³ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*.

¹⁷⁴ Camille Waring, 'Whoretography – The Sex Worker As Image-Maker: A Critical Analysis of Sex Workers' Self-Representation in Online Public Spaces' (doctoral, University of Westminster, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.34737/w4ww5>.

explores themes of archival research but it differs because she consults a digital archive which has an international scope.¹⁷⁵ For this reason, I supplement these with theoretical enquiries into other areas of sex work research. The literature spans disciplines in art history, visual culture, sexuality and porn studies, archival and curatorial theory, and sociological and visual criminological studies. Firstly, literature based on sex workers' lived experience and self-image has been investigated to situate themes of autonomy.

Secondly, I address feminist theoretical frameworks around the sex industry more generally to build my argument, demonstrating that reductionist 'pro' sex work feminist literature (Gayle Rubin) and 'anti' sex work feminist debates (Andrea Dworkin) inform the wider cultural narratives around the sex industry.¹⁷⁶

The concept of using critical visual analysis to acquire knowledge from sex work ephemera is an emerging technique, meaning that there are not many examples of this methodological framework to reference in the literature. Therefore, close engagement with existing visual methodologies in social art history and visual culture studies has been implemented to enrich the study. I analyse methodological strands of social art historical and visual cultural enquiries, by prominent scholars; Jules Prown, Nicholas Mirzoeff, William J.T. Mitchell, Jaś Elsner and Timothy J. Clark.¹⁷⁷ This structure thoroughly examines the current literature in substantive, theoretical and methodological frameworks that guide the research.

¹⁷⁵ Waring and Redman, 'Visual Violence'.

¹⁷⁶ Gayle S. Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in *Culture, Society And Sexuality* (Routledge, 1998); Andrea Dworkin, 'Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality', in *Applications Of Feminist Legal Theory*, ed. D. Kelly Weisberg (Temple University Press, 1996), 28–36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs8md.5>.

¹⁷⁷ Prown, 'Mind in Matter'; Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); W. J.T. Mitchell, 'There Are No Visual Media', *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 2 (1 August 2005): 257–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412905054673>; Elsner, 'Art History as Ekphrasis'; Clark, 'On the Social History of Art'.

Tart Cards

I am discussing the body of tart card publications to identify knowledge gaps in the existing literature. To date, just two journal articles have been published.¹⁷⁸ In total, I have identified eight publications on tart cards, including *London Calling: Tart Cards*, (2023), *Tart Cards, London 1990–1991*, (2023), *KFAXXX Calling Cards From London*, (2021), *Tart Cards of England* (2021), *Tart Art*, (2018), *Tart Cards*, (2003), *Vice Art*, (1993), and *X- Directory*, (1993).¹⁷⁹

All of the existing literature reproduces images of tart cards; this is a strength of the publications as the ephemera have been replicated to preserve their history. It also highlights the complexities and potential limitations of tart card literature; the publications posit tart card knowledge in a singular framework corresponding to each author's viewpoint of the ephemera and their beliefs about the sex industry. In my view, the writers tend to oversimplify existing stereotyped narratives of sex workers, and the tart card literature reflects these biases.

My research closely engages with these eight pieces of primary material; additional insights into the tart card phenomenon and its production are supported by other relevant publications.¹⁸⁰ Tart card literature extends beyond books and journal papers, into videos, the internet, and social media which I have investigated to gain a more holistic understanding of how tart card knowledge has been shared. There are

¹⁷⁸ Ágnes Háy, 'Punish me! I was bad! Advertisements of prostitutes in London phone booths / Büntess meg! Rossz voltam! Prostituáltak hirdetései a londoni telefonfülkékben', *Café Babel* 7, no. 4 (1997): 101–14; Caroline Archer, 'Fetish, Rubber, Spanking & Schoolgirls', *Print* 58, no. 1 (February 2004): 104–7, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/231078837/abstract/CF18982F250C44EAPQ/1>.

¹⁷⁹ Tracey Thorne, *London Calling: Tart Cards* (UK, 2023); Francesca Bianchi, *Tart Cards, London 1990–1991* (Italy: Union Editions, 2023); Jean- Louis Huhta, *KFAXXX - Calling Cards From London* (Klasse Wrecks, 2021); Salter, *Tart Cards of England*; Berlin, *Tart Art*; Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*; Jewell, *Vice Art*; *The X Directory: Kink Cards from 1984- 1994* (London (UK): Pi34, 1993).

¹⁸⁰ Kate Lister, *Harlots, Whores & Hackabouts: A History of Sex For Sale* (London (UK): Thames & Hudson, 2021). p.243

numerous informal articles on tart cards, mostly in blog and vlog formats available on the internet from amateur writers and collectors of the ephemera, this demonstrates the breadth of interest in the cards as a social phenomenon. The cards are a niche subject, yet they have received interest from academics, journalists and independent researchers alike. The problem is that they are written from a singular viewpoint from mainly from the collector themselves, this is problematic because the research is positioned from the collector's perspective, not the sex worker. The extensive accounts from writers' personal accounts with the tart cards demonstrate little attention has been paid to the people responsible for making and distributing the ephemera. This is where my research contribution sits in the wider existing literature on sex work.

Academia

Dr Caroline Archer published *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art* in 2003, (a subsequent journal article based on the same data set was published the following year) which, to date, remains the sole academic source in a limited pool of literature.¹⁸¹ In conversation, Archer modestly dismissed the book's prowess as an academic resource.¹⁸² This is, however, the only existing example of scholarly enquiry into the design of the tart cards, therefore, I argue that it is an important piece of research. This is exceptional for two reasons. Firstly, it shows how little academic interest has been roused by sex industry ephemera, and it also demonstrates how sex work research is typically undertaken, that is, from an

¹⁸¹ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*; Archer, 'Fetish, Rubber, Spanking & Schoolgirls'.

¹⁸² Via Zoom call on 30/08/2023, 12:30 GMT, approx. 45mins duration.

outsider's perspective. I will discuss why this is problematic when exploring the existing literature on feminist theory and sex work.

Tart Cards features interviews with sex workers and clients giving an insight into the production of these items in the 1990s through a typographical lens of visual communication.¹⁸³ Archer's research methods included collecting empirical data from sex workers in London which is invaluable because it provided the foundation of research into tart cards as a social phenomenon, covering much of the same imagery I have studied in the archives.

Archer's qualitative research of sex workers operating in London brothels in the 1990s found that individuals were responsible for crafting their tart cards and creating montages while waiting for clients.¹⁸⁴ This situates sex workers as image makers and contextualised my argument by suggesting that such events occurred in real life, meaning that narratives of sex workers as artists existed, counter to standard sociological, historical, and legal lens accounts. The cards have not been researched attentively, as they currently exist in a dialogue that renders them in an artefactual history in binary sociological and typographical conversations. This context provides the basis of the project's argument that investigates how sex workers were responsible for making these objects, how they made them and why these considerations are so important for future discourses in sex work research, social art history and feminism.

The findings from the literature demonstrate that tart card ephemera gained some attention from researchers with regard to its aesthetic qualities, however, these publications are over twenty years old and a new enquiry into the ephemera is

¹⁸³ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*.

¹⁸⁴ Archer. p.79

required to contextualise this original research. My research contribution can breathe fresh life into these initial avenues of enquiry.

Photobooks

I discovered that coffee-table-style books are the most common type of publication in the existing tart card literature. These are not academic sources, but they contextualise some of the problematic ways in which sex work and tart cards have been understood in a wider societal capacity. I argue that the visual representation of sex workers and tart cards has been perpetuated in bifurcated ways that either glorify or demonise the sex industry. The engagement with these photo- books will prove or disprove my hypothesis because they are the medium in which these narratives and visual representations are upheld. To do this, I analyse each book in order of publication date, starting with the most recent, to demonstrate how tart cards have been discussed in broader discourses.

Artist Tracey Thorne published a photographic zine of tart cards located in London phone boxes from 2021.¹⁸⁵ The photography series was undertaken during COVID-19 times amidst quarantine restrictions and social distancing measures. The photographs omit nostalgia and reflect the apocalyptic atmosphere of London's empty streets during this time. The images depict the remnants of cards left in the phone boxes as they were at the end of their life- span, it evokes sadness because it reflects a point in history when sex workers were struggling to navigate negative public perceptions of cleanliness.¹⁸⁶ This was combined with the burden of Covid

¹⁸⁵ Thorne, *London Calling: Tart Cards*.

¹⁸⁶ Ben Moore, 'Women Turn to Street Sex Work Because of Covid', BBC News, 10 June 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200611041016/https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-hampshire-52937603/coronavirus-sex-workers-at-greater-risk-of-assault>.

social distancing rules, which bred accusations of survival sex due to sex workers' lack of protection from the government's furlough scheme, they had no financial security measures set in place as other industry workers.

The images in this series depict sex workers' tart cards as a dying fad, yet sex workers were still operating and advertising in different ways, mostly promoting themselves through digital means where possible. This example of tart card imagery is symptomatic of trends in the body of existing photobooks, where the ephemera is used in a specific way to relay an oversimplified narrative of sex work.



Figure 8. “Tart Cards, London 1990–1991” book launch, promotional photograph.¹⁸⁷

Tart Cards, London 1990–1991, (2023) is a photobook documenting Francesca Bianchi’s private collection of tart cards.¹⁸⁸ The publication depicts how the cards still attract attention from a visual culture perspective. The book was envisaged by *Union*

¹⁸⁷ ‘Union Editions’, Social Media, Facebook, 12 December 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/unioneditions/posts/tart-cards-london-19901991collected-by-francesca-bianchihttpswwwunion-editionsit/737145241773410/>.

¹⁸⁸ Bianchi, *Tart Cards, London 1990–1991*.

Edition's publisher Giandomenico Carpentieri who saw Bianchi's collection of cards displayed in an exhibition in Rome and sought to turn the installation into a book.¹⁸⁹ In contrast to the other six publications on tart cards, this book differs because the photographs of tart cards are printed in black and white to "avoid the souvenir look."¹⁹⁰ This was achieved by the desaturation of the original printed material which was presented in a sequence of greyscale images, on minimalist white backgrounds. This method of display shows how the aesthetic of sex workers' cards has been reproduced in a whitewashed and sterile way. This careful design consideration interrupts the chaotic 'anti-order' of the cards' original features that gave them their characteristic and unique style. I argue that the original aesthetic has been erased to fit the publisher's personal taste. The images have been curated and edited, showing that the cards are still being used for alternative agendas that are further removed from their original context and from the sex workers who created them in the first instance. The current literature demonstrates that the tart cards remain subject to misinformed narratives around transactional sex and labour that diminish sex workers' agency. This is why the visual analysis of tart card ephemera is vital for a more balanced investigation of sex workers' histories.

The promotional photograph for the book launch event further evidences how tart cards are framed in a certain way, they are depicted as waste. I argue that this contemporary publication upholds negative viewpoints of the sex industry because it

¹⁸⁹ Yaya Azariah Clarke, 'Union Editions Collates Sex Worker Cards from the Early 90s', accessed 25 June 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308130157/https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/union-editions-tart-cards-publication-project-100723>; La Redazione, 'Halo Halo Fest', accessed 29 November 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250321135045/https://zero.eu/en/eventi/280355-halo-halo-fest,roma/>.

¹⁹⁰ Clarke, 'Union Editions Collates Sex Worker Cards from the Early 90s'.

positions them in line with policymakers' opinions from the 1990s.¹⁹¹ The tart cards' negative connotations with environmental pollution and criminality are further discussed in the following chapter (3).

In contrast to Bianchi's minimalist black-and-white publication, the book *KFAXXX Calling Cards From London*, (2021) creates a sensory overload.¹⁹² The musician Jean-Louis Huhta's personal collection of early 1990s tart cards was reproduced and "printed on a variety of coloured paper with coloured ink that replicates the duotones of the original cards."¹⁹³ The images printed in this publication are a reproduction of the original ephemera collected by Dungeon Acid (Jean-Louis Huhta) who began collecting tart cards when visiting London. Again, the literature reveals ownership of the collector and their personal taste rather than ascribing autonomy to the sex workers in the imagery. On the other hand, it demonstrates how the cards are a wider socio-cultural part of British underground and rave cultures. The literature suggests that these sub-cultures are intertwined with working-class histories that are beginning to gain traction in broader discussions of labour and visual culture.¹⁹⁴

In *Tart Cards of England: Complete collection. Tart (Hooker) Cards of the World*, (2021), the British journalist and writer Brian Salter has categorised his collection of tart cards into volumes.¹⁹⁵ Salter's method of categorising tart cards is based on the visual analysis of overarching themes in the representation of sex workers on tart

¹⁹¹ Ian Murray, 'Number Is up for Vice Adverts in Phone Boxes', *The Times*, 6 August 1996, The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0502172227/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=49d7885d>.

¹⁹² Huhta, *KFAXXX - Calling Cards From London*.

¹⁹³ 'KFAXXX - Calling Cards From London', Le Grand Jeu, accessed 28 November 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250115153137/https://shop.legrandj.eu/products/kfxxx-calling-cards-from-london>.

¹⁹⁴ 'Hard Graft'.

¹⁹⁵ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*.

cards. From his extensive collection, the publication is set into thematic chapters or volumes based on his findings from his data. The structure of the book reflects this and each volume features a visual element about the advertised sex worker or their description on the tart cards. For instance, the first chapter or volume is titled 'Blondes', the justification for this is that Salter identified a prevalence of blondes advertised in sex workers' tart cards, a finding also verified by Archer.

This is significant because there are eighteen years between the two publications yet they both recognise that the visual trope of blonde hair is mostly associated with sex work advertising. Salter's methodological framework and findings guide his publication, therefore the second largest category he identified as 'Brunettes and Redheads' is the title of volume two. Volume three is titled 'Orientals/ Indians/ Black Girls' and volume four is 'Text/ Trans/ Lesbians/ Domination/ Schoolgirls'. The volumes are curated in this way because the collector and author tried to make sense of the cards, and presented his findings in terms of common trends and themes. This sequential ordering appears to make sense of the ephemera, but this strategy is inadequate and reduces the cards to unreliable data. The weakness in the statistical ordering of the data is more obvious in volumes 3 and 4, where the methodology unravels in the melding of miscellaneous and ambiguous categories. For example, volume 3 carries a diverse collection of images of non-Caucasian sex workers; the racial profiling of the tart cards has been handled in a reductive way. Volume 4 attempts to merge broad social concepts such as sexual preference and roleplay services with the formal qualities of tart card design. Cards with text only are grouped with queer and fetish communities. This vague, miscellaneous pairing 'sweeps' together the seemingly 'uncategorisable' or interconnected, overlapping themes in textual and visual information on tart cards, consequently failing to explore

the nuance in text-based ephemera, which for me is an avenue for further academic enquiry. As an art historian, this raises more questions about the visual content of tart cards and what histories can be acquired from the ephemera.

Brian Salter's *Tart (Hooker) Cards of the World* includes two volumes of ephemera from Macau and Beijing. Though the e-book is another example of a private collection turned publication, this literature is different because it sought to locate the identities of the models on the tart cards. It also differs because of the expansive timeline, Salter's collection includes examples from the 1990s to the millennium, covering the most expansive timeline of all the current literature.

From this collection, he identified many sex workers, actors, models and celebrities depicted on the cards, which also highlights the emerging trends in fashion and aesthetics. This is another possible avenue for future researchers to use visual culture strategies in the imagery of sex work advertising. Salter's focus was unique, to date no other collector of the ephemera has undertaken efforts to locate autonomy in the images of sex work ephemera. Brian Salter's investigation was the only publication to seek the agency of the sex workers depicted on tart cards by conducting research into verifying their identity.¹⁹⁶ This methodology has its' limitations, for example, Salter could not identify all of the sex workers in the images, these results favoured the images of celebrity status, meaning that the book details the accounts of models, actresses and well-established porn stars. This also highlights another problem as the investigation bypasses all of the 'other' sex workers, those who were not famous and neglects their lived histories. Though impactful, the limitations of his enquiry meant that most identified models were

¹⁹⁶ Salter.

already 'out' sex workers in the industry, and 'everyday' people were not included in the study. This further entrenches binary narratives steeped in whorearchical social ordering where sex workers' labour may become glamourised.

The everyday lived experience of 'normal' sex workers was omitted from this account, instead focusing on the reproduction of photographs of models and celebrities in tart card imagery. This gap in the literature is where I situate my findings, the thesis is not concerned with 'outing' sex workers because this is a harmful practice, but it is an exploration into the everyday lived histories of sex workers. It seeks to find subtleties in sex workers' image-making processes that disrupt the oversimplified binary depictions of sex workers in the cultural imaginary.

Brian Salter's publication thematically explores his personal collection of tart cards, as others before him, namely, Patrick Jewell, (*Vice Art*) have. The reductive categorisation of tart cards does not work because the advertisements are based on a curated image of the sex worker, not their multifaceted human characteristics.¹⁹⁷ Though sex workers are a marginalised community who are frequently stereotyped, their adverts still convey a message informed by an individual, a human being with a rich and complex backstory.

Salter's 'Indian Girls' section only merited three sentences, mostly provoked by the author's sentiment that criticised the tart cards' lack of imagination or "very little creativity".¹⁹⁸ The disinterest in these cards translates into a broader field of knowledge that does not question the creative inputs of 'Indian' sex workers, yet strives to align with biased opinions on the material. Salter's methodology has its' limitations, yet these highlight the rich and varied aspects of the sex workers behind

¹⁹⁷ Jewell, *Vice Art*.

¹⁹⁸ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*. p.412

the tart cards. The cards defy categorisation, much as the human individuals in the sex-working community. The literature reflects this because it is largely a study of cross-referenced information that cannot be pinned down by data analysis alone. The visual analysis of the material is necessary to make sense of the studies already conducted within sex industry research.

In contrast to the investigative methods implemented by Salter to determine the origins of models' photographs, Chelsea-Louise Berlin's publication *Tart Art*, (2018) is a photobook that contains examples of London tart cards that she began to collect in the early to mid-1980s.¹⁹⁹ As a young art student, Berlin collected these items as visual references and her publication offers some aesthetic considerations of the cards in a broader societal context. Similarly to Dungeon Acid's approach, Berlin also has an interest in the British rave culture in the 1990s.²⁰⁰ Her other publications include photobooks of collected ephemera from club nights in the 90s that share parallel aesthetics with the tart cards.²⁰¹ *Tart Art* is 192 pages with full-colour photographs of the cards from her collection, there is a short introductory essay (from pages 6 to 18) where the artist describes their collecting process and provides a visual analysis of selected cards. The period of this collection is five years prior to the material that I am researching first-hand, however, there are many examples from this book that have been reproduced in the 1990s (and later) which I have identified within various archives. *Tart Art* demonstrates how tart cards have been investigated within an art historical framework that centres on the visual content of

¹⁹⁹ Berlin, *Tart Art*.

²⁰⁰ Chelsea Louise Berlin, 'DIY Flyering with Chelsea Louise Berlin', Museum of Youth Culture, 8 April 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307143240/https://www.museumofyouthculture.com/diy-flyering/>.

²⁰¹ Chelsea Louise Berlin, *Rave Art: Flyers, Invitations and Membership Cards from the Birth of Acid House Clubs and Raves* (London (UK): Welbeck Publishing Group, 2020).

the cards through graphic design concepts. Again this is presented through the eyes of the collector. This collection reflects the collector's nostalgia with the ephemera, which has little reference to photographic imagery on tart cards. This timeframe is synonymous with the graphic style print of tart card, which are valued for their aesthetic culture, more than the photographic cards.

An anonymous publication, *The X-Directory*, (1993) documents the author's personal collection of six hundred and one tart cards. A brief introduction is included in the book, however, the focus is on the collected ephemera from 1984 to 1994 and is printed in a format that resembles the iconic *Yellow Pages* directories that cards produced in the 1980s were associated with. The pseudonym and anonymity of the author replicate feelings of criminality associated with the tart cards. The tone of the introductory passage is threatening, warning the reader not to act an 'idiot' by dialling the phone numbers included in the reproduced images of tart cards. This warning in the literature demonstrates how sex workers have been victimised or subject to harassment, unwanted phone calls and infringements of their privacy. The literature is a document of the criminalisation and marginalisation of sex workers. On one hand, the author's message to deter phone calls may suggest that they are an ally, alternatively they are also reproducing the images from their own collection in the same vein as many other collectors. This implies that their voice is dominant over the sex workers depicted in the ephemera.

Lastly, *Vice Art*, (1993) though little more than a booklet, was the first publication that reviewed the tart cards, albeit rudimentarily, in an art historical context.²⁰²

Architect Patrick Jewell made the headlines with the literature on his two-thousand

²⁰² Jewell, *Vice Art*. p.61

tart card private collection.²⁰³ Jewell's literature draws inspiration directly from tart cards; the format of the publication adopts the distinctive features of black text on canary yellow paper, reminiscent of the early monochromatic call cards. Jewell discussed the cards in the context of high art, sharing a brief history of the cards and exploring some comparisons with artistic movements. The book is only 64 pages but makes compelling observations between early tart cards and art historical movements including Surrealism, Dadaism, and Impressionism.²⁰⁴ Though the investigation is undertaken at a purely superficial level, it began to link art historical methodologies around the aesthetic value of tart cards with more mainstream examples of 'Art'.²⁰⁵ In such a limited pool of available literature, this is the closest documentation of an art historical rendering of the tart cards at present.²⁰⁶ The literature is concerned with the aesthetic context of the ephemera, but fails to address the autonomy or artistic inputs from the sex workers themselves.

An observation

Much of the tart card literature has been produced by fans and collectors of the ephemera, the photobooks evidence this, which means that the information shared is from a collector's personal perspective of their private archive. These knowledge bases have been curated by the individual, not by the people (sex workers) who

²⁰³ Simon Midgley, 'Oldest Profession Is Drawn into the World of Art', *The Independent*, 17 November 1993, sec. News, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220708032545/http://www.independent.co.uk/news/oldest-profession-is-drawn-into-the-world-of-art-1504756.html>.

²⁰⁴ Jewell, *Vice Art*. p.15

²⁰⁵ Jewell. p.15

²⁰⁶ At the time of writing 04/2025.

created the images. This only shows one side of the story, that of the collector, and silences the sex worker as the image maker.

The gaps in the literature glaringly point out that a greater deal of research needs to be undertaken in the visual analysis of the production of sex work ephemera to ensure that a fairer and unbiased representation of sex workers' social histories is depicted accurately. An important emerging theme found in the existing literature shows that both sex workers and external parties judged the aesthetics and the imagery on tart cards. For example, the 'coffee table' style publications have been produced by private collectors responsible for deciding which ephemera 'made the cut' in their personal archives. This demonstrates unequal power balances between sex workers and the collectors because the sole collector's personal aesthetic decisions take precedence over the authentic realities of sex workers themselves.

The literature shows that there are other problematic factors to consider in the visual analysis of sex work ephemera. Close engagement with tart card publications illustrated how the tart cards have been researched in binary ways, thus influencing how people view sex workers more generally. The cards have been pictured and promoted within contexts of filth and denigration which further harms sex workers by perpetuating a victim narrative that causes violence towards sex workers.²⁰⁷ There is a moral distinction between the types of sexual services advertised which I argue, stems from the visual information on the cards. This informs the wider reading of sex workers' images as either valuable collectors' items or detritus. It fails to address the sex worker as the producer of their own image.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ 'Union Editions'.

²⁰⁸ Archer, 'Fetish, Rubber, Spanking & Schoolgirls'.

In this project, I am proposing an alternative research paradigm that moves beyond the binary codes of the glorification or demonisation of sex workers and progresses into a nuanced state of understanding the industry as a continuously evolving landscape. The literature published on the tart cards favours the aesthetic of the 'early' cards, the advertisements from the 1980s are valued more than the photographic tart cards in the mid to late 1990s. Archer's analysis of the ephemera is the most extensive, looking at cards from the 1980s to 2001 when the cards became criminalised. There is no formal, visual analysis of the cards produced after this point in contemporary literature therefore this is an area to which the thesis contributes.

Interdisciplinary approaches to tart card research

Dr Kate Lister references tart cards to illustrate wider social histories in a chronological account of the changing legislation around sex and censorship in the UK.²⁰⁹ The cards are also a visual accompaniment to arts-based qualitative research methodologies. Lister worked closely with sex worker-based charities *Basis Yorkshire* and the *National Ugly Mugs* (NUM) in a project that involved re-designing some of the iconic examples of tart cards (c.1984) to "empower" sex workers.²¹⁰ *Our Voices* sought to reclaim ownership by subverting misogynistic and sexual themes in the original cards by applying sex workers' accounts on the images to humanise them and to portray their unique sense of identity.²¹¹ The workshop and resulting publication demonstrate the potential breadth and scope of research that empowers sex workers by reclaiming power through humour and draws on the ephemera

²⁰⁹ Lister, *Harlots, Whores & Hackabouts: A History of Sex For Sale*. p.243

²¹⁰ *Our Voices*.

²¹¹ *Our Voices*.

designed and used by sex workers themselves. The tart cards as a sociological research tool also highlight the interdisciplinary value of the ephemera as a medium and show that further scholarly attention to the production of tart cards is urgently required.

I have identified emerging trends in sociological research methods that seek to use more holistic and collaborative efforts with sex workers in creative arts-based methodologies and data collection.²¹² Such approaches welcome the voices of sex workers, activists, allies and organisations, however, they do not take into account the existing objects and images of sex workers' visual culture as a focus of the enquiry. Cultural geography scholars such as Phil Hubbard engage with tart cards as a social phenomenon but focus on the wider socio-cultural impact of the ephemera and its' immediate effect on its environment through policy.²¹³ The study into the tart cards found parallels with the morality panics outlined by policymakers' concerns with sex work informed by the 1981 *Indecent Displays Act*, firmly situating tart card research in a sociohistorical context.²¹⁴ Tart cards are effective at highlighting issues in sociological accounts because they are highly visual pieces of sex workers' culture, however, there is little evidence of them being recognised to have significant value in revealing sex workers' histories.²¹⁵ Whilst these approaches seek to centre sex workers' voices, they do little to seek autonomy through visual means.

²¹² Moshoula Capous Desyllas, 'Representations of Sex Workers' Needs and Aspirations: A Case for Arts-Based Research:', *Sexualities*, 5 December 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713497214>.

²¹³ Hubbard, 'Maintaining Family Values?'

²¹⁴ R. T. H. Stone, 'Out of Sight, out of Mind? The Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981', *The Modern Law Review* 45, no. 1 (1982): 62–68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1094834>.

²¹⁵ Lister, 'Dial "S" for Sex'.

Theoretical frameworks

This section of the review addresses the important feminist theory on sex work which unpins how the sex industry is viewed in a wider context. The literature focuses on sex workers' self-representation, representation, lived experience and history. I then situate these themes in the context of feminist theory to determine the thesis' contribution to the field.

I believe the most useful investigations into sex workers' self-representation are not always rooted in academia, favouring the accounts of sex workers themselves such as independent researcher Jo Weldon's investigations into sex workers' style.²¹⁶ More sex worker-led literature and sex worker academic research are emerging, however, due to the perpetual stigma around sex work it is not always feasible for academics to 'out' themselves as sex workers. Sex worker academics are polarised by society, revealing how sex workers' stigmatised status excludes them from certain academic contexts.²¹⁷ The rise in student sex worker-based research papers highlights the gap in the literature where the two identities have been segregated in society.²¹⁸ I have closely engaged with sex worker-led literature, pro and anti sex work feminist theory and academic sex industry research to gain a well-balanced understanding of the various accounts informing current sex work discourses. There are problematic factors around power dynamics and collecting data in academia that have been voiced by sex workers' rights activists.²¹⁹ Scholars

²¹⁶ Jo Weldon, 'Whatever Happened to Class?', *Radical History Review* 2024, no. 149 (1 May 2024): 54–56, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-11027404>.

²¹⁷ Waring, 'The Prostitute and the PhD'.

²¹⁸ Ron Roberts, Amy Jones, and Teela Sanders, 'Students and Sex Work in the UK: Providers and Purchasers', *Sex Education* 13, no. 3 (1 May 2013): 349–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2012.744304>.

²¹⁹ Lime Jello, 'Why You Shouldn't Study Sex Workers', *Tits and Sass* (blog), 16 April 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240328005854/https://titsandsass.com/why-you-shouldnt-study-sex-work/>.

admit that data on sex work is unreliable and have questioned the number of sex workers that operate in the UK (online or IRL) however, the inconclusive statistics do not cause limitations for my investigation, in fact, the ambiguity of the figures drives my research.²²⁰

Despite the absence of conclusive data, images of sex workers centre on binary depictions of the urban street walker or the glamorous escort. Sociologist Desyllas writes that “the subjective experiences and voices of sex workers are seldom heard.”²²¹ It is argued that researchers’ preconceived ideas of the industry combined with unethical research methods continue to undermine and silence sex workers.²²² Stigma frameworks have also been identified in both academic and non-academic circles where the term ‘whorearchy’ is used to explain the “infighting” amongst sex workers which is dictated by class, appearance, and services offered.²²³ Maclean recognises that the visibility of street-based sex work perturbs policymakers and the default, regulatory approach is implemented to limit public exposure.²²⁴ They pertain that images encountered through various forms of media could deviate from the true, lived experiences of sex workers and may strengthen stereotypes of criminality and victimisation.²²⁵

Researchers report that categorising sex work as either indoor or outdoor creates a social hierarchy system however, Brooks-Gordon theorises that the “pyramid” of

²²⁰ Maclean, ‘Introduction. Sexwork in the UK’, pp.1127-8; Marianne Hester et al., ‘The Nature and Prevalence of Prostitution and Sex Work in England and Wales Today’, *University of Bristol*, Centre for Gender and Violence Research, October 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/842920/Prostitution_and_Sex_Work_Report.pdf. p.39

²²¹ Desyllas, ‘Representations of Sex Workers’ Needs and Aspirations’.

²²² Yarbrough, “‘Nothing About Us Without Us’”.

²²³ Knox, ‘Tearing Down the Whorearchy From the Inside’; Hester and Stardust, ‘Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary’.

²²⁴ Maclean, ‘Introduction. Sexwork in the UK’.

²²⁵ Persak and Vermeulen, *Reframing Prostitution*.

social status amongst sex workers is somewhat interrupted through online platforms.²²⁶ It is this significant technological advancement of sex workers' visual culture that began to emerge in the mid-90s that enriches the project. It is widely documented that figures calculated in sex industry research may be non-existent, compromised or simply unreliable.²²⁷ The stigmatised nature of sex work can affect data resulting in research that portrays a distorted demographic of crime.²²⁸ This is a valid concern that is prevalent within other areas of contemporary sex industry research.²²⁹ It is this speculation that makes the scope of sex work notoriously difficult to articulate.²³⁰

Richard Goodall, a British lawyer (boasting forty years of experience) authored a book on "prostitution" and directly recounts his positionality as someone who enforced legislation throughout the 1990s.²³¹ The literature is not an academic source but it does give an insight into the ideologies against sex workers through the eyes of a man who upheld policies and laws regarding the sex industry. The literature focuses on the British criminal justice system and discusses a plethora of conflated topics such as rape, AIDS, abortion, disease, violent offences against women and children, and porn, typical of Sex Work Exclusionary Radical Feminist

²²⁶ Sanders, 'UK Sex Work Policy'; Eva Klambauer, 'Policing Roulette: Sex Workers' Perception of Encounters with Police Officers in the Indoor and Outdoor Sector in England', *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 18, no. 3 (1 July 2018): 255–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895817709865>; Belinda Brooks-Gordon, *The Price of Sex: Prostitution, Policy and Society* (USA: Willan, 2006). p.96.

²²⁷ Kathleen N. Deering et al., 'A Systematic Review of the Correlates of Violence Against Sex Workers', *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 5 (May 2014): e42–54, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.301909>.

²²⁸ C. Gabrielle Salfati, Alison R. James, and Lynn Ferguson, 'Prostitute Homicides: A Descriptive Study', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 23, no. 4 (April 2008): 505–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260507312946>. p.508; Sharon Hayes, Belinda Carpenter, and Angela Dwyer, *Sex, Crime & Morality* (UK: Routledge, 2012).

²²⁹ Jones, *Camming*.

²³⁰ Hester et al., 'The Nature and Prevalence of Prostitution and Sex Work in England and Wales Today'.

²³¹ Goodall, *The Comfort of Sin*.

(SWERF) literature that merges irrelevant and stigmatising content.²³² Though Goodall admits that their work is not a scientific study this is an example of the types of literature around sex work that were published in the UK that further muddled ideas around the sex industry and human trafficking. The book is indicative of the backlash to feminist thought and sexual liberation in the 1990s. The British lawyer made comparisons between the stigmatising categorisation of sex workers in the UK and the USA, observing that:

The lower class prostitute is the English street- walker, the American hooker...She is the 'criminal' of the female class, the poor relation, the lowest of the low... The call- girl is the better type of prostitute. She is the sexual entrepreneur of the modern age...Then there is the pleasure- girl... 'hackettes', social climbers, cover- girls, models, etc.²³³

Though the insensitive study is far removed from academia, it reveals the attitudes towards sex workers in the 1990s and contextualises some of the criminalisation of working-class sex workers' movements. The literature reinforces that sex work was (and still is) a classist structure where sex workers from lower socio-economic backgrounds are feared as criminals and are deemed uncivilised or 'lesser than' in society. Goodall formed the opinion that sex workers were a 'nuisance' based on his experience of prosecuting those in the sex industry and speculated that call-girls services were "no different from those rendered by her sisters in the lower class."²³⁴ This trail of thought outlines the huge disparity in public opinion between the presumed class divisions of indoor and outdoor-based sex

²³² Dworkin, 'Against the Male Flood'.

²³³ Goodall, *The Comfort of Sin*. p.89

²³⁴ Goodall. p.15; Goodall. p.89

workers in the UK.²³⁵ Though the well-established topic of stigma within the sex industry and intersectional feminist discourse will not provide the focus of my thesis I acknowledge that stigmatising narratives are a contributing factor to the visual representation of sex workers via tart cards.

Sex workers' (self)representation

Dr Camille Waring's research on sex work and photography has opened a dialogue within visual culture and the arts.²³⁶ Waring's study on the digital self-image of sex workers combines a methodological approach that reflects her background in sex work, criminology and photography.²³⁷ Waring's research embodies a form of activism that addresses violence against sex workers, the censorship and ownership of images and surveillance within the industry.²³⁸ At present, Waring is the primary scholar researching sex workers' rights as human rights within a methodological framework of critical visual theory that addresses sex workers' image-making processes. Typically, these themes co-exist as two separate bodies in academia, with sex workers' rights and feminist theory largely belonging to sociological and criminological fields, whilst the literature on the representation of bodies is more methodologically attached to feminist art historical theory.

Waring's research centres on the contemporary study of sex workers' self-portraits within the digital sphere as a form of activism.²³⁹ My research acts as a

²³⁵ Sanders, 'UK Sex Work Policy'.

²³⁶ Waring, 'Feminist Art Activisms and Activisms (Chapter 16) - Visual Activism and Marginalised Communities (Women Full Service Sex Workers) in Online Spaces.'

²³⁷ Camille Waring, 'The Photographic Theorist', *The Photographic Theorist*, accessed 22 February 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309124023/https://www.thephotographictheorist.com/>.

²³⁸ Waring, 'The Prostitute and the PhD'; Waring, 'Feminist Art Activisms and Activisms (Chapter 16) - Visual Activism and Marginalised Communities (Women Full Service Sex Workers) in Online Spaces.'

²³⁹ Waring, 'Whoretography – The Sex Worker As Image-Maker'.

precursor to this research by investigating the intersecting identities and self-representation of sex workers in the pre-digital and early stages of the internet. The dialogue between Waring's research and this thesis represents an intersection that can benefit from further research whereby the study of sex work ephemera and its' affective nature can enrich the discussion of sex workers' rights.

Sex workers' memoirs have emerged as a distinctive literary genre, with some works gaining significant mainstream recognition.²⁴⁰ A prime example is Brooke Magnanti's *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, which was adapted into a successful television series starring the British popstar, Billie Piper.²⁴¹ These memoirs have evolved from niche publications to a recognised form of personal narrative, exploring the complexities of sex work through intimate, nuanced storytelling.²⁴² Dramatised and televised depictions of well-established and mainstream roles within the sex market, such as porn stars, dominatrices, strippers and escorts, emulate Western and North American perspectives, yet there has been little interest in the British tart card phenomenon and its role in shaping societal attitudes around the sex industry.²⁴³

Sex workers' self-expression has steered away from the phenomenon of carding, perhaps due to the negative connotations and criminalisation of the cards. The tart cards are viewed in binary frameworks that are steeped in classism and criminality, revealing the working-class elements of some sex workers' lives. Such depictions

²⁴⁰ Jenna Jameson and Neil Strauss, *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale*, Reprint edition (It Books, 2010).

²⁴¹ Brooke Magnanti, *Belle De Jour: Diary of an Unlikely Call Girl* (New York: Grand Central Pub, 2006).

²⁴² Danielle Egan, ed., *Flesh for Fantasy: Producing and Consuming Exotic Dance* (New York, NY: Seal Press, 2005).

²⁴³ Jameson and Strauss, *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*; Melissa Febos, *Whip Smart: The True Story of a Secret Life*, Reprint edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011); Sylvia Wolf and Deirdre English, *Susan Meiselas: Carnival Strippers*, 2nd Ed., Rev edition (New York: Göttingen: Steidl, 2004); *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, Drama (Artist Rights Group (ARG), ITV Productions, Silver Apples Media, 2007).

are not perceived as glamorous as other aspects of sex workers' aesthetic culture and have failed to reach an audience readily as other mainstream sex working roles that have been televised, documented and researched. In the following section, I introduce key feminist scholars' views and theoretical positionings on sex work to situate the ephemera in context to its wider socio-political frameworks.

Feminist viewpoints on the sex industry

Prominent literature from key scholars in the decriminalisation movement such as Belinda Brooks-Gordon, Teela Sanders and Pippa Grenfell inform the feminist debate on sex worker's rights.²⁴⁴ The close engagement with different feminist positions within sex industry debates situates my research contribution, highlighting the importance of a critical visual analytical methodology. The bifurcated debates on feminist viewpoints around the sex industry have been oppositional since the 1970s but are still prevalent in contemporary feminist discourses.²⁴⁵ The 1990s was a particularly contentious and polarizing period for feminist debates on the sex industry due to reductionist 'pro' and 'anti' pornography campaigns.

Feminist perspectives on sex work range from viewing the industry as a form of exploitation and violence against women to considering it a legitimate form of labour and potential empowerment. This literature review explores the key feminist

²⁴⁴ Brooks-Gordon, Morris, and Sanders, 'Harm Reduction and Decriminalization of Sex Work'; Laura Connelly and Teela Sanders, 'Disrupting the Boundaries of the Academe: Co-Creating Knowledge and Sex Work "Academic-Activism"', in *The Emerald Handbook of Feminism, Criminology and Social Change*, ed. Sandra Walklate et al., Emerald Studies in Criminology, Feminism and Social Change (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), 203–18, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78769-955-720201018>; Pippa Grenfell et al., 'Decriminalising Sex Work in the UK', *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 354 (2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26943753>.

²⁴⁵ Julie Bindel, 'Women Should Not Be for Sale', *The Critic Magazine*, 29 May 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250120090955/https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/june-2022/women-should-not-be-for-sale/>.

viewpoints on the sex industry, highlighting the arguments of both abolitionist feminists or sex worker exclusionary radical feminists (SWERFs) and those who support sex workers' rights. This part of the literature review addresses feminist theoretical positionings on the sex industry because it highlights the disparities between feminist groups that have informed the discourses around sex workers' visual representation, stereotypes and binary narratives of sex-working individuals. Researchers investigate the lack of nuance in the oversimplification of labelling sex workers' roles, in which the cultural perceptions "range from 'drug addicted street hustlers, teenage Thai girls sold by their parents to brothel owners, [to] high-priced career call girls working as independent entrepreneurs or for escort agencies and mainstream corporations'."²⁴⁶ It is recognised that these rigid categories do little to enhance research outputs, yet these nuances persist. They are acknowledged but underdeveloped.

Abolitionist Perspectives

Abolitionist feminists argue that sex work is inherently exploitative and a form of violence against women.²⁴⁷ They view prostitution as a practice that perpetuates patriarchal structural inequalities and reinforces male dominance over women, contemporary arguments persisting that women are "instruments for serving men's needs, and their needs are secondary if they register at all."²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Kara Anne Arnold and Julian Barling, 'Prostitution: An Illustration of Occupational Stress in "Dirty Work"', in *Occupational Stress in the Service Professions* (CRC Press, 2003), 261–80, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203422809-13>. p.261

²⁴⁷ Carole Pateman, 'What's Wrong with Prostitution?', in *The Sexual Contract*, 30th anniversary ed (Wiley, 2018).

²⁴⁸ Lori Watson, 'Prostitution and Sex Equality', in *Debating Sex Work*, ed. Jessica Flanigan and Lori Watson (Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190659882.003.0002>. p.29.

Anti-sex work feminists or abolitionists such as Julie Bindel have been campaigning for the partial criminalisation of the sex industry, otherwise referred to as the 'Nordic' model.²⁴⁹ Prominent figures in the anti-sex work feminist movement such as Sheila Jeffreys, Andrea Dworkin, Kathleen Barry and Catherine MacKinnon share Bindel's ideologies believing that prostitution is "systematic" violence against women.²⁵⁰ This stance demonstrates the core underpinning of the abolitionist framework, sex work cannot be viewed as neutral labour because the patriarchy has power over (female) sex workers' bodies.²⁵¹ This political and moral viewpoint has been strongly opposed by sex workers who advocate for decriminalisation and vehemently reject the 'Nordic/ Swedish model' contesting that it ignores the needs of those working in the industry and causes further harm.²⁵² The fundamental flaw in the theory relies on the heteronormative gendering and biased roles of those buying and selling sex, and the demonisation of the client has been identified as a contributing factor in sex workers' safety.²⁵³ Sex work activists such as the ECP strongly contest the regulation of the sex industry which criminalises the buyer because they argue, creates precarious and unsafe working conditions for sex workers.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ Ida Kock and Agnete Strøm, 'The Nordic Model of Sex Work: Feminist or Oppressive?' (Webinar, THINK Series, University of Essex, 16 March 2022), <https://web.archive.org/web/20220628062026/https://www.essex.ac.uk/events/2022/03/16/think-debate-the-nordic-model-feminist-or-oppressive>.

²⁵⁰ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (Routledge, 2008); Dworkin, 'Against the Male Flood'; Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (NYU Press, 1995), <https://www.jstor.org/uniessexlib.idm.oclc.org/stable/j.ctt9qg779>; Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Human Rights and Global Violence Against Women (1992)', in *Are Women Human?*, And Other International Dialogues (Harvard University Press, 2006), 28–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjnrvc6.6>. p.29; Julie Bindel, *The Pimping of Prostitution: Abolishing the Sex Work Myth*, 2nd ed. 2019 (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95947-1>. p.5

²⁵¹ Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy Symposium'.

²⁵² Brooks-Gordon, Morris, and Sanders, 'Harm Reduction and Decriminalization of Sex Work'.

²⁵³ Mosley, 'The "John"'.

²⁵⁴ 'Decriminalisation of Prostitution: The Evidence' (House of Commons: English Collective of Prostitutes, 3 November 2015),

Feminist writers have not engaged with tart cards directly but explore topics around pornography which are inextricably linked to sex workers' representation. For example, Gail Dines' anti-porn campaign relates to the visual culture of the tart card phenomenon in her theory of the 'porn culture' in the UK.²⁵⁵

Supportive Feminist Perspectives

Liberal feminists such as Gayle Rubin and Carol Queen emphasise people's right to choose sex work as a legitimate form of labour.²⁵⁶ They argue that criminalising sex work only exacerbates the dangers faced by sex workers and that decriminalisation would improve their working conditions and safety. This perspective focuses on individual autonomy and the right to self-determination. Sex-positive feminists challenge the stigma around sex work and celebrate sexual freedom. They argue that sex work can be empowering for some people as it is a reclamation of sexuality and autonomy. This perspective emphasises the importance of respecting sex workers' choices and agency. In terms of image, the tart cards remain absent from current literature as they are a niche subject, yet they inform a broader topic of representing female sexuality and promote self-ownership in sex workers' imagery.²⁵⁷

<https://web.archive.org/web/20250308150536/https://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Online-Symposium-Report.pdf>.

²⁵⁵ Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), http://archive.org/details/pornlandhowpornh0000dine_i4p7.

²⁵⁶ Rubin, 'Thinking Sex'. p.158; Carol Queen, *Real, Live, Nude Girl: Chronicles of Sex-Positive Culture* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997), <http://archive.org/details/reallivenudegirl00queen>. p.93-4

²⁵⁷ Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Indiana University Press, 1994). p.135

Intersectionality and sex worker inclusive feminist theory

Intersectional feminists highlight how race, class, and other factors shape sex workers' representation.²⁵⁸ Sex work researchers have adopted Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to locate autonomy in discussions around capitalism, bodily autonomy, choice, labour and working conditions.²⁵⁹ They call for centring marginalised voices in sex worker rights movements and argue that a one-size-fits-all approach to sex work policy fails to address the diverse realities of sex workers.²⁶⁰ This perspective advocates for nuanced and inclusive policies that consider the intersecting identities of sex workers. Studies recognise that the image and representation of sex workers is predominantly a female issue, identifying that feminine beauty standards play a large role in sex workers' advertising strategies.²⁶¹

The literature review located feminist theory in the context of sex industry research to guide the project's research question. Relevant literature was established to obtain the theoretical framing of the project by addressing how sex workers' self-representation has been researched and how this informs my study. Abolitionist and liberal feminist divides inform the dominant narratives in conducting sex industry research, meaning that the research can be biased. Many scholars are trying to combat this problem in contemporary methodologies, calling for more nuanced research strategies to provide a richer discussion of sex workers' labour

²⁵⁸ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Duke University Press Books, 2014).

²⁵⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *U. Chi. Legal F.* 1989 (1 January 1989): 139, https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/3007; Lindsay Blewett, Angela Jones, and Milo Osbourn, 'Sex Work and Disability: Introduction To The Special Issue', *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (31 October 2022), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v42i2.9121>.

²⁶⁰ Majic and Showden, 'Redesigning the Study of Sex Work'.

²⁶¹ Julieta Vartabedian, 'Bodies and Desires on the Internet: An Approach to Trans Women Sex Workers' Websites', *Sexualities*, 21 September 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717713381>. p. 234

conditions, lived histories and human rights. Though such debates are imperative to sex workers' rights, the angle of sex workers' representation through visual culture is missing from feminist discourses. The study of tart cards is a key area that my research can contribute towards developing wider feminist knowledge in sex industry scholarship.

Feminist Art Theory

Feminist art theory links to the mainstream discourses of feminist thought and theory by adding to these themes with a visual application. Not dissimilar to feminist theory, feminist art critique backed up some problematic areas of socially constructed power dynamics and imbalances by addressing heterosexual and patriarchal modes of viewing women and women's bodies.²⁶² Prominent academics in art historical feminist theory such as Griselda Pollock, Laura Mulvey, Camille Paglia, Lynda Nead, and Linda Nochlin sought to address problematic social power (im)balances within visual culture.²⁶³ The terminology of the male gaze gained traction from its preconception in visual theory and became integrated within feminist discourse, with modern scholars appropriating the concept and creating the 'whore gaze' a term coined by filmmaker and sex workers' rights advocate P.J. Starr in 2018.²⁶⁴ A 2017 study titled *Beyond the Gaze* suggests an evolution outside the original patriarchal terminology attached to the perceived notion of sex work and modes of viewing

²⁶² Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.

²⁶³ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Art's Histories* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999); Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'; Camille Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps: New Essays*; Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992); Nochlin, *Representing Women*.

²⁶⁴ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'; P. J. Starr, 'The Whore Gaze (Preliminary)', Tumblr, *Moral High Ground* (blog), 23 April 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220418164235/https://moralhighground.tumblr.com/post/173232707815/the-sex-worker-gaze>.

drawing upon themes of marginalised identity and representation in online spaces.²⁶⁵

Feminist art theory is an integral part of my thesis because it closely engages with how sex workers are viewed, how they are gendered bodies and how they are perceived in society.

Methodological frameworks

This section addresses the three main components of my methodological approach which centres on social art history, visual culture and porn studies, visual and cultural criminology, and archival studies.

Social Art History

This branch of art history coined by T. J. Clark is instrumental in my methodological approach.²⁶⁶ It centres on examining images and understanding the complex social issues and context of images within their environment. This methodological approach centres on the visual analysis of the object or image at the heart of the investigation. The fundamental underpinnings of a social art history methodology recognise that the object or image cannot be separated from its cultural context, including factors such as politics, religion, gender, race, and socioeconomic conditions. My background as an art historian means that I interpret the meanings and symbols within the visual data differently from other scholars' methodological approaches. My specific visual research methods included gathering data from tart cards and cross-referencing my findings with existing bodies of literature about tart

²⁶⁵ Sanders et al., *Internet Sex Work*.

²⁶⁶ Clark, 'On the Social History of Art'.

card production. This process of deep critical analysis allowed me to incorporate other visual elements from tart card archives including maps, drawings, photographs and documents into my research methods. The social art history approach lays the foundation for further enquiry into other visual and interdisciplinary fields that address intersectional feminist enquiries into sex work ephemera.

Sex worker rights activists recognise that sex work is an inherent communication system, however, the study of visual prompts in sex work imagery is lacking.²⁶⁷ Sex workers' "ephemeral street literature" is another channel of information sharing and requires critical analysis as documentation of sex workers' lived experience through a visual culture perspective.²⁶⁸

The literature shows that other aspects of sex workers' visual culture are gaining traction in academic interest, however, tart cards remain absent from contemporary discussions. The social art history research paradigm is best suited to obtain the most conclusive results from my study. By addressing tart card imagery in its contextual landscape, further evidence of sex workers' everyday lived experience and representation can be identified rather than using sociological methods alone.

Visual Culture and Porn Studies

The close engagement with existing literature on pornography is integral to my research because the tart cards are an extension of debates on obscenity and public decency.²⁶⁹ Key scholars such as Linda Williams, Feona Attwood and Kelly Dennis provide critical foundations to build on themes of censorship and pornography in

²⁶⁷ Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*. p.70

²⁶⁸ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.7

²⁶⁹ Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

which the cards have been situated.²⁷⁰ These works bridge the gap between visual culture and traditional modes of sex industry research, for example, Dr Feona Attwood addresses the visual representation of sex workers in the media, referring to the British TV series *Secret Life of a Call Girl* (an on-screen adaptation of the memoir/ novel by Belle de Jour).²⁷¹ Dr Matt Lodder's methodology subverts traditional, gendered modes of heteronormative sexuality by highlighting women's autonomy in pornography.²⁷² These approaches demonstrate the value of critical visual analysis in sex workers' representation, yet sex workers' autonomy in self-portrait imagery is an emerging topic within contemporary visual culture studies.²⁷³ My research contributes to these themes by investigating the context of the environment in which tart cards were produced, distributed and viewed.²⁷⁴

Obscenity debates

This segment addresses how tart cards have been placed in debates around morality and pornography by exploring feminist literature. In 1993 Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminists (SWERFs) such as Andrea Dworkin wrote [of sex workers]:

²⁷⁰ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (University of California Press, 1989); F Attwood, ed., *Mainstreaming Sex*, Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture (London (UK): I.B. Tauris, 2010), <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780755697083>; Dennis, *Art/Porn*.

²⁷¹ Mendes et al., 'Commentary and Criticism'. p.110

²⁷² Matt Lodder, 'Visual Pleasure and Gonzo Pornography: Mason's Challenge to Convention in "the Hardest of Hardcore"', *Porn Studies* 3, no. 4 (1 October 2016): 373–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1241160>.

²⁷³ Waring and Redman, 'Visual Violence'.

²⁷⁴ James Brindle, 'The New Aesthetic and Its Politics', in *You Are Here: Art after the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (London (UK): Cornerhouse ; SPACE, 2014), 20–27.

She is, of course, the ultimate anonymous woman. Men love it. While she is on her twenty-fourth false name-dolly, baby, cutie, cherry tart, whatever all the pornographers are cooking up this week as a marketing device-her namelessness says to the man, she's nobody real... she's a generic embodiment of woman. She is perceived as, treated as-and I want you to remember this, this is real-vaginal slime. She is dirty.²⁷⁵

The tart cards were an extension of how other sex workers such as porn actors were facing marginalisation from feminist groups. The ways in which sex workers advertised their services were tethered to themes of identity, or more specifically non-identity for SWERFs. Branding sex workers as 'tarts' was not only a way in which patriarchal systems could oppress and objectify women, SWERFs also took on the role of overtly gendered, feminine stereotypes to further entrench victim narratives to suit their anti-porn campaigns' agendas. In the early 1990s feminists were debating sex work as work, with SWERFs publishing literature that accused sex workers of being dirty, further directing Victorian beliefs around sex and morality onto transactional sex and the (bodies) providers of the service. The onus of such debates is placed on the male gaze and men's criminalised position of buying sex. The tart cards have been embroiled in wider debates around pornography and censorship as the tart cards have been accused of promoting pornographic imagery.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy Symposium'. p.6

²⁷⁶ Barbie Dutter, 'Clampdown on Callbox Sex Cards', *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 1996, The Telegraph Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0701274047/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=b2802dce>.

