

## ARTICLE

# The body as commodity: A study in Belo Horizonte's low-end prostitution zone

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### Abstract

This study aims to identify and analyze the exchange relationships and commercial dynamics surrounding the body and its symbolic transformation within a low-end prostitution zone in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The conceptual framework addresses two main themes: first, the consumption of the body as a commodity; second, the notions of price, value, and exchange in the context of prostitution. The qualitative research involved 39 in-depth interviews, with the data analyzed through discourse analysis, resulting in two overarching discourses: *social precariousness and productive efficiency*. The former facilitates the commodification of the prostitute's body, sold at negotiable prices depending on additional services, much like any other product. However, price differs from value, which is personal and laden with symbolism. Visual, auditory, and tactile elements, whether related to the body itself or taboo objects, play a role in this market, where negotiation and purchase precede consumption, implying temporary use and disposal.

**Keywords:** Body. Commodity. Prostitution.

### *O corpo como mercadoria: um estudo no baixo meretrício de Belo Horizonte*

#### Resumo

O presente estudo tem como objetivo identificar e analisar as relações de troca e comércio do corpo e sua transformação simbólica numa zona de baixo meretrício da cidade de Belo Horizonte. As referências conceituais abarcam 2 tópicos: de um lado, consumo e corpo consumido; de outro, preço, valor e troca no contexto da prostituição. A pesquisa de campo, de natureza qualitativa, contou com 39 entrevistas em profundidade, cujos dados foram submetidos à análise do discurso, pela qual se chegou a 2 interdiscursos: precariedade social e eficiência produtiva. O primeiro promove e facilita a transformação do corpo da prostituta em mercadoria, sendo vendido a preços negociáveis, dependendo dos serviços adicionais incluídos no programa, como qualquer outro produto, porém considerando que o preço difere do valor – este, individual e carregado de simbolismos. Apelos visuais, auditivos e táteis relativos ao produto, quer pelo próprio corpo, quer por objetos tabus, se mostram úteis nesse comércio, em que a negociação e a efetivação da compra precedem o consumo, implicando um descarte de caráter temporário.

**Palavras-chave:** Corpo. Mercadoria. Prostituição.

### *El cuerpo como mercancía: un estudio en un barrio de meretrices de Belo Horizonte*

#### Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es identificar y analizar las relaciones de intercambio y comercio del cuerpo y su transformación simbólica en una zona de prostitución de la ciudad de Belo Horizonte. Las referencias conceptuales abarcan 2 temas: por un lado, el consumo y el cuerpo consumido; por otro, el precio, el valor y el intercambio en el contexto de la prostitución. La investigación cualitativa de campo incluyó 39 entrevistas en profundidad, cuyos datos se sometieron al análisis del discurso, dando lugar a dos interdiscursos: la precariedad social y la eficiencia productiva. El primero promueve y facilita la transformación del cuerpo de la prostituta en una mercancía, vendida a precios negociables, dependiendo de los servicios adicionales incluidos en el programa, como cualquier otro producto, pero considerando que el precio difiere del valor –este, individual y lleno de simbolismo–. Los atractivos visuales, auditivos y táctiles relacionados con el producto, ya sea a través del propio cuerpo o de objetos tabú, son útiles en este comercio, en el que la negociación y la compra propiamente dicha preceden al consumo, lo que implica una disposición temporal.

**Palabras clave:** Cuerpo. Mercancía. Prostitución.

## INTRODUCTION

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The triad of trade, markets, and exchange has been a central element in most societies since ancient times, regardless of their economic development. Studies on trade span multiple disciplines, including economics, sociology, anthropology, and marketing. Particularly in the field of marketing, these topics take on diverse aspects and dimensions, addressing various objects of analysis.

This article aims to explore perspectives related to the trade of the body. Indeed, the literature presents several studies examining the body as an object of desire, such as in plastic surgery, where the body is shaped to meet socially constructed ideals of beauty (Crockett, Pruzinsky, & Persing, 2007; Leem, 2016). The body also serves as a marker of social identity (Pereira & Ayrosa, 2012), symbolizes belonging to a particular group (Medeiros et al., 2010), and provides sexual satisfaction in exchange for money (Russo, 2007).

