# Internet fuels virtual subculture for sex trade, study finds

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Thomas Holt, assistant professor of criminal justice at Michigan State University, says the Internet has spawned a virtual subculture of "johns" who share information electronically about prostitution. Credit: Michigan State University

The Internet has spawned a virtual subculture of "johns" who share information electronically about prostitution, potentially making them harder to catch, according to a new study co-authored by a Michigan State University criminologist.

The research by MSU's Thomas Holt and Kristie Blevins of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte challenges the common perception that sex customers act alone and do not interact for fear of reprisal or scorn. The study appears in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

Holt, assistant professor of criminal justice, said today's Web-savvy johns use the Internet to solicit prostitutes and to provide each other with warnings of prostitution hot zones and stings, which can hamper the efforts of law enforcement officials.

But the more police become familiar the johns' Web activities, the more it can help them zero in on the perpetrators, Holt added.

"The growth of these deviant subcultures has made it more difficult for law enforcement," said Holt, who has helped police devise prostitution stings. "On the other hand, it gives us a new opportunity to use the way the offenders communicate to better target their activities."

The study analyzed prostitution Web forums in 10 U.S. cities with the highest rates of prostitution arrests: Atlanta; Baltimore; Chicago; Dayton, Ohio; Elizabeth, N.J.; Forth Worth, Texas; Hartford, Conn.; Inglewood, Calif.; Las Vegas; and Memphis, Tenn.

In the Web forums, the johns provide detailed information on the location of sexual services on the streets and indoors, as well as ways to identify specific providers, information on costs and personal experiences with providers.

The open nature of the forums led the johns to carefully disguise their discussions with a unique language, or argot, based largely on code and acronyms. This argot may help johns and sex workers to avoid legal sanctions and any social stigma associated with participating in the sex trade, the researchers said.

The study also said the johns place significant value on the notion that paid sexual encounters are normal and nondeviant. "These Internet communities help these individuals justify their behavior," Holt said.

In addition, the study found that the johns, in their Internet exchanges, generally perceive prostitutes as commodities rather than people.

Source: Michigan State University (news : web)

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