In order to represent breasts, genitals, anus, and face all within the tri- fold frame of the centrefold, models were propped up, legs spread, raised, and then jack-knifed against their bodies, arms plunged between them to spread the labia. The effect created was that the breasts and face occupied – impossibly – the same plane as vagina and anus, the whole flattened as though a specimen under glass.²⁷⁷

The argument that tart cards were pornographic is underdeveloped because as Dennis describes in her analysis of *Hustler* porn magazine images, the bodies in pornographic print were splayed, and posed to simulate sexual acts, whereas the tart cards featured partially clothed models that were more ambiguous. I argue that the imagery used resembled soft- porn, but they were not explicit images and usually mimicked popular boudoir-style photography as discussed in case studies throughout the thesis. In contrast to pornographic magazines in which the pages were typically A4 sized the images on the tart cards were much smaller. The images on tart cards were often cut by hand, this meant that they were from other types of magazines and printed media, not confined to porn.

Dennis argues that “the photographic flatness of *Hustler’s* centrefold is designed to create the effect of absolute proximity to the viewer's body.”²⁷⁸ The tart cards differ from that of the porn magazine because they are arguably more intimate. The tart cards include smaller-scale images printed onto thick cardstock, whereas pornographic images are printed on thin glossy magazine pages. The modes of viewing are different.

²⁷⁷ Dennis, *Art/Porn*. p.97

²⁷⁸ Dennis. p.98

Historical discourses around the mechanical reproduction of images have translated into contemporary debates around taste, value and authenticity within the arts sphere. This extends to the pornographic model:

Professional and consumer digital editing software such as Photoshop, Aperture, and iPhoto straddle artistic, consumer and professional realms of image production. Similar to the camera in the nineteenth century, such software editing tools have an unsavoury reputation within discursive realms of high art as “easy” or as “cheating.”²⁷⁹

The proliferation of erotic imagery and the technological advancements in 90s Britain that made this possible drove forward longstanding critiques of film and pornography. The social landscape that facilitated the mainstream use of pornographic photography, meaning that “anyone” can make art” devalues the content in certain contexts because it is a practice that is no longer gatekeeping by the elite.²⁸⁰ The age-old problem of ‘anyone’ making art is tied to capitalist production. Sex workers having control of their image is perceived as dangerous because they are subverting power dynamics of the status quo in art historical discourses that often strip sex workers of their autonomy, and act as passive art *subjects* rather than proactive image-makers.

The main factors for the ‘boom’ in tart card production were informed by technological advancements and access to these tools (further explored in Chapter 4). Such advancements are also documented in porn studies, where sex workers

²⁷⁹ Dennis. p.129

²⁸⁰ Dennis. p.129

operating in different fields and using moving images were critiqued for the proliferation of erotic films.²⁸¹ The DIY aspect of sex workers' self-image reappears as a cyclical cause for concern. The critique of amateur productions based on the prevalence or influx of material adds a layer of scrutiny that presumes an unskilled person was responsible for making the images means that artistic merit is diminished. As art historians have theorised: "Photography was often thought to be particularly 'artless' and, by the same token, particularly associated with reality, because of its tendency simply to record the raw data of visual experience."²⁸² Such studies rooted in post-impressionist artworks and high-art paintings are transferrable to the imagery of sex workers because photography as I have explored through the existing literature, accuses sex workers' photography in tart card production as vulgar, tasteless and obscene.

Visual and Cultural Criminology

Aspects of cultural and visual criminological methods are useful in unearthing sex workers' hidden stories because the methodology is centred on images as data. For instance, Mike Presdee states:

Cultural criminology uses the 'evidence' of everyday existence, wherever it is found and in whatever form it can be found; the debris of everyday life is its 'data'. It uses cultural artefacts whenever and wherever they present themselves, examining the cultural 'trail' they leave behind.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Dennis, p.130

²⁸² Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994). p.37

²⁸³ Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (London: Routledge, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203299142>. p.15

This methodology is not dissimilar to visual criminologists, Eamonn Carrabine, Michelle Brown and Ronnie Lippens who use images as primary source data, however, I argue that this methodology is not adequate to fully investigate the critical social landscape of the sex industry.²⁸⁴ Though familiar with this methodology, it will not be the primary tool for acquiring data, the thesis will have a more archival-based and visual framework rather than a criminologist's approach to understanding sex work. An art historical informed approach looks beyond the criminalised status of sex workers' identities, moving into more challenging territories that are not easily compartmentalised.

Historically, cultural criminological and sociological methods have reigned over the thematic exploration of sex work and violence.²⁸⁵ An extensive body of global literature on the phenomenon of sex worker homicides exists because sex work has been reported as one of the most dangerous occupations for women.²⁸⁶

Sex work and violence

London's notorious affiliation with 'Jack the Ripper' folklore sets the UK apart from other countries due to the infamous history of crime and sexual violence within British culture.²⁸⁷ From Victorian London's obsession with the infamous Whitechapel murderer to high-coverage murder cases, such as the Suffolk Strangler, Steve

²⁸⁴ Eamonn Carrabine, 'Visual Criminology: History, Theory and Method', in *The Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Criminology* (Routledge Handbooks Online, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074701.ch8>; Michelle Brown and Eamonn Carrabine, 'The Critical Foundations of Visual Criminology: The State, Crisis, and the Sensory', *Critical Criminology* 27, no. 1 (1 March 2019): 191–205, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-019-09439-7>; Lippens, 'Using Visual Methods in Criminological Research'.

²⁸⁵ Hilary Kinnell, *Violence and Sex Work in Britain* (Devon (UK): Willan, 2008).

²⁸⁶ Salfati, James, and Ferguson, 'Prostitute Homicides'.

²⁸⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence', *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3 (1982): 543–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177712>.

Wright, in 2006, violent crimes inform the narratives around sex work by the media's reliance on existing presumptions around sex and morality.²⁸⁸ In 2008 it was estimated that in the UK "prostitutes are 60 to 120 times more likely to be murdered than nonprostitute females."²⁸⁹ Hilary Kinnell's research and other academic papers published at this time were concerned with the well-being of sex workers and had an emphasis on crime and violence.²⁹⁰

It was no coincidence that these publications were highly influenced by the intense global media coverage of American serial killer (The Green River Killer) Gary Ridgeway's sentencing and the British 'Ipswich murders' that followed closely in 2006.²⁹¹ Contemporary research is still enamoured of the legend of the Ripper murders.²⁹² Literature detailing the Ripper's frenzied attacks on sex workers is brutal, particularly in the case of Mary Kelly: "The body is opened, penetrated, dissected, made totally possessable."²⁹³ Mary Kelly's evisceration turned her into a fictional character who bore the brunt of gender-based violence in the overzealous accounts of the Whitechapel murders. Scholars reiterate that it is the impersonal and dramatised narratives of the murders that dehumanise sex workers and transform them into objects of entertainment for consumption.²⁹⁴ Not only are sex workers'

²⁸⁸ Anna Gekoski, Jacqueline Gray, and Joanna Adler, 'What Makes A Homicide Newsworthy?: UK National Tabloid Newspaper Journalists Tell All', *British Journal of Criminology* 52, no. 6 (12 August 2012): 1212–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azs047>. p.1225

²⁸⁹ Salfati, James, and Ferguson, 'Prostitute Homicides'. p.505

²⁹⁰ Kinnell, *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*; Stephanie Church et al., 'Violence By Clients Towards Female Prostitutes In Different Work Settings: Questionnaire Survey', *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 322, no. 7285 (2001): 524–25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25466333>; Maggie O'Neill et al., 'Living with the Other: Street Sex Work, Contingent Communities and Degrees of Tolerance', *Crime Media Culture* 4, no. 1 (2008): 73–94, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/cmctre4&i=69>.

²⁹¹ Salfati, James, and Ferguson, 'Prostitute Homicides'. p.506

²⁹² May-Len Skilbrei and Per Jørgen Ystehede, "'Down on Whores" Considering Representations of Jack the Ripper's Victims', in *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research* (London (UK): Routledge, 2019), <https://read.kortext.com/reader/epub/1199634?page=>.

²⁹³ Bloom, *Cult Fiction*. p.174

²⁹⁴ Rachel Lennon and Pranee Liamputtong, 'Two Women, Two Murders: Stigmatized Media Representations of Violence against Sex Workers', in *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research* (London (UK): Routledge, 2019).

bodies predisposed as sites of crime they are also understood as less valuable than non-sex working people. This is tied to themes of morality which extend to debates on cleanliness, public decency and environmental waste.

The idea that sex workers are dirty is tethered to their visual cultural understanding in wider UK social standing, Kinnell discusses how the 'smackhead prostitute' is unreliable as a police witness, this is due to a plethora of socially conditioned ideas about what a respectable person looks like and how they behave.²⁹⁵ This is tied to identity and morality politics. It is reminiscent of Linda Mahood's *Magdalen's*, an investigation of sex-working women in the nineteenth century because it addresses how themes of single, unchaperoned women were deemed suspicious or criminal. Another prolific researcher in this area is Judith Walkowitz who studied Victorian transactional sex markets and their effect on public health in tandem with the *Contagious Diseases Acts* of the late 1800s.²⁹⁶ The historical connotations of single women, danger and sexuality are also derived from what they look like.²⁹⁷ Victorian women were accused of prostitution based on both their physical appearance and their clothing.²⁹⁸ Though fashion has evolved substantially, and Lombroso's pseudoscientific theories into the identification of criminals by physiognomy have been debunked, such modes of identifying and classifying women as sex workers based on visual evidence are still enacted in contemporary law.²⁹⁹ The remnants of historical enquiry into sex workers' criminalised status resurface in the language around policing sex work. Sex work

²⁹⁵ Kinnell, *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*.

²⁹⁶ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives Of Sexual Danger In Late-Victorian London*, 1st Edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁹⁷ Acton and Planck, *Prostitution*. p.20

²⁹⁸ Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* (Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁹⁹ Klambauer, 'Policing Roulette'. p.264-5

was considered a “vice-related crime” that also links back to outmoded concepts of controlling sex workers' movements and visibility.³⁰⁰ These entrenched ideas rooted in antiquated language promote the further victimisation of single women as untrustworthy, sexualised beings and sever the human connection. Once the sex worker is situated as a dehumanised object, they are closer to narratives of environmental pollution.³⁰¹ This details how ‘vice’ operations have operated against sex workers and have been at sex workers’ expense, further humiliating them and removing their agency.

I am more interested in sources that reclaim agency over sex workers’ presumed identities such as Hallie Rubenhold’s *The Five* which sought to humanise the (female) victims of the infamous Jack the Ripper murders.³⁰² Rubenhold reflected on archival evidence to demystify and give agency to the women (historically categorised as prostitutes) breathing a fresh perspective on the forgotten, overlooked lives of the murder victims. Rubenhold subverted the typical reading of the women as human beings rather than victimised characters. Rubenhold’s research identified that some of the Ripper’s victims were not engaged in sex work, counter to mainstream accounts of the women’s criminalised status as prostitutes.

My research seeks to adopt a similar methodology, turning attention to the archives to address contemporary issues in sex workers’ representation by examining cases which are not as high-profile, reflecting the everyday histories of working-class sex workers. The sensationalism around the Ripper murders further

³⁰⁰ Teela Sanders, Maggie O’Neill, and Jane Pitcher, *Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy & Politics* (London (UK): SAGE, 2017). p.163

³⁰¹ Kinnell, *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*. p.90

³⁰² Hallie Rubenhold, *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (London (UK): Doubleday, 2019).

entrenches narratives of victimhood in sex work discourses. I aim for the thesis to ask questions of ordinary 'day-to-day' accounts of sex workers' experiences to give a more nuanced perspective of those working in the industry. Such impressions of London's historical violence against sex workers are deeply imprinted onto the general populace's imaginary. This situates how the cards have been understood in a wider social grounding of sex workers' labour conditions. The thesis seeks to demystify the fantastical element of sex-working 'victim' stereotypes in London by using tart cards as primary research material for the first time.

Methodologically, visual criminology assumes the researcher's position in two defined ways as either 'image-maker', whereby "criminologists might produce images to prove or assert moments of harm" or as image interpreters, where themes of crime or deviancy can be identified in existing images.³⁰³ This bifurcated approach is why an alternative framework must be applied to future research on sex workers' visual culture. Visual criminological methodologies stem from art historical debates that are rooted in finding the 'truth' in images, focusing on photography and painting as primary examples.³⁰⁴ Currently, visual criminological theories centre on the 'pure' sensory rawness of images, with a biased reliance on photography and high-art forms such as painting.³⁰⁵ Lippens acknowledged counterarguments in visual criminology methods, indicating that photography may also have an 'obtuse meaning' or backstory which contradicts the legitimacy of film as an accurate source of evidence.³⁰⁶ The rationale for this research is not about 'making sense' or finding

³⁰³ Bill McClanahan, ed., 'Visual Methods in Criminology', in *Visual Criminology*, New Horizons in Criminology (Bristol University Press, 2021), 37–50, <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781529207460.004.p.39>

³⁰⁴ Lippens, 'Using Visual Methods in Criminological Research'. p.446

³⁰⁵ Lippens. p.441

³⁰⁶ Lippens. p.443

truths of the images in Lippens' terms, it is concerned with understanding how oppressed people (sex workers) represented themselves, as an act of empowerment, in retaliation to stigmatising law and social order.

The two avenues of research methods implemented by visual criminologists require further attention and modification to suit the needs of this enquiry, as this study differs from both perspectives outlined in visual criminological frameworks. To conduct a thorough investigation of the tart cards, it is essential to understand the materiality and context of the imagery. Visual criminologists may suggest that the role of the researcher as 'image interpreter' would be appropriate because the tart card imagery already exists, however, this position must be applied with some adaptations because the medium is atypical. The tart card ephemera differs from standard visual criminological enquiry because the images exist in realms outside of traditional 'art' norms, not yet identified in visual criminology methods. The cards' imagery consists of text, graphic design and photography, aspects which are often coalesced, resulting in a rich set of unique material that has been produced by sex workers themselves. This is crucial because the way that sex workers have been demonised within British law means that very little engagement with the lived realities of sex workers and their social histories has been undertaken in academia. The nature in which the tart cards have been archived explains how sex workers have been (mis)understood as criminalised bodies, the documents pertain to the harm to sex workers as marginalised communities, illuminating why the cards remain understudied.

Engagement with visual culture and porn studies literature situates the tart cards in context to wider feminist debates on obscenity. The project seeks an alternate methodology from criminological and sociological enquiries of sex work, fields which

dominate sex industry research. I propose an interdisciplinary approach that implements elements from cultural and visual criminology to further existing research and lay the foundations for future discourses. The literature on archival studies demonstrates that sex work ephemera is an emerging topic, however, the investigations would benefit from a visual cultural historian's perspective to analyse the images from the ephemera in greater depth. The current literature highlights why this approach is suitable for locating agency in sex workers' representation, however, these have been informed by sociological frameworks that do not engage with images on a critical level. Some methods focus on the criminality aspect of sex work which I argue gives a one-sided opinion of the ephemera and the sex-working community that it represents. A deeper analysis of sex work ephemera as a visual concept is missing from current literature and requires further exploration. [sex work] "functions as a metaphor for social issues deemed particularly pressing in the historical or contemporary contexts and has little to do with sex industry realities."³⁰⁷ Further interrogation into the visual strategies of sex workers' imagery is needed to gain a well-rounded knowledge base of sex work and sex workers' visual culture.

Archival studies

The study looks to the archive, and the direct source material of the ephemera to gather information. Examples of tart cards existing as collector's items and art mediums can be identified in the literature on the curation of paper artefacts such as *Collecting Printed Ephemera*, published in 1976.³⁰⁸ Social historian acclaimed

³⁰⁷ Susan Dewey, Isabel Crowhurst, and Chimaraoke Izugbara, *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research* (London (UK): Routledge, 2019). p.451

³⁰⁸ John Lewis, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*, First Edition (London: Littlehampton Book Services Ltd, 1976).

‘ephemerist’ and founder of the London Ephemera Society, Maurice Rickards’ wrote literature on the joy of collecting ‘wastepaper’.³⁰⁹ Such examples have historical links, particularly to 19th-century examples of ephemera that became mainstream in Industrial Britain due to the vast printing of materials. The literature is ‘of its’ time’ where collecting ephemera as a hobby became fashionable in the late 1970s for artists, enthusiasts and paper crafters as “it can cost nothing, for it is often the by-product of things one has to buy.”³¹⁰ Paper ephemera often has a sentimental attachment, however, sex workers’ advertisements are not always seen in the same vein.

Rickards’ lifelong interest and collection of ephemera helped to compile a definitive encyclopedia of paper-based paraphernalia in 2000. In this publication, sex worker’s adverts are coined as “the transient minor documents of everyday life”.³¹¹ The *transient* pieces of literature were made for a specific purpose and often discarded afterwards. In some cases, collectors were questioned why they would want to collect such rubbish.³¹² “Indeed, for many ephemerists, the drive to collect is the drive of chivalry – to rescue, to protect, honour and admire.”³¹³ Rickards’ legacy as a collector and enthusiast is a sentiment shared by the artist Ágnes Háy.

Rickards associates paper ephemera with a spiritual essence that is imbued within the object, he acknowledges that this concept is fantastical at times, however, they are talking about real, human existence through these artefacts. Rickards’ analysis of an invoice documents the print type that is embossed on the reverse of

³⁰⁹ Maurice Rickards, *This Is Ephemera : Collecting Printed Throwaways* (Brattleboro, Vt. : Gossamer Press : Distributed by S. Greene Press, 1977), <http://archive.org/details/thisisephemeraco00rick>. p.7

³¹⁰ Lewis, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*. p.9

³¹¹ Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*. p.13

³¹² The artist and collector Ágnes Háy joked about the tart cards as rubbish in our correspondence.

³¹³ Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*. p.15

the paper, adding that this is valuable to ephemerists because it adds another layer of authenticity.³¹⁴ “Just as the ancients conceived of the genius loci, the soul and spirit of a place, we may perceive a genius papyri. In every fragment of ephemera resides the spirit of the paper – the abiding essence of its message, origin and content.”³¹⁵ Rickards’ sentimental attachment or romanticised idea of the ‘spirit of the paper’ is useful in my methodology where the sex worker is read in context to their advertisement because in the existing literature, this aspect is missing. Rickards elaborates:

Evocation lies not only in the trace and shape of the images and characters it bears, but in the substance of the paper itself. The whole item, legend, image and substance considered together, encapsulates its spirit. As we examine the paper, its tint and texture (listening, even, to the slight sounds of its handling) we are transported in all but fact to the moment of its first appearance.³¹⁶

The unconscious mark-making or ‘by-product’ from mark-making techniques is what Rickards deems as valuable, because the human enterprising of these items differentiates the documents from other soulless paper artefacts, comparing this notion to a ‘genuine’ or ‘fake’ painting in terms of quality.³¹⁷ This critical consideration pays attention to the embodiment and value of the people concerned with the ephemera, placing value on those associated with the object.

³¹⁴ Rickards. p.17

³¹⁵ Rickards. p.16

³¹⁶ Rickards. p.16

³¹⁷ Rickards. p.16

Other researchers have tried to compartmentalise the tart cards' origins and collate them by geographic location to unveil something deeper about the social status of residents in a particular area.³¹⁸ Independent researcher Alison Barnes identified the limitations in this methodological enquiry, however, it is the most common method of collecting sex work ephemera data to date.³¹⁹ This type of location-based research is not dissimilar to the Victorian modes of class and status found in Charles Booth's maps of poverty in London boroughs.³²⁰ This method of acquiring data does little to progress knowledge into sex workers as individual beings and promotes classist ideologies around the sex industry.

Contemporary scholars such as Vicky Iglikovski- Broad and João Florêncio are drawn to the archive to conduct interdisciplinary studies around marginalised subcultures, queer and sex-working communities' stories.³²¹ Visual culture researcher João Florêncio takes on a 'history from below' approach within an archival context. His focus on gay pornography in the archive is an example of current scholarly attention drawn to the wealth of underrepresented sexualities in the archives.³²² In 1994, Gilfoyle recognised a prominent issue in the archival processes of sex work ephemera in American culture, questioning how collections may preserve the "treasures" of sex workers' lived experience.³²³

³¹⁸ Barnes, 'Geo/Graphic'.

³¹⁹ Barnes.

³²⁰ 'Prostitution | Charles Booth's London', The London School of Economics and Political Science, accessed 30 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250117140225/https://booth.lse.ac.uk/highlights/prostitution>.

³²¹ Iglikowski-Broad, 'The National Archives - Reclaiming the Records'; João Florêncio and Ben Miller, 'Sexing the Archive: Gay Porn and Subcultural Histories', *Radical History Review* 2022, no. 142 (1 January 2022): 133–41, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-9397115>; Bauer et al., 'Visual Histories of Sex'.

³²² Florêncio and Miller, 'Sexing the Archive'.

³²³ Gilfoyle, 'Prostitutes in the Archives'. p.527

Photography is understood as an important medium for engaging with social histories, however, Jennifer Tucker identified problematic flaws in visual studies that critique the 'scientific' value of photographs.³²⁴ Again the reliance on photography alone excludes many types of ephemera produced by sex workers that may reveal alternative histories.

Contemporary papers show that historians are developing intersectional methodologies to address marginalised peoples' lived experiences.³²⁵ The concept has been emerging since the 1990s when archivists such as Timothy Gilfoyle have questioned how sensitive or problematic archival materials should be studied to include different socio-historical accounts.³²⁶ Sex work has been identified as such a problematic category, yet there is little emerging literature that explores the possibility of using sex workers' ephemera as primary research material.³²⁷ Homosexual (male) sex workers' histories are emerging in archival research but remain tethered to themes of criminality and deviance, rather than the individual.³²⁸

Emerging research indicates archivists have been advocating for the reclamation of sex workers' histories, however, the materials proposed to do this fall on more 'traditional' ephemera such as photographs, police records and legal documents which I argue persistently portray sex workers in a negative and narrow viewpoint.³²⁹ Though visual methodologies are emerging from engagement with archival material,

³²⁴ Ariella Azoulay, 'Photographic Archives and Archival Entities', in *Image Operations*, ed. Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk, 1st ed., Visual Media and Political Conflict (Manchester University Press, 2017), 151–66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvnb7m30.18>; Jennifer Tucker, 'The Historian, the Picture, and the Archive', *Isis* 97, no. 1 (2006): 111–20, <https://doi.org/10.1086/501104>.

³²⁵ Bauer et al., 'Visual Histories of Sex'. p.6

³²⁶ Gilfoyle, 'Prostitutes in the Archives'.

³²⁷ Florêncio and Miller, 'Sexing the Archive'.

³²⁸ Ross, 'Sex in the Archives'; Vicky Iglikowski-Broad, 'The National Archives - "Importuning Men": Sex Work and the Male Trade', text, *The National Archives* (blog) (The National Archives, 14 September 2021), <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/importuning-men-sex-work-and-the-male-trade/>.

³²⁹ Iglikowski-Broad, 'The National Archives - Reclaiming the Records'.

problematic discourses around what types of documents are deemed sensitive or worthy of investigation are surfacing within interdisciplinary fields. This forms the basis of the research question which aims to address how a nuanced, intersectional feminist reading of tart card ephemera can open a dialogue around sex workers' self-representation and agency.

Conclusions

This review of the current publications on tart cards evidences the research gap I am navigating as an art historian. The existing body of literature on the tart cards is largely devoted to the research outputs from private collectors of the ephemera. These limited publications provide a small library of image-heavy, coffee-table-style books. The examples follow a typical photobook format, including a brief introductory essay and an overview of the phenomenon. This means that they are richly illustrated with images of the tart cards, but do not go into a further detailed analysis of the socio-historical or political context around the cards, or the sex industry. In conclusion, the existing literature on tart cards has been mostly undertaken at a superficial level. This point highlights the connection to my proposed research questions, whereby I seek to humanise sex workers.

Through the literature review, I have identified a significant knowledge gap in the production of sex workers' imagery and situated my research in terms of its wider contribution to interdisciplinary art historical, cultural and visual criminological, archival and sociological fields. I am creating new knowledge of sex workers' self-representation, branding and marketing strategies that have been sidelined in academic discourses. The project furthers debates on pornography, female sexuality,

and representations of women across interdisciplinary factions of feminist research and gender studies.

In summary, the existing research outputs situate tart cards within sociological qualitative research methods.³³⁰ The literature reflects how independent researchers and tart card scholars have tried to acquire data in geographical frameworks that demonstrate a mainstream body of knowledge in sex workers' ephemera.³³¹ The studies show how cards have been researched through a typographical and graphic design lens but have not yet been researched through a visual cultural perspective.³³² This presents an exciting opportunity where my contribution lies. My methodology uses a critical visual analysis of the ephemera to further both tart card knowledge and sex industry research by revealing historical design considerations in sex workers' self-promotion which is currently absent from the literature.

The research from primary tart card scholar Dr Caroline Archer is over twenty years old and expressed that interest in the cards peaked in the 1990s, coming to an abrupt end when it became illegal to card in 2001. The absence of literature in ephemera produced from the millennium to the present day means that tart card enquiries were neglected from this timeframe. This is a significant gap which this thesis seeks to address and contribute. My investigation and perspective breathe new life into this early tart card enquiry, adding value to the emerging research area.

The following chapter addresses some of the overarching themes of sex workers' representation as marginalised bodies to situate the themes of crime in existing tart

³³⁰ Háy, 'Punish me!'

³³¹ Barnes, 'Geo/Graphic'.

³³² Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*.

card literature before offering an alternative reading of the ephemera and sex working community.

Chapter 3: Criminalisation and the Policing of Sex Work

“Who are those fair creatures, neither chaperons nor chaperoned...Who are those painted, dressy women, flaunting along the streets and boldly accosting the passers-by? Who those miserable creatures, ill-fed, ill-clothed, uncared for, from whose misery the eye recoils, cowering under dark arches and among bye-lanes?”³³³ *William Acton, 1870.*

“Is this the real fear then: not that more people are becoming prostitutes but that the conventional ways we’d distinguish a prostitute from a non-prostitute woman are no longer as functional? Antiprostitution laws are primarily about exclusion and banishment; How, now, will we know who is to be banished and excluded?”³³⁴ *Melissa Gira Grant, 2014.*

“Prostitutes are still, for many people, just what’s at the end of the peep hole – or the handcuffs.”³³⁵ *Melissa Gira Grant, 2014.*

Introduction

I argue that the viewing of sex work through a criminal lens remains unresolved. Sex work researcher Melissa Gira Grant identified that attitudes and stereotypes around sex workers persist, based on historical associations with sex work and crime.

³³³ Acton and Planck, *Prostitution*. p.viii

³³⁴ Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*. p.45

³³⁵ Gira Grant. p.24

However, her book was published ten years ago and yet these problematic and outdated ways of stereotyping sex workers are still prevalent in the West.³³⁶

Social policies and attitudes drive perspectives on tart cards because these are the way that sex work is viewed and, by extension, the way sex workers are viewed. I argue that perspectives on tart cards can be challenged when you analyse them as documents of self-representation. This chapter explores how the wider cultural imaginary perceives sex workers, how the tart cards contributed to this viewpoint and how an alternative reading of the ephemera can disrupt these narratives. Moreover, I explain the sociohistorical context of surveillance, control and criminality of sex work in the UK. It lays out the environment in which sex workers were criminalised through their advertising and shows another interpretation of how tart cards can be understood in wider discourses around the sex industry.

³³⁶ Maddy Coy, Josephine Wakeling, and Maria Garner, 'Selling Sex Sells: Representations of Prostitution and the Sex Industry in Sexualised Popular Culture as Symbolic Violence', *Women's Studies International Forum* 34, no. 5 (1 September 2011): 441–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2011.05.008>.



Figure 9. Ripper article, *The Illustrated Police News*, 1888.³³⁷

³³⁷ 'The Illustrated Police News Law Court and Weekly Record', London Museum, accessed 10 April 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20241103153001/https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/collections/v/object-752237/the-illustrated-police-news-law-court-and-weekly-record/>.

Background

London's historical ties linking sex work with criminality hark back to Victorian ideologies tethered to the surveillance of single "unchaperoned" women in unofficial red-light zones.³³⁸ Not only have sex-working women been understood as criminals, but they have also been seen as powerless or disgusting which in turn, has led to wider issues of violence.³³⁹ These problematic viewpoints have evolved and translated into more complex modes of monitoring sex workers' bodies in contemporary times.³⁴⁰

Sex workers' lives are perceived as less valuable, even expendable in society. The 'Yorkshire Ripper' Peter Sutcliffe coldly explained in his defence of murdering thirteen women, that they were "bastard prostitutes who were littering the streets. I was just cleaning up the place a bit."³⁴¹ Such views about sex workers and their proximity to waste material are glaringly obvious and prevalent across the world.³⁴² They are not native to the UK, however, London has negative assumptions about the infamous 'Jack the Ripper' murders that set the tone for contemporary ways in which sex workers' murders are reported in the media.³⁴³ The Ripper narratives are a

³³⁸ Acton and Planck, *Prostitution*.

³³⁹ Benjamin Bowling, Robert Reiner, and James Sheptycki, 'A Fair Cop? Policing and Social Justice', in *The Politics of the Police* (Oxford University Press), 123–44, accessed 6 August 2023, <https://www.oxfordlawtrove.com/display/10.1093/he/9780198769255.001.0001/he-9780198769255-chapter-6>. p.127; Kinnell, *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*.

³⁴⁰ Belinda Brooks-Gordon, 'State Violence Towards Sex Workers', *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 337, no. 7669 (2008): 527–28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20510720>.

³⁴¹ Julie Bindel, 'Peter Sutcliffe Murdered 13 Women: I Was Nearly One of Them', *The Times*, 15 November 2020, sec. news review, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307150824/https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/peter-sutcliffe-murdered-13-women-i-was-nearly-one-of-them-k6sq8rhvk?region=global>.

³⁴² Dominika Gasiorowski, 'Bodies That Do Not Matter: Marginality in Maya Goded's Photographs of Sex Workers in Mexico City', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 24, no. 4 (25 October 2015): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2014.993308>. p.513

³⁴³ Louise Wattis, 'Revisiting the Yorkshire Ripper Murders: Interrogating Gender Violence, Sex Work, and Justice', *Feminist Criminology* 12, no. 1 (1 January 2017): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085115602960>. p.4

cyclical and persistent theme to which media reporters make not-so-subtle references.³⁴⁴

Fear of another Ripper as six bodies are found

By DAVID CONNETT

DETECTIVES hunting the killer of a mystery woman found beaten and naked in a ditch fear she could be the fifth victim of a new Ripper.

The body, with clothes and identifiable jewellery missing, was found wrapped in a duvet by a woman walking her dog at the village of Coleby, near Lincoln, last Wednesday.

Police are linking the death with those of four other women strangled in the last eight months, and they have not ruled out the possibility that it could be connected with the death of a sixth woman found strangled four days earlier. The killings are being compared to the Yorkshire Ripper case because the first four victims were prostitutes, who regularly worked red light districts.

Sam Paul, 20, was the first to die. Her body was found half naked in a ditch near Swinford, Leicestershire, not far from the junction of the M1 and the A6.

Miss Paul, from Rowley Regis, West Midlands, the mother of a baby daughter, was last seen getting out of a taxi in the red light area of Broomfield, Birmingham.

The second victim, Tracey Turner, 32, was found naked in March by a road at Bitteswell, south of Leicester, and four miles from where Miss Paul was discovered.

Police said she was a prostitute who had worked in London and Birmingham. She was known to pick up men at motorway service stations, and was last seen on March 5 at the Hilton Park services on the M6 in Staffordshire.

Emma Merry, 18, was killed two months later. She was discovered stripped and dumped on an industrial estate at Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent.

Hatchback

Miss Merry, from Thetford, West Midlands, worked in the red light district of Burslem. Her body was found by a fellow call girl.

The fourth victim was discovered later that month. Miss Dawn Shields, 19, mother of a boy aged one, was naked when her body was discovered by a National Trust warden in a shallow grave at the Peak District beauty spot of Mam Tor, also known as the Shivering Mountain, in Derbyshire.

She disappeared from the Sheffield red light district of Broomfield, and was last seen getting into a dark coloured hatchback.

Leicestershire police said they had no idea of the profession of the mystery woman found at Coleby.

Detectives are looking closely with colleagues in Leicestershire, South Yorkshire, Staffordshire and the West Midlands in the hope of identifying her.

Detective Superintendent George Patterson, leading the inquiry, said: "Only until we know this woman's identity can we begin to discover what happened to her."

"When we know who she was, we will discover her background, her character, and possibly the motive for her murder."

The mystery woman is believed to be aged 16 to 21 and to have died at least 36 hours before her body was found. She had been beaten around the head, arms and body, although police are uncertain of the exact cause of death.

"She was white, had a pale complexion, was 5ft 6in, and of slim to medium build," added Sgt Patterson. "She wore her dark brown hair shoulder-length. Both ears were pierced but her earrings had been removed."

"Two light-coloured rings were found on the middle finger of her left hand, one a band and the other of a heavy twisted design."

Detectives are examining the possibility that her murder could be connected to the discovery of a second woman's body 25 miles away at Grantham four days earlier.

The victim that time was Sharon Harper, 19, a barmaid at the town's Market Cross pub. She was last seen leaving work in the early hours of a Sunday morning.

She had been strangled. Her body, found by children playing half a mile from her home, had been dumped in a car park shanty. She had a steady partner, a regular job at the pub and no convictions for prostitution.

Steady

"We cannot link the two at the moment but we are talking closely with colleagues," said Supt Patterson. "The possibility that a new Ripper is on the loose is forcing fear into the hearts of women, particularly prostitutes, in towns across the Midlands and Yorkshire."

Sharon, a Sheffield prostitute, flashes the six inches of blade which she believes will protect her. "I wouldn't get myself into trouble," she said. "I know what I'm doing. After all, I've been doing it for 10 years."

Yorkshire Ripper Peter Sutcliffe was jailed for life in 1981 for murdering 13 women and attempting to kill seven others. Several of his victims were prostitutes.

After this inquiry, police corrected that vital claim had been missed in a paper mountain of information and witness statements.

A host of 25,000 people were interviewed during the inquiry. Some, including Sutcliffe himself, were questioned several times.

Police have since introduced the Police (Class Office) Large Major Enquiry Review computer, which is being used in the investigation of the recent murders.

EMMA MERRY, 18. Killed in May. Body found on industrial estate at Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent.

DAWN SHIELDS, 19. Last seen in Sheffield in May. Body found in shallow grave at Mam Tor.

UNIDENTIFIED, 20 to 30. Found at Coleby last Wednesday. Badly beaten several days earlier.

TRACEY TURNER, 32. Last seen at M6 services last March. Body found on roadside near Bitteswell.

'SAM' PAUL, 20. Went missing last December. Found dead in ditch near Swinford.

SHARON HARPER, 19. Body found last week in shrubbery near pub where she worked in Grantham.

Graphic: DAVID ACE

Figure 10. The Daily Mail's 'New Ripper' article, 1994.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ Lennon and Liamputtong, 'Two Women, Two Murders'.

³⁴⁵ David Connett, 'Fear of Another Ripper as Six Bodies Are Found', *Daily Mail*, 12 July 1994, Daily Mail Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1861305654/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&id=207f3419>.

It is acknowledged that simplified or reductive images of sex workers represent the binary narratives presumed of sex workers' identities as either poor victims or high-class businesswomen in fiction, the media and wider society.³⁴⁶ I argue that this visual backdrop provides the basis of how policies are enacted to remove sex workers from public view.³⁴⁷ This is coded in Victorian policy, which intended "not so much to punish vice as to prevent crime".³⁴⁸ A sentiment shared by Robert Moreland chair of Westminster's planning and environment committee who voiced similar concerns 128 years later, stating that the council's objection "is not with prostitution as such, but with the people who illegally litter and deface the city's streets with this offensive and often pornographic advertising material."³⁴⁹

References to 'clean-up operations' are not restricted to the UK and can be recognised in global strategies for policing sex work and implementing social control.³⁵⁰ The universally adopted language around the "cleaning up" of red-light areas is enforced by the law, rehashed by policymakers and adopted by civilians.³⁵¹ Such laws extended to the tart cards because they were perceived not only as an environmental health issue but also one of morality and obscenity.³⁵² The connotations of sex work, crime and cleanliness have been discussed at length in

³⁴⁶ Lizzie Seal, 'Sex Work and the Night-Time Economy', in *Gender, Crime and Justice* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6805216>. p.98

³⁴⁷ Neville and Sanders-McDonagh, 'Gentrification and the Criminalization of Sex Work'.

³⁴⁸ M. J. D. Roberts, 'Morals, Art, and the Law: The Passing of the Obscene Publications Act, 1857', *Victorian Studies* 28, no. 4 (1985): 609-29., <https://www-jstor-org.uniessexlib.idm.oclc.org/stable/3827463>. p.613

³⁴⁹ Ibrahim, 'In Kiosks Of London, Card Game Gets Dirty'.

³⁵⁰ Susan Dewey et al., 'Control Creep and the Multiple Exclusions Faced by Women in Low-Autonomy Sex Industry Sectors', *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* 17 (27 November 2020): e17457, <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-43412020v17d457>. P.13; Melinda Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to SlutWalk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013). p.2

³⁵¹ Hubbard, 'Cleansing the Metropolis'; Sanders, O'Neill, and Pitcher, *Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy & Politics*; Home Office, 'New Measures to Control Prostitutes' Cards in Phone Boxes', A Consultation Paper (London (UK): Association of London Government, May 1999); Travis, 'Phone Box Sex Cards Targeted in Clean-Up'.

³⁵² Dutter, 'Clampdown on Callbox Sex Cards'.

parliamentary debate and sex workers themselves have historically been considered throw-away items.³⁵³

Methodology

This chapter addresses what material is available in the archives to position how sex work and tart cards have been documented within a wider social framework and how there is a focus on antiquated ideologies of hygiene, cleanliness and social order.³⁵⁴

The tart cards evidence problematic viewpoints on the sex industry. I use newspaper articles to show how sex workers' tart cards were seen as an extension of the sex industry (as by-products or waste material of the sex industry). This highlights tensions in sex workers' visual representations from an outsider's perspective.

Psychoanalytical theories of disgust (William Miller, Aurel Kolnai) and social abjection theorists (Julia Kristeva, Imogen Tyler) are implemented to situate how sex workers and tart cards were understood in 1990s Britain.³⁵⁵

Turning attention to the archives to seek what knowledge of tart cards exists, this chapter shows the oversimplified way tart cards were seen as a social problem. This evidences how the cards exist in a criminalised way, I then moved past these barriers and implemented visual analysis strategies to reveal other nuanced readings of sex workers' visual culture. This chapter shows how sex workers were

³⁵³ Sir William Shelton, 'Sexual Offences Bill', House of Commons, 16 February 1990, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250322141338/https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1990/feb/16/sexual-offences-bill>; Hubbard, 'Maintaining Family Values?'

³⁵⁴ Maggie O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). p.50

³⁵⁵ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (London (UK): Harvard University Press, 1998); Aurel Kolnai, 'On Disgust', in *On Disgust*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer and Barry Smith (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2004), 29–86; Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection', trans. John Lechte, *Oxford Literary Review* 5, no. 1/2 (1982): 125–49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43973647>; Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*.

criminalised but my analysis explains the human enterprise of sex workers' labour and working conditions. The chapter addresses feminist theory to explore the 'sex work as work' narratives and lived realities of sex workers through their ephemera.

Chapter structure

The chapter has three main sections:

- First, I demonstrate how the cards were criminalised by addressing the physical environment in which they were placed by looking at the history of phone boxes and their links to the cards in London. This is followed by an investigation into the government's legal actions to stop carding, specifically the Criminal Justice Act 2001. An exploration into the wider ideas around carders are then explored through archival material to gain a broader picture of how sex workers' criminalised status permeated to others affiliated with the industry.

- Secondly, I expand on how the tart cards were criminalised by demonstrating links between sex work ephemera and sex workers themselves. I evidence this by tracing media reports in the archives that illustrate how sex workers have been viewed as dirty and hazardous. I then investigate the psychoanalytical and sociological theoretical frameworks for understanding how fears of sexuality and transactional sex are situated within disgust

narratives. This evidences the link between physical, tangible disgust and moral disgust around carding and sex work more generally.

- Lastly, I demonstrate how my methodology can disrupt this narrative and give evidence of a different reading. Correspondence with a collector of the tart cards, Ágnes Háý reveals a personal account of tart card production, further illuminating intimate knowledge of tart card production. Engagement with the existing literature is undertaken to show how collectors are working with the ephemera and I discuss how effective these methods are in locating autonomy in sex work imagery. I further investigate the archives for carders' accounts to reveal a different perspective on their roles within the industry. These avenues support my visual analysis of the ephemera that humanises sex workers.

The following section begins by giving a contextual background of how the tart cards became criminalised and how this relates to the wider morality politics of the sex industry.



Calling-card crisis: Miles Young, the leader of Westminster Council, with a sackful of seized advertisements Photograph: Craig Stennett

Drive to beat prostitutes on the numbers game

Figure 11. Article from *The Sunday Telegraph*, 1994.

Tart cards and criminality

The red phone box is an iconic piece of British visual culture.³⁵⁶ The classic K2- K8 models are associated with quaint, British countryside landscapes, but, the later aluminium and Perspex KX series have an altogether different association with crime.³⁵⁷ The addition of tart cards in London and Brighton's phone boxes

³⁵⁶ Linge et al., 'In Celebration of the K8 Telephone Kiosk – Britain's Last Red, Cast-Iron Phonebox'. p.141

³⁵⁷ Linge et al. p.141; Paul Talling, 'Telephone Boxes', *Derelict London - Photography, Social History and Guided Walking Tours*, accessed 18 October 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250124061258/https://www.derelictlondon.com/telephoneboxes.html>.

dramatically challenged narratives around the wholesome and idealised notions of the phone box in British culture.³⁵⁸ The phone boxes themselves have been under scrutiny as vessels for crime and have been accused of attracting vandals.³⁵⁹

In 1991, councillor John Newman was reported to say that the tart card “problem is getting worse”.³⁶⁰ This shows how tart cards have historically been placed in moral panic narratives related to detritus and disgust. Various pieces of legislation were used to charge carders with civil and criminal prosecutions including *The Criminal Damage Act* (1971), *The Indecent Displays Act* (1981), *The Environmental Protection Act* (1990) and *The Town & Country Planning Act* (1990).³⁶¹ The charges against these acts were minor and the carders came under fire from Government officials who wanted to enforce greater penalties against them and deter them from distributing the adverts.³⁶² Following the tart card ‘boom’ in 1992, the increasing number of tart cards in central London’s phone boxes caused concern over litter problems.³⁶³ In response, cleaning-up initiatives were formally set up by London councils in 1994.³⁶⁴ The changing perspectives on the phone boxes and the tart cards culminated in a lot of interest from the general public. The cards were stolen from phone booths as souvenirs by tourists, curious passers-by, and potential customers, and were also acquired by serious collectors who appreciated the cards as a form of art.³⁶⁵

³⁵⁸ ‘Call Me - Anatomy of a Hooker’s Card’, *Penthouse*, September 1997.

³⁵⁹ Talling, ‘Telephone Boxes’.

³⁶⁰ Price, ‘Stacking the Cards’.

³⁶¹ Home Office, ‘New Measures to Control Prostitutes’ Cards in Phone Boxes’. p.6

³⁶² ‘House of Commons Hansard Written Answers (Pt 2)’, parliament.uk, 24 March 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160609220752/https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansrd/vo990324/text/90324w02.htm>.

³⁶³ Maclean, ‘Crackdown on Calling Cards’.

³⁶⁴ Home Office, ‘New Measures to Control Prostitutes’ Cards in Phone Boxes’. p.5

³⁶⁵ Leila, Oral History of Prostitution, interview by Wendy Rickard, Audio recording, August 1997, C803/14, British Library.

The human interaction with this ephemera caused some of the problems in its demise as a medium; once the cards became detached from the booths they were considered rubbish and viewed as a nuisance littering the streets.³⁶⁶ *The Environmental Protection Act* of 1990 was enacted by law to try and prosecute carders.³⁶⁷ The efforts were largely unsuccessful because it was difficult to track carders' movements and prove in court.³⁶⁸ Westminster Council reported that they removed 1.1 million tart cards from phone boxes during an eight-week trial in November 1994.³⁶⁹ The cards were removed from approximately 700 BT boxes which roughly equated to the removal of 21,500 cards daily.³⁷⁰

In 1998 "it was estimated that 13 million cards were removed each year during routine cleaning of Westminster kiosks (the cards have to be weighed as there are too many to count). The number would have been appreciably greater had it not been for the 'cooperation' of enthusiastic collectors."³⁷¹ After increasing pressure from London councils, Parliament started proceedings to make it illegal to 'card'.³⁷² Despite tart cards connotation of filth (be it morally or tangibly) they survived in great numbers even after 'carding' became illegal in 2001.³⁷³ Fines of up

³⁶⁶ 'Getting Tough on Phone Box Vice Cards'.

³⁶⁷ 'Environmental Protection Act 1990', Text, legislation.gov.uk (Statute Law Database), accessed 7 March 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250312211403/https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/43/section/87>.

³⁶⁸ Jessica Smerin, 'Prostitutes' Calling Cards Evade the Law', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2 April 1995, The Telegraph Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/I00701004485/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=c3c8c098>.

³⁶⁹ Jim Shelley, 'Card Tricks in Phone Boxes', *The Guardian*, 6 July 1995, Bishopsgate Institute, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250125171234/https://jimshelley.com/crime/prostitutes-cards/>.

³⁷⁰ Home Office, 'New Measures to Control Prostitutes' Cards in Phone Boxes'. p.5

³⁷¹ Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*. p.349

³⁷² Home Office, 'New Measures to Control Prostitutes' Cards in Phone Boxes'.

³⁷³ BBC News, 'Sex Card Laws Tightened', 1 September 2001, https://web.archive.org/web/20250307142711/http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1520377.stm.

to one thousand pounds were given to carders caught actively distributing material.³⁷⁴

Criminal Justice Act 2001

The cards were an (in)famous part of London's visual culture and the phone booths were plastered with these adverts. I argue that the sheer volume of mass-produced tart cards that were visible in London in the 1990s profoundly impacted how sex workers' aesthetic representations informed feminist debates. Sex workers revealed that some of the cards were printed in batches of 20,000 pieces and BT estimated that they removed 150,000 cards from London phone boxes per week.³⁷⁵ The production of this ephemera roused tangible arguments for and against sex work that are ingrained in contemporary British history. The various acts of Parliament that had been used to charge and arrest carders had proved ineffective, according to a report by the *Home Office* produced in 1999.³⁷⁶ Government officials agreed that the cards were offensive, but could not decide how to resolve the issue until an agreement was made two years later.³⁷⁷ The *Criminal Justice Act* of 2001 was specifically introduced to target carders placing adverts in telephone boxes and fines were increased to a maximum of five thousand pounds.³⁷⁸ Criticisms of this Act maintained that "efforts were not intended to eradicate the sex industry but merely to remove it from the

³⁷⁴ Home Office, 'New Measures to Control Prostitutes' Cards in Phone Boxes'. p.3

³⁷⁵ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.57; Phillips, 'Report of the Director of Legal Services Prostitutes' Cards'.

³⁷⁶ Home Office, 'New Measures to Control Prostitutes' Cards in Phone Boxes'.

³⁷⁷ Phillips, 'Report of the Director of Legal Services Prostitutes' Cards'.

³⁷⁸ Home Office, 'Explanatory Notes to Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001', legislation.gov.uk (Queen's Printer of Acts of Parliament, 2001), <https://web.archive.org/web/20190806033134/http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2001/16/notes/division/3/1/3/7>.

public gaze.”³⁷⁹ Both sex workers and carders were driven into more precarious working conditions after the cards were banned and the removal of cards became a legal requirement.³⁸⁰ Headlines reported that carders were aggressive and anti-social, linking their movements to criminal activity.³⁸¹ Subsequently, the tart cards’ visibility began to dwindle in numbers, this, paired with the mainstream use and accessibility to the internet, digital media and the prevalence of mobile phones contributed to the demise of the British phone box.

The concept of using phonebooths to make phone calls quickly fell out of fashion and convenience in the late 1990s almost rendering phone booths obsolete.³⁸² Mobile telephones have almost eradicated the need for public phone booths, which now have associations with criminal activity.³⁸³ The government’s measures to control tart cards took a singular approach which was an effort to destroy sex workers’ advertisements.³⁸⁴ The effects mimic a long history of the visible eradication of sex work from the public eye.³⁸⁵ As Graham Scambler and Annette Scambler explain, “prostitution has never been defined in statute; its meaning therefore is derived from common law. It is judges who have decided and continue to decide precisely what activities amount to prostitution and who can be regarded as a prostitute.”³⁸⁶ This is a concern that continues to be problematic in contemporary British society. The arguments are still valid, there are no significant

³⁷⁹ Sanders, Brents, and Wakefield, *Paying for Sex in a Digital Age*. p.66

³⁸⁰ Shelley, ‘Card Tricks in Phone Boxes’.

³⁸¹ Travis, ‘Phone Box Sex Cards Targeted in Clean-Up’.

³⁸² ‘Calling All Payphone Users’.

³⁸³ Shelley, ‘Card Tricks in Phone Boxes’.

³⁸⁴ Home Office, ‘New Measures to Control Prostitutes’ Cards in Phone Boxes’.

³⁸⁵ Jenn Clamen, ‘Sex in the City: The Clampdown on Prostitutes Advertising in Phone Boxes Is Driving Them out on to the Streets’, *The Guardian*, 9 July 2002, https://web.archive.org/web/20250308125928/https://walnet.org/csis/news/world_2002/guardian-020709.html.

³⁸⁶ Graham Scambler and Annette Scambler, *Rethinking Prostitution: Purchasing Sex in the 1990s* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997). p.59

changes to the criminal justice system and the categorisation, stereotyping and labelling of female sex workers' criminalised status remain prevalent. Documentation from the *Home Office* demonstrates that the Bill did little to deter carders, as the 'problem' of tart card litter was raised in a later 2004 report on prostitution.³⁸⁷

Carders

'Carders' or 'cardboys', were a title given to the people paid by sex workers to distribute and affix their tart cards in London telephone boxes. The gendered role assigned to the card boys aligned with other stereotyped associations of class; it was assumed that the types of people employed by sex workers were criminals, students or "men on the dole."³⁸⁸ Speculation around carding and the financial gains of this enterprise were widely reported in the British media, with uncertainty around the actual sums of money paid for carders' services. According to ephemerist Maurice Rickards, carders were paid up to £350 daily, an amount that varies wildly across different media outlets.³⁸⁹ Dr Caroline Archer's findings from her research revealed that carders were mostly male students and that they were "well remunerated, so it was worth the risk."³⁹⁰ The paucity of information on carders' histories is further evidence of the extreme second-hand marginalisation imposed on those working with, and allies to, sex workers. This also shows how sex workers' histories fall prey

³⁸⁷ Home Office, 'Paying the Price: A Consultation Paper on Prostitution' (London (UK), 2004), https://web.archive.org/web/20241114135740/http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/16_07_04_paying.pdf.

³⁸⁸ Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*. p.349

³⁸⁹ Rickards. p.349; John Grigsby, 'Fight against Call Girl Cards Nets 25,000', *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 1994, The Telegraph Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0702002116/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=ecf38e18>.

³⁹⁰ In conversation with Archer on 30/08/2023.

to misinformed agendas or become entirely fabricated. By re-opening and examining archival material, the nuanced lived realities of sex workers can reveal different perspectives that locate agency in sex work imagery.

Sex work and visibility

I am situating themes of surveillance and violence with close engagement of the existing literature to demonstrate how sex workers have endured a long-standing history of marginalisation based on their appearance. It is a human rights issue. The point is to determine how important the visual aspect of sex work is, this is one way in which sex workers are imagined as threats or criminals. Sex workers have a longstanding discourse in morality and fashion debates that centres on their visual appearance. Media reports have perpetuated this stereotype, utilising images of women wearing high-heeled shoes, stockings and mini skirts to depict this image of the criminalised prostitute body.³⁹¹

The tart cards evidence indoor sex markets, however, scholars have criticised biased literature that has led us to believe that street-based sex work is the most common form of transactional sex.³⁹² Sanders' research found that UK street-based sex work has undergone a "fairly dramatic displacement and 'shrinking' in recent years" due to various, targeted police operations which aim to control street sex

³⁹¹ John Gaskell, 'Streetwalkers Give a Red Light to Vice Zones', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 6 September 1992, The Telegraph Historical Archive, <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0703577981/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=10fcdfb3>.

³⁹² Sanders, 'UK Sex Work Policy'.

work.³⁹³ These operations are carried out due to residential fears and societal anxieties based on negative presumptions of street-based sex work. The hyper-visibility of street-based sex work as opposed to sexual labour conducted in the privacy of indoor venues contributes to the stigma of the “uncivilised” prostitute stereotype.³⁹⁴ It has been pointed out that “the process of moving sex work into the private sphere can be mapped along broader trends toward sexual gentrification.”³⁹⁵

In 1997 the ECP wrote: “Twelve years later in King’s Cross, politicians and the police are still calling for more policing to ‘clean the streets’ of prostitute women.”³⁹⁶ In the UK, local businesses reported that “street prostitution was considered a source of embarrassment and believed to project the wrong image of a company.”³⁹⁷ This demonstrates how deeply rooted whorephobia was and still is, which also confirms why the printing shops that liaised with sex workers as clients are not known. They operated in secret. I argue that the way tart cards have been removed from public view is in alignment with longstanding political strategies that sought to ‘sanitise’ public areas by targeting sex workers as a cause for concern. The following section solidifies these links in greater detail.

³⁹³ Sanders, Brents, and Wakefield, *Paying for Sex in a Digital Age*. p.75; Colin Drury, ‘Britain’s First Legal Red-Light Zone Scrapped Following Years of Complaints’, *The Independent*, 16 June 2021, sec. News,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20250308151724/https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/legal-red-light-holbeck-managed-approach-leeds-b1866849.html>.

³⁹⁴ Persak and Vermeulen, *Reframing Prostitution*. p.15; Carolyn Sally Henham, ‘The Reduction of Visible Spaces of Sex Work in Europe’, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 18, no. 4 (1 December 2021): 909–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-021-00632-4>.