Several studies have explored the body as a work tool in relation to prostitution (Silva & Capelle, 2015; Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2016; Pereira et al., 2020), focusing on its objectification and the psychological, social, and legal implications of this process. However, the marketing aspects inherent in the sale of the body for sexual purposes remain underexplored (Cerqueira & Misoczky, 2021).

The body, as a symbolic artifact, can serve both as a visual space for individual identity construction (Schouten, 1991; Malysse, 2007) and as an object of negotiation in specific markets, where it is offered in exchange for monetary value (Le Betron, 2006). In the context of prostitution, particularly in low-end districts, the body is sold at pre-established, albeit negotiable prices (Paiva et al., 2020).

This trade modality, which is one of the world's oldest professions, has uncertain origins. Analyzing it solely in terms of the sale of sexual services is limiting, as it involves many factors beyond the borders of mere transactions (Meihy, 2015). Today, prostitution is widespread globally, and in Brazil, it is generally categorized into two distinct categories: luxury prostitutes and low-end prostitutes (Oliveira, Guimarães, & Ferreira, 2017). This study focuses on the latter.

Low-end prostitutes typically charge lower prices, perform quicker services, and find clients on city streets or in less upscale brothels. In both cases, these professionals aim to build customer loyalty, as it ensures a reliable source of income, which is significant given that activity in low-end brothels fluctuates throughout the month. One common strategy is to foster friendly relationships with clients to encourage referrals (França, 2007). Thus, ordinary marketing strategies can be identified in these practices, developed by the practitioners themselves and learned through experience over the course of their careers, generally without any prior training (França, 2007).

The city of Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais and one of Brazil's largest cities, is home to one of the country's most prominent prostitution and bohemian districts: The rua Guaicurus red-light district (Andrade & Teixeira, 2014). This area is a crucial marketplace for the exchange of sex for money, where the body is commodified. Known colloquially as the "up-and-down street," the term refers both to the sexual act and the constant flow of men frequenting the brothels, which are located on the upper floors of buildings, requiring customers to go up and down stairs to access them (Barreto & Prado, 2010). Although unconsciously, the prostitutes working in these environments adopt strategies for boosting their income and achieving a competitive edge, often with a marketing mindset.

Although many studies discuss exchange as a marketing phenomenon, the symbolic aspects of body consumption are more commonly explored within organizational studies, as highlighted by Shdaimah and Wiechelt (2012), Morcillo (2014), Ayuste et al. (2016), França (2017), Silva and Capelle (2017), Pereira et al. (2018), among others.

From a marketing perspective, Baudrillard (2008) argues that consumption operates as a class institution, with access to goods and services unequally distributed, reflecting the fetishistic logic of consumer ideology. Le Breton (2003), focusing specifically on the body, asserts that the body is not just a vessel for being; it is also malleable and can be shaped to construct one's personal identity. As an object of consumption, the body can be altered to become more advantageous to its owner (Le Breton, 2003; Baudrillard, 2008).

The concept of “symbolic consumption” pertains to the communication of social and individual identity (McCracken, 1988; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982) and is evident in non-rational behavior (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), various body languages (Le Breton, 2010), and, in the case of sex workers, in actions such as undressing, dancing, or feigning pleasure (Aranha, 2018). With these elements in mind, this study analyzes the exchange relationships and commercial dynamics surrounding the body, as well as its symbolic transformation, in a low-end prostitution zone in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

This analysis is particularly relevant as it addresses a gap in the literature on the symbolic commercialization of the body, specifically in the context of consensual sex in exchange for money, from a marketing perspective – particularly regarding competitiveness and customer loyalty. Additionally, this is a taboo topic in the literature. As Sabri, Manceau, and Pras (2010) note, while these themes are present in contemporary societies, there is limited marketing research on the consumption of these products or services, often due to legal, religious, or moral restrictions.

Pinto and Lara (2011) argue that the scarcity of studies on this subject, especially those adopting new perspectives, reflects not a lack of interest but rather a delayed effort to bring these issues to light using innovative approaches and research objects – a trend that has become more visible since the early 2000s. The authors contend that there are still gaps and challenges within the experiential and symbolic perspectives of consumption that need to be addressed in future research.

## CONSUMPTION AND THE BODY

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Consumption plays a significant role in shaping both individual and group identity (Belk, 1988), and its practice is intertwined with the social and symbolic aspects of specific groups with which individuals may seek to associate or distance themselves (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). It carries symbolic meanings that go beyond utilitarian purposes, turning the consumed object into what Baudrillard (2008) calls an “object-sign.” Therefore, its significance is not limited to its practical use but extends to its symbolic representation. In the context of men’s consumption of female prostitution, this can be linked to the broader social issue of male domination (Schotten, 2005; Federici, 2019). Schotten (2005) suggests that prostitution is symptomatic of various masculinities, even though it is often viewed as a form of female autonomy. Purchasing the services of a prostitute may reflect complex, socially constructed norms, such as societal views on what is permissible within marriage as a component of family life (Pereira et al., 2020). Thus, consumption is not just about the act of consuming but also about what is represented (Baudrillard, 2008).

Given that humans are inherently social beings, their consumption cannot be explained solely by the physical possession of goods (Douglas & Isherwood, 2009); there is a cultural dimension to consumption, which often reflects non-rational behavior influenced by the values – both emotional and utilitarian – that products and services embody (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991).

Since no purchasing decision is entirely rational (Carvalho, 2009), an emotional component must also be considered. Indeed, even routine or swift decisions related to pleasure and survival involve emotional evaluation. In prostitution, the pursuit of pleasure transcends mere survival and often incorporates experiential factors, such as a client’s prior relationship with a specific prostitute.

The consumption of sex remains taboo, and its practices are often influenced by socially constructed rules. Therefore, differentiation between competitors is frequently employed as a strategy to boost demand (Larsen et al., 2018). Desire, shaped by both positive and negative emotions, makes the visual aspect particularly important – especially in prostitution, where the intersection of bodily and emotional labor plays a significant role (Cerqueira & Misoczky, 2021).

Ultimately, the consumer’s choice remains sovereign, as consumption is not imposed (Douglas & Isherwood, 2009), even when the object of consumption is a body rather than an inanimate object. Paradoxically, the body itself may be treated as inanimate during consumption. As a commodity, it sheds traditional values related to family and culture, becoming something to be observed, desired, and consumed (Ortega, 2008; Federici, 2019). Consumption, therefore, reflects the relationship

between society and individuals, shaping identities, facilitating communication, and building communities. In this regard, it is an existentially rich and complex experience (Pinto & Batinga, 2018), not necessarily tied to materiality (Weingarten et al., 2022). The consumption of the body, or its transformation into an object, is situated in this context.

## PRICE, VALUE AND EXCHANGE IN THE CONTEXT OF PROSTITUTION

Prostitution can be understood through the lens of social exchange, where its existence presupposes an analysis of the cost-benefit ratio. Given its reciprocal nature, consensual sex always involves negotiation, which, in the case of prostitution, is centered on financial payment (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2016).

Money, as an institution, enables exchange and ensures the impersonal nature of relationships, reflecting preferences and possibilities (Simmel, 1994). Simultaneously, in financial transactions, the parties involved must understand the value attributed to the object of exchange. Prostitutes typically negotiate the price of their services in advance, determining limits on which parts of their bodies may be touched, the maximum duration of the encounter (the *programa* or “session”), and other rules they deem important (Nelson, Korgan, Izzo, & Bessen, 2019). Particularly regarding the third pillar – exchange – it presupposes the notion of ownership, which is associated with the number of things that can be appropriated, even when the object in question is someone else’s body, which, in turn, implies a condition of the body’s reification (Cavenacci, 2008). On the other hand, this negotiation may reflect the meaning the prostitute assigns to her work, balancing elements of intimacy and financial exchange (Rebonato et al., 2021).

Exchange is a fundamental human activity essential for the survival of individuals (Smith, 1996). It ranges from fulfilling basic physiological needs, such as food, to satisfying more hedonic desires. Since human beings are social by nature, and exchanges have existed since tribal communities, their evolution into formal and informal contracts in contemporary society is noteworthy (Douglas & Isherwood, 2009). In prostitution, the process of negotiation involves setting a price (Russo, 2007) and establishing the acceptable boundaries of the transaction – in this case, the use of the body for sexual purposes (França, 2017; Pereira et al., 2020).