³⁹⁵ Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*. p.44

³⁹⁶ Scambler and Scambler, *Rethinking Prostitution*. p.89

³⁹⁷ Kingston, *Prostitution in the Community*. p.79

Media reports

The prevalence of tart cards reported in the media provides accounts that verify how the tart cards were seen as the residual waste of the sex industry. These archived reports, such as the article headlined *The London phone boxes that are being used by 'prostitutes and as toilets'*, show the links between sex workers' visual culture, disgust, and criminality.³⁹⁸ This connotation can clearly be identified in photographer Tracey Thorne's work, (Figure 3) where tart cards are advertised alongside vandalism on a phone box that reads 'public toilet'. From around 1996, questions around the weaponisation of waste material and what was regarded as 'sex industry litter' began to rise to the surface.³⁹⁹ Waste became political because it was tethered to the erasure of marginalised groups of people who were accused of creating such mess in civilised society.

³⁹⁸ Gregory, 'The London Phone Boxes That Are Being Used "by Prostitutes and as Toilets"'.

³⁹⁹ Ibrahim, 'In Kiosks Of London, Card Game Gets Dirty'.



Figure 12. *BT Today*, Magazine article clipping (detail).⁴⁰⁰

⁴⁰⁰ 'Getting Tough on Phone Box Vice Cards', *BT Today*, September 1996, Sex ephemera: sex worker phonebox cards. Box 12, Wellcome Collection.

The environmental pollution attributed to the tart cards is apparent when visually analysing newspaper cuttings and ephemera from archival collections. In Figure 12 the ephemera has been ‘clipped’ or cut by hand with scissors, by the sole collector of the tart card archives at the Wellcome Collection. The addition of this item in the box of cards contextualises the collection within the criminalisation of the sex industry.

The photograph in the report depicts a white man, whose identity I speculate to be that of Westminster Councillor Miles Young or an uncredited interviewee from the article. The figure is dressed in formal attire and looks down at the camera from a standing position in a red London phone box. The way the figure is presented gives an air of authority as the man’s gaze meets the photographer’s position below himself. The man is surrounded by clear, plastic waste bags full of tart cards, that flood the composition up to his knees, while he holds a substantial number of loose cards in his hands. The brief article cites interviews with four men from various organisations including BT, the Met police and members of Parliament. The article does not have any involvement with women or with sex workers themselves. This is important because it demonstrates arguments in sex worker’s rights literature that identify problems in social structures where male-dominated authoritative institutions impose laws on marginalised women.⁴⁰¹ The article cites Science and Technology Minister Ian Taylor who said:

The practice of prostitutes advertising their services on cards placed in phone kiosks have become increasingly offensive and seedy. I welcome the

⁴⁰¹ Jane Scoular, *The Subject of Prostitution: Sex Work, Law and Social Theory* (UK: Routledge, 2015).

telecoms companies' willingness to work together within the industry to tackle this problem. I hope that all operators will join BT in supporting this initiative to stamp out these unsightly advertising cards.⁴⁰²

This piece of ephemera is indicative of the type of language geared towards sex workers in the media at that time. It was reported that the Westminster council agreed that tart cards "blighted London's image" meaning that how policymakers viewed sex work ephemera reflected the concerns and whorephobic prejudices informed by mainstream society.⁴⁰³ This shows how the causal direction of misinformation gathered traction by fear-mongering narratives that were not informed by sex workers at all. The echo chamber of opinions cast on sex workers as obscene image makers resounded from authoritative figures such as policymakers and the police. The ephemera demonstrates how the exchange of information between legislators and officials was upheld through a male, outsider's perspective. In another development, the opinion of Metropolitan police inspector Ronald Holmes was used to elaborate on the social problem of sex work and advertising in London, Holmes quote stated, "There is no doubt the cards are becoming more explicit."⁴⁰⁴ The people in charge of making laws coined sex workers and their imagery as offensive detritus that required sanitation.

As sex work researcher Raven Bowen writes: "Sex workers are not treated as members of our communities deserving of respect and protection, but as public nuisances, to be disposed of like garbage."⁴⁰⁵ The tart cards and the accompanying

⁴⁰² 'Getting Tough on Phone Box Vice Cards'.

⁴⁰³ 'Getting Tough on Phone Box Vice Cards'.

⁴⁰⁴ 'Getting Tough on Phone Box Vice Cards'.

⁴⁰⁵ Raven Bowen, *Work, Money and Duality: Trading Sex as a Side Hustle* (UK: Bristol University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447358831>. p.19

archival material on the phenomenon are the visual evidence of such attitudes identified in sociological research. I argue that if “representations are raw evidentiary materials” then this explains how sex workers have been criminalised via external parties in their imagery.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁶ Katherine Biber, ‘Law, Evidence and Representation’, in *Routledge International Handbook of Visual Criminology* (Routledge, 2017). p.14



Figure 13. Two articles adjacently displayed in the Wellcome collection.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁷ 'Sex Ephemera : Sex Worker Phonebox Cards. Box 18.', Wellcome Collection, 18, accessed 10 May 2024,
<https://web.archive.org/web/20250309122858/https://wellcomecollection.org/works/bedatv3h>.

The image of the 'white slave' became synonymous with damaging stereotypes associated with Eastern European sex workers in the millennium, as the media were presenting scare-mongering features with a focus on human trafficking.⁴⁰⁸ Media articles were produced at a rapid rate, demonising immigrants and sex workers, as 'clean- up' campaigns to rid street-based sex workers were in full force in areas of London to present a respectable version of the city in light of the Olympics. The articles show the lack of nuance in understanding the sex industry, and the disparity between autonomy and sex trafficking. They demonstrate how the character of the male pimp was depicted as the villain in- keeping with SWERF frameworks.⁴⁰⁹ The tart cards were the tangible objects of an industry that policymakers were on the periphery of and literally became the 'target' of campaigners' sanitation efforts. The tart cards were viewed as the material extension of the sex industry that civilians would otherwise not encounter, therefore they culminated in representing tensions imparted by anti-sex work feminist thought.

The tart cards evidence the landscape of sex workers' marginalised status and reveal how they were responding to oppressive 'victim' narratives. In Figure 14 the text-only design simply reads "I like my job" with a contact number. This archival material is dated from 1997 and demonstrates how sex workers were responding to general assumptions of their lack of agency in the sex industry. This message is reinforced again later in Figure 15 where the textual information reads "I love my job", explicitly subverting human trafficking themes.

⁴⁰⁸ Thompson and Veash, 'Britain's Sex Slave Trade Booms'.

⁴⁰⁹ Tiggey May, Alex Harocopos, and Michael Hough, 'For Love or Money: Pimps and the Management of Sex Work', Police Research Series (London (UK): Home Office, 1 January 2000). p.10

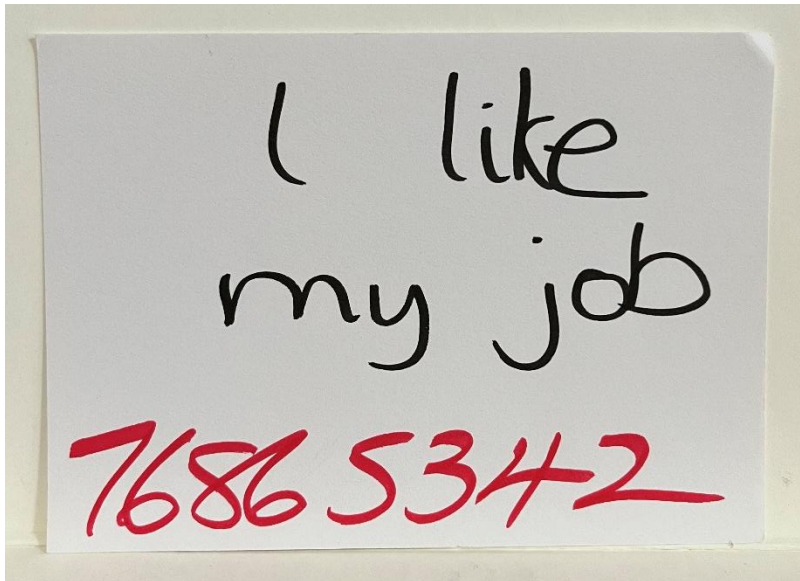


Figure 14. *I Like My Job* card, Háy collection, 1997.



Figure 15. *I Love My Job* card, Wellcome collection, 2013.

The addition of this declaration of 'love' for the job is listed alongside the services available and is positioned at the top right-hand side of the composition, a prime advertising space. The card was in circulation in 2013 and corresponds to the aftermath of the Olympics and the 'cleaning up' strategies put in place by local authorities. I argue that this message was instilled to disrupt mainstream opinions put forth in the media about sex workers' negative connotations with human trafficking and slavery. Sex workers were actively promoting themselves as independent agents, however, this was not accepted, understood, or even listened to, as evidenced in the earlier example, Figure 14. The sex worker was responding to the wider social implications of slavery narratives, recognising that the partial criminalisation of sex buyers meant that the client may feel outside pressure as a 'sex pest'. The shame and stigma perpetuated towards male sex buyers was at the detriment to sex workers, as they had to persuade their clients that they were, in fact, autonomous beings. The tart cards show how sex workers have been advocating for their rights and safety, yet this has not been picked up in academic discourses.

Disgust and social abjection

This section seeks to address themes of social stratification to situate how discourses have placed sex workers as a site of fear and degeneration. The fear around sex workers is reflected in the way that their existence is criminalised. For example, women sex workers who are alone are feared because they are untrustworthy. The traits and personalities that people assume in the construction of the sex workers' bodies contribute toward a fearmongering tactic that translated into

British law. Theoretical enquiries have been explored in psychoanalysis and sociology, the prominent theories are outlined in this part to understand wider society's mistrust and fear of the sex-working community.

Herz's theory of moral disgust applies to the broader societal values of sex work as a threat in which the underpinnings of what behaviour is deemed acceptable, and what actions are tolerated or repelled.⁴¹⁰ Dirt can be tangible and intangible, however, the image of the sex worker encompasses both parallels of moral impurity and physical contamination. Another aspect of Kolnai's theory of disgust expresses that the tangible filth is implied by a gendered, feminine excess. The sexualisation of the sex worker's body as a gendered, female form is often attributed to stereotypical feminine traits. The 'excessive' nature of the sex worker is largely categorised as superficial adornments to the body, such as long, hair, wigs, eyelash extensions, glamorous or revealing clothing, and high-heeled boots or shoes.

Tyler's theory of social abjection is prefaced in disgust as an indication of 'other'.⁴¹¹ Tyler's theory of abjection is applicable to untangling the societal fear applied to sex workers, as bodies, entities, waste, and objects. The imagery of the 'sex worker' has roused anxiety, disgust and anger and is the central focus which has been prevalent within tart card literature.

⁴¹⁰ Rachel Herz, *That's Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012). p.209

⁴¹¹ Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*. p.26

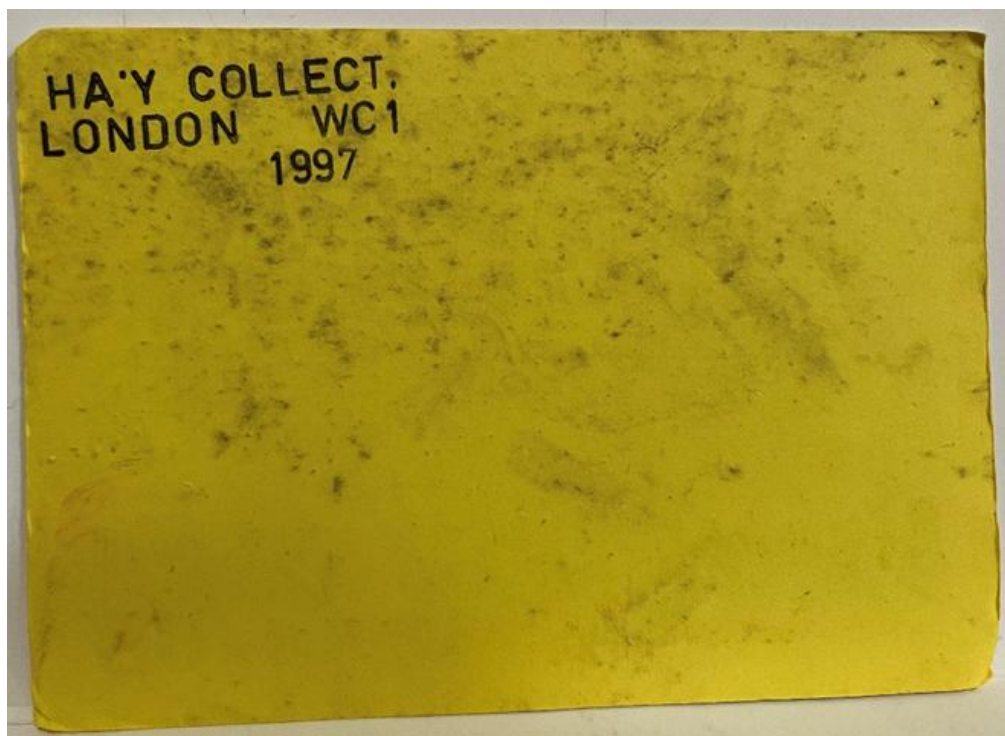


Figure 16. Vandalised *Horny, Sexy, Blonde* card. Háy collection, 1997.

As depicted in Figure 16, the additional hand-drawn graffiti implies such themes of disgust. The original image on the card does not contain explicit nudity but

depicts sexuality in the vein of glamour modelling photography. The sex worker's body is reduced to a receptacle of male fantasy, similar to Victorian attitudes of the 'prostitute body' as a "seminal drain".⁴¹² The vandalism to the image from an external party attributes these values to the sex worker's body, it is not an autonomous choice that the sex worker has incorporated into the design. This demonstrates wider societal issues with sex workers' representation rather than that of the workers themselves. The material evidences how sex workers' bodies are violated, they are deemed less valuable than other people. The damage to the reverse of the card shows how the object has been (mis)handled and relegated to the dirty floor, thus denoting her as detritus.

The immorality associated with sex workers is vastly promoted by the media, such as the untimely death of infamous *Playboy Playmate* Anna Nicole Smith in 2007.⁴¹³ Psychoanalytical theories of disgust which promote the emotional reaction of disgust to that of death are interconnected to themes of sex work and value. "The prototypical object of disgust is... in general, the transition of the living into the state of death."⁴¹⁴ The mainstream narratives of sex workers as disposable waste material are tethered to violence and crime. Where the shadow of past murder victims haunts the contemporary images of sex workers. Kolnai's theory of disgust is useful to unravel the affective nature of tart cards and to situate their typical placement within anti-sex work feminist discourse. Kolnai theorises that people feel "disgust toward what is viscous, what adheres in an improper place."⁴¹⁵ The application of this theory

⁴¹² Timothy J. Gilfoyle, 'Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity', *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 1 (1999): 117–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2650183>.p.121

⁴¹³ Jacque Lynn Foltyn, 'Bodies of Evidence: Criminalising the Celebrity Corpse', *Mortality* 21, no. 3 (2 July 2016): 246–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2016.1181351>.

⁴¹⁴ Kolnai, 'On Disgust'. p.53

⁴¹⁵ Kolnai. p.55

is suitable to understanding the material culture of the object and its' affective response in the public domain. The idea of proximity and disgust being able to "adhere" to objects is one theory that can apply to 'sex industry waste'.⁴¹⁶ Bodily fluids are seen as disgusting because they are organic matter that decomposes.⁴¹⁷

The sex workers' historical connotations with miasma theory and Alexandre Parent Duchatelet's hypothesis of the social sewer connect the physical bodily waste to tart cards as an extension of the waste or sex workers' bodies.⁴¹⁸ Another aspect of Kolnai's theory addresses the subjective view of beauty that intertwines superficial aesthetics with sex workers' bodily autonomy "an object may be very ugly without being disgusting, and may even be disgusting while being only moderately and perhaps only ambiguously ugly (for example, some disgusting insects, or a dressed-up harlot)."⁴¹⁹ This projects ideas of beauty and morality as further discussed in the next chapter.

Disrupting criminality narratives

The following evidential points contribute to the thesis' wider argument that sex workers' tart cards can be read in an alternative reading of the ephemera and give a more nuanced view of the sex workers depicted on the cards. In this section, an investigation into a collector's methodologies in procuring and researching tart cards is undertaken to understand the motivations behind the process of acquiring data. This is followed by an exploration into the carders' roles to gain further evidence of a

⁴¹⁶ Kolnai. p.55

⁴¹⁷ Kolnai. p.54

⁴¹⁸ Charles Bernheimer, 'Parent- Duchatelet: Engineer of Abjection', in *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century France* (Durham N.C: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁴¹⁹ Kolnai, 'On Disgust'. p.100

different perspective from the third parties working alongside sex workers. These accounts can help contextualise how the tart cards have been situated in binary frameworks and reveal other avenues of exploration and future research questions.

Ágnes Háý

I have corresponded with the collector of the tart cards housed at the Bishopsgate Institute, Ágnes Háý who offered invaluable insights into her experience collecting the ephemera.⁴²⁰ Her accounts of engaging with the tart cards build wider evidence of the social attitudes around carding and sex work, revealing a personal account that can provide an alternative reading of the cards than the existing literature alone. Ágnes Háý emigrated to England in 1985-6 and found the cards in London's phone boxes astonishing, she did not recall having anything similar to the tart cards in her experience growing up in Hungary. Háý is an artist and folklorist and has a background in collecting Hungarian street lore. Identifying as a feminist, her "mission is about the vagina" and her artistic practice explores a range of themes from Babylonian mythology to the symbol of the Sheela na gig.⁴²¹ The tart cards can be read as street lore, the folklore of the cards is intertwined with British culture and society. The fantasised character of the sex worker can be read in a mythological context.

⁴²⁰ In a conversation with Háý via Zoom on 01/06/2023. 20:00 GMT, approx. 60 mins duration.

⁴²¹ In conversation with Háý, 01/06/2023; Ágnes Háý, '@agneshayart', Instagram, 2 April 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CqjOraNslID/?img_index=1.

Archives: “I like Steph”⁴²²

Háy donated her collection of tart cards to the Bishopsgate Institute in 2023 and said that the collections manager Stephen Dickers was “convincing” that the cards would be well looked after. She liked his personality. The Bishopsgate Institute was founded in 1894 by Reverend William Rogers and opened to the public on New Year’s Day (1895). The reverend was inspired by the struggles of the working-class poor of the East End of London. Rogers intended to create educational spaces, libraries and universities but wanted to ensure they were accessible to everyone regardless of their background. The Bishopsgate Institute’s contemporary statement aligns with that of the historical figure, priding itself on making the collections as accessible as possible, making it unique because its archival collection features working-class and marginalised histories. The Reverend’s vision is upheld through the continuation of the original mission of building a ‘cultural centre’ and the Institute has remained faithful to these values. The library and archives manager Stefan Dickers has been responsible for sourcing extensive LGBTQ+ material since 2011. The Bishopsgate Institute “preserve and celebrate the lives of everyday people - often telling the stories which are neglected by the mainstream.”⁴²³ The collection is accessible to the general public for free which is a unique feature of the institution that caters to include everyone. “Anyone can explore the collections for free, supported by our team of experts.”⁴²⁴ The collection dates from 1890 to the present day and is widely known as the UK’s most comprehensive collection of LGBTQ+ archival material, including the library and special collections. Dickers maintains that “I’m very

⁴²² In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

⁴²³ Stefan Dickers, *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQ+ Places and Stories*, ed. Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell (Milton, UK: RIBA Publications, 2022), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6964008>. p.160

⁴²⁴ Dickers. p.160

passionate about making sure that everybody's history is included in the collections."⁴²⁵ The institute is open to collecting working-class histories including London's history, radical politics, and feminism. The history of the Institute as a left-wing organisation frames the tart card archives in a different way to other institutions, such as the Wellcome collection, for example, that pathologizes the tart cards because it seeks to illuminate marginalised voices.

⁴²⁵ *Archiving at the Bishopsgate Institute - Beyond the Binary at the Pitt Rivers Museum*, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307132524/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G41QrKRVgxU>. Approx. 22:10.



Figure 17. Photograph of cards in the Háy Collection, 2022.

The Ágnes Háy tart cards are boxed and collected according to their phone directory. The cards were sorted and arranged into categories of their landline phone numbers. The cards have been organised to display how tart cards' visual styles vary from different socio-economic areas. Such information would have been invaluable

for the ‘vice’ teams that wanted to eradicate phone sex lines in the 1990s.⁴²⁶ An examination of the area codes would have revealed the approximate location and the types of workplaces, and how many sex workers were advertising at one site (brothel). This is important to note because in UK law two or more sex workers operating simultaneously classes as an illegal brothel, despite many pro-sex work activists campaigning for the safety of sex workers.⁴²⁷ Allies advocating for sex workers’ rights argue that sex workers’ criminalised working conditions, such as working alone, increase the chance of violence, either from clients or police brutality.⁴²⁸ This is one of the reasons why the cards are so important in the wider context of exploring sex workers’ histories. The collector’s motivations for the ephemera also unearth social conventions around the sex industry and document the environment in which sex workers were navigating.

Due to Háy’s background in folklore and mythology, her methodology and cataloguing strategies reflect this and are evidence of sex workers’ existence in London. The cards were date stamped and included the area code, initially, this process was meticulous and the first two years of her card collection were systematically collated. After collecting for five years, her interests took different directions, meaning that later cards in the collection were not stamped or given the same attention. An archivist advised her to donate the cards, she admits that most people would question why she was keeping those and that she should throw them

⁴²⁶ Mary Fagan, ‘BT Blocks Direct Access to Telephone Porn Lines’, *The Independent*, 29 June 1993, The Independent Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FQ4200381669/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=204ee712>.

⁴²⁷ Gideon Long, ‘Reuters: British Prostitutes Want Their Work Decriminalised’, *English Collective of Prostitutes* (blog), 3 December 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240916102550/https://prostitutescollective.net/british-prostitutes-want-their-work-decriminalised/>.

⁴²⁸ Katie Cruz, ‘Unmanageable Work, (Un)Liveable Lives: The UK Sex Industry, Labour Rights and the Welfare State’, *Social & Legal Studies* 22, no. 4 (2013): 465–88, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/solestu22&i=463>. p.480

away.⁴²⁹ Recognising the transient nature of the tart cards, Háy defended the ephemera, stating: “I believe in collecting and archiving.”⁴³⁰ This drives the argument for collecting sex work ephemera, I argue that an individual does not need to fully endorse the sex industry or hold ‘pro-sex work’ views to appreciate the significance of the ephemera as a valuable piece of social history.

Háy’s focus in collecting the tart cards was to explore social power relations: “It is more than sexuality, I wanted to learn about punishment and power.”⁴³¹ Háy’s research questions were centred on heterosexual fetishisation, asking: what attracts men in middle-class England? And what does British society think of punishment and sexuality? She collected tart cards for this purpose, but her findings were never formally documented, however, she did write a short article on the phenomenon in a Hungarian magazine.⁴³² Háy concluded that punishment was sexualised in tart card imagery and found the prevalence of violent terminology ‘caning, spanking, and domination’ for example, written on the cards shocking.⁴³³ For Háy, the cards evidenced a wider cultural problem with violence and control and had “nothing to do with sex”, and in her opinion, she believes the cards are a metaphor for primal urges, therefore the cards possess a primitive quality.⁴³⁴ I agree that the cards demonstrate a broad range of erotic services that branch into BDSM and punishment, however I do not agree that the cards are primitive. The cards reveal a rich enterprise that is not solely focused on sexual violence or power play. These themes do crop up, as do

⁴²⁹ In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

⁴³⁰ In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

⁴³¹ In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

⁴³² Háy, ‘Punish me!’

⁴³³ Háy.

⁴³⁴ In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

a whole range of other services that range from 'vanilla' to 'kinky' sex and are not easily defined, nor do they exist independently.

Themes of control and sexuality have been raised by other collectors of the ephemera, with Caroline Archer expanding on this subject from her own research.⁴³⁵ The BDSM and fetish subcultures evident in tart card imagery also show how sex workers were viewed as different because they advertised services that were outside of typical monogamous and heterosexual activities. The intersecting roles and subversion of dominance in some sex workers' services flipped traditional gendered roles of female passiveness and male dominance, resulting in a shift in power dynamics. Háy focused on kink and fetish from the perspective of the potential (male) customers of whom the cards were aimed. Her research was driven by discovering if British heterosexual, middle-class male sexuality was tethered to kink, fetish and punishment. She identified that punishment had been sexualised and wanted to explore the commodification of caning, spanking and humiliation. Háy reported that British activities of kink and fetish were different from her experience in Hungary. (In her opinion Europe was more open-minded about sex, but the sexual landscape that welcomed guilt and shame in the UK was very different). The tart cards evidence a wide range of fetishes and can reveal the prevalence of underground subcultures within British history.

Háy recounted her process of collecting the cards, sometimes sweeping entire phone boxes, with dozens of adverts, taking all of them under the guise of "pretending to be a good moral citizen."⁴³⁶ The cards were collected from various

⁴³⁵ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*. p.544; Archer, 'Fetish, Rubber, Spanking & Schoolgirls'.

⁴³⁶ In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

locations in London, as her background as a folklorist encouraged her to see patterns and trends in the cards' messages. Háy's results determined that many of the cards shared identical phone numbers, when she called, the same maid answered, this alludes to brothels and organised (illegal) properties.

Tart card collecting

Háy pretended to be either a "pervert or a puritan" to collect the ephemera and remembered sometimes "moral people" took the cards down and threw them on the ground.⁴³⁷ Háy recalled that she received mixed reactions because some people thought it was a positive action because she was cleaning up pornographic material. When Háy physically took the cards from the boxes some carders tried to verbally abuse her but she shouted back. She feared that they would 'beat her up' and was "afraid of them" because she was undoing the carders' work.⁴³⁸ Háy did not witness much activity in the daytime, recounting that the carders came out at night and they carried a big ball of blu- tak, to affix the cards to the inside of the phone boxes.

Háy is interested in social hierarchical levels and power and advocates that the cards have a wider social-historical context. The cards are "just one part of the world that she observes."⁴³⁹ Háy's broader concerns in her artworks address political activism, in a sentiment shared by pro-sex work feminists from the 1970s, Háy stated, "all work is prostitution, so it's just the detail."⁴⁴⁰ Her account of the ephemera

⁴³⁷ In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

⁴³⁸ In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

⁴³⁹ In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

⁴⁴⁰ LIES Collective, "All the Work We Do As Women": Feminist Manifestos on Prostitution and the State, 1977' 1 (2012): 215–33, <https://www.liesjournal.net/volume1-14-prostitution.html>; In conversation with Háy, 01/06/2023.

implied she has no moral objection to prostitution, but capitalism. Háy argues that sex workers get killed because of society, it is not fair to assume that sex workers get killed because they deserve it. Háy's motivations for collecting the ephemera disrupt criminality themes because she recorded data for a sociology-driven exploration into sexuality studies not for the sole use of documenting sex workers as a marginalised community.

Carders' accounts

Carders have been accused of being "aggressive", hostile men who perpetrate patriarchal power dynamics between sex workers and themselves.⁴⁴¹ This idea promotes that they are exploitative and almost pimp-like characters who prey on vulnerable sex workers for their financial benefit. There are accounts of sex worker advocates, such as the notorious carder Graham Binns in historical newspaper archives, yet these have not been examined in relation to the tart cards.⁴⁴² I argue that the engagement with sex work ephemera can reveal an alternative social history of the carders' roles in the sex industry.

⁴⁴¹ Richard Ford, '1,000 Fine to Halt "tart Card" Displays', *The Times*, 19 May 1999, The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0500945107/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=6ed0f240>.

⁴⁴² Dan Conaghan, 'Prostitute Card Boys Fight Their Convictions', *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 1995, The Telegraph Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0701749349/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=4e278332>; Smerin, 'Prostitutes?'

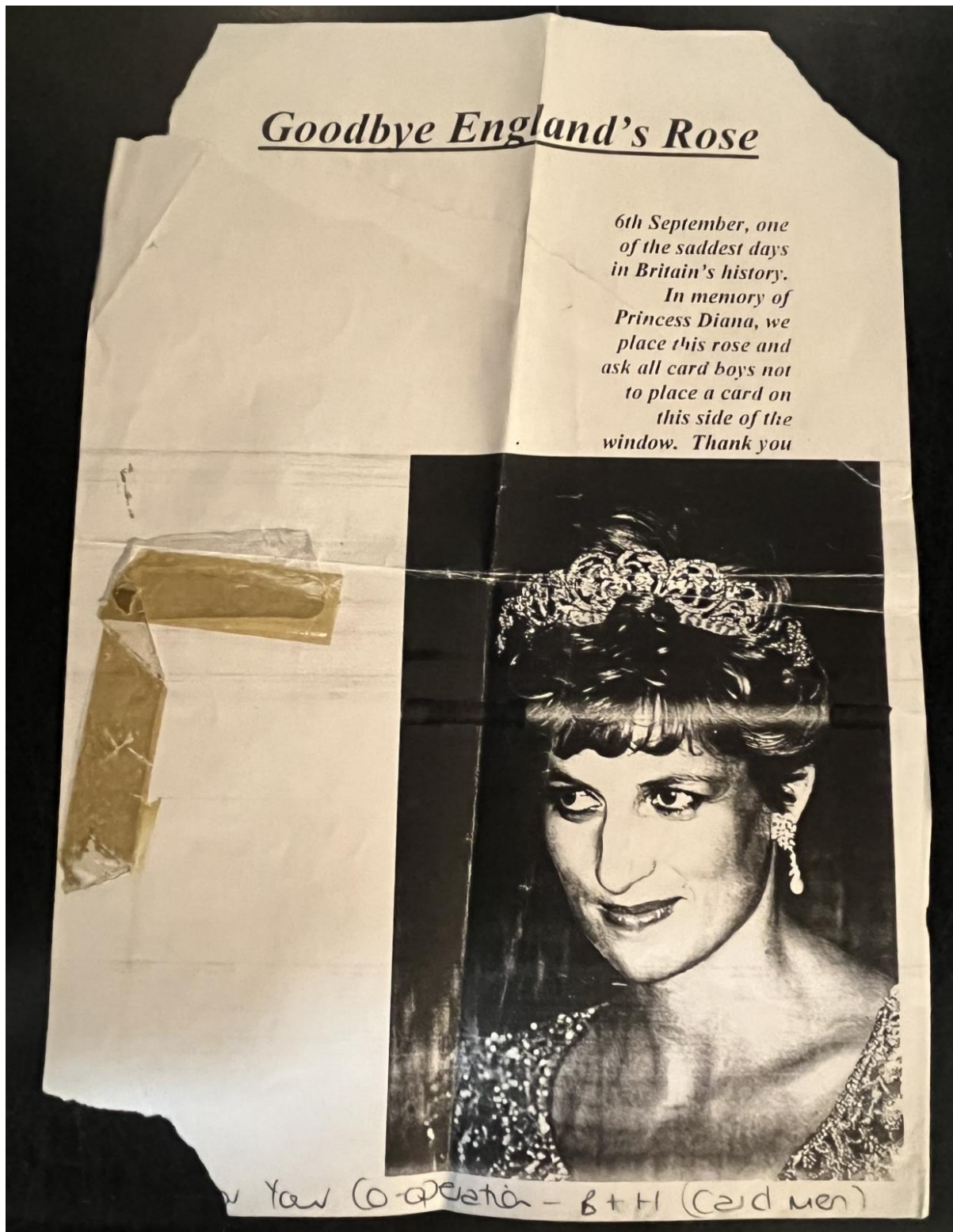


Figure 18. Photograph of Princess Diana tribute, Háy collection, 1997.

Háy collected a different piece of tart card ephemera (Figure 18) which I argue, shows how sex workers' bodies were perceived and categorised as different from other women. This document that carders taped in a London phone box is crucial to understanding the broader scope of the sex industry and how this ephemera contributed to the visual culture of sex workers' bodies. The collected printout provides another account of the surveillance techniques implemented towards sex workers as criminalised individuals.

By disseminating the visual cultural relevance of the ephemera, it reveals different stories of the carders, who were mostly framed as threatening, working-class men. My visual analysis of the Diana memorial printout also demonstrates how carders were upholding ideologies about women through distributing such material. Princess Diana was highly regarded and her controversial death was an integral part of British culture. The death of Princess Diana may have perpetuated the "English Rose" rhetoric, associated with British women, sexuality and gender roles that were prevalent in tart cards from the 1990s.

The purpose of the display was a gesture to pay tribute to the princess who died suddenly in a car accident. Though the sentiment is a wider reflection of a societal culture around the death of royalty, the visual analysis of the ephemera also engages with themes of sexuality that can be explored through a feminist framework. Women's roles can be examined with a feminist theoretical positioning using Freudian psychoanalysis where women could be morally categorised as either good or bad (Virgins or Whores).⁴⁴³ This approach is useful when considering sex workers

⁴⁴³ Katy Deepwell, *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* (UK: Manchester University Press, 1995); Sigmund Freud and Philip Rieff, 'The Most Prevalent Form of Degredation in Erotic Life (1912)', in *Sexuality and The Psychology of Love* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

marginalised position in society, which is further stigmatised, as discussed by the feminist activist group, the Guerilla Girls: “Good whores get saved by rich, good-looking husbands, and the bad whores go crazy, drink too much, get sick and die.”⁴⁴⁴ This application of Freud’s Madonna/ Whore theory helps to contextualise how sex workers have been viewed as different from other women and have been placed in binary discourses that I wish to deconstruct.

Historical constructions of ‘the prostitute’ in literature, media, political and official discourses have been fascinated with the ‘whore’ image which has dominated the cultural imagination. Pheterson (1989: 231) neatly summarizes: ‘The prostitute is the prototype of the stigmatized woman’ defined by unchastity which casts her status as impure. The ‘prostitute’, or the ‘whore’, is contrasted to the female mirror image of the ‘Madonna’ which portrays the image of pure femininity: that is, sacred and holy. The ‘Madonna/whore’ binary projects the status of the prostitute woman as a failed example of womanhood, defined by her immoral sexual behaviours, and someone to be avoided.⁴⁴⁵

Sex industry scholars recognise that sex workers are viewed as different from other ‘normal’ civilised women, however, there are few explorations into the sex workers’ self-image.⁴⁴⁶ My visual analysis of existing archival material produced by sex workers contributes to such studies. Háý’s personal account of collecting cards

⁴⁴⁴ Guerrilla Girls, *Bitches, Bimbos, and Ballbreakers: The Guerrilla Girls’ Illustrated Guide to Female Stereotypes* (New York, N.Y: Penguin Books, 2003). p.42

⁴⁴⁵ Sanders, O’Neill, and Pitcher, *Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy & Politics*. p.2

⁴⁴⁶ Waring, ‘Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms (Chapter 16) - Visual Activism and Marginalised Communities (Women Full Service Sex Workers) in Online Spaces.’

from phone booths and her interactions with carders tells a story of an underground and hidden criminalised pursuit.⁴⁴⁷

The ephemera can be read in a context that identifies a lack of respect towards sex workers because the carders ask to keep Diana's image separate from images of sex workers. It can also be read in a different way that shows that the carders respect women and understand that the two types of ephemera are separate entities and that displaying them alongside each other could be perceived as morbid, in poor taste, or just as a visually misaligned and combative mix of two wildly different messages. The printed document had a rose taped to the paper, next to the portrait of the princess. Carders paying their respect to a royal figure shows a level of compassion and empathy for a human that they would have had little to no personal interaction with on a daily basis. This could also be said of their employers, the sex workers themselves. This demonstrates that they have the capacity to understand the nuance in respecting women's interchangeable roles as princesses or sex workers, a personality trait which is not afforded to carders currently, in the existing knowledge of tart cards and carders' histories. Again, the debate of respect and whorearchy comes into the discussion because it centres on themes of perception and representation.

It is routinely published that sex workers' voices are missing from sex industry debates.⁴⁴⁸ This is problematic because it raises ethical concerns about who is responsible for making policies around sex work and questions whether outside parties possess intimate knowledge of working in the sex industry to construct laws which prioritise the safety of sex workers. I argue that such critiques should extend to

⁴⁴⁷ Háy, 'Punish me!' p.107

⁴⁴⁸ *Our Voices*.

the visual representation of sex workers. For instance, the tart cards received a great deal of attention from the public, this in turn, has generated many collections of the ephemera but has also spread a lot of misinformation.

In a YouTube video, amateur vlogger and enthusiast Jonathan Vlog says of tart cards: “Anyone with half a brain knows that when they ring that number they’re not going to be speaking to a Polish supermodel.”⁴⁴⁹ This critique echoes viewpoints in the existing literature which seem untrustworthy of sex workers’ images on tart cards.⁴⁵⁰ More interestingly, a comment in defence of sex workers left on the YouTube video serves as a piece of evidence of carders’ histories.

@gareththomas2376’s response to Johnathan Vlog’s statement appears to validate the authenticity of sex workers’ appearance from his lived experience and personal account of carding in the 1990s.

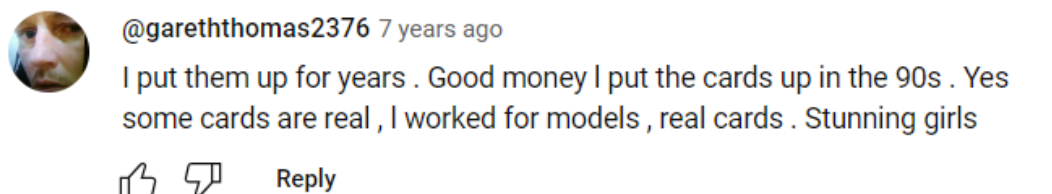


Figure 19. YouTube comment, posted 2017.⁴⁵¹

If the person commenting is truthful and is who they say they are, (a carder from the 1990s) then his position defends sex workers, as he is actively verifying the the models’ authenticity. The comment left on a YouTube video about London’s tart

⁴⁴⁹ ‘Tart Cards’ in *London Phone Boxes*, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250326193402/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPBpG53coi0>. 01:48.

⁴⁵⁰ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*.

⁴⁵¹ ‘Tart Cards’ in *London Phone Boxes*.

cards may reveal another human element to the social dynamics between the people involved in and around the delicate economy of London's sex markets in the 1990s. The relationships formed between carders and sex workers are barely referenced, instead, the striking visual aesthetic of the cards and typology take precedence in the existing literature. This comment is interesting because it gives a carder's account. In the original video the content maker questions how genuine the depictions of sex workers were on the cards. This is an argument that is prevalent within the literature and is a prerequisite for many collectors in their categorisation of tart card imagery, such as Brian Salter's research methods for example.

This account recognises that some of the models advertised on the tart cards were repurposed images from other sources. Yet, the carder's comment subverts mainstream misogynistic views that accused sex workers of fabricating, 'ripping-off' or editing their appearance to appear more attractive. This evidences wider issues in sex workers' representation, revealing how misinformation around the sex industry is circulated due to the lack of direct research inputs from those with sex-work experience.

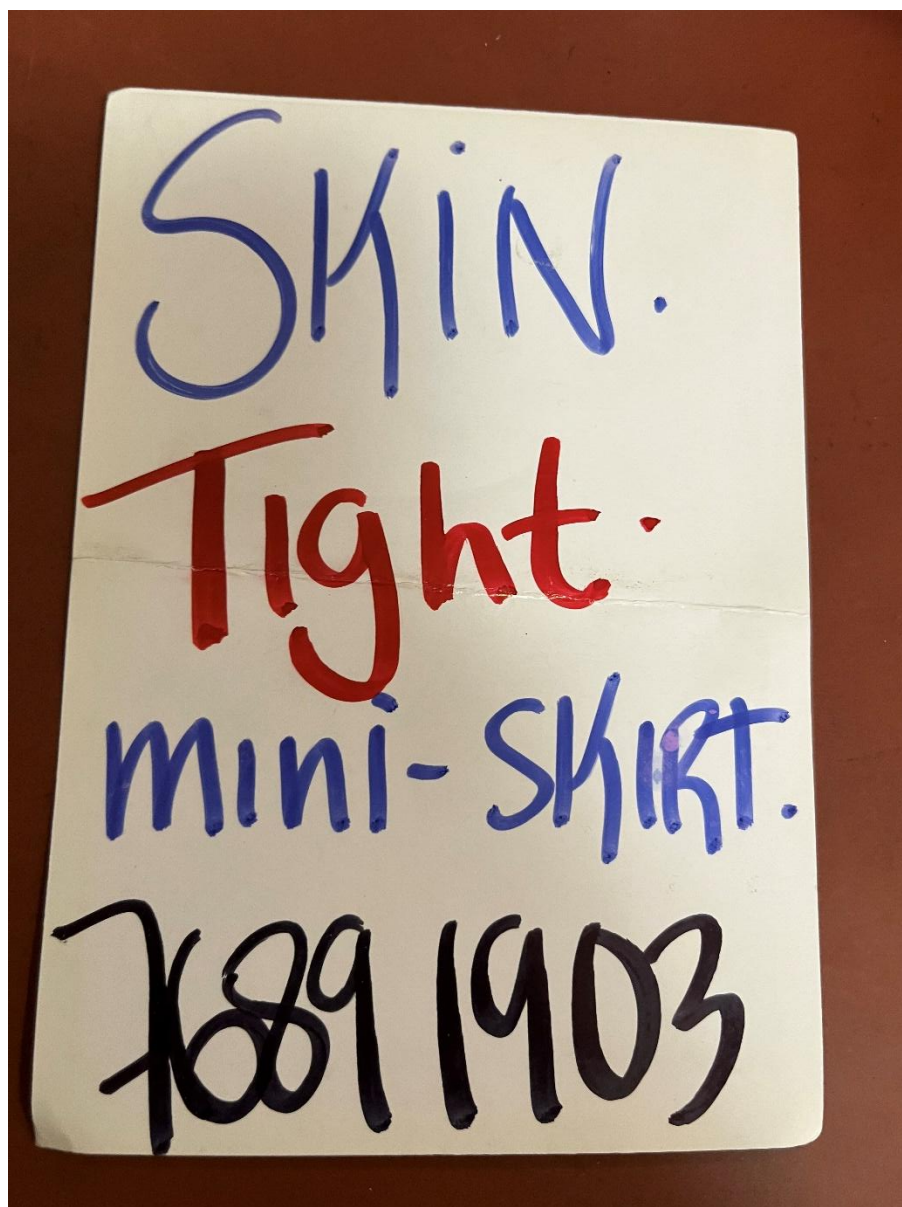


Figure 20. Skin Tight Mini-Skirt, Háý collection, (undated) c.1998-9.

Visual analysis of tart cards

The visual analysis of the hand-written advertisement (Figure 20) reveals how the sex worker appropriated a visual trope that has been a significant visual marker of which sex workers are associated. The image of the sex worker in a skin-tight mini skirt is reproduced in the media, TV shows and cinema. It is a recurring trope that

has been used in the past to identify sex workers' criminalised status.⁴⁵² This strong visual metaphor works in both ways to both harm and protect, SWERFs may view this card as derogatory. This is due to the sex worker reducing their identity to an object that relies on the sexualisation of body parts and encourages the exploitation of women and girls' bodies to satisfy the male gaze.⁴⁵³ Whereas a more nuanced reading of the card may find the advert as having autonomy. I argue that the sex worker is relying on tropes already in mainstream consciousness to communicate a message of sexual availability effectively. The medium used is undetectable, as the marker pens are widely accessible, they can be purchased in any stationery shop, superstore or market stall. The four-letter phrase accentuates text in different colours and cases.

The coloured marker pen or Sharpie tart card is eye-catching because it fights against the criminalised description paired with sex work aesthetics. 'Skin tight mini-skirt' conjures the cultural imaginary of the sex worker's body. The words used to describe the sex worker have to do with the visual representation of her form, the advert is not sexually suggestive or explicit, it does not offer a menu of services available, nor does it include X-rated language. This demonstrates how ingrained the image of the sex worker is because it can be summed up in four words. The handwritten advert is a cheap and effective way to advertise, it also removes the need for photographs or images because the description summons the imaginary of the prospective client. This could be read as a safety tactic, as the sex worker does not have to risk becoming outed in public. Their anonymity is protected to a degree and the use of ambiguous text, though the message has an obvious sexual

⁴⁵² Goodall, *The Comfort of Sin*.

⁴⁵³ Gerassi, 'A Heated Debate'. p.82

undertone, is not conducive to breaking obscenity laws. The card cannot be criminalised, this is what policymakers were grappling with, because they understood tart card production to be operating in the grey areas of the law.

Conclusions

The key findings from my research reveal that sex workers often self-censored their images to comply with legal constraints, utilising culturally ingrained descriptors about their appearance to navigate their circumstances. The main evidence of an alternative reading of the tart cards is in the body of the existing material itself. The visual analysis of tart card production details how sex workers were facing financial prosecution, the threat of deportation or displacement and many other forms of police-led abuses, yet they continued to advertise in this way. The archives are a living document of how the ephemera has been understood in different contexts. I argue that the contexts are polarising and narrow, which means that there is scope for understanding a deeper, holistic meaning to sex work ephemera. The cards have associations with the criminal underclass, yet they are beginning to flourish in exhibitions discussing working class and labour conditions.⁴⁵⁴

The overwhelming body of tart cards demonstrates how sex workers were producing their advertisements while considering the law. The tone of the adverts was sexual in nature, yet this had to be done in a way that complied with obscenity and vice laws.⁴⁵⁵ For example, discreet phrases with double- entendres such as 'French lessons' or ' "Large Chest for Sale" were typical of the late 80s and early

⁴⁵⁴ 'Hard Graft'.

⁴⁵⁵ Stone, 'Out of Sight, out of Mind?'

1990s tart cards as examined in the following chapter.⁴⁵⁶ The addition of text has similar design implications. The visual analysis of the tart cards typography shows that these were used interchangeably. Sometimes the lettering acted as a form of censorship over the nipples of the depicted model. Most commonly seen though, is that the language utilised is not advertising explicit sexual services. The phrases elucidate sexual acts. These examples show how sex workers were operating under strict conditions that would impact their livelihoods if convicted, arrested and/ or charged.

This study challenges mainstream narratives surrounding sex work and crime by humanising the portrayals of sex workers found in tart cards. It underscores the significance of visual culture studies in understanding how sex workers are represented, highlighting that prevailing themes of criminality contribute to violence against them, framing this as a pressing human rights issue.

My research opens avenues for future discussions on the sex industry by illustrating how the criminalised status of sex workers is often viewed through the lenses of morality and cleanliness. I began this chapter with some quotes from Melissa Gira Grant, emphasising the dual perceptions of sex workers as either fetishised objects or criminalised bodies, which illustrates the ongoing problem of their representation. By providing contextual background, I traced the origins of sex worker advertisements back to Victorian ideologies that were inherently unsympathetic. Through a meticulous visual analysis of tart cards, I situated them within their historical context and examined how they reflect the criminalised status of sex workers. I demonstrated that sex work has a longstanding criminalised history

⁴⁵⁶ Eckersley, 'London's Callbox Eye Candy'.

that has been in the cultural imaginary since morality debates from the Victorian era. This analysis was supported by social theory and challenged long-standing narratives, offering alternative interpretations that reveal how these individuals sought to express themselves while remaining within legal boundaries. I also explored the role of carders and the broader implications of censorship on visibility, linking these themes to issues of violence against sex workers and public perceptions. The sanitisation efforts targeting tart cards serve as a metaphor for the societal desire to erase marginalised groups, reinforcing the idea that sex workers are treated as waste rather than human beings. Ultimately, my findings demonstrate that visual representations in tart cards are not merely advertisements but complex cultural artefacts that reflect broader societal attitudes towards sex work. By situating my research within the existing literature on sociological and criminological perspectives, I aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of sex workers' lived experiences and challenge the dominant narratives that have historically marginalised them.

My findings reveal that sex work ephemera should be visually analysed because they mostly exist in collections that have been acquired by a singular individual. My argument is that this narrow view does not represent the entire sex-working community, nor does it cover an exhaustive timeframe, or geographic location adequately. My visual analysis supplemented existing literature and research into policy, providing a more well-rounded approach to understanding sex workers' lived experiences. The carefully collected images in my case studies reveal deeper interconnections between sex workers' stigmatised representation. The findings show that sex workers were grappling with these very obvious visual stereotypes and demonstrate how they were working with or against these ideologies to

represent themselves and their services. The results of the visual analysis reveal how the criminalisation of sex workers' status informed their design configurations in their advertisements, either appropriating these tropes or subverting them. These were not the only binary ways that sex workers were using the cultural imaginary's reliance on overplayed tropes in the media, the fantastical character of the sex worker in high-heeled boots, skin-tight miniskirts and fishnet stockings can be read as a negative assumption of criminalising women who dress this way, on the other hand, it was a powerful set of descriptors that conjures the general populace's imagination of the sex workers' body. This means that sex workers could utilise these themes in their self-images to provide anonymity and operate under the restrictions and negative connotations placed on their collective identity. The findings from this chapter explain how sex workers' images have been largely misunderstood and show how external parties view, shape and place (often negative) connotations onto them. The next chapter will visually analyse a body of tart card imagery to explore how tart card production changed in line with the legal frameworks discussed here.

Chapter 4: Evolution of Tart Cards

"One person's pornography is another person's erotica."⁴⁵⁷ *Linda Williams*

Introduction

Following on from the previous chapter about sex work, tart cards and criminality, an investigation into how these considerations altered the production of tart card imagery is explored. The focus of this chapter is centred on the critical visual analysis of the tart cards, tracing the thematic elements that contributed to the evolving aesthetic changes in the cards' appearance. Close engagement with the body of tart card literature and porn studies is undertaken to locate significant markers in how the cards' artistic status in the 90s developed negative connotations with crime in the millennium. Once a chronological background has been discussed, themes of autonomy are integrated into the debate to counter mainstream narratives about the tart cards and the sex industry more generally. The investigation is important because it reveals different stories behind the apparent 'changes' that critically explore the social landscape of sex work and goes beyond a superficial exploration of the tart cards' aesthetic.

Tart card researcher Dr Caroline Archer echoes viewpoints from the existing literature which critique the evolution of the tart cards stating: "Charm and allure has been lost in the current cards and substituted with a standardised image of sexuality where all individuality and originality has been lost."⁴⁵⁸ The overarching finding from the literature demonstrates that tart cards from the mid-1980s to the 1990s are heralded as the golden era of tart card production whereas cards produced in the

⁴⁵⁷ Linda Williams, 'Porn Studies'. p.6

⁴⁵⁸ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.79

late 90s and the millennium are considered worthless. This generalisation of sex workers' tart cards has been taken as true, but I argue that this is not the case and that the tart cards are as unique as the people depicted in the printed adverts. To prove my hypothesis I use critical visual analysis to study the images; scholars and collectors have not previously taken this methodological approach. This visual investigation reveals the nuance in sex workers' histories, highlighting how current research into the cards is inadequate and calls for a more holistic approach that locates autonomy in sex workers' representation. This is important because the way that sex workers are viewed is tethered to violence towards them. The findings build towards the wider research question by providing evidence that locates autonomy in sex workers' agency. This research humanises the representation of sex workers, moving away from oversimplified binary narratives that categorise sex workers as just victims or businesswomen.

This chapter addresses the pertinent themes of obscenity and censorship within tart card debates through critical engagement with porn studies to understand how the cards were positioned in a wider understanding of sexuality and visual culture.

Methodology

The evolution of tart card design is inextricably linked to advancements in communication, technology and social change. Turning attention to the archives, my findings examine how changes in technology and society influenced the visual representation and thematic elements of sex workers on tart cards from an art historical and visual-cultural perspective. This chapter visually analyses a corpus of images to determine how chronological digital and technological advancements

helped to shape the unique aesthetic of tart card imagery. My research investigates early 1990s tart cards with an emphasis on ephemera from 1992 to understand the dramatic rise in tart card production at that time. The close observation of various tart card archival collections provides evidence to show the rapid development of the cards and establishes how quickly the images were edited and reproduced.

Following on from themes of censorship investigated in the context of UK law and policy, this chapter addresses some of the societal anxieties around tart cards and aims to locate agency in tart card imagery.

Chapter structure

First, the historical background of the tart cards' origins is explored to contextualise how the phenomena came into existence. A series of Xerox print tart cards provide a case study to visually analyse the evolution of the tart cards' appearance, which is discussed in a dialogue with home desktop publishing (DTP) developments and technological advancements, such as the internet and digital photography. This is followed by a discussion on censorship and obscenity debates within pornography to situate how the cards fit into broader morality politics.

Lastly, the findings corroborate accounts in the existing literature that support the idea that the cards' aesthetic significantly changed. I then offer an alternative reading that is more sensitive to the autonomous individual behind the commercial product. This level of investigation is deeper than the analysis available in the current literature because it directly engages with the imagery on the cards.

Historical background: The Origins of Tart Cards

Tart cards have an historical legacy with Victorian modes of solicitation.⁴⁵⁹ Though the cards have changed drastically in tone and appearance from their antiquated counterparts, their messages similarly propose a range of transactional sexual services. The more recognised form of tart card was first adopted in 1959 when the Street Offences Act made it illegal to solicit.⁴⁶⁰ This law meant that sex workers had to advertise their services in more discreet ways than using themselves and their bodies as the tangible advertisement: this is where the tart card came into existence. The cards were in text format and were displayed in newsagents' shop windows, usually as discreet personal ads amongst other messages such as 'to rent', or 'items for sale'.⁴⁶¹ The advertisements moved into phone boxes once sex workers identified a legal loophole in Margaret Thatcher's privatisation of British Telecoms in 1984.⁴⁶² The commercial industry of telecommunications and the physical design of phone boxes drastically altered how sex workers advertised.⁴⁶³ New features and design configurations on the KX series of phoneboxes introduced in 1985 replaced the iconic red phoneboxes, with the KX100 model as the standard issue most widespread in London in the 1990s. The sleek design with glass and aluminium surfaces provided an ideal backdrop for carders to affix the tart cards, the cards were

⁴⁵⁹ Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*. p.349

⁴⁶⁰ 'Street Offences Act 1959', accessed 29 December 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240518081007/https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/7-8/57>; Frankie Miren, 'How the UK's Prudish Laws from the 1950s Make Sex Work Dangerous Today', *VICE* (blog), 30 April 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240410014004/https://www.vice.com/en/article/5gj7e8/brief-history-uk-sex-work-prostitution-law-frankie-mullin>.