The distinction between use value and exchange value is permeated by factors such as status, sentimental value, and symbolic value. Goods can be a means of signaling group membership, highlighting social differences, and transmitting messages, thus helping to shape and sustain social relations (Featherstone, 1995).

Regarding pricing strategies, Sheth and Koschmann (2018) argue that focusing solely on price competition is often disadvantageous for the parties taking part in the transaction. According to the authors, competing in environments of imperfect competition – where product differentiation, consumer preferences, and factors such as quality and convenience are taken into account – tends to be more beneficial.

While Bauman’s observations were not made specifically about the prostitution market, they apply to other consumption contexts, as the underlying rules of exchange remain the same. Indeed, the author points out, regardless of the market:

“First, the ultimate destination of all commodities offered for sale is their consumption by buyers [...] who will wish to obtain commodities for consumption if and only if consuming them promises gratification of their desires. [...] The price which the prospective consumer in search of gratification is prepared to pay for the commodities on offer will depend on the credibility of that promise and the intensity of those desires.” (2008, p. 18).

In this context, service providers aim to satisfy their customers, as satisfaction is often a precursor to loyalty, which is the ultimate goal. However, while satisfied customers tend to be more loyal, satisfaction alone does not determine loyalty. Factors such as price competition – which tends to be less advantageous – or product customization by competitors can also influence loyalty as new market entrants emerge (Oliver, 1999). Therefore, loyalty is considered the most valuable intangible asset a business can possess, as it provides a source of competitive advantage (Cossío-Silva et al., 2016), helping to avoid price wars, increase perceived value, and drive more exchanges.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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This study adopted an exploratory research design with a qualitative approach. This methodological choice was guided by the suitability of this approach to the phenomenon under investigation, considering the sociocultural characteristics and aiming for an in-depth analysis of the specific singularities and meanings involved (Mattos, 2011), particularly the commercialization of the body in the context of a low-end prostitution zone in Brazil.

Data collection involved 39 in-depth interviews with prostitutes working in the brothels of Rua Guaicurus, a low-tier red light district located in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. According to Devotta et al. (2016), in-depth interviews were chosen based on their capacity to allow participants the freedom to share their experiences and interpretations in detail. The interviewees in the research corpus were selected based on accessibility, and the interviews were conducted at their respective workplaces during working hours. It is worth highlighting that this decision was made with the understanding that spatial and temporal contexts significantly influence the work dynamics of individuals who face marginalization and stigma (Pereira, Paiva, & Irigaray, 2021).

Prior to the interviews, the research team conducted three observational visits to the brothels to better understand the daily dynamics of that locus. All observations were recorded in a field diary, as suggested by Falzon (2016). As for the methodological approach, the decision to conduct the interviews in the same rooms where the prostitutes provided their services allowed for a closer observation of the workplace dynamics and the relationships between the subjects and their work environments, further enriching the study. The interviews took place between January 2019 and March 2020 and were brought to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were addressed, and the purpose of the study was clearly explained to the participants (Silverman, 2016). All women willing to participate signed an Informed Consent Form (ICF). The women were identified using their respective *noms de guerre*, pseudonyms they use to conceal their real identities when interacting with clients. This approach was used to capture experiences that would contribute to the discussion of the phenomenon under study (Saunders & Townsend, 2018).

In total, the interviews generated approximately 114 hours of recorded material, resulting in over 1,500 pages of verbatim transcripts. For this study, a selection of the data was made, focusing on issues related to the symbolic commercialization of the body, as previously discussed. However, this research forms part of a broader agenda that aims to analyze labor relations within the context of low-end prostitution in Belo Horizonte.

After data collection, the discursive corpus was subjected to French discourse analysis. This method, which combines elements of linguistics, social sciences, and philosophy (Johnstone, 2016), enables the examination of language and discourse construction, considering its production process, the ideology that shapes it, and other varied analytical strategies. This approach allows for interpretive and reflective discourse analysis within a socially constructed reality (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2018) while also considering the symbolic aspects of language that generate meaning and significance for the participants (Pêcheux, 2014). During the data analysis process, two key semantic themes emerged from the interviewees' accounts: *social precariousness* and *productive efficiency*. These themes guided the initial phase of data analysis.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

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The 39 prostitutes interviewed ranged in age from 18 to 65. Of these, 31 identified as single, while eight reported being in some form of marital relationship. Additionally, 30 of the participants were originally from cities outside Minas Gerais and stated that they worked in the Guaicurus area primarily for personal and family survival. A common thread among them, despite slight variations in their personal life stories, is that they all come from economically precarious regions with inadequate infrastructure, where jobs are scarce and access to basic necessities is limited. From a young age, they became accustomed to living with a lack of basic goods and services essential for survival, such as inadequate nutrition, lack of basic sanitation, limited education, and poor levels of safety. When asked about their decision to enter prostitution, all of the respondents emphasized their desire to attain a more dignified social and financial position.



"You don't have much choice when you grow up hungry, witness your father's murder as a teenager, and have to work just to survive. Life has never been easy for me, my dear. I don't think it's been easy for anyone working here. No one would endure this kind of daily routine unless they had to." (Suellen)

"Only those who've never *starved* the way I have would bad mouth prostitutes. For me, this [job] was the light at the end of the tunnel. I had no other choice." (Tatiana Dalila)

These accounts reveal discursive patterns that highlight an overarching interdiscourse connected to the social precariousness experienced by a significant portion of the Brazilian population, particularly those living in peripheral regions. The italicized passages from the previous accounts reflect both a driving motivation and, at times, what is perceived as the only viable solution for the interviewees, who felt compelled to enter prostitution in low-income areas.

In this context, it is important to note that studies on prostitution, particularly low-end prostitution, often point out that prostitutes tend to emphasize adverse aspects of their life histories in their narratives, using these as justifications for entering an occupation that is socially and morally condemned (Barreto & Prado, 2010; Paiva et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020). This represents a form of discursive refraction, in which individuals reframe and reinterpret their life experiences in ways that shed light on certain aspects while leaving others in the shadows, depending on what is convenient for the speaker. It is not within our scope here to assess the truthfulness of these narratives, but as some studies have pointed out, this is only "one side of the story" (Olivar, 2012), and discourses that challenge this perspective are also relatively common.

"I come from a relatively stable family. Could I have had a different life? Yes, I could. But once you're in this line of work, *you start to enjoy the lifestyle* – the quick money." (Natasha)

"I left this place and worked as a domestic worker [for a while], but I came back because *I can't even come close to making the money [in that job] that I make here in a week*. Sometimes, in just two days here, I earn what used to take me a month as a housekeeper." (Carla)

It is essential to emphasize the agency of prostitutes – their ability to make decisions about their own lives – rather than always portraying them as mere victims of circumstance (Cohen et al., 2013). In this sense, sex workers can act as transgressors of perspectives that polarize various "phenomena pertaining to sex work between the extremes of necessity and abjection and professionalization and perversion" (Cerqueira & Misoczky, 2021). This phenomenon can be understood as a "double discursive effect," where sex work is rejected in two ways: on the one hand, through the discourse that commercialized sexuality is inauthentic and thus "normal" because it is transactional, and on the other hand, through the rejection of its organizational aspects, which render it illegitimate (Brewis & Linstead, 2000).

The red-light district of Rua Guaicurus, which is the locus of this research, currently contains over 40 brothels and more than 200 sex workers, underscoring the competitive nature of this environment.

"It's not easy here. There are so many girls you can't even imagine what we have to do to get clients. Some girls will do the whole session for just ten reais, and now they've even opened brothels for transvestites, which makes it worse. [...] We got to do crazier things every day just to make ends meet here." (Ana)

"The key here is to be sweet to the customers, to be a 'sweetheart.' One thing's for sure: *a man who goes to a whorehouse is always a man who goes to a whorehouse*, and if you treat them with affection, like *a little girl in love*, they get hooked. Some of them *come here every day to 'clock in' with me*." (Bianca)

These accounts introduce themes and figures that are still considered taboo in marketing studies despite their being common in contemporary society (Sabri, Manceau, & Pras, 2010). Since the income of the interviewees is directly tied to the number of sessions they perform, it can be inferred that by cultivating customer loyalty and making clients feel special, they are maximizing both their results and their earnings. In this context, strategies emerge that are comparable to traditional marketing principles, which, according to Baudrillard (2008), generate symbolic meaning around the sexual act.