⁴⁶¹ Lister, 'Dial "S" for Sex'.

⁴⁶² BT Plc, 'Our History - About BT', accessed 2 August 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307155246/https://www.bt.com/about/bt/our-history>.

⁴⁶³ Linge et al., 'In Celebration of the K8 Telephone Kiosk – Britain's Last Red, Cast-Iron Phonebox'.

more visible and the physical space inside and outside the boxes provided ample space to maximise visibility.



Figure 21. Weathered tart cards on a KX series phone box, Tracey Thorne, 2023.

The only option to liaise with a sex worker in the early 90s was to approach them directly on the street or via telephone; the first webcam was connected to the Internet in November 1993 but it was not commonplace to communicate with sex workers on webcams until much later in 1996.⁴⁶⁴ The cards from the early 1990s look a certain way because they pre-dated the internet and retained some of the visual tropes acquired from earlier forms of sex work advertising, such as 'personals' (personal adverts) that were placed in telephone directories.⁴⁶⁵ For this reason, the trope of the telephone played a large role in the composition of early 1990s tart cards. Another factor was that in-car phones were installed and used regularly in vehicles as it was not yet illegal to drive whilst holding a phone until 2003.⁴⁶⁶ The distribution and display of tart cards within phone boxes also reinforced the image of the sex worker with the telephone. The use of the telephone receiver in sex workers' graphic design has also been interpreted as a phallic visual symbol.⁴⁶⁷ SWERFs would theorise that the visual trope serves as another means to degrade women via the tart cards. In this instance, the handset symbolises the penis connoting heteronormative power dynamics portraying the woman's body as the submissive pleasure-giver and the male recipient as the dominant pleasure-receiver.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁴ 'How the World's First Webcam Made a Coffee Pot Famous', *BBC News*, 21 November 2012, sec. Technology, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307142407/https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-20439301>; Jones, *Camming*. p.48

⁴⁶⁵ Muir, 'No Sex Please, We're BT'.

⁴⁶⁶ 'Panasonic EF 6157 Car Phone', Museum of Design in Plastics, accessed 7 September 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230331095504/https://www.modip.ac.uk/artefact/aibdc-001116>; 'Road Traffic: Mobile Phones', The Crown Prosecution Service, accessed 7 September 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230711063751/https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/road-traffic-mobile-phones>.

⁴⁶⁷ Anna McCarthy, 'Reach Out and Touch Someone: Technology and Sexuality in Broadcast Ads for Phone Sex', *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (Fall 1993): 50–57, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1306635760/citation/E6E711619849436CPQ/1>.

⁴⁶⁸ A. K. Richards, 'A Romance with Pain: A Telephone Perversion in a Woman?', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 70 (1989): 153–64, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1298179094/citation/C04A10D0AAFE451APQ/1>. p.155

Sex workers and feminists such as Melissa Gira Grant state that “prostitution is in itself a communication system.”⁴⁶⁹ In this context, the telephone is the visual conduit between the sex worker and the customer. The trope is an effective marketing tool that explicitly conveys how clients can contact the sexual service provider. I argue that an alternative viewing of the tart card imagery would suggest that sex workers were working with limited resources and wanted to find the most effective visual signifiers to communicate their message via advertising. Sex workers were navigating early graphic illustrations and hand-rendering their own images to develop a sense of individual branding.

Archer’s account of tart card production

Caroline Archer’s personal account of acquiring tart card research and data was informed by an autoethnographic methodology in which she spent time in London ‘working- flats’ in the late 90s. Archer identified that sex workers were creating adverts that were acquired from the resources available to them in the media. Archer recounted her experience with seven ‘working girls’ in a Tottenham Court Road brothel (customarily working from a house) where she observed each of them making tart cards.⁴⁷⁰ Archer revealed that street workers did not have cards, and neither did escorts because they were “too high class”.⁴⁷¹ The tart cards were used by middle-class sex workers but were considered too tacky or gauche for high-end escorts who would display their advertisements in personal magazines. Such observations reveal the cards’ potential as a feature of the whorearchy. Themes of class and status are abundant in sex work research, yet the phenomenon and the

⁴⁶⁹ Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*. p.70

⁴⁷⁰ In conversation with Archer, 30/08/2023.

⁴⁷¹ In conversation with Archer, 30/08/2023.

prevalence of tart card usage amongst different classes of sex workers have not been discussed at length in academia.

Archer describes the 'lick n stick' creation of tart card production as a scrapbook process whereby sex workers cut images and text from magazines and pasted them onto cards in a rudimentary way. The madam of the house or working flat may have produced the cards but more often than not, it was the sex workers themselves who produced their own material, it was a reflection of the individual and how they wanted to portray themselves. Some examples were well-hand drawn whereas others were less so, however, the varying degrees of artistic skill involved in mark-making and sex workers' visual representation all contributed to the tart card phenomenon.

In Archer's experience, it was found that it would be difficult to find any printers who would 'confess' to printing the tart cards due to the criminalisation of third parties' involvement with sex work. The stigma around sex work likely limited sex workers' options in selecting a print house; the companies that worked with sex workers were taking a risk as their work was seen, as at least immoral and at worst, illegal. The amateur, DIY association with sex workers' tart cards is visible in counterfeit renderings that appear in numerous editions of the ephemera. Such details of flaws and impurities and typographical errors in the design process demonstrate how carding was an underground activity because it implies that the printers were rushed for time, working solo, or under pressure from external forces.

Archer speculated that commercial printers may have completed these tasks as a 'side job' alongside their legitimate printing jobs. It 'doesn't go through the books. *Kwik Print* and *Pronta Print* were two companies operating in London's Soho in the 1990s that were rumoured to have connections with tart card production.

However, it was also likely that most tart card printers operated outside of London. The demand for tart cards meant that a significant volume was required, which was not possible to complete in a home DTP set-up. The cards may have been designed at home, or a working- flat but were then printed externally by an industrial printing press machine. Archer revealed that the machine may not have been a commercial printing press but an amateur with a printing press in their garage who could have bought second-hand machine.

The connection between ‘girls’ and the printers, including the geographical space between sex workers and third parties is vital to comprehend because they would have been criminalised for breaking the law. “All the support services are illegal” so a printer would be seen as supporting sex work as they are classified as a third party.⁴⁷² Promoting distance was essential for the safety of those involved from persecution. The types of computer hardware and software available were limited, in Archer’s observations and first-hand experience, sex workers were typically using technology from the previous decade.

Clients wanted honesty and integrity. “Most are not fooled by glamorous images on the cards” as this was seen as dishonest, with many customers reporting to favour the hand-drawn elements on tart cards.⁴⁷³ Archer theorised that this rudimentary approach was preferred because potential clients wanted to feel the human being behind the advert, though she recognised that this was not a requirement for every client it was an interesting research finding because it links to authenticity and the humanisation of sex workers.

⁴⁷² In conversation with Archer, 30/08/2023.

⁴⁷³ In conversation with Archer, 30/08/2023; Archer, *Tart Cards: London’s Illicit Advertising Art*. p.70

Archer recognised that the cards' aesthetic followed trends, and the cards ended up emulating each other. Another finding noted the re-appearance of 80s tart card designs in phone boxes after her book was published. Another noteworthy finding of Archer's research evidences whorearchical social structures echoing the sentiment that "Dominatrices are the 'top pecking order' because they don't have sex with clients."⁴⁷⁴ In Archer's experience, "Many of the girls drew their own images for their cards because they had a lot of time on their hands watching a lot of telly, soap-operas drinking tea and eating biscuits."⁴⁷⁵ The designs were created in-house by the sex workers themselves. Archer's research through a typography and digital graphic design lens has opened the discussion around the phenomena, however, it fails to address individual agency in tart card production. Archer claimed that sex workers were all essentially selling the same service. I disagree with this statement and will critically analyse a chronological body of images as case studies to prove my point.

⁴⁷⁴ In conversation with Archer, 30/08/2023.

⁴⁷⁵ In conversation with Archer, 30/08/2023.

Early 90s tart cards



Figure 22. Sexy Busty Blonde cards, Háy collection, 1992.

The 1990s sparked a flurry of sex work advertisements, specifically the period between 1992 and 1994 in which A6-sized tart cards became more prolific in London.⁴⁷⁶ The cards reflect the wider socioeconomic landscape in London, where the country was recovering from a recession in the early 90s. Journalists reported that “the number of cards has leapt by 500 per cent in two years” a claim reinforced by academics who discovered that in 1992, 20,000 tart cards circulated per week in Westminster, which rose to 50,000 in 1994.⁴⁷⁷ It is no coincidence that this timeframe is when three of the archives in this study (Háy, Lowther/Wellcome and Barnbrook) began, providing an extensive body of evidence to understand the phenomenon of the dramatic rise in tart card production at this time.

Early 1990s tart cards (typically up until 1993) contain little text and use mini phrases, slogans, puns and innuendos. These cards were limited to black ink printed onto coloured card stock and included graphic designs of (predominantly female presenting) women in various stages of undress. It was not feasible to produce this type of tart card from a home desktop setup because printers did not yet have the technology to print ink onto any surface other than standard office paper. Full-colour home desktop laser printers were not released in the UK until 1994 with Hewlett Packard’s Deskjet range but could not produce the same quality achieved by printing businesses.⁴⁷⁸ This suggests that the tart cards were produced in-house by a professional printing service. The physical production of printing the tart cards has fallen into two categories when looking at the branches of feminist thought; anti-sex

⁴⁷⁶ Grigsby, ‘Fight against Call Girl Cards Nets 25,000’.

⁴⁷⁷ Marianne Macdonald, ‘Phone-Box Sex Adverts Face Crackdown: BT Asked to Join Action against Blight of London’s Tourist Areas’, *The Independent*, 19 June 1994, sec. News, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220707160547/http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/phonebox-sex-adverts-face-crackdown-bt-asked-to-join-action-against-blight-of-london-s-tourist-areas-1423776.html>; Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*. p.349

⁴⁷⁸ Jim Hall, ‘HP LaserJet – The Early History’, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20231217155751/http://www.hparchive.com/seminar_notes/HP_LaserJet_The%20Early%20History_by_Jim_Hall_110512.pdf.

work feminists see this as ‘third-party involvement’ which is then interpreted as a criminal offence, whereas pro-sex work feminists view this as a collaborative act of allyship. I argue that the reality of the production of tart cards lies in a separate category that may incorporate both sides of the coin in feminist discourses but is not limited exclusively to either view. To understand sex workers’ experience in the 1990s it is crucial to investigate the ephemera that they created because the objects are an extension of sex workers’ visual representation. The tart cards are also indicative of the means of production that sex workers utilised.

Though Polaroid was already well established and granted user privacy and immediacy, digital cameras became mainstream in the 1990s as the units were cheaper and more accessible to a wider population. As well as Polaroid instant print cameras, disposable cameras were also very popular in the early 1990s, the disposable models were much cheaper to buy than some of these devices, but the fundamental design of the cameras remained the same and, apart from Polaroid, still required the development of the film in printing shops. The development of photographic imagery on tart cards can be traced to 1992 but was more commonly found from 1993 onwards. Where the cards had mostly been previously produced with thick paper, the tart cards’ look changed with the use of different cardstock. One-sided, gloss-coated card, (known as C1S) was more frequently occurring in tart cards during this time. The images were printed onto the glossy side, giving the appearance of professionally produced photographs. The majority of the cards made at this time were only printed on one side, so the reverse of the card was left as the wire side (the rough side of paper) whereas the front-facing side, technically known as the felt side (or smooth side of paper) included the printed text and imagery. Where sex workers had previously cut and pasted illustrations from vintage 1940s

American pornographic comics to decorate their tart cards, they started to turn their attention to photographs.⁴⁷⁹



Figure 23. *Diana: Naughty but Nice*, Háy collection, 1993.

In Figure 23, the model perches on the edge of the stool accentuating her long, slim legs, and showcasing the beauty standards that were highly fashionable in the early 1990s.⁴⁸⁰ The card has been folded many times, this indicates that it was handled and concealed, perhaps from a prospective client, or someone who took offence and removed the card and crumpled it in their pocket. The body is devoid of colour and, in its black-and-white state, the figure is an anonymous mannequin. The

⁴⁷⁹ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.57

⁴⁸⁰ Dara Persis Murray, 'Kate Moss, Icon of Postfeminist Disorder', *Celebrity Studies* 4, no. 1 (1 March 2013): 14–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2012.750099>.

door in the hallway is ajar, welcoming the viewer into the private space of the sex worker, where her luxurious silky sheets lay in elaborate folds that spill onto the glossy hardwood floor. The text also implies an ambiguous message, where 'naughty but nice' is open to interpretation from the viewer. The image looks more like a high-fashion perfume advert that you would see in a magazine rather than an advertisement for sexual services. I was unable to locate the original image, however, when using the Google reverse image search tool to find the photograph's origin, the results showed similar imagery to that of vintage hosiery adverts, alongside images from Helmut Newton's fashion photography. The results from the Google reverse image search of the photograph in Figure 23, displayed adverts from Calvin Klein, and featured the supermodel, Naomi Campbell. The source of the image was also linked to US Vogue and the Rolling Stone Magazine, as well as vintage paper advertisement archives. This means that sex workers, and other tart card designers, cut these images from fashion magazines to use in their own advertising.

The material quality of the tart card appears as if it had been folded and concealed. The collector may have found the image appealing and wanted to keep it hidden as a private memento. The creases of the gloss paper interrupt the smooth aesthetic of the airbrushed legs, making them appear skeletal. Applying Nochlin's theory of fragmentation, the body has been dismembered by the composition of the photograph, but the rough handling of the card itself, resulting in damage to the surface, may add another layer of violent intent.⁴⁸¹ According to Dworkin's theory, the fragmentation served to fetishise the body part and reduce the human to its sexual

⁴⁸¹ Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. p.38

organs.⁴⁸² Feminists, however, have been theorising the images of fragmented women's body parts in advertising since the 1950s.⁴⁸³ In contrast, it could be argued that the sex worker was selective in depicting their most lucrative assets in the composition. Alternatively, the cropped image may have served several purposes, to protect the sex worker's identity, and to represent a high-end, luxury service that was befitting of a higher service charge.

Mid to late 90s tart cards

One of the significant developments in tart card advertising in the mid-90s was the advent of debit and credit symbols in graphic design. Sex workers notoriously have difficulty securing financial stability despite having been numerous cited as part of innovative technological developments with early digital transactions.⁴⁸⁴ The tart cards evidence early design concepts and digital payment processing systems that are systematically turning their backs on sex workers in current discourses.⁴⁸⁵ In early 1993 (April- May) many updated tart cards began circulating with corporate banking logos 'VISA/Mastercard' and 'American Express' symbols (printed) on them. The advancement of card payment services was a huge advantage for sex workers and this additional information was necessary to appeal to changing demographics in digital transactions. The visual imagery of the tart cards reveals the evolution of transactional sex and shows how technology has been implemented by sex workers.

⁴⁸² Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy Symposium'. p.6

⁴⁸³ Eileen R. Meehan, *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=310561>. p.232-3

⁴⁸⁴ Zahra Stardust et al., 'High Risk Hustling: Payment Processors, Sexual Proxies, and Discrimination by Design', *CUNY Law Review* 26, no. 1 (2023): 57–138, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/nyclr26&i=69>; Jones, *Camming*.

⁴⁸⁵ Rébecca Franco and Val Webber, "This Is Fucking Nuts": The Role of Payment Intermediaries in Structuring Precarity and Dependencies in Platformized Sex Work', *Porn Studies* 0, no. 0: 1–18, accessed 31 December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2024.2393641>.

The symbols of the various banking and credit card logos are easily recognisable, but the typefaces are quite different from their authentic designs. Archer explained that the sex workers, or third parties responsible for designing the cards, used the most convenient software to hand in order to reproduce these images, which was most likely outdated technology. The dated and unsophisticated machines (including hardware and software) may not have been working as they should, creating imperfections and irregularities. It is only retrospectively that this 'genre' of accidental art has been created, which was not the original intention.⁴⁸⁶

An alternative to cutting and pasting found images from magazines, the advent of digital photography in the mid-90s expanded sex workers' horizons in their self-expression. The most popular SLR camera amongst photography enthusiasts was the Nikon N90S.⁴⁸⁷ However, it is more likely that the image was captured on a compact 35mm film camera.

Figure 24 shows the various models and makes of cameras available on the market from 1994 in Argos, a popular British shopping catalogue. There was not a great deal of variation between the cameras from this year; they mostly shared the same features, but some of the more high-end models included auto-focus capabilities.

⁴⁸⁶ In conversation with Archer 30/08/2023.

⁴⁸⁷ 'Digicam History', accessed 6 September 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190305105407/https://www.digicamhistory.com/1994.html>.

The image displays two pages from the Argos Spring/Summer 1994 catalogue, pages 474 and 475. The pages are filled with advertisements for various cameras, organized into sections: AUTO FOCUS, ULTRA-COMPACT, ZOOM, and TELEPHOTO. Each advertisement includes a photograph of the camera, its name, price, and a list of features. The cameras are from brands like Panasonic, Olympus, Canon, and Halma. The prices range from £48.50 to £159.00. The layout is dense with text and images, typical of a retail catalogue from that era.

Figure 24. Argos catalogue pages, Spring/Summer 1994.⁴⁸⁸

This is not an exhaustive list of available cameras from 1994 but it demonstrates the typical pricing and specifications of the technology to which the general public had access. A Polaroid 636 Instant series camera was listed for sale at £29.50 and a twin pack of Polaroid 600 instant print film (2 x 10 prints) cost £20.50 in 1994.⁴⁸⁹ This is relevant to consider because the pricing of these items was much more affordable than earlier models. This allowed people more freedom over the photographs they captured, the images that they wanted to take and the convenience and privacy this afforded.

Though the camera and film were luxury items, they could also be viewed as an investment. By 1995-6 there was a transitional shift in the typology of tart cards from

⁴⁸⁸ Issuu, 'Argos Superstore 1994 Spring/Summer', Retromash, 20 December 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20240917134739/https://issuu.com/retromash/docs/argossuperstore-1994-springsummer_3beffda92e28.

⁴⁸⁹ Issuu. pp.469-470

'model' to 'porn actress', where the 'top-class model' or (ex)photographic model appears frequently on cards during this period. This also coincided with a visual change of direction as photographs were used instead of graphics or illustrations. Technology such as the internet, digital cameras, and mobile phones became more accessible and the prevalence of editing software such as Photoshop expanded towards a wider audience. Glamour model Samantha Fox (one of the most photographed women of the 1980s) entered the Eurovision Song Contest in 1995 and appeared in a topless photoshoot to celebrate the Sun's 25th anniversary of the (in)famous page three feature.⁴⁹⁰ "Samantha Fox exemplifies to perfection the British taste for bums and tits which frequently accompanies a type of morality discernible in the Sun newspaper."⁴⁹¹ Around this time, MP Clare Short and the Campaign Against Pornography (CAP) were petitioning against topless modelling, fuelled by a radical feminist perspective that believed the images were misogynistic examples of pornography.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹⁰ Lynda Lee-Potter, 'Money, Mammaries and Me Mum', *Daily Mail*, 25 March 1995, Daily Mail Historical Archive, <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1861308252/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=c9662db3>.

⁴⁹¹ Jewell, *Vice Art*. p.9

⁴⁹² Carter, 'The Anti-Porn Campaigner'.



Figure 25. Campaign Against Pornography article, *The Independent*, 1997.

In 1996 newer 'artistic' styles of cards were created, with full-colour photographs accompanied by lines of text but they did not fully replace the 'old style' cards that were still circulating widely. 1996 was also significant for the development of sex workers' visual culture. The Spice Girls' single 'Wannabe' was number one in the charts for seven weeks and promoted 'girl power' in post-feminist 'Ladette' culture in the UK.⁴⁹³ Each member of the pop group had carefully curated personalities with a sense of style and corresponding matching outfits. Their image was built on

⁴⁹³ Carl Smith, 'Official Chart Flashback: Spice Girls' Wannabe Gives Geri Horner, Melanie C, Mel B, Emma Bunton and Victoria Beckham Their First Number 1 Single', Official Charts, 21 July 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20240724183856/https://www.officialcharts.com/chart-news/official-chart-flashback-spice-girls-wannabe-gives-geri-horner-melanie-c-mel-b-emma-bunton-and-victoria-beckham-their-first-number-1-single__36926/.

stereotypical labels of women, but they took ownership of their persona and promoted some feminist values of friendship, community, and connection.⁴⁹⁴



Figure 26. The Spice Girls backstage at the 1997 BRIT Awards.⁴⁹⁵

The fashion promoted by the Spice Girls' management team is important to consider because these outfits are not dissimilar to the types of adornments worn by sex workers, as seen in Figure 27. The cards show how they were a product of wider pop culture, taking references from the context in which they were produced. For example, Madonna's *Blonde Ambition* tour alongside her iconic conical bra, designed

⁴⁹⁴ Bettina Fritzsche, 'Spicy Strategies: Pop Feminist and Other Empowerments in Girl Culture', in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 156.

⁴⁹⁵ Olivia Blair, '25 Nostalgic Photos Of The Spice Girls, As "Spiceworld" Turns 25-Years-Old', ELLE, 8 July 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250121055758/https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/celebrity-style/g36966719/spice-girls-outfits/>.

by Jean Paul Gaultier in 1990, sparked controversy and feminist debate.⁴⁹⁶ The pop culture of the 90s promoted a version of female sexuality through the same visual tropes that sex workers were using on their tart card imagery, but the stigma remained for sex workers. This double standard is important to consider because it is usually sex workers who remain absent from feminist movements, though they suffer the brunt of misogynistic and whorephobic abuse.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁶ Katarina Mitić, 'Madonna: Feminist or Antifeminist? Domination of Sex in Her Music Videos and Live Performances From the 20th Century to the Present Day', *AM, Art + Media : Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 8 (2015): 68–72, <https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i8.107>. p.69

⁴⁹⁷ Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite*. p.158



Figure 27. *Private Massage*, Wellcome collection, 1998.

The cards are embroiled within obscenity debates, as anti-porn campaigner Dines laments how softcore porn is mainstream and part of our culture in the West. “What happens in our culture is that women are split into two. You are either “fuckable” or invisible.”⁴⁹⁸ The visual analysis of tart cards shows how external pop

⁴⁹⁸ *Pornland: How the Porn Industry Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2014), <https://web.archive.org/web/20250330171226/https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/127014?vp=essexuk.26:50>.

culture references informed the evolutionary shift in tart card production from 1996. It was reported that “over 10 million cards were collected by BT between August 1996 and November 1997.”⁴⁹⁹ The findings reveal that an emerging theme in tart cards produced in 1997 included services aimed at a diverse range of customers that catered for men, women and couples. This was the first time that these services were advertised openly, they may have been negotiated before, however, 1997 marked a change where alternative services that were arranged by verbal communication became explicitly printed. By 1998 the production of tart cards had changed, they became so embellished that they were printed on C2S (double-sided, coated gloss cardstock), with additional information such as the amenities and location, often including a map of the surrounding area. My visual analysis shows that the radical change in the appearance of tart cards was also informed by social contexts.

⁴⁹⁹ UK Parliament, ‘ADVERTISING BY PROSTITUTES - Early Day Motions’, 9 March 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211015213508/https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/15627/advertising-by-prostitutes>.

Millenium & Beyond

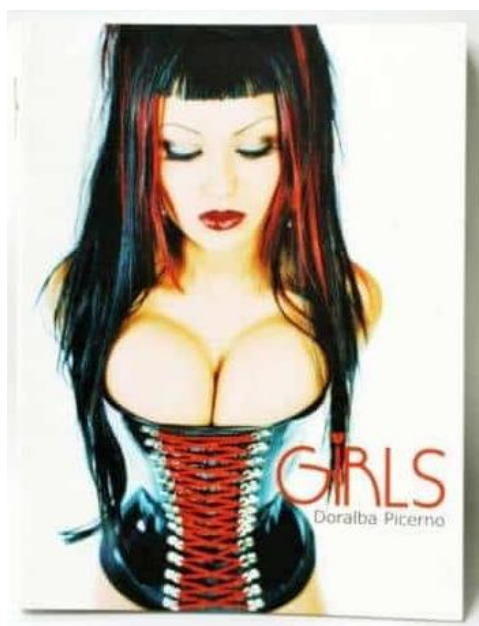


Figure 28. Doralba Picerno, *Girls* (book cover), 2007.

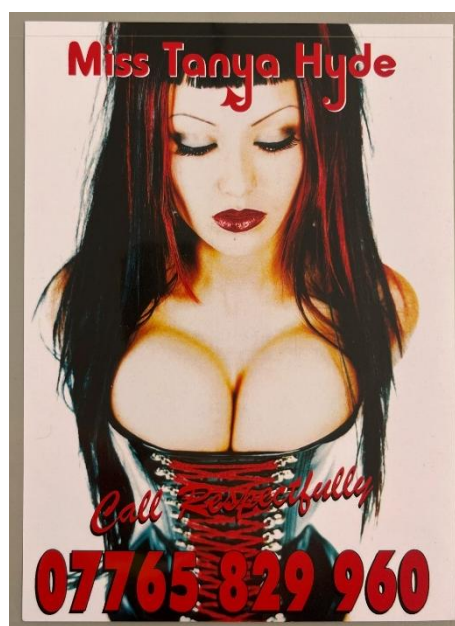


Figure 29. *Miss Tanya Hyde*, Wellcome collection, 14/05/2013.

Doralba Picerna's photographic series of alternative models is a source of tart card imagery. Her original book, with a striking photograph of a model in a corset, printed in 2007 has been reproduced countless times. 'Miss Tanya Hyde', a play on words from the saying 'tan your hide' meaning to administer a beating, used the image from the front cover of photographer Picerno's book on alternative pin-up girls. The tart card demonstrates how sex workers' design configurations were influenced by the images around them. The typography of Miss Tanya Hyde's name contains a forked symbol indicative of the devil. This symbolises the historical associations of 'prostitution' with immorality that were abundant in the nineteenth century.⁵⁰⁰ This subversive trait takes ownership of deviancy narratives inferred by SWERFs such as Sheila Jeffreys who demonised male sex buyers as rapists.⁵⁰¹ The relevance of the

⁵⁰⁰ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Sexuality Debates* (Oxford, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1543025>. p.42

⁵⁰¹ Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution*. p.3

pitchfork iconography entails that the sex worker is the dominant party, they are the one who produces power and inflicts pain. This contrasts with typical gendered power imbalances that are normalised in heterosexual relationships and are ascribed as a masculine trait.⁵⁰² This account evidences Archer's research that shows that sex workers were creating adverts from other resources, however, it also contradicts her research because it is ambiguous in the services offered. Sex workers were reproducing images influenced by the popular culture references and visual culture around them. This evidence also counters debates from the previous chapter that accused tart card imagery of becoming more pornographic.

The image is not overtly sexualised. It is, however, a 'tasteful' boudoir-type or glamour-modelling style photograph, because it conveys nudity but does not explicitly show censored body parts. The model (known only as Natalie) is wearing a black PVC, Elizabethan-style corset that accentuates her bust, yet the garment covers her nipples.⁵⁰³ Though the model appears nude below the waist, she is wearing inconspicuous black underwear and her lower body is cut from the frame. These stylistic techniques echo the original purpose of the series, as photographer Picerna documented the alternative fashion of London in the millennium.⁵⁰⁴ Its inception was not dissimilar to *Fruits* or other projects in this era concerned with documenting underground subcultures and fashion.⁵⁰⁵

The reproduced image (Figure 29) demonstrates how sex workers were utilising aesthetically pleasing images of women's bodies in their advertisements. The image was re-envisioned as an alternative, dominatrix service. This shows the

⁵⁰² Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). p.25

⁵⁰³ 'J Design', Corset.dk, 14 February 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240519114423/https://corset.dk/news/j-design/>.

⁵⁰⁴ In conversation with Picerna at the Big London Tattoo Show, ExCel London, 26/08/2023.

⁵⁰⁵ Shoichi Aoki, *Fresh Fruits Magazine* (UK: Phaidon Press, 2005), <http://archive.org/details/fresh-fruits>.

intertwining connections between sex workers' aesthetic culture and pop culture references that are reflected in BDSM contexts.⁵⁰⁶ The use of PVC, leather and latex in sex work aesthetics has crossovers with popular culture. The Spice Girls were accused of promoting sexualised or "stripper chic" aesthetics in their music videos and TV appearances.⁵⁰⁷ The integration of 'sexy' clothing into mainstream fashion has been coined as 'pornification' or 'stripperfication' of everyday, civilian clothing.⁵⁰⁸ This is exacerbated by sex industry culture, with the "porn-etration" of everyday life.⁵⁰⁹

Stars, Lovehearts and Playboy Bunnies

Visual markers often accompany the textual information on sex workers' tart cards. The most common being five-pointed stars that 'censor' images by covering female-presenting nipples, and genitalia to swerve obscenity politics. It is a longstanding residual trope that is synonymous with pornographic imagery. There is not a conclusive answer as to when women's bodies, more specifically women's nipples started to have stars covering their breasts as a form of decency, however, it is linked to a larger historical study of obscenity. The use of asterisks and other symbols such as 'at' signs (@) octothorpes (#), ampersands (&) and exclamation marks (!) are called gawlixes and have been used to censor offensive words in print

⁵⁰⁶ Andrea Beckmann, *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sadomasochism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230244924>. p.112

⁵⁰⁷ Meredith Levande, 'Women, Pop Music, and Pornography', *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2007): 293–321, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/article/235558>. p.299

⁵⁰⁸ Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire* (Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=170506>. p.61

⁵⁰⁹ Dick Hebdige, 'Contemporizing "Subculture": 30 Years to Life', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 3 (2012): 399–424, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549412440525>. p.414-5

since 1901.⁵¹⁰ Typically associated with comic strips, the grawlix has been an effective visual marker for expressing profanity.⁵¹¹ I theorise that with the widespread adoption of American comic strips and visual culture into British language and literature, the grawlix may have evolved from its linguistic origins into a visual sphere. This may have translated into the visual culture of obscene imagery as the asterisk was already a forged symbol within the visual landscape of profanity. Stars adorn the bodies of sex workers' tart cards more commonly in later examples of the phenomenon. My findings reveal that early tart card designs featured a variety of models' poses in various states of undress, either fully revealing their breasts or covering them with lingerie or a well-positioned prop. As seen in Figure 30, the printed cards of the early 90s did not typically censor nipples, however, the inconsistent printing techniques sometimes resulted in accidental censorship.

⁵¹⁰ Kurt Kaletka, 'The Grawlix: How to Swear in Cartoons', 18 March 2019, <https://www.trueorbetter.com/2019/03/the-grawlix-how-to-swear-in-cartoons.html>.

⁵¹¹ Mort Walker, *Lexicon Of Comicana* (USA: Museum of cartoon art, 1980), <http://archive.org/details/lexicon-of-comicana>.



Figure 30. *Sexy New Model*, Háy collection, 1994.

The inclusion of stars to censor the nipples is a much later addition, appearing in tart cards from approximately 1998 onwards. This shift depicts how the sex industry and pornography more generally affected the production of the cards. The design configurations began implementing more censorship controls in line with obscenity laws. The addition of the symbols make the imagery appear more pornographic because they are in alignment with broader visual censorship restrictions in pornographic film and print.



Figure 31. *Gorgeous Indian Princess*, Háy collection, c.1998.

Cartoon hearts are abundant in the design considerations of tart cards, they can be found in early examples from the late 1980s to the present day. They are an effective marketing strategy because they portray love, femininity and sexuality. The hearts also had a dual role as censorship markers.



Figure 32. Mrs. Robinson tart card, Háy collection, 1998.

Graphic illustrations of the Playboy bunny logo also became synonymous with sex work and porn. In time, the popular visual symbolism of the Playboy bunny was replaced by the more demure sexualised language of soft porn. The advertised 'Playgirls' and 'bunnies' align with more middle-class associations of escort work (Figure 33). The Playboy symbol is more commonly associated with 'chav' culture.⁵¹² The examples below show how the trope can be implemented in textual and visual ways to promote different agendas of sophistication or 'sexiness'. Photography and other visual tools gave sex workers the freedom to construct their sex worker

⁵¹² Sara Bragg et al., 'Too Much, Too Soon? Children, "Sexualization" and Consumer Culture', *Sex Education* 11, no. 3 (August 2011): 279–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2011.590085>.

persona. This is similar to the concept of online avatars or AI-generated images of sex workers in existence now. The visual analysis of tart cards can be read in wider technological advancements in sex industry research beyond the scope of the thesis.



Figure 33. *Sophisticated German Playgirl*, Salter collection. (Undated). c.2000.



Figure 34. Author's photograph, Aldgate, London, 06/04/24.

The bunny ears of the Playboy franchise are still adopted in some designs of tart cards, this is a long-standing visual trope that signifies porn stars. The bunny ears were fashionable after pop star Ariana Grande's *Dangerous Woman* came out in 2016, reaching number 2 in the charts. This left fans to question the motives of her attire, one fan theorised that she was trying to portray the image of a “superhero or vigilante.”⁵¹³ The ‘masked’ sex worker has been read in two ways, as either a form of protection enacted by the sex worker to conceal their identity or as a decorative embellishment to heighten the senses. Not dissimilar to the message behind the Spice Girls’ marketing team that implemented the theme of empowerment, Grande also spoke of empowerment through this image. It appears that women’s sexuality is

⁵¹³ Vanessa Jackson, ‘What Does Ariana Grande’s Bunny Mask Mean? The “Dangerous Woman” Cover Art Is Mysterious’, *Bustle*, 18 March 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250115083634/https://www.bustle.com/articles/148764-what-does-ariana-grandes-bunny-mask-mean-the-dangerous-woman-cover-art-is-mysterious>.

closely tied to their appearance, their choice of clothing and who it is aimed at. The inclusion of 'stars' and other symbols censored the genitals of the models depicted on the cards, which shows how sex workers were limited in their exposure. They had to comply with laws, societal pressures and infringements of their privacy. (Following on from themes of criminality in the previous chapter). Images from the early 1990s were less likely to contain these tropes, whereas later images were subject to digital manipulation, where graphics, logos, symbols, and text were applied to glamour modelling pictures.

Xerox case study

The following set of images is a series of three irregular-sized advertisements consisting of black ink printed onto thin white copy paper, and they appear to have been 'cut out' by hand, with scissors.⁵¹⁴ I argue that these examples of tart cards are valuable because they emit a handmade quality that is rarely documented in sex workers' visual culture. I argue that in general, sex workers depicted on tart cards have been analysed in an objectifying way and have been looked at in a manner which devalues them. The literature encourages the notion that the bodies advertised on tart cards are gradually being devalued and therefore, dehumanised. There is no definitive way of knowing who produced the cards with no obvious measures to tell. It is impossible to clarify who made these cards, however, the visual analysis reveals whether the cards were made by hand, photocopier, or print press. Though handmade cards were cheaper and easier to make, there is a relatively low number of those materials in the archives.

⁵¹⁴ Refer to Figure 35, Figure 36 and Figure 37 for individual measurements.

The image set's unusual measurements show how the multiple adverts would have fit the dimensions of an A4 sheet of paper. The images were cut neatly but with scissors rather than a guillotine implying that the person could have done this from work or home with little to no specialist equipment. In 1996, home colour printers were becoming more readily available and were priced between £150 and £350 but mono printers were much more common as they cost considerably less.⁵¹⁵ It is likely that the images would have been printed on a library machine or in a printing and scanning machine in a convenience store where the customer could photocopy relatively cheaply, 'by the page'. This process was problematic, as the machines were in public spaces but on the other hand, were cost-efficient, as the prints were priced per sheet. For those who were willing to take the risk of using commercial printers and photocopiers in libraries, offices, and printing shops these materials could be obtained for a low cost, yet they may have experienced some disapproving looks from inquisitive onlookers. The set of advertisements may have been printed from a home desktop printer, due to the resolution of the image and print quality, however, I believe that only one set was printed.⁵¹⁶ Tart cards may have been made from home, but using a computer, scanner and printer solely for this purpose was an expensive investment. This meant that you could curate your advertisement to your own specifications and need not worry about concealing your identity in public, but it was not the norm for the general population to have these devices in a home setting as yet.

⁵¹⁵ Issuu, 'Argos Superstore 1996 Spring/Summer', Retromash, 18 October 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230227114821/https://issuu.com/retromash/docs/argossuperstore-1996-springsummer>. p.533

⁵¹⁶ I have researched 22,000 cards and have not seen any duplicates as with most examples of tart cards.

The crude printing methods are paired with low-quality paper, where the edges of the adverts are rolled up, due to handling and storage. The font is duplicated on all three images and appears as if it may have been traced from a child's handwriting stencil before the images were photocopied. The saturated ink creates striking black-and-white contrasted images that evoke a homemade zine aesthetic. I cannot ascertain whether the images were made by a sex worker, however, from my investigation, I would presume that this is the most authentic example of a sex worker's homemade tart card. The woman in the photograph does not possess the same qualities as some of the tart cards discussed in the thesis. In this instance, the woman directly makes eye contact with the viewer, she flashes a wide, inviting smile and although posed, her body language appears relaxed. Her dark curly hair and lipstick are feminine symbols of beauty. She reclines on a heavily patterned bedspread, much like the other depictions of sex workers, but this composition is different. The woman is not posing in a 'sexy' glamour modelling way, she leans on her right-hand side with her arm supporting her, the natural weight of her breast comfortably tracing this movement. The pose is slightly staged and awkward. The light from the camera flash is uneven and draws the viewer's eye to the woman's right hand resting on her knee where traces of cellulite can be identified on the upper thigh. The stark lighting illuminates the model's face, and the top right-hand side of her body, the light also accentuates her outfit, a sheer white lace, two-piece babydoll set of lingerie. The white, lace camisole exposes the sex worker's stretch-marked breasts and natural folds of skin on her stomach, while the matching sheer lace underwear reveals neat pubic hair. This is not typically seen in other depictions of sex workers on tart cards, they mostly comply with hyper-feminine beauty standards of the time, where it was fashionable to have an underweight, toned physique devoid

of any body hair. It is theorised in art historical discourses that pubic hair depicted in painting was shocking because it connotes a 'real' woman, a human person with autonomy.⁵¹⁷

The lighting in the composition is stark, due to the close proximity of the flash to the model, showing that this was an amateur photographer. On a deeper, critical level of analysis, the tart card evidences the complex dynamics and relationships between sex workers and allies in the 1990s, this example is indicative of an outsider's relationship with the depicted sex worker.

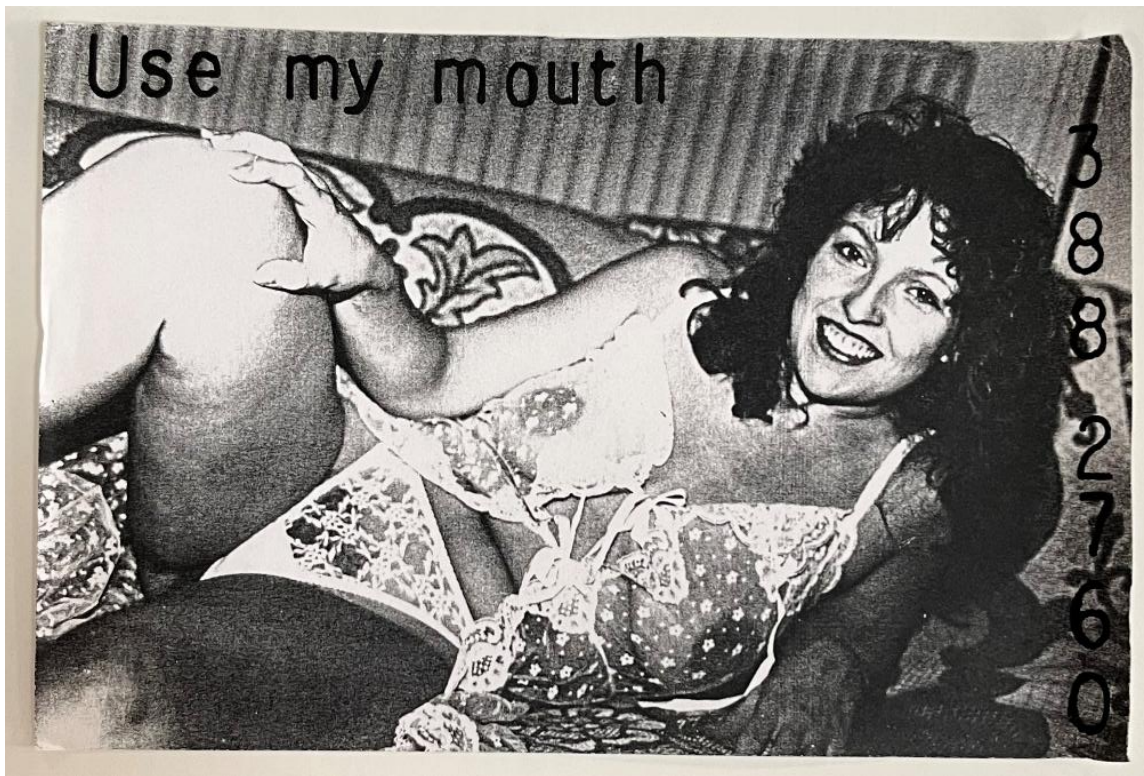


Figure 35. *Use my mouth*, Háy collection, 1996. 164mm x 108mm.

The homemade portrait evokes a sense of comfort juxtaposed by the stark message of the textual information 'Use my mouth'. The sex worker is depicted

⁵¹⁷ Dennis, *Art/Porn*. p.96

The same woman can be identified in Figure 36, where she is standing this time, holding up the gathered fabric of her babydoll negligée to expose her body to the viewer. The flash of the camera at close range bathes the figure in white light, smoothing her skin and drawing attention to her thighs and lace underwear. The photograph is taken in an intimate setting, there is a picture frame on the wall that humanises her as a person with individual tastes and interests. A chest of drawers is visible behind the model, signifying that this photograph was shot in a bedroom, a private space, by a friend, a co-worker, or a partner (or perhaps all three). She smiles while making direct eye contact with the audience. The negative space in the top right-hand corner of the composition created the perfect blank canvas for the stencilled message 'Good oral' which happened to align with the model's eye line and facial features. The telephone number follows the same format as the first image, whereby the sequence of numbers descends the side of the photograph. Thus far, the two images share strikingly similar messages with an emphasis on the sex worker's mouth as a repetitive design feature. It is theorised that:

The mouth functions as a classic fetish, some sign which both involves and displaces visual knowledge of female genitals but can disavow the threat of that knowledge by harking back to another more comforting visual encounter and sensuous experience – that of looking up to them other/female caretaker in the course of being suckled.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁹ Griselda Pollock, 'Woman as Sign: Psychoanalytic Readings', in *Vision and Difference*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2003). p.178

This art historical analysis informed by psychoanalytical concepts of the mouth as a fetish reinforces the visual imagery within the cards. The images offer a homely and comforting image of a sex worker that evokes sexuality but also human connection and intimacy. The third image in this sequence deviates from the previous two tart cards in its visual and textual information, further disrupting clean-cut narratives to 'place' sex workers' labour into neat categories. The same woman is pictured again, however, on this tart card she is fully nude.

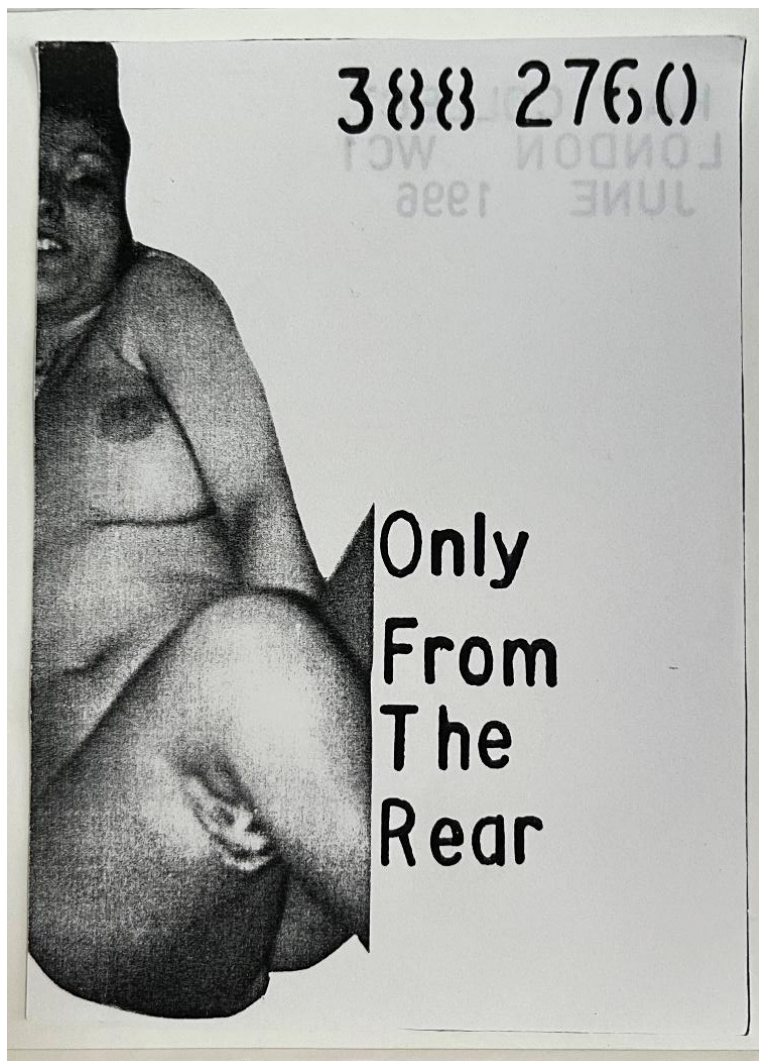


Figure 37. *Only From the Rear*, Háý collection, 1996. 107mm x 148mm

The model's stripped body reclines, which is at odds with the statement 'only from the rear' where models in bent-over poses would usually be implemented in this style of card, here, the woman is pictured from the front. Her body twists away from the camera, covering her modesty, whilst her hand grips the soft flesh of her upper thigh. In this composition, the homely comforts and soft furnishings in the background have been cut out entirely, the sex worker's body is the visual focus of this advert. The reduction of the sex worker's body paired with the eradication of her creature comforts may be read in a SWERF-informed narrative in which this order of images reveals a pattern, whereby the woman's physical form becomes less. This emerges through fragmentation, where an uneven line in the composition slices down the woman's body removing her entire right arm, shoulder, breast and obscuring half of her face. There is a mere suggestion of her left leg but this is also cut out of the composition. The model's signature dark hair is cropped from the image, just leaving a black, inked mass that strips her of personality, severing the emotional connection between the viewer and the subject. The familiar, homely accents in the background have been completely excised, leaving the twisted form of flesh the sole focus of the composition.

The sex worker has been stripped, twisted, reduced and de-personalised, but she is *smiling*. Sex worker exclusionary radical feminist criticism would argue that this image is inherently violent, however, the model appears to enjoy having her image manipulated for the male gaze. This may have been a tactical strategy implicated to protect her identity, if it were not for the other examples of her work, it would be difficult to deduce that it was the same person. By cropping the amount of visual information in the background, the sex worker has more control over their anonymity and personal safety.

The process of editing their photographs also gave sex workers creative control over how their images were viewed. Art historian Lynda Nead theorises that 'body fascism' subverts the idealised, perfect and healthy female bodies, it is transgressive and disrupts typical feminist discourses around beauty and sexuality.⁵²⁰ In this instance, the application of the theory may explain how sex workers exercised control over their images and their bodies by omitting or obscuring certain visual information. The body is read in a context that is not a true reflection of the person because it is not the person who is marketed for sale, it is purely for sexual services provided by the sex worker. It may be argued that distorting her body and portraying it in this way gave her greater bodily autonomy than in traditional posed portraiture-style photographs. These three images are incredibly rare, in particular the last image because they show an insight into the homemade nature of sex work adverts in 1990s London. The series of the three tart cards bridge the gap between mass-produced adverts and rubbish because they show how homemade adverts became closer to things that can be screwed up and thrown away. It is an important consideration because they were flyers that were potentially made by anybody and do not have the same aesthetic value as professionally printed adverts.

The text is a living document of the left-behind impression marks where the biro has been applied with pressure into the paper. The rudimentary mark-making techniques or as ephemerist Rickards would deem the "spirit" of the person in the composition reveal a human element to the advertisement.⁵²¹ The homemade, arts and crafts style of this series of cards counters mainstream opinions voiced in the existing literature that accuses modern tart cards of becoming mass-produced,

⁵²⁰ Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. p.77

⁵²¹ Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*. p.16

soulless throwaway items. The foreshortening of the image creates a flat plane in which the body appears squashed, this is synonymous with pornographic camera angles which were designed to extract feminine features, including the breasts, face and genitals. In this case, the image does not follow the typical pornographic style, instead deviating with a composition that is not in line with erotic, or pornographic photography.

In terms of what material the images were printed on, the cheap, Xerox copy paper had an iconic, punk aesthetic that influenced the later cards. The monochrome aesthetic of the early 90s tart cards is still heavily featured later in the decade, black ink and white paper would have been much cheaper than full-colour photographs and coloured cardstock with gloss accents. Because the items cost less to make, and this is apparent in the design process, their aesthetic value is less, which in turn, devalues the person who is actually printed on the card. This is the typical reading of the sex workers who feature on tart cards, the literature empathises with the sex worker, however, does not fully engage with the women pictured in a contemporary pro-sex work feminist discourse.

For all the contradictions in the interpretations of the cards, the literature unanimously stresses that tart cards, especially the homemade examples, are a lower value of class. The higher-quality printed cards cost significantly more than black-and-white home-printed Xerox copies. Somebody was paying for them, whether that was a sex worker, house ma'am or brothel owner. The DIY cards gave a different impression because they could be made by anyone, an unskilled entrepreneur or an amateur designer. The lower-quality cards could be seen as being working class, as the designers, or sex workers themselves were utilising scant resources available to them, however, the handmade cards are rarely

documented. The findings from this research identify crossovers that appear in multiple collections such as Háy, Salter, Barnbrook and Wellcome. The main difference is that this particular set of images is incredibly rare, they do not feature in any other collections, they are important because they communicate a part of history that remains understudied.

From a SWERF-informed analysis of this material, for example Carole Pateman's theory of *The Sexual Contract*, it could be deduced that the sex worker is a subordinate victim.⁵²² The application of this theory does not consider the nuances in sex workers' individual realities that may take into account other socio-economic factors such as unstable housing, ignoring the element of choice in implementing 'survival sex' strategies. It follows a standard stereotypical reading of sex workers, where their images have been reduced to rubbish and their bodies have become synonymous with waste, reflecting only one perspective. A pro-sex work account may also be too reductive in concluding that she was an independent sex worker who worked intermittently and chose to curate her own imagery based on her socioeconomic status and resources. My critical visual analysis of the three images concludes that the sex worker was promoting her brand and image to gain custom, demonstrating that sex workers were aware of advertising strategies. The images provide an intimate insight into this sex worker's lifestyle, but they remain a singular facet of the sex worker's personhood. The sex worker depicted is smiling and promoting her image but this does not mean that she was unaware of sex workers'

⁵²² Sharon Thompson et al., 'The Sexual Contract 30 Years on: A Conversation with Carole Pateman', *Feminist Legal Studies* 26, no. 1 (2018): 93–104, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/femlst26&i=93>. p.94

marginalisation and exploitation, labour conditions, violence and unequal human rights in her occupation, a sentiment recognised by many sex workers and allies.⁵²³

This series of tart cards demonstrates that sex workers were using a multitude of different modes of self-expression in their advertising methods. These hand-crafted versions may not have garnered the same amount of attention as the other cards produced in the 1990s, however, these pieces of ephemera show nuances in sex workers' histories that can paint a different picture to mainstream knowledge. This series of three images depicts the interconnecting roles of the sex worker, highlighting how intimacy and transactional sex are often neglected in discourses around the sex industry. My visual analysis reveals powerful nuances in the variety of ways that sex workers choose to establish themselves and define their self-representation.

Visual Analysis

The close engagement and critical visual analysis of tart cards reveal that the cards did not use pornographic images, not in the sense that they were explicit. None of the 22,000 cards I examined contain images of penetration or simulated sex acts.⁵²⁴ Considering the evidence from Archer's account that indicated sex workers' resourcefulness in acquiring and reproducing images, it would not have been difficult for sex workers to obtain pornographic magazines. Therefore, this indicates that the use of imagery was a conscious design choice for sex workers. The issues with genuine or authentic images in tart card design are asymptomatic of wider values of sex workers' presumed personality traits in which they are perceived as deceptive,

⁵²³ Anonymous, 'The Alchemy of Pain: Honoring the Victim-Whore', in *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival*, ed. Tina Horn and Natalie West (New York: The Feminist Press, 2021).

⁵²⁴ This does not mean they did not exist but shows that they were not typically used for this purpose.

secretive and untrustworthy. This ties to value because women with more feminine traits were seen as a higher class (slim, toned, small waist measurements, larger bust, wider hips, long hair and conventional beauty standards.) Again the images of women who did not comply with conventional Eurocentric beauty standards were considered less valuable.⁵²⁵

The tart cards are a sidenote to a wider problem with whorearchical divides within the sex industry, where amateur housewife porn, or 'reader's wives' images are linked to working-class histories. On the other hand, the demand for such imagery that rejects high-production erotic imagery featuring established pornstars indicates a social concept where the male sex buyer prefers low-end images because they evoke authenticity. The genuine trope is a marketing strategy that escalated British 'tart with a heart' tropes and narratives.

Conclusions

The investigation revealed that visual tropes, symbols and significant markers associated with sex industry images intersect with other pop culture references. The tart cards were critically analysed to seek patterns and trends in sex workers' methods of self-representation and self-branding. The tropes also trace themes of self-censorship, further giving evidence of criminalisation placed on sex workers' bodies as discussed in Chapter 3.

A Xerox case study was implemented to counter arguments that criticised the 'soulless' cards produced from the mid to late 90s. The study revealed how sex

⁵²⁵ Mireille Miller-Young, 'Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography', *Sexualities* 13, no. 2 (2010): 219–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709359229>. p.227.

workers had greater options to represent themselves via photography and home DTP advancements. The body of images analysed in the Xerox case study showed a different type of tart card that is absent from the current literature. The images portray a DIY aesthetic and feature amateur photography skills in tart cards that have yet to be discussed in the existing literature. The hand-made Xerox printed advertisements wildly deviated from the typical design specifications of professionally printed tart cards in mainstream discussions.⁵²⁶ This shows that there may be other rare examples of such ephemera residing in private archives that can contribute to future tart card discourses. This case study revealed that sex workers were representing themselves in their advertisements by drawing upon their own skills as independent labourers.

The woman depicted in the Xerox series was not a glamour model or semi-famous celebrity as Salter's investigation of tart card models identified. This shows how the everyday sex worker navigated options in portraying herself. The images are representative of amateur photography that evokes a 'reader's wives' style of erotic imagery, however, I argue that though the images are strikingly different, they are still not conducive to pornographic imagery. By situating tart cards in wider feminist debates on pornography, the visual analysis proves that tart cards were not pornographic, yet they shared the same problematic modes of viewing.

My findings reveal that early 90s cards are more focused on visual themes of communication, evidenced by tropes of telephones in the design. This is evident in Figure 22, where the reclining female sex worker's body is pictured next to a landline telephone, and she is depicted talking on the phone. This aesthetic changed once

⁵²⁶ *The X Directory: Kink Cards from 1984- 1994.*

the internet became more widely used for sex workers to advertise. The widespread use of digital photography also altered the way that sex workers could represent themselves in a vastly changing environment. The evolution of tart cards from the 1990s to the present day reflects a complex interplay of technological advancements, changing social norms, and the adaptability of sex workers' marketing strategies. While mainstream criticism, as evidenced by Archer's research, often laments the loss of original aesthetic charm in later tart cards, a more nuanced approach reveals a rich tapestry of visual communication and self-representation.⁵²⁷

The body of existing literature on tart cards is mostly in favour of the aesthetic of the early 90s tart cards. This means that there is an extensive gap in the knowledge base of sex workers' advertising from the millennium. This chapter addressed how the cards have reflected the changing trends, tastes and beauty standards of the time, as well as discussing the nuances in self-representation and the developments in technology. The aspects combined, give a more balanced impression of the social background in which the cards were produced. The investigation discovered that sex workers' distribution of advertising materials did not alter from the early 90s, but found that methods of production became more prolific with the advent of more accessible home tech and the convenience of in-house printing shops.

Existing literature in porn studies highlighted some of the problematic ways in which tart cards were situated within wider obscenity debates.⁵²⁸ My findings revealed that tart card imagery was not explicit counter to mainstream opinions that accused tart cards of breaking obscenity laws. The sex workers of the 90s were

⁵²⁷ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.79

⁵²⁸ Williams, *Hard Core*.

intrinsic in developing sex workers' aesthetic culture that can be identified in contemporary advertising. The design configurations of current tart cards incorporate some of the early 90s Playboy symbols and other visual tropes seen in print, which still appear in the digital sphere. Some of the same visual signifiers and language used are effective at relaying certain messages and services that are still used today in visual marketing strategies on the internet.

My study shows that fashion and pop culture borrow elements from sex workers' visual culture. The cards highlight the causal arrow between visual signifiers that switch back and forth between celebrity culture, the media and high fashion. The tropes of bunnies have been explained as reducing women's bodies to animals in SWERF-informed frameworks, however, my visual methodology offers an alternative view that disrupts this reading. Burlesque masks, bunny ears and other bodily adornments allow sex workers to customise their appearance and play with their alter egos to portray an image of themselves in alignment with the services available.

Archer theorised that all the services are the same, however, this is not true, as sex work is a broad category of intimate service providers and this has always been the case. Sex workers do not have rigid roles, they are fluid and are not easily defined. The industry is vast, which is why current tart card knowledge is inadequate at present. The masks, props and other visual adornments worn by sex workers in tart card imagery are also indicative of sex workers' criminalisation. The conscious obstruction of sex workers' faces meant that they could exercise a degree of anonymity whilst expressing themselves creatively.

The human enterprise of sex work is not solely down to visual imagery, it is a form of labour and as such, the marketing reflects that. The humble, amateur form of

handwritten advertisements with a telephone number transcends timeframes, they may not be viewed as collectable, valuable, worthwhile or interesting pieces of subversive art, however, they do show that sex workers are still operating under such marginalised and oppressive social control. They are using methods that do not require sophisticated design. These ephemera can show the day-to-day realities of sex workers who are living multifaceted and diverse lives. In the following chapter, a chronological investigation into a case study looks at one sex worker's self-representation over twenty years to bolster the claims made in this chapter: further producing alternative knowledge on different formats of tart cards outside of the typical mainstream examples of the ephemera.

Chapter 5: Marble Arch Kitty



Figure 38. Kitty, Háy collection, 1992.



Figure 39. Kitty is Back, Internet Archive, 2011.⁵²⁹

Introduction

These two images depict one sex worker's tart cards which were made almost two decades apart yet share striking similarities. Marble Arch 'Kitty' or 'Katrina' is the case study that forms the focus of this chapter. Kitty's tart cards are critically analysed to counter the arguments put forward by policymakers in the previous chapters (3 and 4). My findings from the archives demonstrate that sex workers had agency over their images, contrary to mainstream opinions in the existing literature. The point of using one prolific example highlights and locates the nuance proposed in the methodological framework, as the chronological visual analysis of this set of tart cards spans technological, social and policy changes in the UK. This is read in conjunction with pro and anti-sex work feminist theories to uncover another strand of enquiry into the design of sex workers' visual culture. The cards show what kinds of formatting and print were available in the early 90s, the examples investigated

⁵²⁹ 'Kitty Is Back in Marble Arch', TartArt, 19 June 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130429123427/http://www.tartart.co.uk/2011/06/19/kitty-is-back-in-marble-arch/>.

explore the breadth of imagery and the limitations of such technology in the development of sex workers' self-promotion. After careful observation, I found that 'Irish Kitty' also used the pseudonym 'Katrina'. The study uses Marble Arch Kitty's images to prove that despite policymakers' concerns, tart cards did not always follow a linear degeneration in which they became more explicit.⁵³⁰ An exploration of 'Marble Arch Kitty' addresses themes of personal branding. This argument builds on contextual and sociohistorical narratives established in the previous chapter by addressing the ephemera from a sex worker's perspective.

Chapter structure

This case study opens a discussion about sex workers' self-representation by showing another perspective of tart cards. This disrupts the typical narratives around carding, usually centred from an outsider's viewpoint.⁵³¹ The chapter visually analyses Kitty's tart cards chronologically to position my argument, where I object to the assumption in the existing literature that tart cards naturally became more pornographic. This, in turn, proves that sex workers had their own design considerations and were not 'pimped' or coerced into producing images. I implement art historical and feminist art critiques in the visual analysis of Kitty's imagery on her tart cards to portray a different, more nuanced perspective of sex workers' images. The chapter is concerned with three key areas that address the critical analysis of graphics, the visual analysis of photographic imagery in Kitty's advertisements, and a discussion of the wider implications of these findings. Firstly, I address the textual content to disrupt widespread narratives that criticised sex workers for the cards

⁵³⁰ Murray, 'Number Is up for Vice Adverts in Phone Boxes'.

⁵³¹ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*.

becoming too obscene. In this chapter, I prove that the language used in the branding and marketing of sex workers' services did not always follow an ideology that the cards transgressed into pornographic material. This is supplemented by a feminist critical analysis of Kitty's photographic material in her advertising, which also shows that the images produced by sex workers did not always involve more uncensored or explicit imagery as projected by media reports. This demonstrates how sex workers were portraying themselves and their services, however, they were not and I argue, still typically not thought of as autonomous image-makers. This chapter adds to the thesis by offering an alternative reading of the ephemera which remained fairly consistent throughout nineteen years.

A critical visual analysis informed by feminist art theory and intersectional feminist theory is implemented alongside visual criminological methodologies to offer an alternative reading of tart cards.

Into the archives: Kitty's cards from 1992

The earliest known example of Marble Arch Kitty/Katrina's tart card [dated 1992], is held at the Bishopsgate Institute in the Ágnes Háy collection. This period aligns with Háy 's arrival in London and the beginning of her ephemera collection. This timeframe is consistent with accounts from other collectors I conversed with, who also began collecting around the same period due to the rapid growth of the carding phenomenon. The significance of my research lies in the analysis of a body of images spanning 19 years, demonstrating a sustained use of visual tropes in one sex worker's advertising methods. Although I speculate that earlier examples may exist, the extensive timespan of the analysed ephemera from 1992 provides a strong

foundation for my argument. Kitty's tart cards have little design fluctuations from the first design I found in the archives dated 1992 to the most recent example from 2011. I argue that these design configurations are in stark contrast to the statements given by policymakers and members of the MET Police Vice Unit who lamented that tart cards were becoming "nastier".⁵³² These cards show that from almost a timespan over twenty years, Kitty's cards did not become more explicit, obscure or pornographic, counter to mainstream opinions in the law and wider British society. I have arranged the cards in chronological order, starting from 1992 to 2011, as identified within various archival collections to show the development of one sex worker's tart card production.

This evidence shows how one person advertised their services using tart cards as a medium over the course of nineteen years. (Visual analysis of this material has been applied to show the nuance in sex workers' self-representation). The time-frame spans almost twenty years, and the extensive research undertaken in this corpus of images shows how tart card production developed with the advent of advancing technology and the widespread use of the internet.

Given the scope of this chapter, it is not feasible to visually analyse every example of Katrina's tart cards. However, I have identified key points that I have signposted as compelling evidence that defy the voices of the legislators who had an open dialogue with the media. These findings challenge the narratives put forth by the law, the government and policymakers who engaged in open dialogue with the media. In contrast, the sex workers who designed these cards were given little to no opportunity to voice their opinions on the industry that they not only contributed to

⁵³² Murray, 'Number Is up for Vice Adverts in Phone Boxes'.

but also created. This chapter aims to highlight the disconnect between public discourse and the lived experiences of those directly involved in the sex work industry. “Thus, visual criminologists and critical criminologists share an ongoing, urgent concern with deepening our understandings of the complexity of relationships between crime, law and the state, as well as the role of control, power, resistance and subordination—all framed within an intellectual and political desire for social justice and transformation.”⁵³³ The chapter contributes to the thesis by examining one sex worker’s tart cards as part of a wider investigation of how sex work ephemera has been situated within narrow viewpoints. This case study reveals how the cards are misunderstood as criminalised, sex industry litter and seeks an alternative methodological framework to make sense of tart cards’ visual information.

Analysis of graphics

An analysis of the textual, symbolic and graphic visual information on Kitty’s tart cards demonstrates the human enterprise of carding; and shows mark-making and visual communication from a sex worker’s perspective. The methodology is enriched by ephemera enthusiast, Maurice Rickards’ sentiment that “These items mirror exactly the graphic fads and fancies of the day.”⁵³⁴ Such materials reveal a hidden visual culture of sex work that has been lost to the archives.

Kitty’s cards were mass-produced, no larger than A5 size, and though they include handmade elements, such as the handwritten text, they are produced to a high quality on CS1 cardstock [one-sided gloss-coated card]. Every example of

⁵³³ Brown and Carrabine, ‘The Critical Foundations of Visual Criminology’. p.193

⁵³⁴ Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*. p.34

Marble Arch Kitty's tart cards was consistently printed on this high-quality grade C1S cardstock.⁵³⁵ The 'front' of the adverts feature photographic images of Kitty alongside handwritten, and scanned text printed on the glossy side of the card, and the back is left plain on the 'wire' side. Years later, the handwritten parts were replaced by computer-generated graphic fonts, however, this was only integrated for a brief time before returning to the original handwritten format. Though the cards were prone to experimentation, they were consistently printed to a business standard. This finding shows that Kitty's cards were produced in-house by a professional printing press machine, furthermore, this illustrates that Kitty did not print these on her own. In the 1990s it was impossible to recreate the feel of the thicker tart cards because the technology did not yet exist in a home desktop publishing environment. This point is crucial because it demonstrates third-party involvement in the production of sex work ephemera, something that has been criminalised in law and is considered problematic in British society. It also shows that Kitty may have been collaborating with a range of different groups of people such as designers and printers to create her final product. This locates autonomy because it demonstrates how she planned, considered and budgeted for her marketing strategies. These findings reveal that outside parties and organisations were willing to assist sex workers. This is an interesting piece of evidence because it goes against the grain of SWERF-informed frameworks that were actively discouraging the production of sex industry images. Whilst feminist literature failed to address sex work ephemera as a separate entity, other related topics that centred on the visual presence of sex, such as fierce anti-porn campaigns helped to situate the ideologies around carding that informed

⁵³⁵ 'Kitty Is Back in Marble Arch'.

knowledge around tart cards.⁵³⁶ Anti-porn feminists disagree, and Long's account of feminist activism on sex work censorship in the 90s states "In the UK, institutionalisation tended to favour liberal feminist approaches, and while organisations such as the Greater London Council developed policies around sexist advertising, radical feminist critiques of pornography were generally not high on the agenda."⁵³⁷ I argue that this positioning that was founded on anti-porn feminist campaigns continued to align the tart cards in a certain way, that was entrenched in obscenity laws and pornography. This aided in the general assumption that tart cards and by association, sex workers, were seen as 'lesser than'.

It is crucial to note that printing tart cards was a lucrative business in the 1990s due to the limitations in home computers, and technology such as scanners and printers and also social barriers to accessing expensive and professional printing equipment. Professional printers had a financial motivation to produce the material for sex workers, however, the ambiguous terminology around third-party involvement meant that they were operating a business model that was a legal grey-area. This problematic aspect of the sex industry is one of the reasons that little knowledge about carding and the printers who assisted sex workers exists. The social stigma around profiting from a sex worker created a social dynamic where these deals were exchanged in private.

⁵³⁶ Julia Long, *Anti-Porn: The Resurgence of Anti-Pornography Feminism*, 1st ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350218512>. p.152

⁵³⁷ Long. p.48

Hand-written elements



Figure 40. *Kitty is Back: As Horny as Ever*, Háy collection, c.1993.

This text-only example is one of the rarest examples of Kitty's tart cards in existence within the archives. Kitty's handwritten advertisement is indicative of early tart cards that were displayed in newsagent windows before the tart card 'boom' when cards began circulating widely in phone booths.⁵³⁸ The hand-rendered lettering has been designed with intention, the text has been carefully considered and has been executed within ruled lines to keep symmetry. The text has varying hand-made fonts but is uniform and clear for the audience to read. The different font types have been applied to generate an eye-catching advertisement. The signage is in all caps, but the style and bold accents in the text show pre-planned and careful consideration of

⁵³⁸ Barnes, 'Geo/Graphic'.

the intended message. This text-only example of Kitty's advert is rare, no other duplicates of this ephemera have been identified across archives. A similar version can be seen in Brian Salter's collection, but these are the only two examples I have found. I have identified this text in later reproductions of Katrina's cards where the information accompanies a photograph of a female-presenting figure. This demonstrates that she stuck to a formula when curating her advertisements which is against the grain of the existing literature. A yearning develops in Kitty's cards, one that comprises human experience, and intimacy. Not only does Kitty describe herself as coming back; her adverts often have 'back again' in bold capital font, but she also emphasises that her 'gentlemen always come back'. The guarantee promotes a feeling of mutual interest, and the exchange in returning visits is reciprocated, like visiting an old friend. Kitty offers her clients a 'well-stocked free bar', promoting an air of hospitality beyond the basic services available. This sets her apart from the competition because she offers an experience not just a service. This does not imply that she dislikes her occupation, in fact, it instils contemporary viewpoints put forward by sex workers who argue that aspects of their job roles can be enjoyable as well as lucrative.⁵³⁹

Physical characteristics

I argue that the reworked and edited reproductions of Kitty's cards from the late 1990s into the millennium provide more evidence of Kitty's autonomy. For instance, Kitty reports a fluctuation in her bodily measurements, her bust has enlarged from a 38B cup to a 38C cup and her hips have increased by two inches. This change in her

⁵³⁹ Bowen, *Work, Money and Duality*. p.31

proportions is explicitly stated in her advertisements, evidence of this can be identified in Figure 38 and Figure 39. This promotes an air of authenticity which further supplements the visual information included on her tart cards via her photographs, as it makes her seem more genuine and believable. As found in Archer's research, the aspect of being 'genuine' was a strong selling point for clients to consider when selecting sex workers' services.⁵⁴⁰

My critical analysis of the cards asserts that Kitty's amended measurements suggest that she has put on weight and is older; she is human and has advertised herself as such. This is an empowering move because most mainstream ideas about sex work have been influenced by research outputs from academics outside of the industry. Such research has promoted wider ideals about beauty, value and labour where sex workers over the age of thirty are considered 'too old', and in turn, are relegated to lower socio-economic status.⁵⁴¹ I argue that this case study provides a social historical account that evidences how sex workers were promoting themselves in many individualistic ways, contrary to common (mis)understandings of the industry.

Autonomy is located in Kitty's advertisements because she is depicted as a person, not an object. This reading is in contrast to Bindel's theory that denotes female sex workers as objects of heterosexual male desire.⁵⁴² Kitty's imagery shows vulnerability but by suggesting that she is subject to the ageing process much like every other human being she is taking control of her representation and claiming ownership of her body. This concludes that she is projecting herself as more than

⁵⁴⁰ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.69

⁵⁴¹ Arnold and Barling, 'Prostitution'. p.265

⁵⁴² Bindel and Atkins, 'Big Brothel: A Survey of the off-Street Sex Industry in London'. p.8

'just' a sex worker, she is a person. This aspect is important because it shows how Kitty wanted to convey a sincere image to her clients. In contrast to anti-sex work rhetoric which argues that sex workers operate under patriarchal, heteronormative social dynamics that exert control over women, Kitty is indifferent to this logic. The human aspect of Kitty's tart cards appeals to wider frameworks about sex and social control because her communication demonstrates that she cares about what her customers think. The message that Kitty portrays is that she respects her clients and wishes to provide them with a luxury service, this is not something that a victim would promote. Typically, SWERFs use the argument that sex work cannot be a form of neutral labour because transactional sex is an abuse of patriarchal power (im)balances that causes harm towards women.⁵⁴³ In my visual analysis, I have used this case study to show that the oversimplified feminist narratives of 'trafficked victim' or 'empowered sex worker' are insufficient because they do not apply the nuanced realities of sex workers' lived experiences.

Kitty describes herself as a 'great-looking, leggy, blonde', these adjectives stayed consistent throughout her career and defined her brand. Kitty's cards differed because she advertised herself as a 'mature' service provider. This is in stark contrast to the majority of tart cards in which sex workers branded themselves as much younger; typically, the most common, average age of the sex workers advertised in tart cards ranges from eighteen to twenty-five years old. I discovered that cards advertised sex workers as young as 17 years old, but these are much rarer. My findings reveal that seventeen is the youngest age reported on the ephemera (see Figure 2 and Figure 53), this verges on the consensual age of sex in the UK (16), which is not illegal, but may be seen as socially immoral. The legal age

⁵⁴³ Dworkin, 'Against the Male Flood'.

of consent between heterosexual partners is 16 years old per the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885.⁵⁴⁴ Though it was not illegal to have consensual sex with 17-year-olds in the 1990s (and still is not), it may be viewed as unusual or exploitative because adults are regarded as 18+ years old in British culture. The results from this research found that many cards advertise seventeen-year-old sex workers' services, however, the image is not always an authentic representation of the individual.

Sex workers advertising their services as seventeen-year-olds may generate concern because it raises questions of consent and exploitation. This is apparent in Rebecca Whisnant's literature that conflates issues of human trafficking and child exploitation with the sex industry.⁵⁴⁵ This is not the case in Kitty's advertisements: whereas the majority of tart cards advertised 'teens', Kitty's adverts were atypical because she described herself as 'mature'. The terminology is vague, yet Kitty went further than an ambiguous descriptor and even explicitly stated her age in some of her cards which demonstrates that she was transparent about her age. Furthermore, she used her age to set herself out from the majority of the competition. Maturity connotes experience, which in turn, is highly commodifiable in the sex industry; Kitty played to her strengths, taking ownership of this marked difference. Kitty's promotion of maturity also equates to an alternative service, one which evokes safety and comfort. This is further evidence that implies she was working autonomously.

Next, I move on to analysing the handmade visual tropes in Kitty's tart cards to investigate recurring themes. This aids in locating autonomy in tart card production in

⁵⁴⁴ 'Sexual Behaviour 19th Century', accessed 20 April 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231028124104/http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/sexualbehaviour19thcentury/>.

⁵⁴⁵ Stark and Whisnant, *Not For Sale*. p.xi

contrast to mainstream narratives that perpetuate anti-sex work rhetoric, thus showcasing a different perspective of the phenomena.

Superimposed details

In Kitty's tart cards, the minimalistic symbol of a shamrock can be identified. Kitty implements the symbolism of the 'Irish' lucky charm, whereby the shamrock is the sex worker's national identity and a vital visual tool for self-promotion. Kitty commodifies her heritage to set herself apart from competing trade and to create a strong visual brand. The iconography of the shamrock, typically a green leaf, is an instantly recognisable and culturally embedded symbol. The detail has been hand drawn, the sketch is not printed in colour, it is a simple black line drawing of a three-leaf clover that conjures St. Patrick's Day celebrations. The minimalistic symbol humanises Kitty by adding a personalised touch to the composition which also adds visual interest. It is an easily recognisable symbol and by utilising it in multiple later revised designs, the recurring trope ensured that her customer base could immediately identify her. Kitty is the only example of tart card imagery that advertises herself as Irish, this is a rarity in itself.

The inclusion of the plant motif also serves as a visual signifier of eroticism. In art historical theory the symbolism of flowers and nature is tethered to the female body and more specifically, acts as a metaphor for female sexual organs.⁵⁴⁶ In Kitty's tart cards, there are no outwardly explicit or pornographic visual elements in her imagery, however, classic art historical tropes allude to sex. The addition of floral imagery has historical connotations with delicate femininity which ties to classical

⁵⁴⁶ Pollock, 'Woman as Sign'. p.186

depictions of the female body. Such iconography is theorised as tasteful, whereas pornographic content is considered vulgar which I will explore further in the chapter.

Visual analysis of photographic images



Figure 41. *Kitty is Back* (photographic card), Háy collection, (undated) c.1994.

The Gaze

The 1994 card [pictured above], includes more of Kitty's facial features than the later examples of tart cards. This is the only example that partially reveals her eyes. It is unclear whether the design concept was consciously or subconsciously arranged in this way. Visual criminologists may theorise that the concealment of the person's

identity allows them to operate on the margins of the law, contextualising Kitty's occupation as a criminalised activity. Street-based sex workers have been posed as victims of crime by prolific media coverage of serial killers who targeted female sex workers, however, the safety implications were not confined to this sub-set of sex workers.⁵⁴⁷ The stigma around the sex trade means that all people within the industry are at risk from violence.⁵⁴⁸ This context is important when visually analysing sex work ephemera: though Kitty is depicted as a high-end sex worker, this does not mean that she would have been safe. It is important to remember that the techniques of concealing her identity were crucial, because of prevailing insights about sex workers' lack of value in society.⁵⁴⁹ One way that Kitty anonymises herself is by using visual techniques that hide or distort her face.

The historical connotations of sexual violence and sex workers operating in London hark back to Victorian London but also held persistent and cyclical consequences for sex workers in the 1990s (as discussed in Chapter 3). The figure is fully clothed, and the outfit is revealing, however, the image does not require censorship. Inserting Pollock's theoretical line of enquiry where "the eye is the symbol of female genital organs" the hand gesture playfully lifts the negligée revealing stockings and suspenders in a typical boudoir or strip-tease aesthetic. This pose 'hides' the genitals but is compensated for by the visual trope.⁵⁵⁰

The handwritten text on a piece of paper was placed on the photograph to obscure Kitty's identity, revealing one eye. This would make it difficult to identify the

⁵⁴⁷ Coy, Wakeling, and Garner, 'Selling Sex Sells'. p.444

⁵⁴⁸ Kinnell, *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*.

⁵⁴⁹ Wattis, 'Revisiting the Yorkshire Ripper Murders'. p.7

⁵⁵⁰ Pollock, 'Woman as Sign'. p.185

person but also shows a degree of accuracy in the photograph's authenticity that reassures the viewer [and/or potential client] that it is a real person.



Figure 42. Marble Arch Kitty (photographic card), Háý collection, 1995.

Three copies of this same advert (1995) exist in the Háý collection, demonstrating that the card may have been printed on multiple occasions or once at a high volume. This was the example that inspired the thesis because it is a very different type of tart card compared to the majority of surviving ephemera. The blend of photography, handwritten calligraphy and line drawing in this set of cards makes them unique from most tart cards in the Wellcome and Bishopsgate collections. This tart card is special because it develops another critical side of sex work imagery that

has been neglected and forgotten about in the archives. It is important to note that between 1994 when the photograph of Kitty is stated to have been taken and its date-stamped collection in 1995, many technological advancements occurred. The advancement of digital photography during this period also had a profound effect on the production of tart card imagery. The exploration of Kitty's tart card development enriches knowledge about the phenomenon of carding, sex workers' social histories and graphic design.

Stigmatised views of sex work have forced sex workers to engage with concepts of dual personalities, opting for a distinction in their work/ life balance, which entails a separation between these identities.⁵⁵¹ The representation and self-representation of sex workers is a highly visual research area, yet there is little engagement in the literature with actual images made by sex workers. Waring's theoretical concept of the sex worker presenting as 'face in' or 'face out' was developed in the context of online abuses and violence against sex workers in their self-portraits.⁵⁵² This concept can be applied to pre-digital images such as Kitty's tart cards, where sex workers anonymised their images to protect their identities from violence from the general public, the police, and BT, who threatened to disconnect sex workers' phone lines. Waring's theory of 'face in/out' is useful for developing further enquiry into sex workers' autonomy because it considers nuances in the social environments in which sex workers may reject or accept their personal identity with their work identity. By applying this theoretical stance, the critical analysis of historical ephemera can be analysed in this context. In the 1995 version of the tart

⁵⁵¹ Moshoula Capous- Desyllas et al., 'Understanding the Strengths, Challenges, and Strategies of Navigating Work Life and Personal Life among Sex Workers', in *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research* (Routledge, 2018), 269–82, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351133913-26>.

⁵⁵² Waring, 'Feminist Art Activisms and Activisms (Chapter 16) - Visual Activism and Marginalised Communities (Women Full Service Sex Workers) in Online Spaces.'

card, Kitty's eyes are completely obscured by the text, instead revealing the lower half of her face. The inclusion of the lips in the image is important because it is a body part that is often sexualised. The omission of Kitty's eyes would suggest that she is trying to protect her anonymity whilst curating her brand.

Feminists have sought to dismantle themes of misogyny in the representation of women.⁵⁵³ Laura Mulvey's seminal literature on the 'male gaze' in cinema was a pivotal theoretical enquiry for sex work researchers to build upon and incorporate into their theories.⁵⁵⁴ In contemporary literature, the gaze has extended to the critique of sex workers' self-portraits and imagery in digital media.⁵⁵⁵ The 'male gaze' theory is imperative to consider in Kitty's imagery because the visual analysis of her designs reveals codes implemented by sex workers to protect their identities. A SWERF reading of Kitty's cards informed by Barry's ideologies may imply that she concealed her identity to remain an anonymous sex object, to differentiate her whore status from 'normal' women.⁵⁵⁶ The typographical information on Kitty's cards either completely or partially covers her face, obscuring her eyes and subsequently, her gaze. This layering of materials, where photographs were arranged with written text on paper created a collage effect that had a distinctive 'look' but also helped to keep Kitty's true identity a secret. This suggests that Kitty understood their criminalised and marginalised status as a sex worker. MacKinnon may argue that by erasing her gaze, Kitty also dehumanised herself.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵³ Nochlin, *Representing Women*.

⁵⁵⁴ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'; Starr, 'The Whore Gaze (Preliminary)'; Starr and Francis, "I Need \$5 Million".

⁵⁵⁵ Sanders et al., *Internet Sex Work*.

⁵⁵⁶ Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), <http://archive.org/details/femalesexualslav00barr>. p.205

⁵⁵⁷ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1987), <http://archive.org/details/feminismunmodifi00mack>. p.173

I argue against this viewpoint. My reading of Kitty's ephemera engages with the feminist rhetoric that asserts 'sex work is work'.⁵⁵⁸ This ideology then situates Kitty as an independent labourer, thus meaning that the image depicts a sex worker, not a complete representation of a human being with a multifaceted personality. Kitty's design configurations may have been implemented to protect her from social stigma due to being 'outed', which would have had significant, social and financial consequences. The gaze (or absence of) can then be understood as a tactical design consideration that was implemented under a systemic social dynamic that marginalised sex workers. Kitty is an example of a marginalised group of individuals working under conditions that criminalised their existence.

'Genuine photo'

This section now addresses photographic theory to situate themes of autonomy in sex workers' tart cards. Kitty's cards are different from other tart cards firstly, in appearance; due to the amateur photography and secondly, the handwritten text that labels the image of the sex worker as 'genuine'. The historical connotations of photography as a scientific tool rather than an art form can be drawn upon in this image.⁵⁵⁹ The nineteenth-century poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire disapproved of the mechanical reproduction of images deeming photographs devoid of artistic merit, an ideology that was popular at this time.⁵⁶⁰ Of course, attitudes towards photography were considerably different in the 1990s, but photographs still provided

⁵⁵⁸ Carol Leigh, 'Carol Leigh, a.k.a. Scarlet Harlot', *Radical History Review* 2022, no. 142 (1 January 2022): 169–84, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-9397159>.

⁵⁵⁹ Meredith Jones, 'Media-Bodies and Photoshop', in *Controversial Images: Media Representations on the Edge*, ed. Feona Attwood et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 19–35, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137291998_2.

⁵⁶⁰ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1859: The Modern Public and Photography', in *Modern Art And Modernism* (Routledge, 1982).

a sense of accuracy and were considered factual before the age of digital editing software.⁵⁶¹ If the photograph cannot lie, then the sex worker must consider their self-representation and how they want to portray themselves, and on the other hand, recognise the implications of this medium as a record-keeping device. These contradictory components in sex workers' self-imagery where the card's designer wishes to display themselves authentically, yet must obscure their identity to protect their anonymity, are prominent in this card. The face of the sex worker is strategically censored by the text box, the additional handwritten note would have been on a separate piece of paper which was then attached to the photograph. The image captured would most likely have been in colour, but the steps taken to achieve this composition required another process of scanning before finally printing, rendering the image in black and white. In 1994 (when the photograph is dated) digital cameras were available but they were rarely used by the general public on account of their price range at approximately £700.⁵⁶² The model likely posed for someone who took the photograph with a more affordable film camera rather than setting a digital camera to a self-timer setting, though this is also a possibility that cannot be ruled out. Either means of production validates the authenticity of Kitty's cards, as they are both indicative of amateur photography, thus capturing a true likeness of her sex-working alias.

⁵⁶¹ Susan Sontag, 'In Plato's Cave', in *On Photography* (London (UK): Penguin, 2008), <https://read.kortext.com/reader/epub/347103>. p.5

⁵⁶² National Science and Media Museum, 'History of Digital Photo Manipulation', 16 June 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240811020636/https://www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/digital-photo-manipulation-history>.

Desaturation

Kitty may have used the black-and-white aesthetic to their advantage by utilising this colour palette to create a luxury experience that would appeal to clients willing to spend more money. Batchelor's theory of the absence of colour and the use of white as an aesthetic reserved for the upper classes can help to understand the design considerations of this card.⁵⁶³ The handwritten text on the advert describes the surroundings as 'classy', this is also apparent in the visual components in the photograph. The sex worker is depicted as a glamorous woman in a black negligée, stockings and patent high heels. The contrast between the black and white photography and the handwritten elements gives mixed and contradictory signals. The luxury aesthetic is implemented through desaturation, however, the homely accents, hand-crafted feel of the advert and the amateur photography allude to working-class histories. The desaturation of the photograph's colour was an innate part of tart card production in 1994 because it would have required a scanner for each element. The steps taken to achieve the final, desired result may have taken many attempts and required manual (re)arrangement of the text and image, resulting in the black-and-white advertisement.

The body

Theoretical stances on sex workers' bodies and their representation have been problematic in feminist visual culture studies.⁵⁶⁴ The cultural significance of how sex workers have been theorised in art historical contexts and beyond, reinstate how the sex workers' image is understood in popular culture. For example, art historian,

⁵⁶³ David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London (UK): Reaktion Books, 2000).

⁵⁶⁴ Coy, Wakeling, and Garner, 'Selling Sex Sells'.

Clayson does not describe Degas' prints of women in the brothel as nude, they are depicted as excessively naked "wearing the signs of their permanently debased condition: their immodesty about, their nakedness and the ungainliness of their anatomies "covered" only by body ornaments specific to the slattern (neck ribbons or necklaces and brightly colored stockings)." ⁵⁶⁵ The 'slattern' (sex worker) is thus identifiable via her gender and the accessories that adorn her female body. Such identifying visual markers of the sex worker are addressed in this section to obtain different perspectives on sex industry fashion and culture. These themes are attached more specifically to the female sex worker's body and are addressed through the case study of Kitty's tart card imagery.

Though tart cards have been collected and cherished as a form of accidental art, no visual analysis of the ephemera has been conducted. I recognise that the cards were not designed as 'artworks' per se, however, the closest theoretical enquiry of sex work is abundant in nineteenth-century post-impressionist artworks. Such methodological enquiries help guide the project and supplement the lack of existing literature on the phenomena. Sex workers' bodies, appearance, and representation have been discussed at length in art historical discourses that identify sex workers 'look' different from other 'normal' women. ⁵⁶⁶ This aspect is vital for understanding how tart cards have been understood as they are not produced in a vacuum, the imagery on tart cards has been selected for various reasons that are based on aesthetic and erotic positionings in art theory. Sociologists were also theorising that "the prostitute stands outside of mainstream society" in 1997

⁵⁶⁵ Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*. p.44

⁵⁶⁶ Charles Bernheimer, 'Degas's Brothels: Voyeurism and Ideology', *Representations*, no. 20 (1987): 158–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928506>. p.164

alongside the rapid acceleration of tart card production.⁵⁶⁷ Studies conducted into social stigma found that women were subject to oversimplified categorisations as ‘sexy’ (erotic but tasteful, therefore, visually appealing) or ‘tarty’ (sexualised bodies that are considered tasteless, therefore, repugnant).⁵⁶⁸ This ideology is exacerbated when applied to sex workers because ‘class’ has different connotations within the sex industry.⁵⁶⁹

Issues around class and representation in sex work are more complex and problematic than in mainstream feminist contexts because it draws on the critical internalised view of the whorearchy.⁵⁷⁰ Such longstanding debates on sex workers' appearance and identification as a marginalised community are still pertinent in contemporary culture.

Legs

Historically, women's legs have been critiqued as hypersexualised tropes in advertising, popular culture and the media.⁵⁷¹ The most prominent feature in Kitty's tart cards is the imagery of her ‘best’ assets: her long legs. Visually, Kitty's legs are the heart of the imagery on her tart cards. The cards depict cropped images of photographs which highlight her legs as the focal point in the composition. Every example of her cards which includes a photograph shares this common theme. Women's legs have been a source of fetishisation identified in Linda Nochlin's theory

⁵⁶⁷ Scambler and Scambler, *Rethinking Prostitution*. p.7

⁵⁶⁸ Kolnai, ‘On Disgust’.

⁵⁶⁹ Duggan, ‘The “Whorearchy”’.

⁵⁷⁰ Knox, ‘Tearing Down the Whorearchy From the Inside’.

⁵⁷¹ Steven Heller, ed., *Sex Appeal: The Art of Allure in Graphic and Advertising Design* (New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2000), <http://archive.org/details/sexappealartofal0000unse>; Katie Salen, ‘Lock, Stock and Barrel: Sexing the Digital Siren’, in *Sex Appeal: The Art of Allure in Graphic and Advertising Design*, ed. Steven Heller (New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2000), <http://archive.org/details/sexappealartofal0000unse>.

of the fragmented body. It is not a new concept and it certainly wasn't in the 1990s when Kitty produced these materials. This means that the trope of (women's) legs has a long-standing and well-established role in the critical iconography of female sexuality. The objectification of female-presenting legs is discussed in a historical exploration in Abigail Solomon-Godeau's *'The Legs of the Countess'* in which female limbs are theorised as a visual source of entertainment.⁵⁷² Erotic labour has been discussed with links to Callen's theoretical analysis of Degas' dancers. The ballet dancers' bodies were synonymous with sex workers' bodies as they contorted into poses for the enjoyment of others.

Art historical theories deduce that cropped images of female (presenting) legs can disclose the "sexual attractiveness of the invisible owner."⁵⁷³ This perspective when applied to Kitty's imagery suggests that ideals of beauty can be determined by other physical body parts even when the face of the model is absent. Cropped and fragmented images of female presenting bodies have historical discourses in fetishism and fashion within high art, however, this academic enquiry has not extended to contemporary images of sex workers.⁵⁷⁴ Feminist art theory critiques that fragmented parts of women's bodies in images reduce the representation of the woman to singular fetishised tropes.⁵⁷⁵ This is a point that the thesis challenges because as previously discussed, sex workers face significantly marked stigma as opposed to other women, meaning that their self-images embody this consideration. In the next section, I will address the problematic contradictions in sex workers' representation through the continued visual analysis of Kitty's ephemera.

⁵⁷² Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Legs of the Countess', *October* 39 (1986): 65–108, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778313>. p.97

⁵⁷³ Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. p.40

⁵⁷⁴ Nochlin. p.41

⁵⁷⁵ Nochlin, *Representing Women*.

The pose

Archer theorises that sex workers' body language is 'instantly recognisable' and that cinema and the media are partly responsible for fuelling stereotypical imagery around sex workers' depictions.⁵⁷⁶ This observation feeds into feminist theoretical stances on the performance of gender and sexuality. The visual analysis of Kitty's pose in her tart cards evidences this viewpoint, however, I look for an alternate reading in her imagery.

Kitty's body is depicted in traditional pin-up styles that reflect boudoir or glamour modelling types of poses. This style of photography is a repetitive design feature in Kitty's advertisements where she poses in a submissive position lying on her back on the advertised satin sheets, with her legs in the air. Kitty adopts a pose whereby her flexed and pointed toes elongate her limbs further promoting the fetishisation of her most lucrative assets, her long legs. Visually, the figure aligns with Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, in *Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look*, as the composition relies on socially coded, hyperfeminine visual tropes to appeal to a heterosexual male clientele.⁵⁷⁷

I propose another framework for understanding the image and suggest that the pose of Kitty's body corroborates with Marxist feminist ideas of transactional sex, labour and capitalism. Sex workers vehemently argue for autonomy and advocate that their occupation comes with many benefits including working from home plus flexible hours that make it a more viable option for those with mental and physical impairments.⁵⁷⁸ Kitty poses in various configurations, she can be seen standing with

⁵⁷⁶ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.31

⁵⁷⁷ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.

⁵⁷⁸ Angela Jones, "'I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job:": Disability, Sexual Ableism, and Sex Work', *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (31 October 2022), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v42i2.9094>.

one leg on a chair, yet the majority of her cards depict her lying down or in seated positions. Though it is not possible (or ethical) to ascertain whether a person has disabilities from looking at an image of them, Kitty's advert relies on the viewer's interpretation of her as a 'horny' physically fit, woman, yet none of these details can be verified. Kitty's poses parrot socially ingrained, gendered roles, however, these poses reflect how she wanted to portray her body and her services. The exploration continues in the following section which addresses the importance of the role of clothing in locating sex workers' autonomy in tart card production.

Clothing

It is important to note the outfits in the tart cards because this reflects how sex workers wanted to market themselves. The role of clothing, specifically shoes, fabrics and lingerie are signifying tropes in the visual fantasy of sex and eroticism.⁵⁷⁹ Though emerging literature on sex workers' fashion explores the relevance of adornments in the visual culture of the sex industry, this is a limited body of work.⁵⁸⁰ There is, however, extensive scholarly enquiry into the visual culture of clothing and its role in fetish and sexual desire.⁵⁸¹ The imagery of Kitty's legs clothed in stockings and suspenders featured in every photograph included on her tart cards. This is interesting as sex workers have begun critical enquiries in emerging fields to discuss

⁵⁷⁹ Dennis, *Art/Porn*. p.102

⁵⁸⁰ Feona Attwood, 'Call-Girl Diaries: New Representations of Cosmopolitan Sex Work', *Feminist Media Studies*, Commentary and Criticism, 10, no. 1 (1 March 2010): 109–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770903457469>; Weldon, 'Whatever Happened to Class?'

⁵⁸¹ Juliana Guglielmi and Kelly L. Reddy-Best, 'BDSM, Dress, and Consumption: Women's Meaning Construction Through Embodiment, Bodies in Motion, and Sensations', *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 23 December 2021, 0887302X211061020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X211061020>.

how problematic it is that mainstream fashion adopts sex worker's culture, whilst actively disconnecting itself from the industry.⁵⁸²

High heels

Cross-referencing across extensive archival material, I found that only one of Kitty's tart cards features a photograph without high heels, [a later example as 'Katrina']. Most of her compositions include this detail. Kitty's recurrent trope of the black patent stilettos is a consistent design feature synonymous with femininity. There are many reasons for this; high-heeled shoes are considered sexy, and are believed to heighten women's attractiveness.⁵⁸³ High heels are gendered and are typically associated with women's fashion; there are longstanding art historical analyses that identify the stiletto as an eroticised symbol of feminine sexuality.⁵⁸⁴ Scientific studies found that women wearing high-heeled shoes are ranked with a higher social status than women wearing flat-soled shoes.⁵⁸⁵ In a visual capacity, this correlates to Kitty's autonomy and aesthetic choices in how she depicts herself as a financially stable, and sexually alluring model.

The stereotypes of sex workers adorning high heels and stockings are immortalised in popular culture, yet tend to be reappropriated in mainstream fashion, meaning that 'normal' women have access to "ho couture".⁵⁸⁶ For example, Ben

⁵⁸² Weldon, 'Whatever Happened to Class?'

⁵⁸³ Paul H. Morris et al., 'High Heels as Supernormal Stimuli: How Wearing High Heels Affects Judgements of Female Attractiveness', *Evolution and Human Behavior* 34, no. 3 (1 May 2013): 176–81, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2012.11.006>. p.179.

⁵⁸⁴ Elizabeth Semmelhack, *Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Shoe* (Toronto: Bata Shoe Museum: Periscope, 2008). p.35

⁵⁸⁵ T. Joel Wade et al., 'On a Pedestal: High Heels and the Perceived Attractiveness and Evolutionary Fitness of Women', *Personality and Individual Differences* 188 (1 April 2022): 111456, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111456>.

⁵⁸⁶ Semmelhack, *Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Shoe*. p.63

Hsu's Pleasers (clear, lucite high-heeled shoes with a platform) were developed in 1993 and are synonymous with stripper culture.⁵⁸⁷ The shoes have a distinctive look which has elevated their presence in professional alternative spaces such as competitive sports, including bodybuilding circles, and pole dance arenas but they have also been worn by celebrities on the red carpet.⁵⁸⁸ Though this specific type of high-heel transcends different social spaces, the first and foremost associations of these fashion accessories are viewed as erotically charged or pornographic.⁵⁸⁹

The persistent role of high heels and eroticism in British culture is a visual trope that is conflated with sex work. "Every time the high heel goes out of fashion, it remains constant in erotica... and when it comes back in, it brings new erotic associations with it."⁵⁹⁰ This merging of sex workers' fashion trends into general popular culture aesthetics is referred to as the 'pornification' of everyday life in Julia Long's SWERF-informed, anti-porn campaign.⁵⁹¹ I argue that this assumption strips autonomy from sex workers because it distances them from their individuality and promotes the idea that all sex workers look the same.

On the other hand, the integration of sex workers' visual culture into the wider populace's imaginary sparked debates in 1990s feminist theory and is still relevant

⁵⁸⁷ 'Step into Confidence: The World of Pleaser Shoes', *Attitude Clothing* (blog), 7 June 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307140158/https://www.attitudeclothing.co.uk/blog/step-into-confidence-the-world-of-pleaser-shoes/>.

⁵⁸⁸ Vanity Fair, 'Helen Mirren's Love of "Stripper Shoes"', Vanity Fair, 14 March 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309124331/https://www.vanityfair.com/style/photos/2017/03/helen-mirren-stripper-shoes-photos>.

⁵⁸⁹ Monique Roffey, 'Vivienne Westwood's Prostitute Shoes and Patent Clutch Bag', *The Independent*, 27 September 1994, sec. London, The Independent Historical Archive, <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FQ4200270321/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=1521fc5c>.

⁵⁹⁰ Pamela Young, 'These Shoes Are Made for Gawking', *Applied Arts Magazine* 28, no. 5 (11 December 2013): 20–23, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft&AN=91936172&site=ehost-live&scope=site&authtype=sso&custid=s9814295>.

⁵⁹¹ Long, *Anti-Porn*. p.50

today.⁵⁹² The literature documents the tension between women's representation and fashion, demonstrating that certain outfit choices revealed conscious and subconscious correlations between class and personality: "Each of these women described the knife edge they walked between being "sexy" and "tarty,"." ⁵⁹³ This finding from the study reveals how imposed societal restrictions and beauty standards have been imprinted onto women, and impact peoples' aesthetic choices on a psychological level. However, sex workers have another layer of marginalisation that goes deeper because their appearance is weaponised.⁵⁹⁴

In the majority of Kitty's tart cards, she is pictured seated on a sofa or reclining seductively on a neatly made bedspread. In other examples, she is depicted standing with one leg raised on a chair or perched on the edge of a bar stool, however, the tropes of her black kitten heels remain consistent. In Figure 43 two other pairs of high heels are pictured, (these can be identified in the corner of the room on the right-hand side of the composition). This suggests that she has a certain sense of style and likes to portray herself in her trademark high heels. I argue that Kitty takes ownership of her appearance because she includes photographs of high heels in her advertisements consistently over nineteen years. This trope is synonymous with glamour, and links to the luxury aesthetic that she was promoting.

Next, I look at the environment in which Kitty was working to gain further critical visual information about how the tart cards can reveal different stories in sex workers' social histories.

⁵⁹² Ruth La Ferla, 'Sex Worker Chic: How Fashion Borrows from Prostitution', The Independent, 12 November 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220707044824/https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/sex-worker-chic-how-fashion-borrows-from-prostitution-a8027251.html>.

⁵⁹³ Kitzinger, "I'm Sexually Attractive but I'm Powerful". p.190

⁵⁹⁴ Danielle Blunt and Zahra Stardust, 'Automating Whorephobia: Sex, Technology and the Violence of Deplatforming: An Interview with Hacking//Hustling', *Porn Studies* 8, no. 4 (2 October 2021): 350–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.1947883>. p.353



Figure 43. Katrina: Mature, Leggy, Blonde, Háý collection, 1999.

Location

Kitty's identifying descriptors went beyond her appearance and included information about her geographical location, most cards advertise her services in the W1 central London area covering Marylebone, Fitzrovia, Mayfair and Soho. I argue that the cards weave a story of Kitty's physical movements around London: Her cards

advertised new premises by highlighting 'moved' to Holborn, Liverpool Street, and Tottenham Court Road, but were predominantly based in Marble Arch.

The cards trace her whereabouts, revealing where she had relocated, explicitly stating 'KITTY HAS MOVED' or 'KITTY IS BACK'. Firstly, her prolific distribution of tart cards with updated contact details reveals how she effectively informed clients of her location and services. Secondly, I argue, and most importantly, it suggests that she was working independently, operating under her own working conditions. The printed material evidences the renewal of her contact details which can also be interpreted as Kitty enjoying her lifestyle choices. Kitty regularly updated her contact details, this implies that she wanted her clients to remain in contact with her, despite laws imposed on carding and sex work in 2001.

Working environment

Kitty's tart cards explicitly describe the environment as having classy surroundings, but the visual components can be analysed in her advertisements to understand notions of 'class' in sex work. As mentioned in the previous section, the aesthetics of what is considered classy is tethered to the politics of looking, and this can extend from the body to the location of the sex worker's body.

The photography in Kitty's tart cards reveals visual clues that ascertain her autonomy as a sex worker. Her images evoke 90s nostalgia, however, a deeper critical analysis of the furniture, fixtures and decorations photographed in this environment helps situate a more robust reading of the cards in the context of when they were produced and distributed. The open champagne bottle on the chest of drawers further expands on her textual description of providing a luxury service. It is

unknown whether Kitty was photographed inside a bedroom in a brothel, hotel or the model's own living accommodation, but the interior is furnished with items that were fashionable at the time. A bouquet of white flowers hangs on the wall, such props conjure the idea of attention to detail. As discussed in artist David Batchelor's exploration of 'whiteness' the application of white décor can present itself as an extension of purity or cleanliness reserved for the upper classes.⁵⁹⁵ An ornate white clock and a porcelain statue decorate the bedside cabinet and the thick, velvet fabric of the curtain further reinforces the 'luxury' aesthetic. Kitty's rendition of class is much more homely than the sterile application of 'whiteness' associated with high-end luxury in Batchelor's theoretical enquiry of class and colour theory.

Kitty explicitly describes her environment as 'classy', but I argue that there are also visual signifiers that can portray class. The use of strong visual metaphors in her marketing differentiates her services from other sex workers. The environment photographed disrupts the mainstream ideas about sex workers because it conveys a more intimate depiction of a sex worker's workplace. Kitty's advert does not look like a mass-produced flyer, this sends a clear message to the audience about her labour and agency, it is on her terms.

The photographs in Kitty's adverts depict homely surroundings, which were against the grain of the 'seedy' or 'tacky' aesthetic that people (specifically, members of Parliament in Westminster) criticised the sex industry for.⁵⁹⁶ Kitty's luxurious surroundings far remove herself from the socially controlled, lower position of street-based sex workers in the whorearchical pyramid.⁵⁹⁷ The visual components in her

⁵⁹⁵ Batchelor, *Chromophobia*. p.54

⁵⁹⁶ Roberts, 'Drive to Beat Prostitutes on the Numbers Game'.

⁵⁹⁷ Duggan, 'The "Whorearchy"'.

adverts imply that she is not engaged in survival sex, is not being 'pimped' and is not using sex work to fund substance use. These are the primary criteria that SWERF frameworks implement to determine coercion in transactional sex, therefore Kitty's cards show an alternate, pro-sex work stance in her imagery.

The message delivered in Kitty's tart cards emphasised a homely and inviting experience. The advert is different because it looks more engaging and therapeutic than other mass-produced tart cards. The bedroom is carefully curated, the bed is made, and the pillows are straightened. The room is clean and tidy, it is appealing. The fabric of the soft furnishings extends to the clothes of the sex worker who wears silk, lace and sheer fabrics. She does not have the same social fears attached to her image as other sex workers lower on the whorearchical scale who were presumed to be dirty, drug addicted and living a hand-to-mouth existence.⁵⁹⁸ Visual analysis shows that Kitty was not dirty or enslaved akin to conflated SWERF ideas around human trafficking.⁵⁹⁹

The fact that Kitty is depicted in her bedroom (either on her premises or in a brothel) creates a vulnerable and intimate image. The photographer is unknown, but it can be assumed that they must have had a close relationship with Kitty because they were allowed access to capture her in her working outfit and environment. Because sex work is so highly stigmatised and therefore dangerous, it can be deduced that a degree of trust has been instilled in the photographer. The homely comfort displayed in Kitty's tart card imagery is symbiotic with sex workers' accounts

⁵⁹⁸ Blake E. Ashforth and Glen E. Kreiner, "'How Can You Do It?': Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity', *The Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 3 (1999): 413–34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/259134>.

⁵⁹⁹ Julia O'Connell Davidson, 'Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand Up?', *Feminist Review*, no. 83 (2006): 4–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3874380>.

that verify their work as a healing practice.⁶⁰⁰ Kitty's cards promote the feeling of a safe environment with familiar surroundings rather than an informal 24-hour business model. This implies that she is not pimped, she is in control and has autonomy over her working conditions. In the next part of my visual analysis, attention turns to the production of Kitty's tart cards from 1997 onwards, when technological developments and the internet became more prevalent.

Moving into the digital age



Figure 44. *Katrina: Marble Arch* Háy collection, 1997.



Figure 45. *Katrina: Moved to Holborn*, Háy collection, 1998.