Regarding the number of sessions performed in a typical working day, the interviewees reported completing between 35 and 45 sexual sessions daily. According to them, around the fifth day of each month – the usual payday for Brazilian workers – this number increases to approximately 80 sessions per day.

“I used to work in São Paulo. There, on a good day, I’d see about three customers, but here, I’ve seen up to *75 customers in one day*. That was my maximum. It’s exhausting, but we get paid well for the volume – it’s almost like *a production line, but with sex*.” (Michelle)

This excerpt highlights the interdiscourse of productive efficiency, which, in the specific context of prostitution, manifests as the effective and rapid delivery of sexual services. For the interviewees, this means that services must be provided quickly – captured in the recurrent expression “time is money,” as uttered by the participants – and effectively, meeting client expectations. The concept of “time is money” has been discussed in various management studies (Paiva et al., 2020). We must acknowledge a view of prostitution that moves beyond being purely exploitative or identity-destroying, allowing it to be considered within the framework of employment relations, where the commodification and individualization of the body come into play (Cerqueira & Misoczky, 2021). To achieve this, most of the women claim to employ specific tactics to ensure both efficiency and effectiveness in their work.

“Did you notice that in the hallways you can hear those girls all moaning? It’s because men can’t handle hearing that — they get there quickly. I bet none of those women are actually enjoying it.” (Vitoria)

“I practice pompoir on my clients. They can’t last three minutes. And the best part: they love it and keep coming back.” (Thamiris)

These excerpts illustrate some of the marketing strategies used, ultimately aimed at increasing profitability through satisfactory customer service. It is worth noting that marketing principles are applied in the realm of low-end prostitution, albeit in an informal, incipient, and unconscious manner. In this context, tactics like moaning and the practice of pompoir can be understood as techniques borrowed from service marketing. These approaches aim to personalize the service, striving to provide quality experiences and build customer loyalty (Oliver, 1999).

“You don’t know what a good hooker can do. I get paid to make men believe whatever they want. And usually, what they want most is to feel like they’re great. Some leave here thinking: ‘I’m the man,’ even though they’re not.” (Pink)

Sometimes, the provision of services intersects with patriarchal societal ideals, where men occupy a dominant role (Schotten, 2005). The very structure of the interviewee’s statements reveals that, from the perspective of most men, the consumption of the body in prostitution extends beyond a purely utilitarian sexual transaction. It is not simply a cold exchange of sex for money; instead, a logic of subordination is often imposed, where the woman is expected to provide pleasure to the man (Federici, 2019). These insights align with those of Paiva et al. (2020), who argue that while it is crucial to analyze the transactional nature of prostitution, reducing it solely to an exchange would be a mistake.

The price for a basic session typically ranges between ten and 50 reais for a basic service. However, the majority of the interviewees offer a broader range of services, specifically designed to meet the clients’ interests, as well as various fetishes, with prices negotiated in advance, depending on the services selected.

“My session includes three positions [...]: that’s ten reais. Want something else? I’ll do it, but it’ll cost extra. Whatever you want, I’ll do it, but you’ll pay for it.” (Karla)

This account highlights the commodification of the body, where there is a conscious strategy to strip the body of its symbolic aspects and transform it into a product that can be sold, even if only for a brief period. In the realm of prostitution, especially low-end prostitution, the body is often reduced to a commodity with both exchange and use value (Featherstone, 1995), as commercial interactions strip away any deeper or symbolic notions of the body.

“*Here, my body is nothing more than an object*. This is a market, just like a farmer’s market. Only here, it’s a *meat market – a body market*. They come in, and they want to touch it to see if the ‘meat’ is to their taste.” (Carol)

The choice of the Portuguese term *feira* ("market" or "fair") indicates the commercial nature of the relationships established within the brothels of the Guaicurus Street red-light district while also reflecting the ideological framework of the situation. In this context, the body in prostitution is viewed purely as a consumer good (Silva & Silva, 2017), through which the service provider seeks personal satisfaction (Russo, 2007) – one of the key factors contributing to the stigmatization of prostitutes in society (Pereira et al., 2020).