⁶⁰⁰ Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead, "The Worst Thing Is the Screwing" (1): Consumption and the Management of Identity in Sex Work', *Gender, Work & Organization* 7, no. 2 (April 2000): 84–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.00096>. p.91

This tart card has been rescanned multiple times, it is possible to deduce this because the moiré (dimpling pattern in the photograph surface) demonstrates this. The original photograph may have been in colour, however, the scanning of the image with block text has reduced the image quality to a grainy reproduction. The telephone number appears to have been amended with an amateur eye, reminiscent of earlier 'lick and stick' designs.⁶⁰¹ Katrina's tart card production demonstrates the shift from physical spaces in context to the expansion of advertising in the digital sphere. The cards are a tangible documentation of her physical movements around areas of London, however, by the millennium the advertising of the area codes became less important because clients could contact sex workers via the internet. 2003 is the earliest date that Katrina started using a URL on her tart card designs, the website has been uploaded to the internet archive but traces of Katrina are missing. I did not confront the sex worker about her design considerations as I did not want to exploit her. I argue that my visual analysis of the ephemera is enough to situate sex workers self-representation and autonomy because the findings show that sex workers were making images to suit their clientele, they were favouring some techniques, imagery and tropes and carving a brand or identity for themselves long before the advent of the internet.

Colour print: The purple era

I have identified many developments in Kitty's tart card production across multiple archival collections. One of the most notable aspects of Kitty's cards evolution between 1997 and 2008 is her change in graphic design. As the title suggests, Kitty's

⁶⁰¹ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.74

tart cards changed from black ink on white paper to predominantly purple backgrounds with the same emphasis on photographic imagery of her legs.

The majority of Kitty/Katrina's cards are housed in the Bishopsgate archive; it is interesting, however, that a later version of this card can be identified in the Wellcome collection, and has been immortalised as "one of the first full-colour prostitute cards from London."⁶⁰² The Wellcome have this example in their collection because the collector recognised its value, as the first of its kind in the development of tart cards and the types of imagery that were being introduced onto the ephemera. This shows that Kitty has been awarded a degree of credit as one of the first (documented) full-colour photographs featured on a tart card. Yet, I argue that this is unsatisfactory because it does not fully give credit to the rich visual culture made by sex workers.

⁶⁰² 'Katrina: Mature Leggy Blonde: 38DD-26-36 Figure: Genuine Photo.', Wellcome Collection, accessed 30 July 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309123047/https://wellcomecollection.org/works/jmtyme5p>.



Figure 46. Katrina (full colour card), Wellcome collection, 1997.

In this tart card it is evident that the figure has been meticulously 'cut out' by hand from a photograph with scissors. There are residual marks around the curves of the body and it has then been applied to a colour background with additional text over the scanned image. This is an advanced tart card for 1997 and is a prime example of sex workers taking autonomy over their design considerations. It is a much more professionally developed example of a tart card from Kitty's previous examples in black and white. The progression in the handwritten components are also evident. Instead of a longer hand-written note, keywords have been selected from her earlier designs. This makes it clear that this is the same sex worker because the slogans are identical, instead of larger sentences, simple phrases have been selected to highlight specific features, which would have been easily recognisable to her customer base.



Figure 47. Katrina – mature, Salter collection.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰³ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*. p.474

The marked difference in the design features is the addition of a URL (website) where Kitty began advertising her services. Another important typographical aspect is her change in heritage. Figure 47 demonstrates how she switches to 'English' during this period before reverting to her original 'Irish' descriptor.

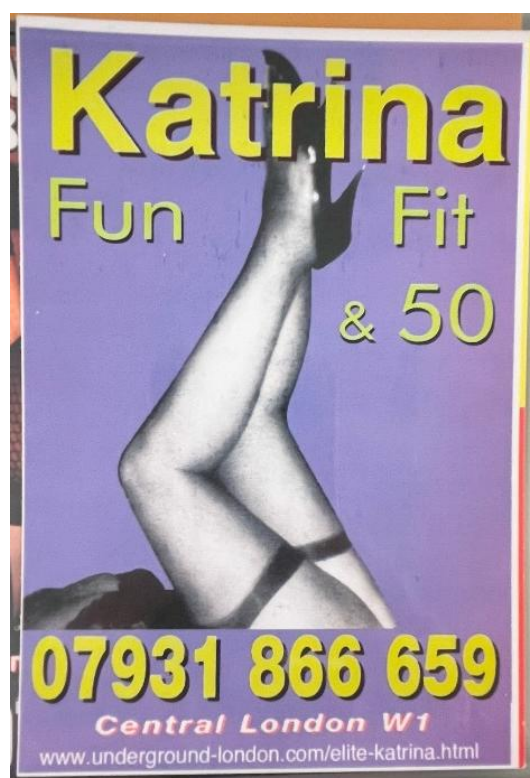


Figure 48. *Katrina: Fun, Fit & 50*, Salter collection, c.2010.⁶⁰⁴

Figure 49. *Katrina: Fun, Fit & 50*, Wellcome collection, 24/09/2010.

Figure 48 is an exemplary card in which Katrina includes a full colour photograph, including her face. The 'face/ in' photograph of Kitty appears blurred from scanning the image but on closer inspection, I conclude that this is an

⁶⁰⁴ Salter. p.66

intentional design feature. The text is fairly sharp, meaning that Kitty chose a blurred photograph of herself to use in the original composition. This suggests that Kitty was experimenting with ways to advertise herself whilst maintaining anonymity. The fonts are similar and the mobile telephone numbers are identical in both samples, therefore, I deduce that the card is from circa 2010. Though Kitty's cards changed in appearance during this time, she still retained a sense of consistency within her design features. The trope of her legs remains at the forefront of the card and is the primary visual feature that conveys her representation.

Image editing and photo manipulation

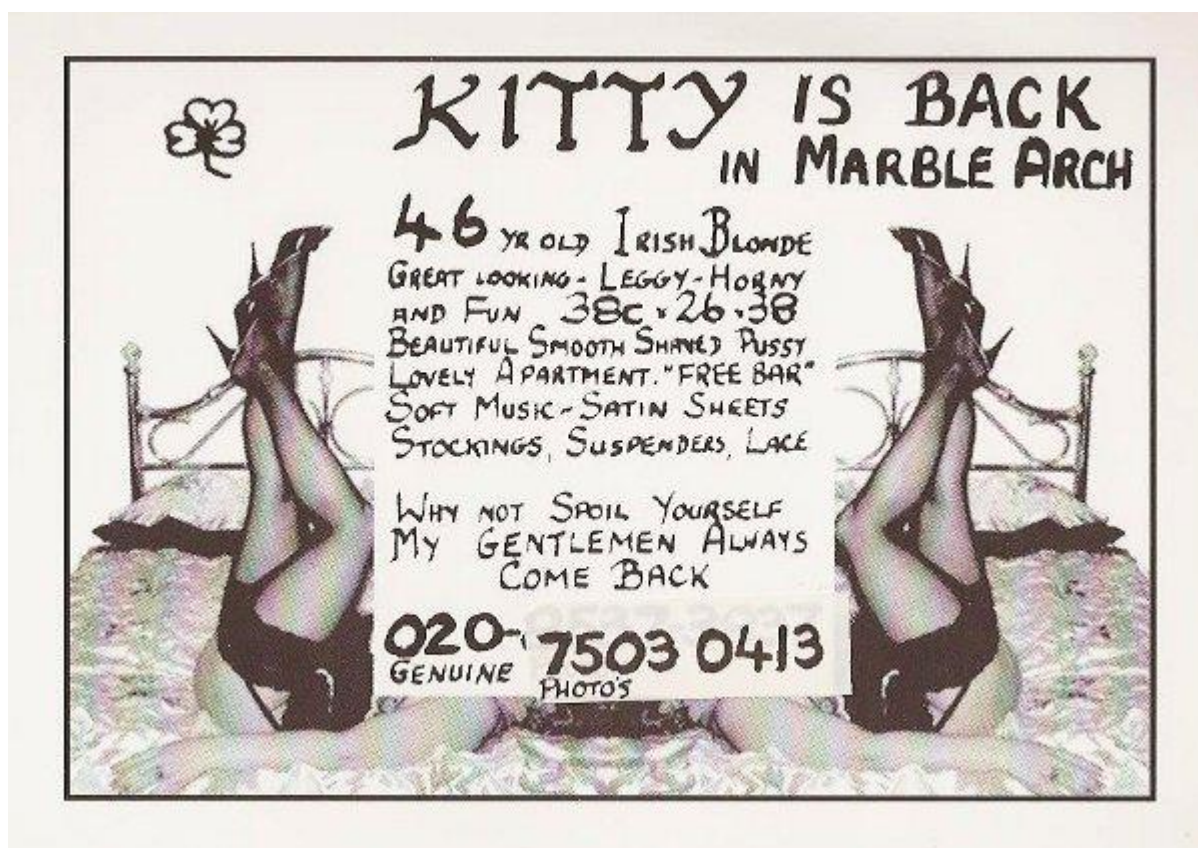


Figure 50. *Kitty is Back*, Internet Archive screenshot, 19/06/2011.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁵ 'Kitty Is Back in Marble Arch'.

Figure 50 was sourced from the internet. The anonymous person who collected tart cards uploaded them to a website that is no longer in use but has been archived.⁶⁰⁶ Though the collector is unknown, their blog demonstrates that they were aware of the literature around tart cards.⁶⁰⁷ The unknown author of the website is critical of Archer's research methods, but, they are open to sharing their resources. Their criticism is because they felt their collection was copied unlawfully. This brings up questions about who the cards belong to, who has access to them and why it matters who the curators of the collections are. The tart cards were created for the general public.

Archer's theory that 'charm' and 'originality' are prerequisites to determine the value of sex workers' images follows a well-trodden path in art historical theory that separates art and porn.⁶⁰⁸ "Since pornography may be defined as any visual representation that achieves a certain degree of sexual explicitness, art has to be protected from being engulfed by pornography in order to maintain its position as the opposing term to pornography."⁶⁰⁹ The debates around censorship and obscenity often arise in sex work research but the study of sex workers' images and ephemera are absent from those conversations. Overlapping thematic elements of kink and deviancy frequently occur in sex work research due to the expansive and intersecting nature of the industry.

⁶⁰⁶ 'Kitty Is Back in Marble Arch'.

⁶⁰⁷ 'The Prostitute Calling Cards of London', About, TartArt, 18 June 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130429093925/http://www.tartart.co.uk/about/>.

⁶⁰⁸ Dennis, *Art/Porn*.

⁶⁰⁹ Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. p.103-4



Figure 51. Marble Arch Kitty, scanned cards, Salter collection, c.2011.⁶¹⁰

Kitty reproduced her image with a different bed, sheets, and headboard, and experimented with various poses, with her hands lying flat or touching her thigh. Again, the focus of the composition is on her 'best assets': her legs. The later tart cards show a mirrored image of Kitty, whereby the fragmented legs act as a frame around the feminine, handwritten text. By manipulating her photograph and flipping the image, Kitty becomes a conjoined set of twins. The fragmentation transforms her into a doll-like manifestation or a hyper-sexualised fantasy of a woman who is more goddess than human. However, the composition is remarkably similar to her early designs. The description of the services offered has been elaborated on, but the textual information adds to the themes of class and luxury implemented in her early design. The fragmented trope of cropped legs in the composition is evident in the tart

⁶¹⁰ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*. p.484

card reproduced nineteen years later with the advent of mainstream internet use. This demonstrates that not all sex workers reinvented their image to portray more pornographic material and shows that they were active agents in the construction of their brand and image. The cards signify her preference in her marketing strategies and self-representation. Though there are deviations in the aesthetic elements, the brand is visually cohesive, showing a dedication to her line of work in carving a strong visual identity. Marble Arch Kitty's tart cards can still be found on the internet archive, as sex workers were industrious and started selling 'tart art' as this provided an additional source of revenue for those who collected the cards. Kitty has a photo-edited tart card that is dated 2011 and features a mirrored image of her legs, similar to the photograph established in her early 1990s tart card in the Háy collection. This demonstrates that Marble Arch 'Kitty' has a long-standing design process tied to the tart card. The seeds of her 'brand' have been planted in the composition of stockinged legs that pose upward from the position on the bed. I have deduced that this is the same sex worker due to close observation of the cards in the Ágnes Háy, Brian Salter and Wellcome collection of tart card archives. Many configurations of this card have been reproduced with amended telephone numbers, however, the content follows a specific design. The emphasis on descriptors 'mature, leggy, blonde' is a prerequisite to signal to her customers who she is and what her customers will recognise, this is her marketing strategy, and this is her slogan. Katrina's profile can be viewed on girlsinthebox.com with the exact same words.

Conclusions

My results show that Marble Arch Kitty [Katrina] can be identified across the most extensive tart card archives held at the Bishopsgate Institute and the Wellcome

Collection, London. Her cards also feature in private and digital collections which has been useful in cross-referencing the designs. My findings reveal that the handwriting on her cards from 1992-2011 is consistent enough to suggest that one person wrote them. Though I cannot ascertain with certainty that she wrote them herself, the longstanding consistent design elements infer that she was working autonomously. This is not the sole reason why I have reached this conclusion: Kitty also used computer-generated text and graphics between 1997 and 2008 but the photos included are the same as the handwritten cards. This shows that she had a consistent brand and aesthetic that she continued to portray in her longstanding career. The type of descriptors used in her marketing also retained consistency. This is important because the case study highlights one sex worker's aesthetic that derails the entire discourse around sex workers' escalating obscenity in their advertising, an ideology that was put forward by policymakers in the 1990s and remained unchallenged.

Though Kitty's cards have been assembled by amateur mixed media methods and collage they are printed to a high quality. This demonstrates that she had a professional printing house that made the cards for her as it was not possible to print these types of media on home desktop computer setups (see appendix, tech timeline). Contrary to the reported hostility and "social exclusion" towards sex workers from third parties as outlined in Bindel's report, this case study provides evidence that third parties were aiding in the development and distribution of sex workers' ephemera.⁶¹¹ This is important to note because the stigmatised status of sex workers is a catalyst for the harm and violence towards them, however, this demonstrates that some people assisted in helping sex workers make images. This

⁶¹¹ Bindel and Atkins, 'Big Brothel: A Survey of the off-Street Sex Industry in London'.

is problematic in itself as the financial incentive may not corroborate with mutual aid and understanding, however, it does show that people were bypassing socially contrived moral obligations in order to help produce sex work images.

The typographical and pictorial themes in Kitty's cards differ from the mainstream body of imagery on tart cards and show a different account of sex work which is more personal. The case study demonstrates that contrary to law and policymakers' opinions around the escalating obscenity in tart card design, Katrina's self-branding in her tart card production scarcely deviated from her original advert in 1992. My visual analysis found that subtle changes in Kitty's bodily measurements portrayed a more 'genuine' depiction of herself, a point that was important to prospective clients as verified in Archer's research.⁶¹² Not only does this show how Kitty was portraying herself as an autonomous individual further indicates that she was aware of the overarching concerns of her clientele, showcasing her knowledge as an entrepreneur. Kitty's cards had a human touch, she was not a sexual object as SWERF arguments may suggest.⁶¹³

Katrina's cards were reproduced and reprinted with differing standards of quality, in this image the black and white cut-out photograph has a defect in the printing process that caused a block of black ink over the ankle area. This may be due to the re-scanning and editing of previous images on the tart cards, perhaps the image was ripped from a previous version of the card which included an obsolete telephone number that had to be amended. It is these residual markings that show the human enterprise of carding and the variations and limitations that operating in this industry could bring about.

⁶¹² Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.70

⁶¹³ Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy Symposium'. p.6

The findings from my visual analysis show a long-standing, consistent design in Marble Arch Kitty's tart cards. This shows how policymakers' arguments about the changing aesthetics in tart card production which were presumed to result in the use of 'nastier' obscene imagery in sex workers' adverts were incorrect.⁶¹⁴ The evidence does not show this. This opinion has been adopted as truth in the current literature, but I argue that these claims cannot be substantiated, they are wrong. I proved my point by undertaking a thorough chronological investigation into the photography used in Kitty's tart cards. This was followed by an exploration into visual tropes and symbols implemented in Kitty's tart card design. The findings from the analysis revealed that sex workers were experimenting with different marketing strategies, especially after widespread use of the internet, however, counter to Met Police's concerns, the cards were not becoming 'pornographic'.⁶¹⁵

Though the photographs in Kitty's adverts may be viewed as vulnerable or intimate her textual descriptions do not reflect this. Kitty's cards are also different due to the way that she describes herself. In contrast to the extensive archival material that shows sex workers advertised their ages between 18 to 25 years old, Kitty is a rare example of a sex worker who used their status as a mature person to their advantage by identifying a niche in the market. It is also noteworthy that in my analysis of approximately 22,000 cards Kitty was the only sex worker to claim her Irish heritage, of course, other Irish sex workers were working in London, however, no other examples of tart cards share this in their advertising strategies. The inclusion of the hand-rendered Shamrock had a dual purpose in Kitty's tart card production, it visually signified her Irish heritage but also added visual interest. The

⁶¹⁴ Bracchi, 'Nasty Card Tricks of the Call Girls'.

⁶¹⁵ Phillips, 'Report of the Director of Legal Services Prostitutes' Cards'.

study engaged with historical theory to situate how themes of female sexuality are intertwined with the visual iconography of plants and flowers.⁶¹⁶ My visual analysis highlights how profound Kitty's tart card production was even from the early 90s. The absence of Kitty's face in her tart cards was explored through feminist positionings of 'the gaze' to locate autonomy in her advertising methods.⁶¹⁷ Though Kitty portrayed herself as authentic my results show that she never revealed her face in her advertisements. Her methods of obstructing her facial features by adding text, cropping the image or adding a blurred effect speak to bigger problems in sex workers' self-representation.

Kitty's imagery was critically analysed to reveal whether her cards could disrupt policymakers' concerns about the 'pornographic' evolution of tart cards and disprove the credibility of their argument. Similar to my results in Chapter 4, the visual analysis showed that the images and photographs were not explicit. Kitty was depicted wearing stockings suspenders and high heels consistently for 19 years. This strong visual branding suggests how fashion items are associated with female sexuality but are not directly linked to porn or sex work.

I discussed Kitty's body at length in art historical theoretical contexts to explore how sex workers' images can be explored through a visual cultural methodology and to situate how sex workers have already been discussed in high-art contexts.⁶¹⁸ Due to the tart cards' status as 'throwaway' items, they have not received the same scholarly attention that artworks have garnered. Kitty's consistent theme of advertising her legs as the focal point of her tart cards was discussed in

⁶¹⁶ Pollock, 'Woman as Sign'. p.186

⁶¹⁷ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.

⁶¹⁸ Eunice Lipton, *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire* (Cornell University Press, 2013).

feminist art-theory-based enquiries to establish how this sexualised trope enriches the wider investigations into sex workers' self-representation. The poses used in Kitty's cards were also investigated as a form of self-expression through a Marxist feminist lens to locate autonomy in her imagery as an independent labourer. I identified gaps in the existing literature that address the fetishisation of clothing, noting that sex workers at present, are often absent from the discussions.

The politics of looking at sex workers' bodies is tied to whorearchical social structures. Kitty's photographs are consistently curated images that portray an intimate view of a sex worker's lived experience. The amateur photography disrupts narratives that accused the tart cards of utilising increasingly pornographic material because Kitty's images do not have a high production value. Kitty's photographs portray intimate services because the environment looks plush and cosy, reminiscent of visiting a family member's home. The bedroom, though dated, reflects the fashion of the time, giving a sense of familial security. It does not align with SWERF-informed narratives of human trafficking.⁶¹⁹

Kitty's cards portray a more holistic approach to sex workers' visual culture which is tied to themes of intimacy, revealing the vast scope of sex workers' multifaceted and interchangeable roles. My findings show that even when Kitty started using URLs on her tart cards, her image remained consistent, this demonstrates that Kitty had established a strong visual brand and identity without having to resort to using more explicit imagery. Kitty *did* experiment with different styles, as my investigation into her 'purple era' explored, however, the visual

⁶¹⁹ Christiana Gregoriou, *Representations of Transnational Human Trafficking: Present-Day News Media, True Crime, and Fiction* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78214-0>. p.7

components and message retained their original content, relying on specific phrases and centring Kitty's legs as the focus of the image.⁶²⁰ Though Kitty has been credited by the Wellcome collection's catalogue as producing one of the first full-colour tart cards, I argue that sex workers largely remain uncredited for their contributions to the creation of the iconic tart card phenomenon.⁶²¹ Kitty's tart cards provide a compelling case study that challenges prevailing narratives about the evolution of sex work advertising in London from the 1990s to the 2010s. Her consistent branding and aesthetic choices over nearly two decades offer valuable insights into sex workers' agency and marketing strategies. Kitty's cards, found across major archives and personal collections, demonstrate remarkable consistency in design and content from 1992 to 2011.

The handwriting's uniformity suggests a single author, likely Kitty herself, indicating a high degree of autonomy in her advertising approach. This consistency extends to her computer-generated cards (1997-2008), which maintained the same photographic elements and descriptors. Despite their mixed-media appearance, the high print quality of Kitty's cards indicates professional production, suggesting collaboration with printing houses. This challenges the notion of universal hostility towards sex workers and demonstrates that some businesses were willing to assist in producing sex work imagery, bypassing societal stigma and SWERF narratives. Kitty's long-standing aesthetic choices, particularly the use of fragmented leg imagery and consistent textual themes 'mature', 'leggy' and 'blonde', contradict claims of escalating obscenity in tart card design made by policymakers in the 1990s.⁶²² Her 2011 card, while more elaborate, maintains similar compositional

⁶²⁰ Interestingly, Kitty changed her identity briefly to 'English' before reverting to her Irish roots.

⁶²¹ 'Katrina'.

⁶²² Shelley, 'Card Tricks in Phone Boxes'.

elements and thematic focus on class and luxury as her 1992 design. Kitty's cards exemplify a deliberate and effective self-branding strategy. The consistent use of visual tropes, such as high heels symbolising overt femininity, and the "mature, leggy blonde" image, created a recognisable brand that persisted for two decades. This approach demonstrates how sex workers could maintain control over their representation, even as advertising mediums evolved.

Katrina's style of tart cards shows her unwavering, stylistic and ritualistic pattern, a formula that she stuck to for approximately twenty years. The findings show that cards became more experimental, however, they do not corroborate with legislators' and policymakers' accounts in which they blamed sex workers for the increasingly graphic nature of the production of tart cards' imagery. The cards detail Katrina's movements across London. The cards follow a strong identifiable brand, one that plays on the trope of the mature, leggy blonde sex worker. The longstanding trope of women's legs in sex workers' advertising mirrors the literature that suggests the historical longevity of the fetishisation of women's legs. The fashion of the stockinged legs harks back to Victorian London and shares a universal visual language that signifies sexuality. As discussed in Chapter 3 this presents pros and cons for sex workers' engagement with the visual trope because it can be associated with exploitation in an art historical context.⁶²³ This case study counters mainstream knowledge of tart cards because it reveals consistent design features implemented by a sex worker, thus showing agency and skill.

⁶²³ Solomon-Godeau, 'The Legs of the Countess'.

Limitations of the study

My visual analysis may be subject to criticism because the case study is highly specific to one sex worker and it cannot apply to the entire sex working community in the 1990s. I acknowledge this limitation but defend my research because this example makes a convincing case study that demonstrates how one sex worker advertised themselves in a certain way. The in-depth analysis of this body of images allowed for more rigorous analysis in keeping with the scope of the research question, providing evidence that contrasts with the way that policymakers were slamming sex workers' tart cards as offensive. This builds a wider picture of tart card production and contributes to the thesis by adding another perspective, that focuses on the agency of the sex worker. Marble Arch Kitty as a case study counters obscenity arguments and policymakers' arguments presented in the previous chapters by locating nuances in the visual culture of tart cards, furthering sex industry knowledge. In the following chapter, the discourse opens to wider intersectional practices that can be evidenced through the visual analysis of tart cards.

Chapter 6: Intersectional Perspectives



Figure 52. Brad: Man – Man Massage, Barnbrook collection c.1992.

Introduction

The chapter seeks to interrogate the power imbalances in tart card production which, while observed in existing literature, currently have had little to no academic engagement. Sex work has long been a contentious and polarising topic within feminist discourse, often framed within a dichotomy of empowerment versus victimisation. Intersecting themes of race, gender and sexuality are further explored

in this chapter to discuss racial stereotypes, queer representation and kink/BDSM subcultures in sex industry images. Traditional feminist theories have tended to categorise sex workers either as empowered agents exercising agency or as victims coerced into exploitation. However, this bifurcated view oversimplifies the complex realities faced by sex workers, overlooking the nuanced intersections of power, agency and vulnerability that shape their experiences. This chapter centres on locating sex workers' agency through the visual analysis of a corpus of tart card imagery. It builds on previous chapters by furthering wider debates into some of the most marginalised groups within the sex working community, highlighting knowledge gaps that future endeavours may address.

In the existing literature, collectors have organised sex workers' tart cards into categories by the advertised model's ethnicity. This method of categorisation is also enacted in other branches of the sex industry including porn as journalist Samantha Cole identified.⁶²⁴ I argue that his way of understanding sex work ephemera is superficial and does not give agency to the individual; this demonstrates heavy-handed and misinterpreted conclusions that maintain racialised stereotypes.⁶²⁵ These are important to dispel because such ideologies are harmful not only to sex workers but also non-sex working people. The investigation touches on these themes because, statistically, sex workers of colour and trans sex workers are more

⁶²⁴ Samantha Cole, *How Sex Changed The Internet And The Internet Changed Sex: An Unexpected History* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2022), <http://archive.org/details/samantha-cole-how-sex-changed-the-internet-and-the-internet-changed-sex-an-unexpected-history>. p.202

⁶²⁵ I recognise as a white, cis-woman I cannot speak for trans sex workers or sex workers of colour, however, I can acknowledge these power dynamics and illustrate further areas of academic interrogation.

likely to encounter violence from the police and at the workplace than cis-female sex workers.⁶²⁶

Chapter structure

The chapter first engages with mainstream knowledge of tart cards in a feminist positioning, secondly, I use visual analysis to disrupt these narratives. The structure is broken down into three parts to investigate areas that I have identified as the most prominent categories of black, global south and Asian sex workers. The investigation builds on these ingrained and well-established racialised labels to address prominent racist visual themes in the sex industry. I then offer an alternative reading of the ephemera in alignment with the overarching research question to seek validation and autonomy using intersectional feminist theoretical standpoints.

Secondly, the chapter addresses how queer sex workers' histories have been explored through the archived tart cards and seeks to set some future research questions in motion for academic discourses. Thirdly, I looked to existing archival research into kink narratives to explore wider issues of obscenity and to build on my argument that cards were not following a linear pattern into debauchery. I demonstrate that kink and fetish have always existed in tart card imagery but were seen as more offensive with the advent of better quality cameras and the internet in the millennium. Lastly, I propose how intersectional feminist perspectives can be elaborated in future discourses to recognise agency in sex workers' representation.

⁶²⁶ Lucy Platt et al., 'The Effect of Systemic Racism and Homophobia on Police Enforcement and Sexual and Emotional Violence among Sex Workers in East London: Findings from a Cohort Study', *Journal of Urban Health* 99, no. 6 (1 December 2022): 1127–40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-022-00673-z>. p.1128

Race, ethnicity and sex work

The tart cards reflected popular culture, visual media and ideas about female beauty standards. They emulated themes of the time, particularly in the controversial advertising and marketing trends of the 1990s and millennium that implemented the sexualisation of thin, “skinny and plastic” white women’s bodies that were fashionable and replicated in porn.⁶²⁷ This section introduces the tart cards as they have been categorised in current literature, which I argue fetishises their ethnicity and does not account for the individual.

Black sex workers

In terms of imagery, tart cards advertising black sex workers’ services enact the same poses and boudoir-style photography that white sex workers were producing. They follow the same formulaic types of glamour modelling imagery, however their difference is in the language utilised on the cards. Black academic pornographer Mireille Miller-Young identified problematic tropes and stereotypes of black actors in pornography. The ‘Brown Sugar’ metaphor in sexualised images of black women also feature in tart card imagery.⁶²⁸ However, I am not undertaking this research because it has already been extensively covered by Miller-Young.

⁶²⁷ Miller-Young, ‘Putting Hypersexuality to Work’. p.228

⁶²⁸ Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*. p.5

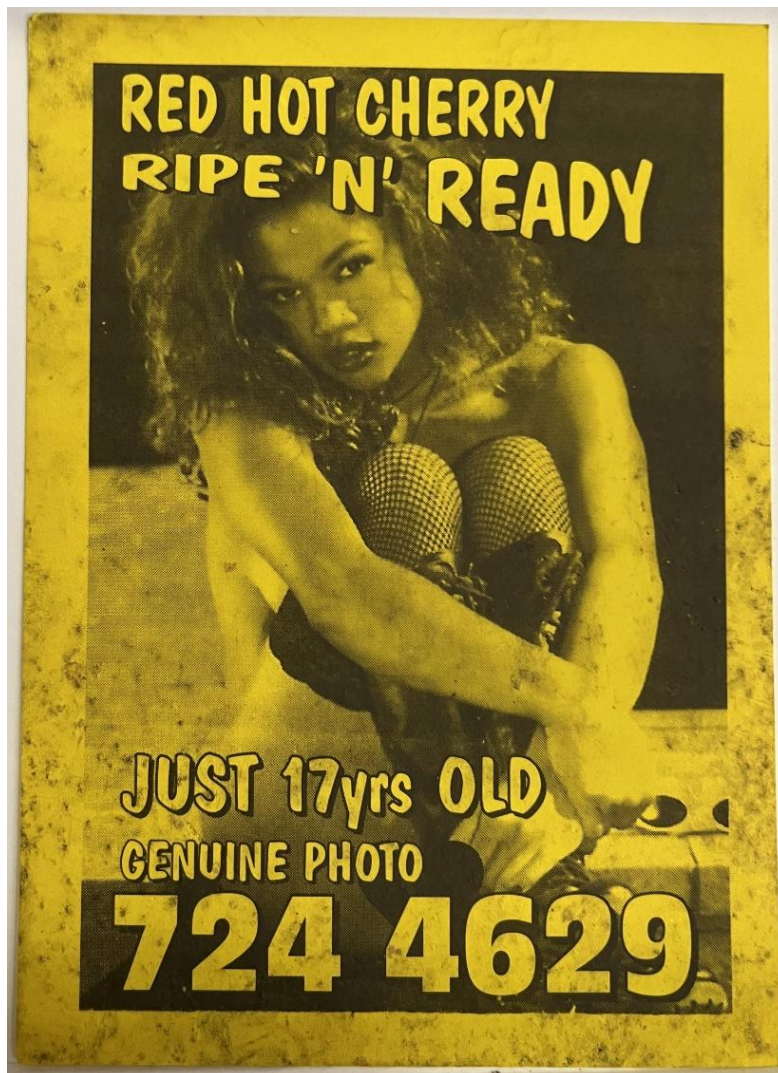


Figure 53. *Red Hot Cherry*, Háy collection, 1997.

A critical reading of 'Red Hot Cherry' may deduce that the language is symbolic and reflects how black women have been understood as exotic objects in the existing literature.⁶²⁹ Colonial themes that appropriate black women's bodies as different or inherently sexualised may be transcribed as violent within feminist discourses.⁶³⁰ The marked difference of the black woman's body is described as

⁶²⁹ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.86

⁶³⁰ Carole Boyce Davies and Carla Williams, 'Black/Female/Bodies Carnivalized in Spectacle and Space', in *Black Venus*, ed. Deborah Willis, They Called Her 'Hottentot' (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 186–99, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt8mv.25>.

'hot', 'exotic' and a 'delight'. The novelty of the sex worker's body is a delicacy to be consumed. SWERF ideologies would argue that the language utilised is disrespectful and dehumanises the person, as the sex worker is reduced to a commodity.⁶³¹ Porn scholars have challenged the role of black sex workers' self-commodification in their success, survival and marketing strategies, addressing how black sex workers negate these connotations and take authorship of their presumed deviant status.⁶³²

Pro-sex work ideologies may advocate for the models' subversive marketing strategies in which they have appropriated harmful stereotypes to further their presumed anatomical and sexual differences. By using racialised assumptions of black women's sexuality and utilising reductionist and racist language to portray blackness, the sex worker is playing on power dynamics and using cultural advertising to stand out from the crowd. Methodologically, this reading pins the production of the tart card onto the sex workers themselves. In a different visual analysis of the tart card, the research suggests that it is impossible to differentiate whether a sex worker or a third party designed the card. This nuance creates space for future discourses of sex workers' lived histories and the representation of their lived experiences because it considers hetero-normative powers that were at play within the process of production.

In Figure 53, the sex worker adopts a bashful pose to promote a child-like attitude; it is no coincidence that this tart card was dated 1997, the same year as the film 'Lolita' was re-envisioned in Hollywood cinema.⁶³³ The reimagining of the nymphomaniac teenager trope was intertwined with sex work culture, both had

⁶³¹ Dworkin, 'Against the Male Flood'.

⁶³² Miller-Young, 'Putting Hypersexuality to Work'. p.221

⁶³³ Peter J. Rabinowitz, 'Lolita: Solipsized or Sodomized?; Or, Against Abstraction – in General', in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2004), 325–39, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999851.ch21>.

questionable themes of consent which were not addressed around this time. Child sexual abuse would have been understood as horrifying, however, the practice of consent amongst sex workers was a relatively new concept that the general public had not ascribed to sex workers' bodies and practices in the 1990s. It was a forgotten part of feminism that excluded sex workers' rights and safety.⁶³⁴ Though abuse is seen as abhorrent and the ideas of grooming were already cemented, consent with sex workers remains debated in contemporary enquiries.⁶³⁵ As identified in a literary analysis of the novel *Lolita*, Rabinowitz lists the items of 'payment' that the author and rapist of the child were given as remuneration which explains how abuse could become conflated with transactional sex in SWERF agendas.⁶³⁶ These images would have provoked SWERF responses because they promote the sexualisation of women and teenage girls, however, as pornographers have identified, sex workers were responding to significant pop culture references.⁶³⁷ Such visual traits are used as a form of marketing that would appeal to a certain audience because the tropes of the "nymphette" are based in imagination and memory.⁶³⁸

The 'nymphette' is self-aware, so the application of this label on the sex worker's body through the tart card asserts that they have control. This implies a sense of

⁶³⁴ Sophie Day, 'What Counts as Rape? Physical Assault and Broken Contracts: Contrasting Views of Rape among London Sex Workers', in *Sex and Violence: Issues in Representation and Experience*, ed. Penelope Harvey, Peter Gow, and Mary McMurran (Psychology Press, 1994).

⁶³⁵ Daisy Manning, Rabiya Majeed-Ariss, and Catherine White, 'Sex Workers Reporting Rape: Understanding Their Vulnerabilities to Improve Their Care. The Characteristics of Sex Workers Who Attend Saint Marys Sexual Assault Referral Centre', *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* 76 (1 November 2020): 102068, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jflm.2020.102068>.

⁶³⁶ Rabinowitz, 'Lolita: Solipsized or Sodomized?; Or, Against Abstraction – in General'. p.333

⁶³⁷ Sinnamon Love, 'Transforming Pornography: Black Porn for Black Women', *Guernica*, 15 February 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230811201622/https://www.guernicamag.com/transforming-pornography-black-porn-for-black-women/>.

⁶³⁸ Byungsam Jung, 'Lolita in Humbert Humbert's Camera Obscura and Lolita in Vladimir Nabokov's Camera Lucida', *Comparative Literature* 74, no. 3 (1 September 2022): 326–44, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-9722376>. p.334

autonomy because it draws on the strength of the narrative implicated by 'Lolita' which is that the erotically charged teenager is self-aware of her sexuality and promotes this image to entice future customers. In a time when consent was not at the forefront of sex work debates, this type of advertising may provide the closest assertion to consensual sex as we understand it today. The typography of the 'ripe cherry' may be read in a context that appeals to hetero-normative male fantasies of de-flowering a virgin. Despite the model's young age, the text swells in size explicitly stating that she is 'ready' implying that she is giving consent and ownership to her body. In *Image Versus Text*, Mitchell argues "words are much more powerful than images, and that images have relatively little effect unless they are verbalised by the addition of narrative fantasy."⁶³⁹ The combination of textual and visual information on the tart card makes it an effective marketing tool.

The language in black sex workers' tart cards is overtly racist, to decode these meanings and to locate autonomy in these images it is imperative to first look at the history of black women's sexuality in a colonial context. The hyper-sexualisation of black women's bodies neatly categorises many nationalities and ethnicities under the term 'black'. Ideas in the 1990s assumed that sex workers of colour were more accommodating to their client's needs than white sex workers, a British lawyer wrote that this was a global truth exclaiming that "It is almost universally accepted that they give better value for money".⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo5956563.html>. p.89

⁶⁴⁰ Goodall, *The Comfort of Sin*. p.83-4



Figure 54. *Black Bitches Love It Up the Arse*, Háy collection, 1995.

The tart card pictured above features a computer-generated font that is in-keeping with the typical language of the early 90s tart cards, in which little sexual descriptors are given. The soft- porn magazine 'cut out' of the sex worker is reminiscent of glamour modelling and is not overtly explicit. The textual information is ambiguous and does not include an itemised list of services provided, however, this is in stark contrast with the hand-rendered message that details a graphic description of anal sex. The blue-ink biro message in all caps reads 'BLACK BITCHES LOVE IT UP THE ARSE' with specific emphasis underlining selected words in full caps, 'BLACK' 'BITCHES' and 'THE ARSE'. The visual marking of these descriptors enforces racist, sexist and objectifying language, which MacKinnon argues reduces the women to a colour, an animal and a (sexualised) body part "lower than

human".⁶⁴¹ The handwritten addition to the printed graphic text in the tart card requires further unpacking because it explains the binary codes of feminist thought that this thesis argues, is inadequate for understanding the rich aesthetic culture of sex workers' visual representation. Semiotics and the visual language of sex work are addressed now, to unpack feminist themes that may argue for and against racialised messages explicitly demoralise sex workers in tart cards. "For some white women, slut transgresses a boundary they've never imagined crossing. Women of colour, working-class women, queer women: They were never presumed to have that boundary to begin with."⁶⁴² Dines may hypothesise that the handwritten message conveys racist and misogynistic colonised language that "eroticises violence against women" and further sexualises black women's bodies.⁶⁴³ The explicit reference to anal sex is a non-heteronormative act historically attributed to sexual deviance, thus reducing the sex worker to a sex object rather than an autonomous human being.

In contrast, a more balanced reading of the card may interpret the message as a direct means of communication that explicitly states the sexual services on offer. By stating that the sex worker 'loves' a certain sex act, the client has an acute understanding of the services provided, opening a direct and clear dialogue that is more statistical than descriptive and ambiguous. The explicit hand-rendered preferences of the sex worker may be interpreted as an empowering statement; however, it is more likely that the inclusion has a nuanced and complex meaning.

Alternatively, I argue that the statement can be read in a holistic way that considers the self-preservation of the sex workers' needs. For example, considering

⁶⁴¹ Catherine A. Mackinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1989). p.138

⁶⁴² Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*. p.78

⁶⁴³ *Pornland: How the Porn Industry Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. 31:47.

health implications and monetary value and financial gain, sex workers may relay messages that they enjoy certain sex acts in which they are most comfortable engaging in, especially in certain social contexts where sex workers wish to keep their personal and professional lives separate.⁶⁴⁴ It has been reported that sex workers utilise different sexual services that they may not engage in with their romantic relationships.⁶⁴⁵ Offering anal sex eradicates the occupational hazards of getting pregnant, it also removes eye contact with their customers and also means that sex workers who menstruate are still able to make money during their cycle because it may provide more convenience than having vaginal sex when on their period. This means that sex workers opted to control their financial stability despite choices that SWERF ideologies may demonise as acts of patriarchal violence.

In today's digital climate, sex worker-led communities operate online via open forums under aliases mostly on *Reddit*, *Threads*, *X* (formerly *Twitter*) and other social media pages. The underground nature of sex work and the marginalisation faced means that these pages, valuable resources to new and old members of the community are continuously evolving and shifting. The stigma towards sex workers from internal and external parties means that the information shared on these platforms can be edited, deleted, shut down, temporarily removed or reposted without consent. This is a precarious way to share knowledge because it can be weaponised (such discussions can become hostile from 'trolls') however, it is a widely used model with its' own set of pros and cons. Before the internet, it would have been difficult for the sex working community to access information and exchange information about potentially risky clients, offering few options to vet

⁶⁴⁴ Teela Sanders, 'A Continuum of Risk? The Management of Health, Physical and Emotional Risks by Female Sex Workers', *Sociology of Health & Illness* 26, no. 5 (2004): 557–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0141-9889.2004.00405.x>. p.567

⁶⁴⁵ Brewis and Linstead, "The Worst Thing Is the Screwing" (1)'. p.93

clients.⁶⁴⁶ In the early 90s, sex workers would communicate knowledge via oral histories and written text, which the tart cards are evidence of. The handwritten sentence “Black bitches love it up the arse” can be taken at face value, it is a racist, misogynistic message that can be read in context to violence against women. It can also be read in another way. The message can be read in context to the subversion of violence against women in the way that it is a harm reduction technique. If this racist and misogynistic idea was already in circulation in society, then the sex worker can take autonomy of this, by reclaiming the slur.

Despite being considered “high- risk”, there are some advantages of transactional anal sex.⁶⁴⁷ Firstly, corporeal advantages: to avoid unwanted pregnancy and to find alternative work while menstruating. Secondly, to address social fears: a lack of eye contact facilitates disconnect, allowing sex workers to compartmentalise sex, intimacy and labour. The tart card depicts a socially constructed message. The sex worker has inadvertently shared knowledge of their experience, one that may have empowered other sex workers to engage in different services providing more choice in their labour. I cannot prove or disprove that the sex worker themselves wrote the handwritten message on the tart card, however, the idea that a sex worker may have written this and shared it as a way to gain capital off their own marginalised status and presumed preferences steeped in the subversion of violent ‘misogynoir’ tropes. My argument is that anti-sex work feminists have interpreted the sex industry from an outsider’s perspective, this viewpoint has not engaged with the ideas that sex workers seek pleasure, consent and other aspects

⁶⁴⁶ Alex Bryce et al., ‘Male Escorting, Safety and National Ugly Mugs: Queering Policy and Practice on the Reporting of Crimes against Sex Workers’, in *Queer Sex Work*, ed. Mary Laing, Katy Pilcher, and Nicola Smith, vol. 1, Routledge Studies in Crime and Society (London: Routledge, 2015), 245–54.

⁶⁴⁷ Grace L. Reynolds, Dennis G. Fisher, and Bridget Rogala, ‘Why Women Engage in Anal Intercourse: Results from a Qualitative Study’, *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44, no. 4 (2015): 983–95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0367-2>.

of intimacy that are not typically explored through this narrow view. The tart cards can be an expression of community self-care and harm reduction through the communication of services available. The language reappropriates themes of misogynoir that Bindel had been critical of.⁶⁴⁸ The cards can be seen as an early reclamation of power because they tell another side of the story. I cannot say with certainty that a sex worker wrote the message, however, it is unlikely that a carder would have had time to write this as it was in their best interest to distribute material efficiently. Brothel ma'ams could have written the note to appeal to the trends and tastes of customers in certain areas. It is unlikely that a customer or the general public wrote it because the handwriting is legible, aesthetic and appears intentional. If it was graffiti or done in a violent way to deface the card it would not have been applied elegantly without consideration for the other textual and visual information on the advertisement.

The racial desires from white men for black women, otherwise known as 'misogynoir' have been observed by sociologists which can be identified in archival collections of tart cards. This is why the visual analysis of sex workers' advertisements is important because it offers another way to understand sex workers' histories and how these histories have been understood. Misogynoir tropes are imprinted onto the sex workers' visual representation in their advertisements; an example of this is evident in Figure 55.

⁶⁴⁸ Bindel, *The Pimping of Prostitution*. p.103



Figure 55. *The Best Tropical Bum*, Háý collection, 1995.

Historically, black women have been exoticised by colonisers, which adds another layer of 'othering' and misogyny towards the female body.⁶⁴⁹ The text; 'Best Tropical Bum' harks back to early colonialist terminology that rendered black women's buttocks as inherently hypersexualised.⁶⁵⁰ The 'tropical' body is a fantasy that encompasses a problematic power dynamic in which socioeconomic factors are at play and marginalise sex workers of colour.⁶⁵¹ The measurements of the sex worker's body are dramatically enhanced; these impossible figures relay the historical discourse where racialised fantasies of black women's proportions were

⁶⁴⁹ Robin Mitchell, 'Another Means of Understanding the Gaze: Sarah Bartmann in the Development of Nineteenth-Century French National Identity', in *Black Venus*, ed. Deborah Willis, They Called Her 'Hottentot' (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 32–46.

⁶⁵⁰ Davies and Williams, 'Black/Female/Bodies Carnivalized in Spectacle and Space'.

⁶⁵¹ Coy, Wakeling, and Garner, 'Selling Sex Sells'.

distorted projections of male desire.⁶⁵² The deeply ingrained racialised dynamics in sex-worker/ client transactions may have acted as a springboard for sex workers' marketing strategies in a twist where subverting themes of misogynoir helped them to achieve coherent branding in their advertisements.

As explored in Chapter 5, women's legs have historically been eroticised in imagery ranging from fashion to high art.⁶⁵³ The erotic leverage of stockings is a visual trope that fetishizes the exposed flesh; the parts of the body that are bare have been researched through nineteenth-century photographs.⁶⁵⁴ Stockings, as a visual marker, underline the genitals, it draws a fetishistic boundary where the fantasy ends, and the "alarming discovery" of the female anatomy is substantiated.⁶⁵⁵ The black and white photocopy of the cut-out photograph is printed onto a pale-yellow card which accentuates the white hold-up stockings against the model's black skin. This fetishisation of the black skin extends to the contrasting white patent stilettos, lace bra and pearl necklace. The trope of stockinged legs has further marginalised status because the sex worker depicted is a woman of colour. Therefore, another layer of stigma is applied to this body.

The image of the sex worker has been appropriated from another source. This image may have been extracted from a porn magazine or a glamour photography shoot; it is difficult to ascertain whether the image was curated by an actual sex worker or by a third party. Sex workers may have cropped their images to protect their anonymity, whereas professional card designers may have cut unwanted

⁶⁵² Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature', *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (October 1985): 204–42, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448327>.

⁶⁵³ Solomon-Godeau, 'The Legs of the Countess'.

⁶⁵⁴ Solomon-Godeau.

⁶⁵⁵ David Raphling, 'Fetishism in a Woman', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 37, no. 2 (1989): 465–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000306518903700208>. p.466

imagery from the original source to avoid potential infringements of copyright laws. The model in Figure 55 is pictured on her knees and appears to lean on the soft furnishing of an armchair or dressing table stool, her taut hand arched with tension. The model's claw-like grip evokes a sense of pressure that is echoed throughout her pose. It is an unusual detail to leave in the composition when the viewer can clearly identify that the surplus background has been cut out. The chair may be symbolic of the client, or it may have remained as an aesthetic visual marker to showcase the sex worker's manicured hands, as a sign of high-maintenance feminine beauty practices and therefore, class.

This revisited pose, where the female form is exaggerated by the arching of the back, enhances the full contours of the breasts that heave under the weight of gravity. The waist is slimmed by raising the hips upward, hoisting the buttocks and accentuating the round musculature. The appropriation of this form is interpreted in many different configurations in the tart card designs. 'Black' was a catchall term for sex workers of many different nationalities, it was used to dumb- down to the average British heterosexual male client in the 90s. In the next section, I address the problematic elements of categorising sex workers' tart cards through this narrow view and engage with existing literature that attempted to conduct such curatorial practices. This provides context for understanding how tart cards have been inadequately quantified, thus extending the scope of the research. Black (female-presenting) sex workers were portrayed as exotic, but other ethnicities also fell into this racialised bracket. So far the study has addressed white cis-hetero male perspectives on black sex workers' visual representation, however, colonial themes and imbalances of social dynamics of power are also prevalent within images of Asian sex workers, as the project will now turn its attention.

‘Exotic girls’

Multiracial sex workers, and sex workers with Global South heritage are grouped as ‘exotic’ in the existing literature of tart card collections.⁶⁵⁶ This reflects the casual racism in the social climate of the UK in the 1990s, of which the tart cards are a product. The UK recognises 28 different classifications of ethnicity, implemented in official government policy, however, this is still a broad categorisation that does not account for all ethnic identities.⁶⁵⁷ This was even more problematic in the 1990s as reflected in the 1991 UK census, which formally recognised only 9 ethnic categories.⁶⁵⁸ The wider social context would have informed how sex workers promoted themselves and may account for the reductive ways that sex workers’ ethnicity has been oversimplified in the existing literature. In hindsight, these factors explain how the tart cards produced in the 1990s allude to a more fertile breeding ground for racialised profiling to take place. It situates the tart cards in context to a wider socio-political landscape that did not address individuality or sex workers’ agency.

⁶⁵⁶ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*. p.412

⁶⁵⁷ ‘Ethnicity Classifications’, GOV.UK, accessed 7 November 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20241211164225/https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/dashboards/ethnicity-classifications/>.

⁶⁵⁸ Peter J. Aspinall, ‘The Future of Ethnicity Classifications’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1 November 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830903125901>. p.1423



Figure 56. Sexy Suzi Wong, Wellcome collection, 2004.

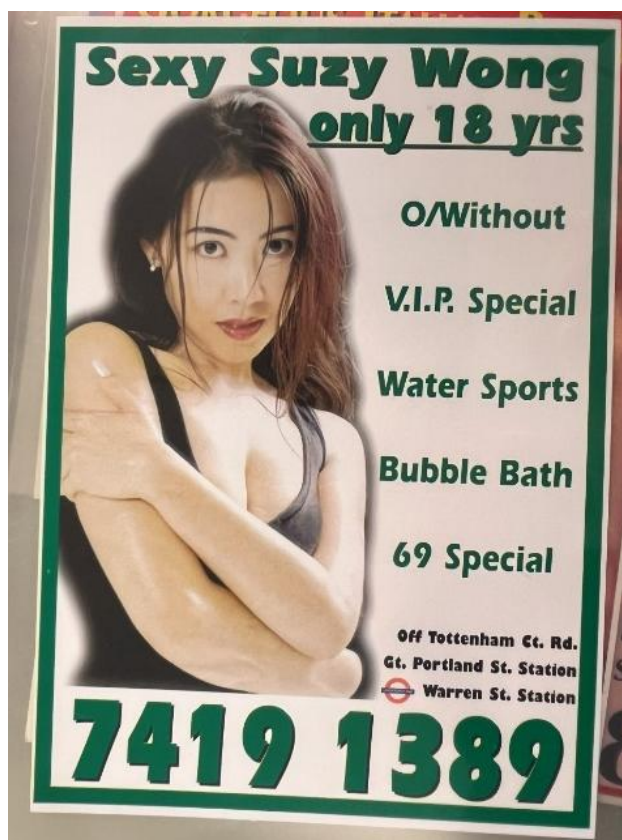


Figure 57. Sexy Suzy Wong, Háy collection, c.2001.

Similar to the reductive language and pattern of categorising sex workers of colour as 'black', sex workers of Global South descent have been lumped together as 'Asian' or 'oriental'. The romance novel *The World of Suzie Wong* and its 1960s film adaptation firmly cemented the narrative of the 'oriental prostitute' in the cultural imaginary.⁶⁵⁹ It was based on a semiautobiographical account of a British soldier's life in Hong Kong during the Korean War.⁶⁶⁰ The tart cards use the character Suzie/ Suzy/ Suzi Wong as an alias for Asian sex workers, heavy-handedly merging global North and South identities. The ambiguous, fictional character was a useful marketing tool comparable to the 'Lolita' trope in black sex workers' tart card imagery. The act of "performing Orientalism" is a technique that appears frequently in tart card design, similar to that of black sex workers' representation in which the adverts encompass racialised parts of their identity, thus claiming agency.⁶⁶¹ As Ham suggests "labour in sex work can involve experimenting with racialised tropes, personas, and archetypes, in a way that affirms rather than diminishes one's autonomy."⁶⁶² This sets the tone for further visual analysis into problematic representations in sex work imagery as the following tart card investigation explores.

⁶⁵⁹ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril': Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). p.113

⁶⁶⁰ Guy Haydon, 'Suzie Wong 60 Years on: Author Richard Mason Interview Remembered', *South China Morning Post*, 4 July 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170725151304/https://www.scmp.com/culture/books/article/2101012/suzie-wong-60-years-after-hong-kong-icon-was-created-we-recount>.

⁶⁶¹ Julie Ham, 'Hypersexualisation and Racialised Erotic Capital in Sex Work', *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 27, no. 1 (2 January 2025): 46–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2024.2351996>. p.52

⁶⁶² Ham. p.52



Figure 58. *Malaysian Model: Suki*, Háý collection, 1995.

In Figure 58 the 'Malaysian model' is depicted in a submissive pose looking up at the viewer from their position knelt on the floor. The figure's domesticated and subdued form is sexualised, depicted in a shiny maid's outfit that reveals her bare buttocks paired with leather ankle boots. In this domestic scene, the model could be interpreted as cleaning because the deliberate cropping of the image makes the woman appear as if they are wearing Marigolds with a rag in their hands. The hands appear to have been tampered with because they do not look as though they belong to this body. The reworked fingers are closer to Mickey Mouse gloves than the manicured nail extensions observed in Figure 55.

On closer inspection, the sex worker may be leaning on a stool, or patterned flooring such as kitchen linoleum. The staged position is unsettling as she looks towards the viewer with a nonchalant expression. 'Suki' is advertised as a nineteen-year-old, however, her appearance is that of an older, adult woman. As previously discussed, the reprinting of images may distort them, however, the facial features in

this tart card are alarming. The sex worker peers up at the viewer through inflamed, black eyes, the whites of her eyes barely visible through swollen eyelids. Her hair is well groomed, she is wearing hoop earrings and appears to be wearing lipstick, however, her face looks discoloured and sore. The saturated ink also obscures her identity, rendering her a 'nobody'. The trope of the trafficked sex slave may have been utilised as a marketing tactic to convey submissive power-play with potential clients. Around this time, Thailand as a sex tourism spot was booming in popularity with British men, who insensitively referred to trans sex workers as the 'Ladyboys of Bangkok'.⁶⁶³ As researchers have observed, human trafficking narratives can be unsubstantiated or even falsified in contexts where (white) tourists encounter Indigenous communities.⁶⁶⁴ The objectification of Asian women and their stereotyped small- statures, sub- servient, gratuitous and 'polite' nature meant that these women were commodities. Self-identifying as a loosely defined 'Asian' sex worker meant that one could make a lucrative earning. Sex workers could capitalise on the ignorance of clients' lack of expertise in geography and racist ideas of what 'oriental' women looked like to take advantage of their 'exoticized' and fetishised looks.

⁶⁶³ Jarrett D. Davis, Glenn Michael Miles, and John H. Quinley III, "'Same Same, but Different': A Baseline Study on the Vulnerabilities of Transgender Sex Workers in the Sex Industry in Bangkok, Thailand", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 39, no. 7/8 (3 September 2019): 550–73, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-01-2019-0022>. p.553

⁶⁶⁴ E. Bernstein and E. Shih, 'The Erotics of Authenticity: Sex Trafficking and "Reality Tourism" in Thailand', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 21, no. 3 (1 September 2014): 430–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxu022>. p.443-444

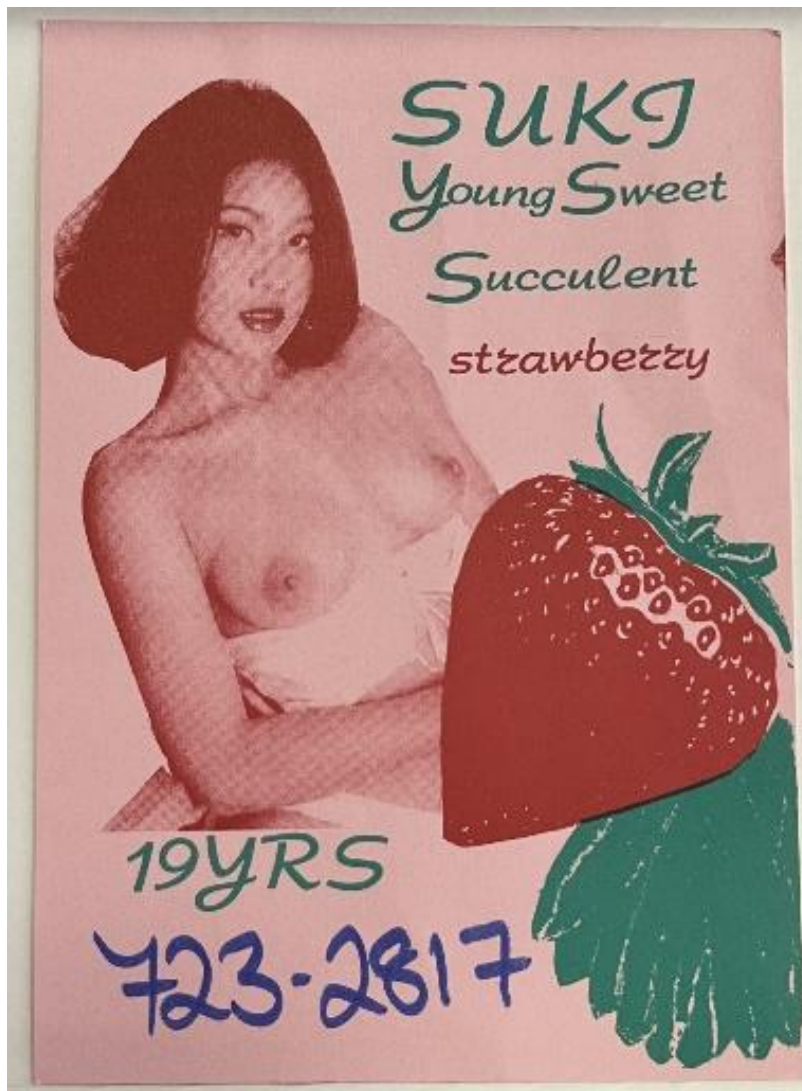


Figure 59. Suki: Young Sweet Succulent Strawberry, Háy collection, 1996.

In a different configuration, the alliteration of 'Suki', the "young, sweet, succulent, strawberry" demotes her image, personhood and sexuality to a piece of fruit. SWERFs would suggest that reducing her personality to organic matter is not only misogynistic but also wildly racist as a vehicle for driving stereotypical narratives about the passive, Asian sex worker. I argue that sex workers were not unaware of the connotations, on the contrary, they would have been utilising these metaphors in their advertising because they aligned with already-established racial stereotypes. This meant that sex workers could draw upon these culturally imagined roles to

strengthen their brand. 'Suki' is cross-referenced multiple times in tart card imagery, when used as a name for a sex worker, it translates roughly as being fond of or having a taste for something.

In pre-modern Japanese poetry, Suki is romanticised as "the fruit that is yet to be tasted" and thus connotes virginity.⁶⁶⁵ Suki expresses love, a simple meaning that translates well in the UK, as it is easy for British clients to comprehend. The strawberry trope plays on taste, sweetness is almost always perceived as delightful, and it is often associated with a pleasant sensory experience. How sex workers described themselves may have been an active decision on their part to appeal to their clients' needs. It is a marketing strategy that relays happy, or even nostalgic memories. Suki is advertised as nineteen- years old, however, it is important to consider the age of consent in other countries because the sex tourism trade boom in the 1990s was controversial for inciting debates around slavery and exploitation put forward by anti-trafficking groups and anti-sex-work feminists. Narratives around sex trafficking women and children in the UK surfaced in the 1990s and began making traction in popular culture references, the ambiguity of tart card production can be read as entrenching or defending the stereotypes around forced labour and the sex industry. Scholars have identified moments in British social history where racial divides existed in images of sex workers, portraying women in an unfavourable light where the narratives of sex-trafficked victims were weaponised by political agendas as a fear mongering tactic.⁶⁶⁶

Scotland Yard's Vice Squad raided indoor premises of sex entertainment venues (SEVs) such as brothels, massage parlours and saunas to 'crackdown' on

⁶⁶⁵ Rajyashree Pandey, 'Love, Poetry and Renunciation: Changing Configurations of the Ideal of "Suki"', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 5, no. 2 (1995): 225–44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25183004>. p.234

⁶⁶⁶ Davidson, 'Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand Up?' p.5

forced sexual labour. The “foreign bodies” in the Guardian’s 1996 article demonstrate how trafficked women in the headlines were faceless beauties who were victims of the sex industry.⁶⁶⁷ The media’s sensationalised stories exacerbate racial stereotypes; in a 1999 news story, Thai sex workers were reported to have sex with clients without condoms and were generally more accommodating than British sex workers.⁶⁶⁸ Scholars have noted how the media has fuelled the fire in constructing racial stereotypes that further marginalise sex workers: “Both the tone and the message of the article — with its images of young, unsuspecting, poverty-stricken female victims duped by moral degenerates into a world of vice — mirrored that of the white slavery movement reported in the *Pall Mall Gazette* over a hundred years ago.”⁶⁶⁹ Academic literature frequently cites the lack of progression within Western society’s attitude towards sex work as a morality problem, however, the sex workers’ images remain unstudied.⁶⁷⁰ I argue that the image of the sex worker in Figure 58 captures the essence of concerns around violent crime and sex trafficking in the UK in the 1990s. ‘Suki’ appears downtrodden and exhausted, her posture, on all fours, emulates the typical glamour modelling pose but contrary to the other discussed tart cards, the viewer is forced to look down at her.

As discussed in the literature review, Brian Salter’s publication is a primary example of how collectors have tried to compartmentalise tart cards. The thematic categorisation of tart cards into ethnic groups based on appearance and representation is an inadequate way to investigate tart cards, yet it is one of the dominant methodological ways that the tart cards are interrogated thus far.

⁶⁶⁷ Alex Duval Smith, ‘Foreign Bodies’, *The Guardian* (1959-2003), 13 June 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/187911973/citation/14DEB8432B014524PQ/15>.

⁶⁶⁸ Thompson and Veash, ‘Britain’s Sex Slave Trade Booms’.

⁶⁶⁹ Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914* (London (UK): Routledge, 2012). p.197

⁶⁷⁰ Doezeema, ‘Loose Women or Lost Women?’

Queer and trans representation



Figure 60. *Man to Man Dave*, Wellcome collection, 1993.

It is a misconception that queer and transexual services were the “last to arrive in telephone boxes.”⁶⁷¹ As the archives suggest, these types of cards existed at the same time as the mainstream heterosexual tart cards, however, they have slipped under the radar.

⁶⁷¹ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*. p.581

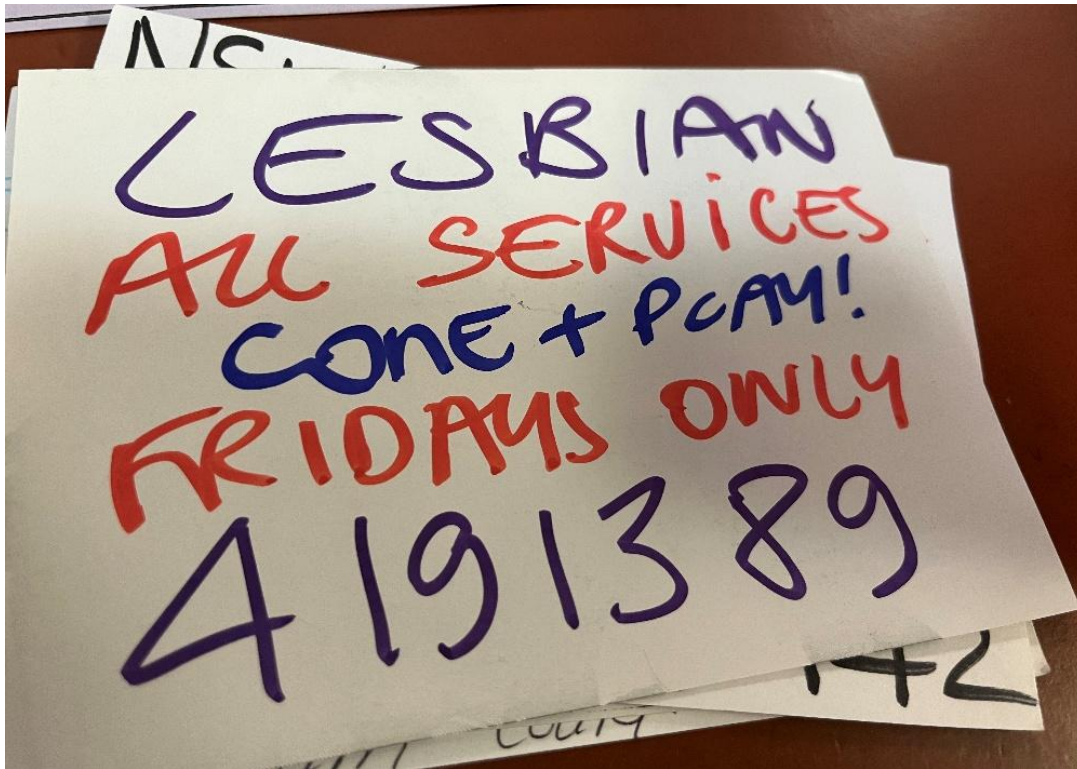


Figure 61. Lesbian services, Háy collection, c.1998.

My findings across the archives show that tart cards have always represented different sexualities, though these were not as mainstream as heterosexual services. The cards show how sex work has a long engagement with the LGBTQIA+ community, that is yet to be explored in an academic capacity.



Figure 62. T.V: It's not a job, It's a pleasure, Háý collection, 29/08/2006.

The earlier examples of such cards used terminologies that may cause offence now. There has been a shift in the language used, for example, “T.V.” (transvestite) was used in the 1980s and early 90s cards as an umbrella term for trans people and transvestites, but this is because the language had not evolved yet to explore subtleties and nuance of sexuality and gender. Labels such as T.V were still being used into the millennium, not dissimilar to Asian sex workers' utilisation of racist ‘Suzie Wong’ labels, not in a derogatory way but in a way that was accessible to the wider public. By drawing upon embedded terminology in the mainstream lexicon, sex workers could penetrate a broader market. Queer sex workers would have been acutely aware of changing terminology to adequately reflect the evolution of their community’s experience of gender binaries, sexual orientation and bodily

autonomy, however, the rest of society may not resonate with these experiences. Thus, the application of detailed or evolutionary terminology in tart card design may have alienated clientele that may not understand nuances between biological sex, gender and representation.

Therefore, the application of 'T.V' in sex workers' advertisements is a visual and textual marker that represents an umbrella term for heterosexual people outside of queer communities to understand. The oversimplification of TV has attracted criticism for not being politically correct, but if we address the sex workers who were adopting this term in their marketing strategies, we can understand that it is a useful tool to differentiate queer services from the vast majority of heteronormative labour advertised in the tart cards. This point is important in locating autonomy because it demonstrates how sex workers were taking ownership of their bodies. Figure 62 evidences this. The tart card was made in the early millennium when emerging language to discern transgender people differently from transvestites was occurring, however, 'TV' has been used to describe this sex worker's identity, services and lifestyle. This connotes that the term transvestite is a part of the kink or fetish community, and therefore is a valuable commodity to advertise in the sex industry landscape. It is important to note that sex work is only one facet of a person's multidimensional life and they may express a different or fluid gender identity outside of their work persona. This could imply that the adhesion of the 'transvestite' label helps to separate and compartmentalise their work identity from their real- word identity.

Mirroring the majority of tart cards, services advertised by queer sex workers were represented by images of heteronormative beauty standards, whereby lesbians were enacting bodily representation that fit the male gaze. In comparison, gay men

were promoting hegemonic masculinities by portraying themselves as able-bodied, muscular and conventionally attractive male figures.



Figure 63. *Transsexual Pre-Op: Jacqueline*, Háý collection, 16/07/2004.

Similar to tart cards made by cis-female sex workers, trans sex workers implement some of the identical visual tropes to signify feminine erotica. This sentiment is echoed in Salter's publication where he makes an interesting observation that trans sex workers promote themselves in the same vein as cis-female sex workers.⁶⁷² Such traits as high heels, lace lingerie and the adoption of similar positions portray boudoir or glamour modelling style photography. This body of tart cards reveals how trans people and sex workers have always existed;

⁶⁷² Salter. p.581

however, they have lived in dangerous margins of the wider society that impacts their visibility. Visually, it is impossible to discern cis and trans sex workers from their advertisements, this is a testament that goes against bigoted mainstream ideologies that rely on visual signifiers to denote the physical differences between trans people and cis people. It is impossible to denote a person's gender identity from looks alone, therefore agency is found in the language and textual evidence provided on tart cards. The sex worker, *Jacqueline* (Figure 63) presented themselves 'face out', choosing to forfeit their anonymity, which meant that they were vulnerable to direct and indirect violence. Direct violence would correlate to the statistics that found that trans sex workers are the most at-risk groups within the sex working community. Indirect violence corresponds to hostile attempts to cause harm, such as 'outing' sex workers, or following BT's approach that disconnected sex workers' phone lines.⁶⁷³

Marketing 'difference'

Most of the images focused on in this project are of female-presenting sex workers, reflecting the overarching theme within archival collections. My analysis reveals that there are examples of male and trans sex workers, yet these numbers are a small fraction of the overall body of tart cards. This leaves scope for further enquiry in locating autonomy in sex-working trans communities in future discourses. I identified interest in these themes via the existing literature, yet a thorough investigation of the wider social histories of trans representation in the tart cards remains unexplored. Tart cards, as vital pieces of sex workers' histories, have almost disappeared from

⁶⁷³ Helen Nowicka, 'Sex-Line Operators Blame BT for Cutting 0898 Business', *The Independent*, 18 August 1994, sec. London, The Independent Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FQ4200265423/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=22c8bb9c>.

contemporary consciousness, the Wellcome Collection's archive of tart cards had garnered the most attention than any other collection (at the time of writing) but the cards now reside in the shadows of the archive.⁶⁷⁴ Institutions such as the Wellcome Collection pathologise sex workers' existence, reducing their lived experience to the realm of medical science through the angle of venereal disease. Other organisations such as the Bishopsgate Institute seek to subvert the tart cards in attempts to redistribute power and autonomy to the sex workers themselves.⁶⁷⁵ Tart cards were 'of their time', they show how sex workers were envisioned and represented by both themselves and external parties.

The affective production of sex work ephemera reveals how sex workers' images have been produced collected, used and distributed. The way that the media has depicted sex workers, how tart cards have been curated, the media attention they have roused and the way that the law and local authorities have reacted to the cards mean that the ephemera are read in a certain context.⁶⁷⁶ These cards show that in contrast to mass-produced tart cards depicting a heteronormative bound viewpoint of sexuality, queer sex workers were operating under the guise of heavily criminalised and marginalised scrutiny.

There are existing examples of queer sexual services but they are incredibly rare, there is a larger body of lesbian services advertised in tart card imagery but they are made in a heteronormative gaze. Fewer examples of tart cards including female sex workers whose services cater to couples, imply that more fluid sexualities

⁶⁷⁴ Stephanie Bossett, 'London's "tart Cards" Reveal History of Sex Work, Design and Printing', euronews, 27 February 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250307153156/https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/27/london-s-tart-cards-reveal-history-of-sex-work-design-and-printing>.

⁶⁷⁵ Iglowski-Broad, 'The National Archives - Reclaiming the Records'.

⁶⁷⁶ Matt Brown, '17 Boxes Of Smut From The Euston Road', Londonist, 27 March 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20170727061808/https://londonist.com/2008/03/17_boxes_of_smu.

and less rigid categories of 'straight' and 'lesbian' services require further investigation. These cards reveal more socially intricate ways of expressing sexual identity and open further questions about how sexuality is represented within sex work. In conclusion, the visual investigation of queer tart cards reveals more questions and intricacies between gender, sexuality and self-representation.

Kink

This section looks at themes of kink and fetish represented on sex workers' tart cards, though they exist, there is little documented written material on this aspect of the phenomenon. This chapter section is concerned with other types of recorded sex work ephemera within the archives and looks at the perspectives of a sex worker and the collector of tart cards to gain a thorough understanding of kink in tart cards. The transcripts of the audio recordings: *The Oral History of Prostitution* underpin the project, where the documentation of a sex worker's voice enriches the thesis, to 'fill in' the gaps or missing pieces in the jigsaw puzzle.⁶⁷⁷ I employed a methodological approach synthesising oral history testimonies with visual archival evidence to construct a nuanced argument. By utilising Wendy Rickard's *The Oral History of Prostitution* audio recordings as primary sources, this research taps into the rich vein of lived experiences, providing a phenomenological perspective on the production, distribution and display of tart cards and adds to the wider picture of socially constructed ideas about the sex industry.

⁶⁷⁷ Hannah Bows, 'Methodological Approaches to Criminological Research', in *Doing Criminological Research*, ed. Peter Francis and Pamela Davies, Third edition (London (UK): SAGE, 2018). p.100

These narratives offer invaluable insights into the subjective dimensions of sex work history, illuminating how an individual interpreted and internalised the sociopolitical contexts of their time.⁶⁷⁸ However, recognising the potential limitations of memory and the subjective nature of personal accounts, this study rigorously cross-references these oral testimonies with a corpus of archival material. This archival evidence, comprising newspaper articles, and photographic records serves a dual purpose: it corroborates the oral accounts where applicable providing a broader contextual framework to situate individual narratives. This methodology explores how personal recollections intersect with, and sometimes diverge from, officially documented accounts, thereby contributing to ongoing feminist debates about the nature of agency and the role of subjectivity in the representation of sex workers. Through this rigorous critical framework, the chapter seeks to make a significant contribution to the field by offering new perspectives on the social phenomenon of tart cards. It demonstrates the potential of interdisciplinary approaches in historical research to yield nuanced, multifaceted interpretations of the past that honour both the lived experiences of the individual and the broader socio-historical contexts within which these experiences were embedded.

I am closely engaging with secondary source material from the British Library. An extensive catalogue of recordings with sex workers, carders, maids, pimps and DJs is held in the *Oral History of Prostitution* archives. This promising body of research has many practical and logistical limitations which means that I (and other researchers) may obtain only partial access to the full collection. Due to data protection, most audio recordings and transcripts remain embargoed to protect the

⁶⁷⁸ Elizabeth Stanley, 'Using Interviews as Storytelling in Criminological Research', in *Doing Criminological Research*, ed. Pamela Davies and Peter Francis, Third edition (London (UK): SAGE, 2018). p.322

anonymity of the interviewees. Unfortunately, the British Library is still recovering from a catastrophic cyber-attack which has also hindered access to audio collections including this series. Fortunately, I was able to refer to notes made in the early stages of my research in which I had access to a partial transcript between Rickard and a sex worker. This research is vital for my project because it details a sex worker's first-hand account with tart cards from the timeframe that I am investigating. In the following section, I will introduce the study and provide some background information to highlight why the study is integral to my research.

The Oral History of Prostitution tapes

Rickard interviewed people involved in various roles within the sex industry from 1996-2001. The interviews took place in several different settings, mostly in saunas, massage parlours and brothels across West London. The recordings were undertaken in situ and, more often than not, were captured in working flats (brothels).⁶⁷⁹ As discussed previously, sex work is not illegal in the UK, however, if more than one sex worker is working in a premises at the same time this constitutes a brothel and is against the law. The 'working flats' were symptomatic of this British custom and as such, were (and remain) closely guarded. The level of discretion required of such premises means that there is scant existing research material around the working flats. These secretive locations fostered a rich and complex social dynamic that is not often represented within sex work research. This is why Rickard's study is so important. She was actively involved in these environments firstly because she was friends with sex workers and secondly because she was

⁶⁷⁹ Wendy Rickard, 'Collaborating with Sex Workers in Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 47–59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3675351>. p.52

employed as a 'maid' in working flats.⁶⁸⁰ It is important to note that the researcher was friends with the sex workers, meaning that she was invited into their workspace, this is a position of privilege that is not always attainable for academics. This aspect is reflected in Rickard's follow-up literature that addresses her reflexivity and positionality as a scholar.⁶⁸¹

Rickard's study was recorded on Dolby 'B' compact cassette tape stereo, using lapel microphones.⁶⁸² The tapes have since become recognised as unstable and conservation efforts have been made to digitise the recordings for future use.⁶⁸³ There are over fifty hours of material available to access in the British Library, however, one session in particular: Track 12 [Tape 6 Side B] [Session six: 15 April 1998] [05:47:06] is useful in this study because the recording contains first-hand evidence of a sex worker's lived experience with tart cards in 1990s London.

In contrast to the main body of recordings that were captured on location, Rickard's sessions with sex worker 'Leila' were recorded in the interviewee's home in Bermondsey, London. Rickard interviewed Leila between the 7th of October 1997 and the 25th of November 1998, building an extensive archive of one year's worth of interviews on eight tapes. Leila's account is important because it is a recorded documentation of a sex worker's experience with a part of their community's visual culture. Here is an account of a sex worker's experience, the sex worker discusses their experience with the tart card phenomenon, this is important because these accounts are rare. The recorded interview builds a wider picture of a personal

⁶⁸⁰ Maid is an umbrella term for an employee who assists in running a brothel, their duties typically involve reception work (taking calls from prospective clients and arranging appointments) and sometimes cleaning and cooking.

⁶⁸¹ Rickard, 'Collaborating with Sex Workers in Oral History'.

⁶⁸² Recording equipment: Marantz CP430.

⁶⁸³ Katerina Webb-Bourne, '250,000 Sounds Preserved by Unlocking Our Sound Heritage', British Library, 23 February 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210223103518/https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2021/02/250000-sounds-preserved-by-unlocking-our-sound-heritage.html>.

account that engages with problematic issues around carding and sex work. Next, I will introduce the interviewee to discuss why their voice is integral to the investigation and what their contribution adds to the argument.

Leila the Milkmaid

'Leila' [Aisha, Iris, Sweetman-Ginn] had a brief period as a celebrity in the late 90s, appearing on the popular daytime television chat show *Kilroy* hosted by Robert Kilroy-Silk, Graham Norton's gameshow *Carnal Knowledge*, and was filmed for a docuseries called *Vice: The Sex Trade*.⁶⁸⁴ Leila was nominated for 'Sex Worker of the Year' at the Sexual Freedom Awards in 1998.⁶⁸⁵ At the height of his fame, before the emergence of sexual assault allegations, British comedian Russell Brand wrote about his dominatrix experience with Leila in his memoir.⁶⁸⁶ These various TV appearances and media exposure are discussed in Rickard's interviews, backed up by the audio recordings. These documents follow- up with problematic debates around the sex industry, further adding contextual information and evidencing Leila's experience in navigating the industry. I argue that having such a prolific sex worker's voice is a rare and valuable commodity in the archive which can further illuminate sex work histories.

Before discussing Leila's opinion on tart cards, I will shed light on some findings from the archives to contextualise Leila's backstory and demonstrate how valuable sex workers' experiences are in sex work research. One key way to do this

⁶⁸⁴ 'Carnal Knowledge - Series 1', *Carnal Knowledge* (BBC, 15 February 1996), <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308123816/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbJaFZUGnDk>; 'ITV's Vice Documentary Sparks Complaints', MediaTel, 22 March 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250330205904/https://uk.themedialleader.com/itvs-vice-documentary-sparks-complaints/>.

⁶⁸⁵ Formerly known as the *Erotic Oscars*, founded in 1994 by Dr Tuppy Owens.

⁶⁸⁶ Russell Brand, *My Booky Wook* (London (UK): Hodder & Stoughton, 2007), <http://archive.org/details/mybookywook0000bran>. p.309

is to visually analyse her representation in the media to make some observations on how she was portrayed. This will then provide a tangled web to discuss and tease out conclusions around the sex industry, female sexuality and intersectional feminist debate.

Leila's representation in the media

MONDAY TV 67

MONDAY'S HIGHLIGHTS



DOCUMENTARY OF THE DAY

Vice: The Sex Trade
9pm ITV

ITV's big new three-part exploration of the sex trade is like prostitution itself – it doesn't offer much that is new. Tonight's opening film flits between various working women, and one client, Peter, an unmarried 31-year-old, unconvincedly claiming that his weekly visits to have his bottom thrashed by "27-year-old" Karen

are more fulfilling than his mates' marriages. The other hookers range from Kat, an escort wined, dined and screwed by businessmen in Nottingham hotels, to 19-year-old Gemma, on the streets since she was 14, who takes punters round the corner to a deserted alley. The most bizarre is "milkmaid" Leila, who services "adult babies". Needless to say, she got the idea from a documentary on TV.

TV2 MONDAY 16 NOVEMBER 11-41

Critics' Choice



The boldest profession: Leila offers her personal services (ITV, 9pm)

Vice — The Sex Trade (ITV, 9pm)

Feigning concern, but really gleefully anticipating an invigorating massage for its viewing figures, ITV ventures into the red-light zone, opening a three-part series on sex for sale by profiling five prostitutes — cheery escort girl Cat, masseuse Karen, teenager Gemma, pensionable Caroline and "adult baby" specialist Leila. In marked contrast to the ITV drama *Band of Gold*, the largely sunny picture that emerges is of women in control, wryly running healthy businesses that exploit men's erotic foibles. The closest thing to a pimp is Leila's partner, helpfully designing a menu for her clients that allows them to specify whether they want genuine breast milk as well as rusks and nappies.

Figure 64. Leila in the *Times*' TV Listings, 1998.⁶⁸⁷

Figure 65. Leila in the *Independent's* TV Listings, 1998.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁷ John Dugdale, 'Critics' Choice', *The Sunday Times*, 15 November 1998, sec. Culture, The Sunday Times Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FP1803343737/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=6ee1b962>.

⁶⁸⁸ 'Documentary of the Day', *The Independent*, 14 November 1998, sec. The Information, The Independent Historical Archive, <http://0.link.gale.com/apps/doc/FQ4200973471/INDA?sid=bookmark-INDA&xid=ed207799>.

It is important to look at how Leila was represented in the media because it reveals wider implications of how sex workers were viewed in British society in the 1990s. Leila was filmed for a three-part series in the documentary *Vice: The Sex Trade* alongside other sex workers and their clients, however, she was the only sex worker featured in every episode. Leila was recorded in her own home, which was different to the other sex workers in the series because they were filmed at their places of work (in both indoor and outdoor settings). Leila was unapologetic and transparent in her representation. This approach outraged some viewers, who criticised her and the broadcasting company for depicting “unusual sexual behaviour.”⁶⁸⁹ This shows how sex workers who are seen as going against the grain of wider societal codes around transactional sex are further marginalised. *London Weekend Television* (LWT) the broadcaster that aired *Vice: The Sex Trade* received 53 complaints about the aforementioned ‘unusual’ sexual activity in the show which further demonstrates how sex is subject to surveillance.

Sex workers who are perceived as undertaking unusual, risky or deviant sex or sexual services are considered to be in bad taste and offend ‘normal’ people outside of the sex industry. The acts are monitored and are subject to strict codes imprinted on society that deem certain acts as kinky or ‘vanilla’. Leila’s portrayal is an example of this social code, it was not so much the explicit or sexual nature of her job that caused complaints, but the taboo and intimate parts of her services that roused controversy. This shows that in the 20+ years of this kind of documentary-style journalism, the debates have little changed around the perceptions of sex and sex workers in general.⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁹ ‘ITV’s Vice Documentary Sparks Complaints’.

⁶⁹⁰ Jacob Stolworthy, ‘BBC Defends Louis Theroux Sex Worker Documentary after Subject Claims She Was “Mistreated” during Filming’, *The Independent*, 5 February 2020,

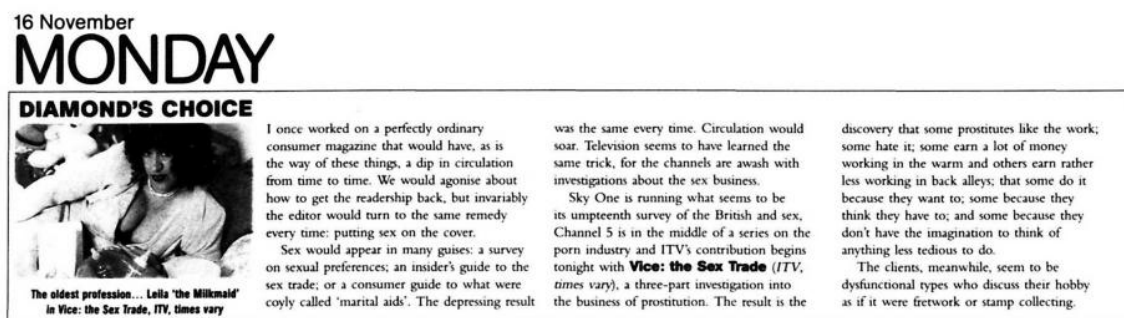


Figure 66. Leila in the Sunday Telegraph's TV Listings, 1998.⁶⁹¹

Leila appeared in 3 episodes on Channel ITV:

16/11/1998 – 21:00 *Working Women*

23/11/1998 – 21:00 *Clients and the Working Men*

30/11/1998 – 21:00 *Policing the Streets*

Despite the controversy around the show, the media articles highlight how the documentary made the 'Critics' TV Choice' and the 'Pick of the Day':⁶⁹²

Although this three-part series will obviously encourage voyeurism it seems to take its brief seriously enough. Tonight's *Working Women* gives a slant on prostitutes which is not at all gloom and doom and which certainly doesn't take sides. The ladies who speak up for themselves seem a gutsy, coherent lot — one, the apparently[sic] permanently lactating "Milkmaid Leila" thoroughly enjoys treating men, quite literally, as babies. Nappy-clad caterer

<https://web.archive.org/web/20220507101528/https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/bbc-louis-theroux-sex-worker-documentary-selling-sex-ashleigh-a9318441.html>.

⁶⁹¹ 'Diamond's Choice', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 15 November 1998, The Telegraph Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0700449824/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=9932ffa3>.

⁶⁹² Dugdale, 'Critics' Choice'.

Rick is even brave (or insane) enough to allow cameras into Leila's baby room to watch it all happen.⁶⁹³

The *Times* TV listing is not the only example that was fairly sympathetic to sex workers, which is atypical because sex work was (and arguably still is) a much-contested and controversial topic. The series finale looked into brothels and the issue of legalisation from a harm reduction stance, stating that “44 prostitutes were murdered between 1986 and 1996” in the Daily Mail.⁶⁹⁴ This shows that attitudes towards sex work were not as easy to compartmentalise in black-and-white as some of the literature insists. It could be argued that Leila was exploited for entertainment purposes because her charismatic and honest approach to her career made high TV ratings and viewing figures. The media coverage of Leila's services is crucial to this project because it demonstrates the breadth of the industry and the overlapping roles that sex workers adopt.

Sex work debates

After the *Vice* documentary was filmed, Leila was invited to discuss sex work further. She appeared on the Killroy show in 1998 to address the topic of street-based sex workers in Streatham, Birmingham and Manchester and how curb crawlers and sex workers were upsetting the locals. The show tried to cover all angles including how working girls were victimised.⁶⁹⁵ Residents of unofficial red-light areas argued that their daughters were being accosted by male clients, criticised sex workers for

⁶⁹³ E. C., 'Pick of the Day', *The Times*, 14 November 1998, The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0502269113/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=80d7c2cd>.

⁶⁹⁴ Dugdale, 'Critics' Choice'.

⁶⁹⁵ Oral History of Prostitution, 15 April 1998. Part 13: Approx. 01:30.

decreasing the value of their homes and accused them of littering condoms and syringes. Leila agreed that there are “different classes of prostitutes” and explained why she felt that she was different from ‘street girls’.⁶⁹⁶ Typical of the time, Leila reflected the whorearchical attitudes within the sex working community, calling out street-based sex workers as ‘trouble’ and ‘alley cats’, “they [street-based sex workers] get their throats slit and end up in bins.”⁶⁹⁷ Leila exclaimed that she did not operate the way these girls do, displaying the whorearchical differences between street and indoor-based sex workers, but ultimately wanted to advocate for the safety of sex workers, she expressed her political viewpoint and wished for prostitution to be legalised in 1998 but called it a ‘pipedream’.

THE TIMES WEDNESDAY MARCH 31 1999 SL

HOME NEWS 15

● Watchdog condemns the ‘tacky erotica’ on Channel 5

Too much, too soon: the verdict on TV sex

By RAYMOND SNODDY
MEDIA EDITOR

THE increasing preoccupation with sex on commercial television came under fire yesterday from the network's regulatory body. Channel 5's late-night “low-budget erotica” attracted particular criticism.

Sir Robin Biggem, chairman of the Independent Television Commission, said in the annual review of the broadcasters' performance that there was a growing emphasis on programmes about the sex industry. The commission was also concerned that too many programmes screened adult material immediately after the 9pm watershed. It would have been better if programmes such as *Vice: The Sex Trade* had been shown later.

The commission reserved its sternest criticism for Channel 5. Although there had been more focused investment in original programmes, sport and better film titles, there had also been a failure to provide much original drama. The commission said that it had had to intervene ten times last year over breaches of the rules on Channel 5. The most serious case was *Sex and Shopping*, which showed scenes unacceptable at any time.

The commission was also worried about “the tackiness associated with an in-

creased use of low-budget erotic drama late in the evening and of various factual programmes on sexual themes, including some material that was unacceptable”.

While only a few elements of the shows had breached programme rules, “broadcasters should note early signs that their preoccupation with a single subject – any single subject – can stretch viewers' patience”. Although there had been good documentaries, the intentions behind programmes such as *The Full Monty*, *Swindon Superheros*, *Stops and Starts*, *On the Edge* and *Sex and Shopping* had seemed too voyeuristic. Sir Robin said he thought

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“tacky” was a good word to describe some of Channel 5's late-night programmes. “It's not so much a concern, it's just low quality.” Asked if he was looking for a better class of soft pornography, he replied: “You could be right.”

Sarah Thane, the commission's director of programmes, said that it was not against “mildly erotic programmes” that were properly made and scheduled. “It's a diversity issue. It's a quality issue.”

The commission also noted that ITV's best-known programme, *Coronation Street*, had disturbed viewers by introduc-

ing tougher storylines concerning everything from drug abuse, transsexualism, teenage sex, verbal abuse and abduction.

Overall, the commission praised ITV for its determination to “refresh and revitalise” its service. But shortcomings in current affairs, arts and comedy still needed to be addressed. Without the programme *We Can Work It Out*, ITV would have had the lowest output of current affairs programmes on record.

Channel 4 had shown a number of promising developments after being criticised last year for a lack of innovative drive. The commission said it expected the channel to ensure “that this positive trend continues and accelerates”.

Channel 5 had achieved impressive growth to 5 per cent of the audience and needed “to build on its achievements by increasing the quality and widening the range within existing programme genres”.

David Elstein, chief executive of Channel 5, said that “tackiness” was a subjective judgement and that the late-night programmes were not low-budget. Channel 5 would carry on showing them.

The ITV Network Centre said it did not agree with the commission's view that there was too much emphasis on sex – at least as far as ITV was concerned.



Lady of the night: but Leila, from *Vice: The Sex Trade*, was on too early, the ITC said

We behaved badly at Christmas, BBC admits

By RICHARD DUCE

THE BBC has admitted that its Christmas edition of *Men Behaving Badly* was likely to “offend or embarrass” some viewers. The Broadcasting Standards Commission will rule today that 18 complaints against the programme were justified.

Many of the people who complained about the episode, in which the character played by Martin Clunes apparently masturbated after watching sex videos, said that the BBC should have realised that, on Christmas Day, many children would have stayed up later than usual.

In its submissions to the commission the BBC accepted that sufficient warnings that the programme might offend had not been given.

□ Cilla Black's *Moment of Truth* show on ITV is criticised by the commission for turning the suffering of a child into “entertainment”. The cameras regularly captured youngsters reduced to tears when their parents failed to win them a prize.

Figure 67. Leila in the Times, 1999.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁶ Leila, Oral History of Prostitution: Session 6, interview by Wendy Rickard, Audio recording, 15 April 1998, C803/14, British Library. Part 13: Approx. 03:43.

⁶⁹⁷ Oral History of Prostitution. Part 13: Approx. 05:20.

⁶⁹⁸ Raymond Snoddy, ‘Too Much, Too Soon: The Verdict on TV Sex’, *The Times*, 31 March 1999, The Times Digital Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0500931832/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&id=82c6e22b>.

The images below were taken by journalists in Leila's home, it is interesting that only one of the images was reproduced in the newspapers. This may be due to copyright, budgeting and other factors, however, the image of her with her blouse unbuttoned with a sultry gaze was selected instead of the image of her laughing on the phone. This raises questions about who the target audience was and what image the media were trying to promote.



Figure 68. Leila AKA the Milkmaid, Shutterstock Item ID: 1005418ky, 1998.⁶⁹⁹

⁶⁹⁹ 'Vice: The Sex Trade', Stock Images, Shutterstock Editorial, 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250331085622/https://www.shutterstock.com/pt/editorial/image-editorial/vice-sex-trade-tv-documentary-episode-clients-1005418ky>.



Figure 69. Leila AKA the Milkmaid, Shutterstock Item ID: 1005418kv, 1998.⁷⁰⁰

Leila's connection to tart cards

In Leila's own words, she recalled when BT hired a security company to inspect the phone booths in the 1990s and witnessed "females and Christian freaks" ripping out cards from the boxes and felt that the public reception towards the images was "a bit over the top... it's a bit much."⁷⁰¹ This perspective shows the consequences of the feminist debates around the sex industry and also evidences how religion and morality still dominated these actions in the 90s. One finding is interesting because it corroborates with what policymakers were arguing at the time: Leila expressed that she thought the cards had gotten "more crude over time... Richard [husband] and I

⁷⁰⁰ 'Vice: The Sex Trade', Stock Images, Shutterstock Editorial, 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250331105059/https://www.shutterstock.com/editorial/image-editorial/%27vice-sex-trade%27-tv-documentary-episode-clients-1005418kv>.

⁷⁰¹ Oral History of Prostitution, 15 April 1998. [05:15:32]

collect cards...we're going to use them to wallpaper one wall of the room...the dirty ones we don't even bother with."⁷⁰²

This further cements why the tart cards are so polarising, how can collectors of tart cards differentiate which cards are 'dirtier'? Leila explained that she thought the cards had got cruder, and some were "absolutely disgusting."⁷⁰³ She enjoyed collecting tart cards and found them funny, admitting that one of her hobbies was collecting beautiful cards. Leila joked, "any normal person would think we are both perverts but we just like to collect cards... I love them."⁷⁰⁴

Leila still has a collection of tart cards in her personal collection at home. Leila shared that she advertised her 'Milk Maid' services through Earls Court Exhibitions and in private subscription magazines, however, she did not personally use tart cards. The inclusion of Leila's voice in this chapter contextualises some of the problematic areas that sex workers were navigating in their representation. Leila's interpretation of the tart cards is vital to the study because it demonstrates some of the whorarchical infighting that scholars have identified in sex-working communities. Her own position as a sex worker garnered attention, and it was not always positive. Leila's interactions with the media opened wider society's eyes to an avenue of alternative service providers that may not have been general knowledge. Leila's distinctions between sex workers upheld some socially derived opinion of the status of full-service sex workers and their proximity to the clients.

Not only is Leila a prominent figure because she was an 'out' sex worker, she was also a public face in alignment with Camille Waring's Face-in/Face-out theory.⁷⁰⁵

⁷⁰² 6. Approx. 4:44, part 11.

⁷⁰³ Oral History of Prostitution, August 1997. Part 11.

⁷⁰⁴ Oral History of Prostitution, 15 April 1998. Part 11: Approx. 04:58.

⁷⁰⁵ Waring, 'Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms (Chapter 16) - Visual Activism and Marginalised Communities (Women Full Service Sex Workers) in Online Spaces.'

Her opinion is critical because it shines light on the lived experience of sex workers. She also provides an account of the distribution and display of sex workers' visual culture, referencing the tart cards and the phenomenon of carding. Leila was a controversial figure briefly in the media (most prolific between 1998-9) for her unusual adult-baby services, however, she criticised tart cards for being vulgar and 'dirty'. This shows how subjective attitudes towards pornography, censorship and transactional sex are in British culture. Despite receiving backlash from non-sex workers herself, she also held opinions about the sex industry that are based on whorearchical notions of value and labour. The archival evidence of a sex worker's account of the tart card phenomenon adds further enquiries into representation and whorarchical modes of social stratification. This lays the foundation for the following segment which addresses kink and fetish communities in tart card imagery further in a wider social setting.

Kink, fetish and tart cards



Figure 70. *I'll Play Your Fantasy*, Barnbrook collection, c.1992.

This section aims to build further evidence that sex workers were orchestrating their own imagery by the branding, aesthetic and types of imagery that they were using on their tart cards. Counter to mainstream concerns in the literature that accused tart cards of becoming more vulgar, I will prove that this was not true, and that kink and fetish have always been a facet of tart cards but have not been subject to interrogation. Dominatrices are often revered to hold positions at the top rungs of the whorearchical social pyramid, however, I will show through the visual analysis of one tart card as a case study that the intersections of what sex work entails are hard to define. The roles are interchangeable and in a state of flux, they are not rigidly defined. Sex workers often adapted their practice to include a range of direct and indirect sexual services. I am using an adult baby service tart card I found to

demonstrate policymakers' fears and to address concerns around explicit imagery and the types of images that were being produced. There is a societal fear of sexual acts that operate outside of heteronormative sexual practices, even though consensual, they were seen as obscene and frightening. Dines' SWERF ideologies use the angle of protecting children from explicit material, however, I will show that the tart card is suggestive and not pornographic.⁷⁰⁶ One of her concerns is that children exposed to 'porn culture' will understand sex as violence against women.⁷⁰⁷ Her criticism lies with the proliferation of hardcore gonzo porn, whilst maintaining that soft-core images are ingrained into everyday life.⁷⁰⁸ I argue that children would not comprehend it in the same way as adults.

The image in question is a rare example because the cards promoting this niche fetish are a minority. On closer inspection of the tart card, Figure 71, the composition of the photograph completely severs the heads of the sex workers, granting them anonymity, whereas the middle-aged man in an adult diaper, romper suit and bib is completely exposed, subverting the typical power balance between the gaze of sex workers on tart cards. The man-baby is depicted indulging in his fantasies, however, it is uncomfortable because the photograph is an intimate, humiliating and infantilising image which could harbour actual detrimental consequences to the client.

⁷⁰⁶ *Pornland: How the Porn Industry Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. 32:45.

⁷⁰⁷ Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), http://archive.org/details/pornlandhowpornh0000dine_i4p7. p.25

⁷⁰⁸ Dines.

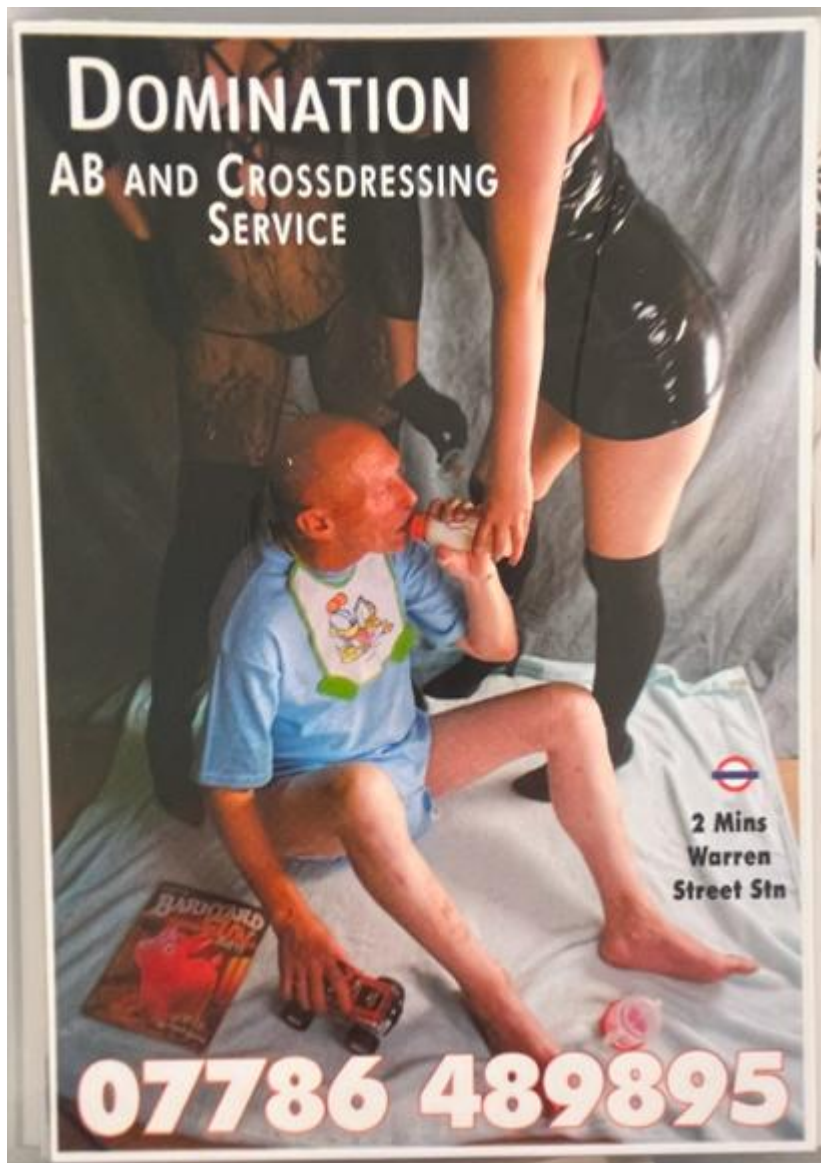


Figure 71. Domination: AB & Crossdressing Service, Háy collection, 18/06/2008.

The man pictured averts his gaze from the service providers and the audience viewing the card, his expression and gaze are fixated on the bottle of milk that he receives from one service provider. Another service provider is pictured standing behind the sitting man-child, wearing gloves and their stance with one gloved hand on their hip demonstrates an empowered stance yet the holding of a baby's dummy between their thumb and fore-finger displays a sense of disgust, further humiliating the client. The lack of contact further elaborates dominatrices' fears that were

researched in sex work literature because it highlights how the service providers were detached from sexual contact, though providing a niche service that centred on male fantasy. The image though sexually charged, depicts two sex workers who do not have any skin-to-skin contact with the client, one provider guides the bottle to the client's mouth, but his hands are clasped onto the object, and even their fingers do not meet or touch contact.

The camera angle looks down at the seated man-baby, and it is apparent that he is positioned on a fleece blanket on the floor. The additional props of the toy car, Sippy cup and the children's book further entrench his infantilised state as 'lesser-than'. The book cover of *Barnyard Fun* depicts a pink cartoon pig which denotes the client's social status as animal-like and repulsive.⁷⁰⁹ This stark contrast in the depiction of clients is rare to find in tart card imagery, however, it demonstrates that these images existed and shines a light on complicated relationships between censorship and whorephobic attitudes in London. Typically, sex workers were depicted as the 'lesser-than' object in the composition of tart cards, the subversion of having the male clientele as the centre of disgust was radical and supported the political landscape that demonised male clients in keeping with the Nordic or Swedish model in partial criminalisation of the sex industry. By imparting the blame onto the repulsive sex- buyer, Jeffreys shifted the narrative of sex workers as deviant women, into women that demanded rescuing from a misogynistic patriarchal industry.⁷¹⁰

This rare example of tart card shows how sex workers were operating and working together in a social landscape that did not have their best interests at heart.

⁷⁰⁹ Sanders, 'Moral Panic'. p.165

⁷¹⁰ Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution*. p.3

The need to obscure the sex workers' faces by omitting them completely from the photograph can be read in different contexts in which they were fearful of criminalisation, as again there are at least two service providers in the image and a potential third who was behind the camera. This would be classed as illegal premises (brothel) and means that their identities had to be obscured for their own protection. The absence of the sex workers' faces also erases emotion from the image, it is impossible to denote their facial expressions- this means that they cannot fit neatly into categorised feminist frameworks of victim or businesswoman. The only emotion read from the image is in the nonchalant expression of the man-baby who is further alienated, he looks complicit in listening to instruction. SWERF frameworks would address the card as an extension of male power over female labour, though the card is not explicit and does not convey nudity, it borders the realms of what is considered 'normal' or 'deviant' sexual activity. An additional layer of stigma is applied because it is a transactional sexual service. The card may not have necessarily been defined as promoting sex work because the imagery is not explicit but it does demonstrate a male client's sexualised fantasy about the female-presenting sex workers' bodies.

Such atypical examples of tart cards offer a rare glimpse into the lived histories and expansive roles of people working within the sex industry. The argument I am making is that the card may have caused offence but it is an example of 'sex work as work' it shows the vast and diverse branches of the industry that do not directly correlate to full-service sex work as an oversimplified ideology. The card demonstrates the intricate knowledge bases and skills that sex workers conduct in their labour. Though the image is atypical, the act of adult nursing relationships (ANR), adult breastfeeding relationships (ABR), 'Little-Big' roleplay scenarios, or the

other various intersecting roles and services that these contain are derived from power dynamics that are orchestrated by the sex worker and fine-tuned to the client's needs. Sex workers' labour is typically dismissed as a low-skilled or 'easy' job, however, my methodology of visually analysing tart cards disrupts this narrative because the images evidence an array of scenarios that cannot discern sex work as one thing or another. That is because sex work cannot typically be defined, it is an overlapping, rich and diverse sector that is propagated by the individuals that operate within the confines of the constructed terminology. This particular tart card is also visually different because the image is centred on the infantilised male client. As Mosley found in their research of the representation of sex worker clients, the interpretation of a 'John' as a violent or pathetic stereotyped person is another avenue for further research.⁷¹¹ The female-presenting bodies align with the narratives associated with sex work because they are depicted wearing 'sex workers' clothes'. This is backed up by the alternative fashion adopted by the two models, who are clothed in PVC, typically associated with kink.⁷¹² They also wear traditionally gendered clothing items, such as dresses, over-the-knee socks, high heels and lace. This entrenches a subversive social dynamic that plays on the traditional roles of the mother figure. Visually, there are a lot of themes that can be discussed in this composition, which is why it is so important to unpack, as it shows the intersecting roles of sex workers' labour. The outfits adorned by the sex workers are typically associated with kink and fetish, however, they are being utilised in a position of care. This signifies the nuances in sex workers' repertoires and evidences their abilities to

⁷¹¹ Mosley, 'The "John"'.

⁷¹² Guglielmi and Reddy-Best, 'BDSM, Dress, and Consumption'.

adapt to specific criteria, which requires flexibility, imaginative thought processes, and creativity.

Tart card literature reported that dominatrices delegated tasks to their clients including the distribution of their advertisements as an act of female dominance.⁷¹³ This demonstrates another intimate facet of sex worker and client relationships that is missing from academic discourses. The nature of dominant (dom)/submissive (sub) relationships is that the dom takes the active role in power play whereas the sub is the passive agent, sometimes referred to as master/ slave partnerships. These relationships can integrate themes of financial domination, humiliation, bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM) and are not exclusively related to sexual activity in the kink or fetish community. Though these themes are also prevalent in non-sexual instances, the role of these identities concerning tart cards must be observed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the landscape in which sex workers were operating in 1990s London. Some dominatrices rejected the label of 'prostitute' as they did not have full-sex or direct bodily contact with clients, however, some feminists have challenged this, stating that dominatrices' services are based on eroticism and pleasure-based acts, therefore firmly positioning their work within the sex industry.⁷¹⁴ This again links back to whorarchical social class.

My visual analysis shows the vulnerability of clients' desires that are not often considered in the wider framework of sex industry research. Due to the stigmatised status of the male client, their desires and fantasies are not often considered as a legitimate source of concern. This picture demonstrates that sex work does not have to entail purely sexual activity and is executed on an individual basis. This means

⁷¹³ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.57

⁷¹⁴ This was the language used at the time.

that a rapport and to a certain extent, a professional relationship must take place for the service to be completed.

The themes are not dissimilar to those of cards produced in the early 90s as identified in Figure 70. The only significant difference is the production of the advert, the desaturated colour palette and hand-rendered elements depict the same erotic labour as the adult-baby service in Figure 71.

Conclusions

Essentially this chapter addressed three main areas, I looked at historical representations of sex workers' bodies by turning to intersectional feminist theory. This demonstrated the typical pathway that sex work has been routed towards. I then offered an alternative reading of the ephemera that future scholars can build on. I then focused attention towards the queer potential of tart card scholarship. The possibilities extend from the foundations of intersectionality based on race, and gender alone, adding further nuance and opportunities for the research to centre on queer communities. Lastly, the intersections between kink, fetish and transactional sex in my research findings were considered to provide another link for future discourses to engage with the emerging theme of archival sex work research.

Racism in sex work

The onus on the malleability of BIPOC sex workers is evident within the literature and the imagery of tart cards. The tart cards reflect the multicultural diversity in the capital but also reveal problematic ways of viewing sex workers. The expectation placed on non-white sex workers as shapeshifting pleasure givers is difficult to

interrogate through binary feminist frameworks, which is why critical visual analysis methods are essential in understanding sex workers' social history.⁷¹⁵ My findings reveal that black sex workers' tart cards looked the same as white sex workers' advertisements. The models used in the imagery followed a trend of adopting similar erotically charged poses, however, the significant difference between white and black sex workers cards was the type of language used.

Most of the imagery on black sex workers' tart cards was that of soft- porn magazine cutouts, or Playboy- esque modelling pictures. Initially, I had thought that black sex workers' tart card production might demonstrate less access to materials, this prejudgment and bias were incorrect because visual analysis showed that they shared the same components with tart cards produced by white sex workers. This demonstrates that black sex workers did not have less freedom of expression in their image-making processes. Examining these results in a wider socio-political context of the British landscape in the 1990s speaks to wider frameworks that address socioeconomic factors such as unequal opportunities and social stratification. It further evidenced the idea that black sex workers had an additional layer of marginalisation to overcome, however, they were using the same marketing strategies as other sex workers with the addition of subverting a history of colonialisised fetishisation.

Queer potential of tart cards

I found that there is a rich history of queer representation in the tart card archives, these are not simple to define and must be examined in their wider socioeconomic,

⁷¹⁵ Goodall, *The Comfort of Sin*. p.83-84

political and social environments. In a similar vein to sex workers of colour, trans sex workers also adopted mainstream visual strategies to appeal to a cis-hetero clientele. This opens space for further investigation into the representation of these workers, the client's identity and their social dynamics and relationships. This is beyond the scope of this project but proposes another avenue for future investigation. The tart cards reveal more about the acceptance of sexuality and gender identity in sex work because the cards detail rich and varied accounts of an individual's working persona, they are abstract. There is not one way that queer sex workers represented themselves, which is in opposition to mainstream ideas that propose that certain groups within the gay community represent themselves in simplified ways.

Kink

Thirdly, the chapter engaged with representations of the kink community in context to the sex industry to situate overlapping themes that conflate deviancy and kink with transactional sex more generally. This provides a space to explore an alternative understanding of tart cards in relation to kink and fetish, giving agency to sex workers who operate in these specialist areas. The tart cards evidence alternative lifestyles and demonstrate the soft skills that sex workers have. Sex workers are seen as two-dimensional figures they are not afforded the same understanding of skill sets that other occupations have. The adult baby tart card demonstrates the breadth of services under the labour conditions of sex workers. It highlights the range of job roles under this label. I used this image to back up current sex workers' voices within the literature who assert that themes of intimacy are often overlooked in sex workers' roles.

Leila's account laid the foundation for my visual analysis to explore an exemplary photographic card featuring adult-baby services. The findings reveal that the card may have been seen as offensive because it subverted typically gendered power relations between the male client and the female sex worker. The infantilised state of the man subverts traditional roles, however, the image does not portray nudity or sexual acts. It is unusual because it flipped the stereotypical 'John' narrative on its head, portraying the male client as a vulnerable child.⁷¹⁶ The PVC outfits adorned by the sex workers also evoke a sense of power, the intersecting roles of sex work and BDSM give the sex workers depicted control and can be read as promoting agency.

I wanted to further disprove policymakers' concerns in mainstream media by arguing that because sex workers advertised different sexual services, their images were still not pornographic. I focused on one case study of a sex worker 'Leila the Milkmaid' who offered adult-baby services to show the breadth of roles in the industry. It is integral to include sex workers' accounts in the research because it reinforces my findings and centres the thesis as a piece of sex workers' histories. I showed the wider context of how sex work was viewed in the 90s through archived media articles to show the bifurcated modes of viewing in sex workers' representation.⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁶ Mosley, 'The "John"'.

⁷¹⁷ Kathleen Morgan, 'Watershed Saved Us from More Leila Horror', *Daily Record*, 7 December 1998, sec. Right to reply, Gale, [https://web.archive.org/web/20250331131437/https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Watershed%20saved%20us%20from%20more%20Leila%20horror%3B%20RIGHT%20TO%20REPLY%20\(Channel%204\).-a060939531](https://web.archive.org/web/20250331131437/https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Watershed%20saved%20us%20from%20more%20Leila%20horror%3B%20RIGHT%20TO%20REPLY%20(Channel%204).-a060939531).

Sex workers of colour, queer sex workers and sex workers operating in kink subcultures all share one thing in common: They express themselves differently. This may seem like a novel idea but the findings from the research show small trends in patterns of formal visual analysis, each tart card is different because it is a wider imagination of the persona behind the person's services depicted on the advertisement.

In the concluding chapter, these details will be discussed in depth to uncover how thematic visual tropes in sex work imagery reveal additional knowledge about sex workers' lived histories and I will propose future approaches to sex industry research.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The key findings from my research suggest that unique expressions found in each tart card reflect the complex personas behind the advertised services. Tart cards demonstrate the diverse range of services offered, including non-sexual intimacy, challenging two-dimensional and stereotypical perceptions of sex workers in the existing literature.⁷¹⁸

The tart cards do not reflect the lives of street-based sex workers, nor high-end escorts as the majority of these sex workers did not use this means of advertising.⁷¹⁹ Instead, the cards reveal the murky middle-ground of sexual service providers in the grey margins of the whorearchical pyramid. My case studies depict a diverse range of sex workers operating in the academically abandoned middle ground, revealing working-class histories. The advertisements depict workers in brothel settings (indoor markets) who arguably may have had more amenities, and possibly more security. These workers had some, or enough, disposable income to make their own handmade, scanned and photographic images or get professional print houses to print their adverts. They do not depict street-based sex workers. My visual analysis of the tart cards provides a fresh insight into the indoor-based market in London in the 1990s and the millennium.

Reflective statement

The period of research over three years has impacted my own thinking and positionality. My thesis is not about finding solutions to the arguments for decriminalisation, though I am in favour of this model, nor is my research to discuss

⁷¹⁸ Brewis and Linstead, "The Worst Thing Is the Screwing" (1)'.
⁷¹⁹ In conversation with Archer on 30/08/2023.

the politics of sex workers' labour conditions, about which there are many scholarly studies. My intention is to address the problematic modes of viewing around sex workers' visual representation.

Initially, the project was an impossible task of determining why sex workers 'look like that', meaning why are sex workers represented in a certain style in the media, popular culture and cinema. More interesting problems were teased out from this early inquiry, ones that centred sex workers as the main protagonists in their image-making choices. The focus of the research changed over time; I had started by questioning why sex workers are portrayed in a certain stereotypical way in popular culture, but this was not an achievable task. It did, however, steer the project into channelling a niche subject, one that asks more pertinent questions about the sex industry and provides attainable results.

The thesis challenged an accepted binary view of sex workers' visual culture that is steeped in heteronormative and Western ideology, and actively argued for a different reading. The project began as a pro-sex work account of London's sex industry in alignment with my positionality but moved significantly beyond the bifurcated understanding of 'pro' and 'anti' sex work rhetoric. The argument is much more nuanced, and the methodological underpinning of such research relies on a reflexive and adaptable approach to the critical visual analysis of sex work ephemera. I argue that the cards have been interpreted in limited ways, and I have actively contributed an alternative feminist methodology to understand the complexities in sex workers' lived experiences and social histories. The thesis is not purely a pro-sex work argument, recognising that the existing labour conditions and individual circumstances of sex workers call for more holistic research approaches. The project was fuelled by my passion and appreciation of sex workers' visual

culture and a desire to question the meaning of images. I drew on my own experience within various sectors of the industry, both positive and negative, to challenge problematic enquiries of sex workers' representation. I have a feminist positioning that was never satisfied with current theory as to why women are depicted and portrayed in reductive ways based on their looks, social status and sexual appetite, which are all subjective but appear set in stone.

I wanted to start addressing the knowledge gap in the existing literature to push forward with more engaging topics on feminist readings of sex work that go beyond tired arguments of whether sex work is 'good' or 'bad'. At first, I was reluctant to engage with anti-sex work literature, but this was detrimental to the project so had to be overcome. I was not satisfied with research conducted by non-sex working academics because this follows a historical power imbalance in sex work studies, where the sex worker is the subject rather than the researcher, which is problematic. I value the ephemera as objects and used this angle to explore the image of the sex worker, which, I argue, is at the root of their stigma and negative connotations. I wanted to locate agency in those advertisements as they show the histories of sex workers carving out an identity. I honour the sex workers' visual history, in contrast to mainstream policies that used their images in a criminological pursuit to demonise them, where the image itself was weaponised.

Key findings

This study aimed to explore the complex visual and social aspects of tart card production to see how sex workers represented themselves through their advertisements from the 1990s. This was done to test whether the stereotypes around sex workers hold credence to the categorisation within the existing literature

on the phenomenon. The findings demonstrate that a broad array of graphics were implemented in tart card design, including photography, digital imagery and hand-rendered components used in many different formulations of collage and mixed media. This shows that sex workers' representation is difficult, if not impossible, to categorise. The broad and diverse range of sex workers' imagery can relate to wider themes of femininity, particularly in popular culture and porn from where the tart cards take influence. Ultimately, the nature of sex workers' self-representation is as individual and unique as the person themselves. This finding is in contrast to the body of literature that seeks to unify sex workers' collective image as a totalising identity.

My primary research question asked: How can the critical visual analysis of archived sex work ephemera provide agency and a nuanced account of sex workers' lived histories? My findings reveal how sex workers were operating in London in the 90s and the millennium, providing further evidence of their labour conditions than the literature alone. My methodology highlights sex workers' individuality, evident in their choice of imagery, sense of branding and personal style. My visual analysis addresses the perspective of the sex workers themselves.

My secondary enquiry questioned: How does an intersectional feminist analysis of London tart cards disrupt binary narratives that demonise or glorify sex workers as 'other'? This was resolved by a methodological approach in which my reflexive positioning was open to the multifaceted dimensions of sex workers' individual experiences. Through close engagement with the existing literature it was evident that roles within the sex industry are not static and should not be oversimplified in such reductive ways. My study recognises that sex workers are at the forefront of debates on their representation in historical, contemporary and future

discourses, yet dominant SWERF agendas subdue those voices. The body of literature highlights issues on how tart cards have been understood within a pro or anti-sex work feminist framing, promoted by anti-sex work feminists. The oppositional divide in sex work debates is propelled by SWERFs, such as Bindel, who refer to sex work researchers as 'pro-sex work', a reductive term not used by sex work scholars.⁷²⁰ An intersectional feminist analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the industry because it understands the complex factors of labour, exploitation and bodily autonomy. My visual analysis rejects oversimplified ideologies solidified by anti-sex work feminist thought, dispelling notions around the sex industry being 'good' or 'bad'.

In the introductory chapter, I outlined the problems of sex workers' representation and explored the tart card phenomenon before addressing some of the problematic threads of enquiry around sex workers and their image production. Chapter 2 consisted of an analysis of sex work and tart card literature to highlight important knowledge gaps, which this thesis aimed to address. My findings from Chapter 3 reveal how tart cards have been situated with themes of criminality and produced evidence to show that sex workers were working with these negative assumptions. Chapter 4 detailed the delicate nuances in sex workers' self-representation, illuminating further insights into the changing aesthetic tastes of the sex industry from the 1990s. In Chapter 5, an exclusive case study of one sex worker's tart cards was undertaken, providing further evidence to challenge mainstream understanding of tart card production. Her aesthetic deviated from mainstream bodies of knowledge in tart card production because she was using self-portraits in a photographic format at a time before researchers claimed that this

⁷²⁰ Bindel, *The Pimping of Prostitution*.

method of tart card production became the norm.⁷²¹ Kitty's early photographic tart cards interrupt the idealised linear progression in tart card evolution, demonstrating that sex workers have always been operating 'under the radar' and that more research is required to understand the full extent of sex workers' creative outputs. Chapter 6 explored the often overlooked intersections of sex work to further build on the knowledge that can be attained from the critical visual analysis of sex work ephemera. This concluding chapter synthesises the overall findings from the thesis to discuss the points raised in relation to the research questions.

Contributions

I argued that people construct an idea about what sex workers look like without addressing sex workers' aesthetic culture. The way other academics, predominantly sociologists, historians and criminologists research sex work has largely neglected the creative outputs produced by sex workers. My results show that the way sex workers' tart cards had been understood was largely informed by underdeveloped research methods. My methodology as a visual culture historian contributes to the field of interdisciplinary sex industry research, providing an alternative mode of understanding sex workers' images and objects as primary research material. I am significantly contributing to the emerging research area of sex workers' archival and visual culture, which currently has substantial knowledge gaps. The significance of the research contributes to socially driven action discourses because it recognises the problematic modes of viewing sex workers as a human rights issue. The visual analysis of tart cards provides a more nuanced account of sex workers' lived

⁷²¹ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*. p.75

experiences because it directly engages with the ephemera produced by the sex-working community. I have identified three areas of significance where my thesis contributes to new knowledge in sex industry research, mainly in sociology, art history and visual culture studies, and cultural and visual criminology.

Sociology: The role of critical visual analysis in sex industry research

The project highlights the importance of the relationship between qualitative data and visual methods. Sociological theory may benefit from interdisciplinary applications of critical visual analysis methods. The existing literature on tart card production neglects the human enterprise of carding because the investigations are based on graphic design, and sociological and cultural geography fields.

A visual culture historian's role in analysing the images is crucial because the analysis goes deeper than the illustrative role of images in sociological research. It demonstrates that images have bigger social implications because they represent a specific group of people. I defend my methodology by arguing that the process of actually looking at, and analysing, the images made by sex workers reveals individual human beings.

Bridging the Literature Gap

While existing literature predominantly favours the aesthetic of early 1990s tart cards, this perspective overlooks the nuances in later designs. The results from my visual analysis show that sex workers' adverts were not explicit in their imagery, counter to the arguments that policymakers were reporting in the 90s. Yes, the tone and language included in some cards *were* sexually suggestive, however, they were

not pornographic. My reading and interpretation of the cards provides new evidence of sex workers' visual cultural history. This was supported by the analysis of secondary source material such as recordings, media reports and archival documents, to gain further insights into the historical accounts of those working as third parties in the sex industry. Such materials, I argue, counter the narratives put forward in mainstream knowledge of sex workers' lived experience. The inclusion of other archived pieces from those with sex industry experience bolsters my visual analysis.

My analysis integrated feminist theory and pornography debates to situate the cards in a wider discourse of sex workers' self-representation. Examining these later cards through a lens of visual analysis shows how they reflect changing trends, tastes, and beauty standards, as well as developments in technology. The evolution of tart cards' aesthetic demonstrates the ongoing adaptability of sex workers' marketing strategies. While the visual appearance of tart cards may have changed from graphic illustrations to photographs, these changes reflect the broader visual and technological landscape of their time. The persistence of certain visual elements and marketing strategies across decades underscores the enduring nature of sex work as a form of labour, transcending simplistic narratives of aesthetic decline. The argument that cards lost their 'original charm' is obsolete because they were not produced in a linear way. SWERF-informed researchers may benefit from adopting a visual methodological approach because their agendas are formed in sociological fields and are often conducted from an outsider's point of view. My review of the literature showed that historically, researchers have had very little engagement with the creative outputs of sex workers, meaning that their ideologies are detached from sex workers' lived realities.

My research contribution as an art historian places the cards in the context of their social landscape to find different ways of understanding tart cards and sex workers' histories. The critical visual analysis of tart cards reveals hidden insights into labour, domesticity and intimacy, which are aspects of the industry that are not always obvious due to overarching (misplaced) themes of eroticism and vulgarity. There is a tendency for the literature to romanticise the early 90s tart cards, whilst later examples are excluded from publication. It is this area that I wanted to enrich because these cards are deserving of the same close attention and artistic merit.

Art History and Visual Culture: Disrupting existing knowledge of tart cards and sex work imagery

My methodology broadened the scope of sex workers' ephemera and image production by disrupting the overarching literature on tart cards as a nostalgic 'fad' of London's urban art scene. Though the ephemera is emerging in more traditional museum contexts and is presently trending within institutions' programmes, the tart cards are displayed alongside the 90s rave scene and working-class histories of London, rather than from a sex work perspective.⁷²²

My research into tart card production from the millennium furthers existing knowledge and builds on the foundations of tart card enquiry from Archer's account of the ephemera. I explored how pornography debates informed discourses on tart card imagery, in the context of their criminalised status from 2001. My findings showed that some of the visual tropes and symbols from pornographic magazines

⁷²² 'Hard Graft'.

were utilised in tart card design, thus cementing their association with pornographic imagery and feminist debates on obscenity and public decency.

As outlined in the literature review, collectors' and publishers' desire to categorise the tart cards has not been an effective way of understanding the phenomenon of carding to date. These explorations have not provided new insights into broader knowledge of the sex industry, instead focusing on labelling stereotypical views of sex workers' images. My findings show that tart cards were presumed to have lost their charm, but my analysis asks wider questions of why they fell out of favour, centring sex workers as image makers at the centre of the debate. I discovered that the changing aesthetics in tart cards ranged from wider popular culture trends in feminine beauty standards to subcultural, gothic and alternative clothing, but was only one facet of the emerging trends in tart card production. The argument that tart cards became more pornographic was contested through my visual analysis of symbols on tart cards. The inclusion of 'stars' to censor female nipples and genitalia has a long history in print contexts but appears more prolifically in late 90s tart cards because they featured full-colour photographs.⁷²³ In contrast, early 90s cards did not feature this design configuration as readily because the images were graphically designed or hand-rendered cartoons of women in various states of undress. The design considerations reflect wider trends in socially derived norms of women's sexuality and beauty standards.

The literature suggests that both sex workers and clients shared the same preferences in the type of tart cards they enjoyed looking at and producing.⁷²⁴ Cards featuring handwritten elements were favoured over full-colour photographs because

⁷²³ Kaletka, 'The Grawlix'.

⁷²⁴ Archer, *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art*.

they required the target audience to read and inspect the card.⁷²⁵ This raises questions about the desired effect of the tart cards and the intention behind them. The artistic licence was in the hands of the card producer, who had to make choices about the sorts of images that would receive attention and ultimately provide capital. The photographs of sex workers used on tart cards were considered more explicit because they were equated with cheapness and vulgarity and historically photography is seen as 'artless' because of its tendency to record the raw data of visual experience.⁷²⁶

While existing literature predominantly favours the aesthetic of early 1990s tart cards, this perspective overlooks the artistic merit of later designs. The integration of feminist theory and pornography debates situates the cards in a wider discourse of sex workers' self-representation. Examining these later cards through a lens of visual analysis shows how they reflect changing trends, tastes, and beauty standards, as well as developments in technology. The evolution of tart cards' aesthetic demonstrates the ongoing adaptability of sex workers' marketing strategies. While the visual appearance may have changed from graphic illustrations to photographs, these changes reflect the broader visual and technological landscape of their time. The persistence of certain visual elements and marketing strategies across decades underscores the enduring nature of sex work as a form of labour, transcending simplistic narratives of aesthetic decline. Again, the methodology is interdisciplinary, connecting sociology-derived methods with critical visual analysis, reinforcing the concept that one area cannot exist without the other.

⁷²⁵ Archer. p.56

⁷²⁶ Archer. p.56; Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. p.37

In Chapter 5, Kitty's imagery was critically analysed to reveal whether her cards could disrupt policymakers' concerns about the 'pornographic' evolution of tart cards and challenge the credibility of their argument. Similar to my results in Chapter 4, the visual analysis showed that the images and photographs were not explicit. Kitty was depicted wearing stockings, suspenders and high heels consistently for 19 years. This strong visual branding shows fashion items associated with female sexuality but not exclusively linked to porn or sex work. The high volume of Kitty's cards means that using her as a case study was effective because there was an extensive body of research to gain conclusive results.

My findings produced from one sex worker's tart card production derail the entire discourse around sex workers' presumed use of escalating graphic images in their advertising methods. This case study disrupts mainstream knowledge by providing a different account of sex work, one that is more personal. The case study of Kitty's tart cards provides evidence that counters the narrative of increasing graphic content in sex work advertising. Instead, it showcases a sex worker's ability to maintain a consistent, non-pornographic brand image over time, highlighting the agency of individuals within the industry. In conclusion, Kitty's tart cards offer a nuanced perspective on sex work advertising, demonstrating how individual sex workers could maintain control over their image and branding despite changing technologies and social pressures. This case study challenges simplistic narratives about the evolution of sex work advertising and highlights complexity and agency within the industry.

A critical analysis of tart cards revealed the intersection of sex industry imagery with broader pop culture references. Fashion of the 90s was integrated into my analysis because it is an important component in sex workers' imagery. My

findings showed that sex workers were representing themselves in ways that were accessible but also reflected the fashion, beauty standards and trends of the time. Archer's account of sex workers creating their own tart cards using 'cut and stick' methods was a strong piece of evidence that counters policymakers' accounts of the explicit imagery used in tart cards.

While symbols such as hearts and stars were used in the early designs to illustrate the text, they also conveyed beauty and women's sexuality by adding a 'feminine touch', whereas these tropes in later examples were reappropriated for a different reason. The symbols in late 90s cards covered the sex workers' modesty and censored the image in line with British obscenity laws. The references to Playboy, with the addition of bunny ears and rip-offs of the official Playboy branded logo was synonymous with porn. The tart cards became inseparable from porn debates but I argue that they are two entirely different visual materials. The 'Playgirl' trope was also widely considered as low-class or 'chavvy' when it was integrated into mainstream fashion.⁷²⁷ The well-established mode of viewing late 90s tart cards as pornographic, throwaway items is situated within wider pornography debates that my methodology sought to challenge.⁷²⁸

Social art history

The study reveals a rich history of marginalisation towards sex workers; as sex workers gained more access to photographic and technological advancements in their self-representation, the cards were classed as artless images made by unskilled amateurs. The tart cards are a reflection of the images in mainstream

⁷²⁷ Bragg et al., 'Too Much, Too Soon?' p.287

⁷²⁸ Dennis, *Art/Porn*. p.129

culture; it would not have been difficult for sex workers to access images in pornographic magazines and to reproduce these images in their own adverts. This shows that sex workers were making carefully curated imagery around their self-representation. It also highlights how they were operating under governing restrictions and obscenity laws.

Representation

The idea that sex workers can be identified by recurring visual tropes that signify their deviant behaviour is rooted in Victorian ideologies, however, the image of the sex worker, the collective cultural imaginary of what a sex worker 'looks like' is embedded in visual culture, the media and everyday existence. The everyday existence is a forgotten part of this creation, where the whore is an embodiment of the person, it is their entire being and persona. I argued that scholars have noted that the sex worker's everyday existence is worth exploring, however, this has not been undertaken in an art historical or visual culture perspective.⁷²⁹

Cultural and Visual Criminology: Challenging assumptions of sex work and crime

My research disrupts mainstream narratives linking sex work to crime because it humanises the depictions of sex workers in the tart cards. The cards are examples of media that have received little attention from criminologists. They are not images typically associated with traditional criminological enquiry, such as CCTV,

⁷²⁹ Graham Scambler, 'Conspicuous and Inconspicuous Sex Work: The Neglect of the Ordinary and Mundane', in *Rethinking Prostitution* (Routledge, 1996). p.110

photography and artworks in the discipline, yet they show how objects themselves can reveal criminalised status.

My findings emphasise the importance of visual culture studies in understanding sex workers' representation. The current themes of criminality in sex workers' aesthetic culture perpetrate violence towards sex workers as a human rights issue. In future discourses, visual research outputs can extend to broader sex industry debates. My findings reveal sex workers' criminalised status through the lens of morality and cleanliness, however, this can extend to other sociological enquiries that address different areas of policy.

Tart cards and criminality

The literature around the criminalisation of sex workers does not explicitly engage with the tart cards as a phenomenon, however, researchers in criminological and sociological fields such as Hilary Kinnell, Teela Sanders and Stewart Cunningham explore sex workers' marginalised status.⁷³⁰ It was interesting to compare and contrast studies on sex work and occupational homicide in the UK because it addresses the social landscape of a similar timeframe to my research.⁷³¹ The body of existing literature on sex work and criminalisation makes correlations between the visibility of the sex worker(s) and their representation, however, the visual component and analysis are neglected. The studies are rooted in a human rights approach in line with sociological methodologies that impact real-life consequences. The ideas around cleanliness and ridding the streets of 'unsanitary' traces of

⁷³⁰ Kinnell, *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*.

⁷³¹ Stewart Cunningham et al., 'Sex Work and Occupational Homicide: Analysis of a U.K. Murder Database', *Homicide Studies* 22, no. 3 (1 August 2018): 321–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767918754306>.

prostitution relieve society from the shame of sex workers' presence in the community.⁷³²

Urban social geography has a role to play in understanding the tart cards phenomenon.⁷³³ The anti-social aspect of sex work is discussed in situ with their working environment and scholars have identified that indoor-based sex markets are widely underreported or neglected entirely.⁷³⁴ The cards were produced in many different ways, reflecting the unique personalities and standpoints of the sex workers themselves. The cards show how sex workers were operating under strict modes of surveillance, they document this because they embody the design considerations and wider implications of presenting or 'outing' oneself as a sex worker.

The accounts of the eradication of tart card displays in phone boxes are a wider contextual example of the sanitising of "marginal and 'undesirable' groups" in London.⁷³⁵ Their removal documents a wider scheme to displace sex workers, to make them invisible and to clean them as if they were a waste product.⁷³⁶ In particular, Westminster City Council had been accused of upholding luxury property developers Soho Estate's vision of creating an "edgy-not-seedy image" of Soho.⁷³⁷ Therefore the literature states that the image of sex work and the representation of sex workers are problematic and have a strong visual impact that has remained unexamined in visual culture studies.

⁷³² Kinnell, *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*. p.54

⁷³³ Jane Scoular et al., 'What's Anti-Social about Sex Work? Governance through the Changing Representation of Prostitution's Incivility', in *Regulating Sex for Sale: Prostitution Policy Reform in the UK*, ed. Jo Phoenix (UK: Bristol University Press, 2009), <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/edcollchap/book/9781847421074/ch002.xml>.

⁷³⁴ Sanders, 'UK Sex Work Policy'. p.71

⁷³⁵ Erin Sanders-McDonagh, Magail Peyrefitte, and Matt Ryalls, 'Sanitising the City: Exploring Hegemonic Gentrification in London's Soho', *Sociological Research Online* 21, no. 3 (31 August 2016): 128–33, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5153/sro.4004>.

⁷³⁶ Neville and Sanders-McDonagh, 'Gentrification and the Criminalization of Sex Work'. p.164

⁷³⁷ Sanders-McDonagh, Peyrefitte, and Ryalls, 'Sanitising the City'.

The literature details a lengthy and hostile gentrification of London boroughs to which the tart cards give testament. Sociological and criminological scholarly research identifies the criminalisation of sex work as having significant historical ties to identity and morality. As discussed in Chapter 3, the criminalisation of sex workers and buyers forced sex workers into precarious working conditions; the tart cards are a reflection of this. As explored in Chapter 5, Kitty's longstanding trope of concealing her identity for nineteen years shows how little progress has been made in social justice frameworks addressing violence towards sex workers. This is a pertinent point that drives my research because ultimately the modes of viewing sex workers are enmeshed with wider feminist agendas of violence, whether from patriarchal forms of gendered violence or violence from the state, links which also hold historical connotations of Victorian London.⁷³⁸

My findings emphasise the importance of visual culture studies in understanding sex workers' representation. The current themes of criminality in sex workers' aesthetic culture perpetrate violence towards sex workers as a human rights issue. I drew upon Melissa Gira Grant's literature to show that sex workers' representation is an unresolved problem; they are viewed in two distinct ways: as fetishised objects or criminalised bodies. I gave background contextual information to show how sex workers' advertisements have roots in Victorian ideologies that were not sympathetic to sex workers. I showed that the themes of morality shifted into contemporary debates, using examples of serial killers who selected sex workers as easy targets. With close attention paid to archival material, the critical visual analysis of tart cards situated them in context to their criminalised status. This was then backed up by social theory. The various criminal acts that pressed charges against

⁷³⁸ Walkowitz, 'Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence'.

carders and sex workers had to be taken into consideration when designing tart cards. The continual pressures from policymakers who tried different angles of prosecution around the cards, from their content to their adhesion, to their ultimate demise as rubbish all shaped how tart cards came to be viewed as an extension of crime. Next, I challenged these longstanding narratives and proposed an alternative reading of the cards, using visual analysis to counter mainstream views of sex work and crime.

Implications

My research has profound implications for feminist theory discourse and gender and sexuality studies. My findings build on the self-representation and self-commodification of the sex workers' image in feminist debates, broadening theories of the gaze.

Advancing pornography and obscenity debates in sex workers' visual culture

My extensive archival research of 22,000 tart cards from across various collections found that images used on tart cards were sexually charged, but they were not pornographic. The evidence contradicts what the literature says about what is considered 'tasteful' and how the cards demand to be viewed. The sex workers may have chosen to remain anonymous through the construction of typography and imagery, or they may have been represented and advertised through an image put together by a third party. This power dynamic over agency opens an avenue for further exploration in which decisions around sex workers' visual tropes may be challenged. Many of the images had been re-appropriated from other images in

advertising, which raises further questions about women's representation and sexuality in corporate marketing. My visual analysis expands on feminist viewpoints of sex workers' representation as exploitative or empowering. The research question aimed at locating agency in sex workers' visual culture but extended existing feminist debates on women's bodily autonomy in their image-making processes.

The visual analysis of tart cards made in the millennium shows how sex workers were engaging with images around them which were accessible to use in their advertisements. My visual analysis provides evidence to counter narratives that accused sex workers of displaying explicit imagery in their advertising methods. The results show that, the images, whilst provocative, were not pornographic. They did not depict sexual acts and were not explicit in nature. The case study of Miss Tanya Hyde (Chapter 6) illustrates how sex workers were using images that overlapped with alternative and BDSM fashion. This promotes the idea that sex workers 'look different' or can be identified via visual means that signify deviancy. This is a form of subversion of the historical connotations of sex work and deviancy that sex workers were reappropriating and reclaiming in their autonomous tart card production.

The changing aesthetics from typical feminine beauty standards to subcultural, gothic and alternative clothing was only one facet of the emerging trends in tart card production. I identified different modes of payment such as debit/credit services included on tart card imagery which also documents social histories, highlighting sex workers at the forefront of new technologies. Popular culture and British customs such as 'Page 3 Girls' were also an extension of sexualised images of women in the media.⁷³⁹ Organisations such as the Campaign Against

⁷³⁹ Brenda Maddox, 'Turning over Page 3', *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 January 1990, The Telegraph Historical Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0700614062/GDCS?sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=7f62a4c5>.

Pornography (CAP) swayed tart card discourse in alignment with pornography and censorship debates.⁷⁴⁰ By situating the cards in a wider context that reflects some of the problematic areas of locating agency in images of women's sexuality, it reinstates how sex workers have been subject to being viewed in specific, reductive ways.

Identifying social injustice in sex work ephemera

Thematic elements of the cards can relay social issues of racism, transphobia, homophobia, whorephobia and kink-shaming. These strands of research extend beyond the scope of the project, revealing the potential, and future reach of my investigation.

I argued that tart cards have been analysed and compartmentalised into distinct racially-driven categories which oversimplify nuances and individualism.⁷⁴¹ Sex work imagery has been produced, studied and understood in rigid frameworks that have perpetuated and maintained outmoded and frankly racist ideologies. White saviour complexes implied by SWERF discourses maintain colonial positionings that reduced women to exoticised assets; sex workers from Asia were itemised as one portion of the sex industry, Caucasian women represented another strand, and black women represented the entirety of the Caribbean, and the African continent.⁷⁴² My visual analysis shows sex workers were subverting those images of misogyny and racism to their own advantage.

⁷⁴⁰ Carter, 'The Anti-Porn Campaigner'.

⁷⁴¹ Salter, *Tart Cards of England*.

⁷⁴² Doezeema, 'Loose Women or Lost Women?'

The cards are a product of London's social climate, reflecting racist attitudes of the time.⁷⁴³ By situating the black sex worker's body in a historical discourse of examining black women's bodies through a fetishised colonial lens, my visual analysis of tart cards showed how sex workers may have been reclaiming their presumed hyper-sexualised status as efficient marketing tools.⁷⁴⁴ The investigation incorporated strong literary and cinematic characters in popular culture to bolster the claims of subverting submissive roles into powerful visual marketing strategies.⁷⁴⁵ The study then approached racist language in tart card imagery and unpacked how the terminology may be read as an example of early 90s harm reduction techniques. I engaged with themes in the existing literature that categorised sex workers by nationality, turning attention to problems in locating agency and individualism by oversimplifying sex workers as 'exotic'.⁷⁴⁶ I found similarities in the way that sex workers drew upon racialised stereotypes in tart card imagery that reflected wider social issues. Though the metaphors may appear reductive, I argue that sex workers were well aware of the wider socio-political implications and used these tropes to their benefit. I explored the angle of human trafficking and the extra layer of criminalisation attributed to sex workers from the Global South through media reports in the archive.⁷⁴⁷ This evidenced the wider attitudes around sex work at the time. I critiqued the method of categorising sex workers' tart cards in this way as it does not account for individual agency.

⁷⁴³ Goodall, *The Comfort of Sin*.

⁷⁴⁴ Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies'.

⁷⁴⁵ Jung, 'Lolita in Humbert Humbert's Camera Obscura and Lolita in Vladimir Nabokov's Camera Lucida'.

⁷⁴⁶ Marchetti, *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril'*.

⁷⁴⁷ Thompson and Veash, 'Britain's Sex Slave Trade Booms'.

I argued that the way existing tart card research has been conducted fails to recognise individual agency and groups sex workers together based on reductive categories of the depicted sex worker's nationality. It was important to argue this point because the modes of viewing sex workers in the context of their ethnicity are problematic and demonstrate how bifurcated narratives around immigration and sex trafficking have influenced violence towards sex workers.⁷⁴⁸

Next, I turned my attention to queer and trans representation in tart card imagery. This was not the sole purpose of the thesis but I wanted to acknowledge an entire history and body of images that can be explored in future discourses. In the same vein as the racist terminologies in tart cards, trans histories also reflect the simplistic language of the time. Alternatively, the slur *TV* (transvestite) was a useful marketing tool because it signified 'queerness' promoting sexual services outside of heteronormative practices. I argue that because sex work has historically been gendered, tart cards that reflect these services outside of this narrow heterosexual view remain to be explored in their entirety. Due to the scope of my research question, many secondary inquiries emerged that I could not fulfil. I wanted to acknowledge Queer and BIPOC sex workers' histories, which the tart cards evidence, finding an entire body of work that requires further rigorous examination.

Limitations

The critical visual analysis research paradigm cannot trace the individual whereabouts of sex workers, nor would I wish to. The project is not focused on 'outing' sex workers but on finding alternative readings in the images produced by

⁷⁴⁸ Davidson, 'Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand Up?' p.14

them in their marketing strategies. This also limits the full exposure of their lived experience as it reflects the carefully curated image created to gain capital; it is not an exhaustive account of an individual's entire personhood. The analysis offers counterarguments against mainstream ideas about sex workers, but it remains subjective.

The tart cards demonstrate how sex workers have been subjected to marginalisation. They are a community bound by this historical stigma, yet how they have been viewed as a homogenous and stereotyped group has been pivotal in their approach to advocating for sex workers' rights. Viewed as 'other' and stigmatised, they find it difficult to be taken seriously.

A proposal: future discourses of sex work research

The breadth of photobooks analysed in the literature review reveals the rich interconnections between the subcultural rave scene, sex work and working-class histories, which opens future questions about sex workers' visual and sonic culture and its positioning in a British socio-political landscape. Further feminist discussion of sex work as work has implications for future human rights movements. Incorporating the human element of the sex trade may benefit or implement social policy.

I propose that centring sex workers' voices and lived experiences should be at the forefront of future research. Though sex workers have precarious safety measures, more efforts should be implemented to invite sex workers as collaborators in their social histories. The cards have been detached physically and spiritually from the humans who made them. It would be of great benefit to the sex-working community and wider population to gain insight into their social history. My research

placed sex workers at the head of their own marketing strategies, as image producers and crediting them for their contributions to visual culture.

The taboo around sex work advertising can be explored in an empathetic way, and as I have proved, can be done in ways that are not obscene, explicit or offensive. The tart cards reveal hidden insights into labour, domesticity and intimacy that are aspects of the industry not always obvious due to overarching (misplaced) themes of eroticism and vulgarity. My argument is that the cards have been read as an extension of the male gaze, which they undoubtedly are, however, this does not detract from the design considerations of the sex workers themselves. The cards have been read in the context of violence, but they can also reveal the considered, powerful and informed design decisions made by sex workers in their self-representation. The research addressed ideas of self-branding and the creation of avatars in a pre and post-digital social landscape, concepts which contribute to current research themes in sex tech and AI emerging in current discourses.⁷⁴⁹

The cards do not 'belong' to any one person, this means that researching the ephemera has a set of problems that are unique to this type of archival material. The cards were not designed with longevity in mind, they were ephemeral paper leaflets that ended up becoming highly collectable.⁷⁵⁰ Archer's research methods have been criticised for plagiarising an online collection of the ephemera, which raises questions about who has ownership of the images.⁷⁵¹ The high volume of cards produced in the 90s means that many duplicates of the same card can be identified

⁷⁴⁹ 'Beyond the Interface: Critical Perspectives of Sex Work and Sextech', *Centre for Feminist Research* (blog), 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308125456/https://www.yorku.ca/cfr/events/beyond-the-interface-critical-perspectives-of-sex-work-and-sextech/>.

⁷⁵⁰ Berlin, *Tart Art*.

⁷⁵¹ 'The Prostitute Calling Cards of London'.

across many archival collections, opening further avenues of discussion in future research enquiries into how the cards have been displayed, who has consent over items in the public domain, and who owns the rights to the images.

Moving forward, I propose centring on sex workers' voices and lived experiences in visual research methods. This includes collaborating with sex workers to document their social histories, focusing on often-overlooked aspects of the industry such as labour, domesticity, and intimacy. Another crucial aspect lies in the critique of, and improvement of, current archival practices in displaying sex work ephemera. By adopting these approaches, future research can provide a more comprehensive, nuanced and respectful understanding of sex work and its representation through ephemera such as tart cards. This shift in perspective not only enriches academic discourse but also contributes to destigmatising sex work and recognising the complex humanity of those involved in the industry.

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Appendix

Tech timeline from 1984

An overview of technological changes that informed tart card production.

- 1984: Tart card visuals were similar to telephone directories.⁷⁵²
- In 1986 digital typesetters featured 120 different font types and were most likely the range of technology to which sex workers had access in the 1990s.
- Barclay's bank introduced debit cards to Britain in 1987 but they were not widely accessible to the general public until the 1990s.⁷⁵³
- QuarkXPress started as a programme solely for Macintosh in 1987 but a later version was developed for Windows in 1992.
- The American company Quark Incorporated owned an estimated 95% share of the market in the early 1990s with their editing programme *QuarkXPress*.⁷⁵⁴
This software was almost exclusively used by typesetters to format page layouts in publishing houses and was rarely used by the general public.
- Before Photoshop dominated the market, the Aldus PageMaker 4.0 was released in 1990 for Mac and 1991 for PC (which was later purchased by

⁷⁵² Muir, 'No Sex Please, We're BT'.

⁷⁵³ 'From the Archives: Paving the Way in Tech Innovation', Barclays, 25 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240509074051/https://home.barclays/news/2022/03/From-the-archives-paving-the-way-in-tech-innovation/>.

⁷⁵⁴ 'QuarkXpress 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 For Macintosh - Software', Computing History, The Centre for Computing History, accessed 29 June 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20241013223506/https://www.computinghistory.org.uk/det/46162/QuarkXpress-3-1-3-2-3-3-For-Macintosh/>.

Adobe in 1994) to create a new product in the professional market to rival their competitor, QuarkXPress.⁷⁵⁵

- 1990 - Adobe Photoshop 1.0 launched, costing approximately £560.⁷⁵⁶
- Microsoft's Windows 3.0 operating system was released on the 22nd of May 1990 and proved to be a success, selling over four million copies that year.⁷⁵⁷
- Xerox machinery could print large quantities of monochrome scans but was exclusively used in professional settings costing £123,596 (\$220,000) in 1990.⁷⁵⁸
- International Business Machines (IBM) was a well-established American company that had been making personal computers in the 1980s but faced record financial losses in 1993.⁷⁵⁹
- Typically, a floppy disk could hold up to approximately 2.9 megabytes (MB) in 1990 and 240MB in 1995.⁷⁶⁰

⁷⁵⁵ Suzanne Crocker, 'Paul Brainerd, Aldus Corporation, and the Desktop Publishing Revolution', *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 41, no. 3 (July 2019): 35–41, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MAHC.2019.2920174>.

⁷⁵⁶ Photoshop 1.0 launched in February of 1990 but was only compatible with Mac computers until 1993 when the programme was developed for Microsoft Windows.

⁷⁵⁷ Brian Livingston, 'Cooking up a Windows Networking Strategy', *InfoWorld*, 21 October 1991.

⁷⁵⁸ Johanna Ambrosio, 'Xerox Unveils Multitalented Printer', *Computerworld*, 8 October 1990, https://archive.org/details/sim_computerworld_1990-10-08_24_41/page/n151/mode/2up?q=xerox.

⁷⁵⁹ 'IBM - Archives - History of IBM - 1990 - United States', TS200, 23 January 2003, http://www-apache-app.cwm.gtm.ibm.net/ibm/history/history/decade_1990.html.

⁷⁶⁰ 'Memory & Storage | Timeline of Computer History | Computer History Museum', accessed 7 September 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250313005517/https://www.computerhistory.org/timeline/memory-storage/>.

- Apple, Hewlett-Packard (HP) and Compaq computers grew in popularity during this time and Windows, rather than Apple was most popular in the 1990s.⁷⁶¹
- 1991- The first Mac laptop, an *Apple PowerBook 100* was launched, followed by the *PowerBook Duo* in 1992, but their uses were limited in comparison to desktop computers.
- In October 1991 the first 64-bit microprocessor, the *R4000* Central processing unit (CPU) was released by Toshiba, however, most commercially available computers would have had 32-bit operating systems. These were the types of equipment that the general public had access to.
- LaserJet scanners cost approximately £3560 (\$2,000) in 1991 and could print at a resolution of 300 dots to the inch.⁷⁶²
- An estimated 1,700 models of printers were commercially available for computers from 1991.⁷⁶³
- 1992 - When Microsoft introduced the Windows 3.1 upgrade, it sold more than three million copies in the first two months of its release in April.⁷⁶⁴

⁷⁶¹ Dana Mayor, 'Computers in the 1990s', *History-Computer* (blog), 1 June 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240313165437/https://history-computer.com/computers-in-the-1990s/>.

⁷⁶² Hall, 'HP LaserJet – The Early History'. p.9; Daniel J. Makuta, *The Complete Desktop Publisher*, Compute! Library Selection. (Greensboro, N.C: COMPUTE! Publications, 1986).p.1

⁷⁶³ Dan Gookin, *DOS for Dummies*, 1st ed. (California: IDG Books Worldwide, 1991), <http://archive.org/details/dosfordummies000gook>. p.95

⁷⁶⁴ Steve Gibson, 'Tech Talk', *InfoWorld*, 8 June 1992, https://web.archive.org/web/20250308155120/https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=YFEEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=snippet&q=three%20million%20copies&f=false.

- Adobe Photoshop 2.5 which was coded (for the first time) to work on both Mac and Windows operating systems allowing more people access to the software.⁷⁶⁵
- The statistics were gathered from American sources, however, they reflect dominant trends and shifts in technology that would have had a causal effect on the UK. Studies in the disparities in the division of wealth between the USA and the UK reported that British people had greater access to personal computers than the American population in the 1990s.⁷⁶⁶ This observation may reveal why the tart cards were such a prevalent, British phenomenon.
- 1992 – rapid acceleration of cards
- In 1992 both QuarkXPress and Photoshop released upgraded software that was compatible with Mac and Windows operating systems. QuarkXPress version 3.1 was available in July 1992 costing £500, shortly followed months later by Adobe Photoshop 2.5 in November, at £280. The capabilities of running software on two different machines was a great development in technology and expanded Quark and Adobe's commercial enterprise by offering the consumer more choices, however, Photoshop grew quickly in popularity this year.
- 1993- Microsoft Excel and Word were introduced. Word gained popularity, replacing processors such as *WordPerfect* and *WordStar* which dominated the market in the 1980s.

⁷⁶⁵ 'Adobe Photoshop 2.5', Web Design Museum, accessed 7 September 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309123720/https://www.webdesignmuseum.org/software/adobe-photoshop-2-5-in-1992>.

⁷⁶⁶ John Schmitt and Jonathan Wadsworth, 'Give PCs a Chance: Personal Computer Ownership and the Digital Divide in the United States and Great Britain' 526 (1 May 2002): 42.

- The Windows 95' operating system (launched August 24, 1995) sold more than 1 million copies within four days and in its first year, sold 40 million units worldwide.⁷⁶⁷ Windows 95 offered new features such as the start menu that were considered major developments as for the first time, computers were commercially aimed at the general public. The intuitive design and ease of use of Windows 95 contributed to high sales and the accelerated use of home computing. This operating system was able to support 32-bit applications, though many front-end components of the user interface would have still been in the familiar 16-bit format.
- Sony's PlayStation became available in North America and Europe in 1995.⁷⁶⁸ This is important because it changed how video games looked, supplying more advanced 32-bit graphics from the standard 16-bit.
- This affected the way that all computer-generated images looked affecting how humans were depicted in digital spheres, rendering their bodies from flat, two-dimensional images to three-dimensional, detailed forms. The fictional character Lara Croft became the most successful heroine in video game history with the British game developer Core Design's *Tomb Raider* franchise.⁷⁶⁹ Lara Croft was created by developer Toby Gard and (from 2010) holds a total of six Guinness World Record titles, including 'Most Recognizable Female Character in a Video Game', 'Most Detailed Video

⁷⁶⁷ Harry McCracken, 'A Brief History of Windows Sales Figures, 1985-Present', *Time*, 7 May 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250311204424/https://techland.time.com/2013/05/07/a-brief-history-of-windows-sales-figures-1985-present/>.

⁷⁶⁸ It was first released on December 3, 1994, in Japan.

⁷⁶⁹ Released on October 25, 1996; Games Industry International, 'Guinness World Records 2010 Gamers Edition', GamesIndustry.biz, 21 January 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308130750/https://www.gamesindustry.biz/guinness-world-records-2010-gamers-edition-lara-croft-secures-six-records-including-most-detailed-video-game-character>.

Game Character', and 'Most Magazine Covers for a Videogame Character.'⁷⁷⁰

The significance of Lara Croft is that she was made with the intention to disrupt the narrative of video game history, in an age where male action figures dominated the gaming market.⁷⁷¹ Her avatar had been meticulously sketched and designed for years, inspired by Gards' younger sister Frances.⁷⁷² Croft's character was initially developed to be an empowered and intelligent action hero, but she soon became a sexualised icon and made a lot of money. As a result, her proportions changed, she was a sex symbol that had enlarged breasts, a cinched waist, and overtly 'feminine' features. Gard criticized that his design had been re-shaped by a cis-hetero male fantasy.⁷⁷³ The visual tropes of hyper- femininity such as enlarged breasts can be identified in the production of tart card imagery. The fixation on the breasts, the proportions, and the bodily measurements included on the cards mirror what was happening in pop culture.

- Windows NT 4.0 operating system upgraded to 32bit in 1996.
- Microsoft Word 6.0. was the first version of Word (released in 1996) that featured 82 pre-installed, non- copyrighted, ClipArt graphics via Windows

⁷⁷⁰ 'Guinness World Records Honors Tomb Raider for "Most Magazine Covers For A Video Game Character" and "Largest Gathering Of People Dressed As Lara Croft"', Square Enix Press Hub, 31 October 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20241008002343/https://press.uk.square-enix.com/Guinness-World-Records-honors-Tomb-Raider-for-Most-Magazine-Covers-For>.

⁷⁷¹ Johnny Davis, 'Toby Gard: Let the Battle Begin', The Independent, 17 April 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308145915/https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/toby-gard-let-the-battle-begin-559868.html>.

⁷⁷² Artura Dawn, 'A Story About Lara Croft's Development History', GameGrin, 23 October 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308150317/https://www.gamegrin.com/articles/a-story-about-lara-crofts-development-history/>.

⁷⁷³ Maja Mikula, 'Gender and Videogames: The Political Valency of Lara Croft', *Continuum* 17, no. 1 (1 March 2003): 79–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1030431022000049038>. p.79

Meta File (WMF).⁷⁷⁴ In future releases, the number of graphics available would rise to an extensive selection of over 140,000 images before Microsoft closed their ClipArt library in December 2014.⁷⁷⁵

- 1996 was also significant due to the rise of internet use, in April of that year, Jennifer Kaye Ringley installed her first webcam in her college dorm, for her website JenniCam.⁷⁷⁶
- The American personal advertising website Craigslist launched at this time, and Yell.com's UK search engine came to fruition.
- Sergey Brin and Larry Page developed the Google search engine at Stanford University, although it was not readily available until 1998 later becoming the mainstream in 2000.
- Adobe Photoshop 4.0 was released in November 1996.
- The American personal advertising website Craigslist launched at this time, and Yell.com's UK search engine came to fruition.
- In 1996 home colour printers were becoming more readily available and were priced between £150 and £350 but mono printers were much more common as they cost considerably less.⁷⁷⁷

⁷⁷⁴ Tim Biggs, 'Microsoft Clip Art Is Dead as Bing Takes over Office Image Duties', *The Age*, 2 December 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308122811/https://www.theage.com.au/technology/microsoft-clip-art-is-dead-as-bing-takes-over-office-image-duties-20141202-11yaoz.html>.

⁷⁷⁵ Megan Garber, 'A Eulogy to Clip Art, in Clip Art', *The Atlantic*, 2 December 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250308154316/https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/12/a-eulogy-to-clipart-in-clipart/383322/>.

⁷⁷⁶ Jones, *Camming*. p.50

⁷⁷⁷ Issuu, 'Argos Superstore 1996 Spring/Summer'. p.533

- Sergey Brin and Larry Page developed the Google search engine at Stanford University, although it was not readily available until 1998 later becoming the mainstream in 2000.
- The digital landscape changed in 1997 when DVDs were released and MP3 players took over from Discman players.
- Grand Theft Auto was released on October 21, 1997, by DMA Design. The player is required to rig a limousine full of explosives and kill a stripper in 'Vice City' Chapter 1: Bent Cop Blues East Vice Beach Phone Missions/ Phone 2 – "Kill the stripper associated with the Rastas."⁷⁷⁸ You must blow up the stripper to complete the mission and progress further in the game.
- Windows 98 (June 25, 1998) was not as well received as its precursor 95.
- The iMac released without a floppy disk drive in 1998
- Disc Operating Systems (DOS): CDs could hold much more data than floppy disks and this shift meant that software packages were being designed with a catalogue of ClipArt libraries.
- Victoria's Secret fashion show became the first major webcast on the Internet attracting over 1.5 million visitors on February 5, 1999.
- Blackberry was released on January 19, 1999.
- Adobe Photoshop 5.5 was released in February 1999.
- Adobe InDesign was introduced on August 31, 1999. (Most popular for print).

⁷⁷⁸ 'Bent Cop Blues - Phone 2', GTA Wiki, 20 July 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20250308160158/https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Bent_Cop_Blues_-_Phone_2.

- Grand Theft Auto 2 was released in October 1999 by DMA Design.
- SMS messages widely available 1999 (The first Short Message Service or text message was sent by software programmer, Neil Papworth on 3 December 1992, but was not widely used until 1999.⁷⁷⁹
- “In 1999 one mobile phone was sold in the UK every 4 seconds.”⁷⁸⁰
- The Home Secretary, Jack Straw proposed banning tart cards in 1999.

⁷⁷⁹ ‘25 Years since the World’s First Text Message’, Vodafone.com, accessed 3 September 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250309124214/https://www.vodafone.com/news/technology/25-anniversary-text-message>.

⁷⁸⁰ Richard Wray, ‘In Just 25 Years, the Mobile Phone Has Transformed the Way We Communicate’, *The Guardian*, 1 January 2010, sec. Business, <https://webcf.waybackmachine.org/web/20250309122209/https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/jan/01/25-years-phones-transform-communication>.