According to Baudrillard (2008), the consumption of a commodity, such as the body, often extends beyond utilitarian purposes, adopting a more visceral dimension where symbolic representations are deeply embedded. This phenomenon is reflected in the following accounts:

"I have a client who sometimes comes here and pays me 150 or 200 reais to use drugs on my body. He never has sex." (Ana)

"Some clients come here and ask me to stroke their heads *while they cry for hours*." (Malu)

"Around 25% of the men I see don't come here for sex. *They'll do everything else but have sex*." (Bruna)

In specific, though not uncommon, cases, the consumption of the body takes on a pathological dimension, revealing socially unacceptable practices and behaviors.

"Once, I was fulfilling a client's crazy fantasy. [...] I didn't want to do it, but when he offered me 150 reais, I agreed. In the middle of the whole thing, he said: 'Now pretend your mother has walked into the room.' I stopped right there and told him that was too much, that I wasn't going to do it. But then he offered me another 80 bucks. So I said, 'Fine, my mother can come into the room.'" (Sheila)

This interviewee's account reflects a social condition of discursive production, where the presence of taboo is evident in the established social norms (Larsen et al., 2018). As the body is consumed, it sheds traditional values tied to family and culture (Ortega, 2008). While this may seem paradoxical, the interviewee expresses feelings of anguish and revulsion at the client's request. However, in the context of a production-driven mindset focused on maximizing income, the request is ultimately fulfilled when additional payment is offered.

The analysis of consumer behavior, regardless of the service in question, is a crucial tool for understanding social reality (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). This excerpt, corroborated by other interviewees, contributes to an understanding of the niche to which low-end prostitution belongs, revealing aspects of both individual and group identity (Belk, 1988).

From another angle, there is a noticeable discursive refraction that reinterprets the simulation of a violent situation by infusing it with a comedic tone and reducing its emotional detachment. This discursive strategy echoes Schotten's (2005) view that purchasing a prostitute's services involves several socially constructed elements, such as the denial of certain sexual practices within marriage. Thus, in some cases, consumption in low-end prostitution zones extends beyond the commodity-body relationship, as consumer interactions are not just about the things consumed but also about their representations – in other words, a commodity-sign relationship (Baudrillard, 2008).

The re-signification of the consumption process emerges as a notable theme in the interviews. Many of the interviewees' rooms are filled with artifacts of great symbolic value in the context of prostitution, designed to reflect and heighten the fetishistic tendencies of a large portion of their clients. One example is the account of an interviewee who stated that the most valuable part of her room is a table displaying dildos strategically placed at the entrance to advertise the services available.

"This is the most valuable part of my room because, here in Belo Horizonte, a lot of my clients like to switch roles during sex. I leave this table full of toys right at the entrance because some of them are too embarrassed to ask if I offer those kinds of services. But when they see all the toys, they know I do. And you know what's interesting? They always start with this one [referring to the smallest toy] because it hurts, but they want to work up to this big one [referring to the largest toy]. But to get there, they have to go through them all, and each one has its own price. It starts at ten reais, then goes to 20, and eventually reaches 50. In this game, the session ends up being much more expensive." (India)



Marketing techniques are notably used to promote the services on offer, much like a shop window display that draws customers in with key items. It is intriguing to observe how props are strategically placed in the bedroom to appeal to men's fetishes, subtly indicating the provision of services that are still considered taboo among male clients. Through a strategy of discursive refraction, the message is conveyed without overtly challenging the client's masculinity or virility. From this perspective, analyzing the consumption of prostitution through the lens of a commodity-sign relationship (Baudrillard, 2008) ties it to socially accepted male behaviors (Schotten, 2005), particularly in consumer interactions.

This technique, along with others highlighted by the interviewees, can be understood as a source of competitive advantage. Price competition, especially in prostitution, tends not to be beneficial for service providers (Sheth & Koschmann, 2018), making differentiation and customer loyalty more effective strategies.

These marketing principles are central to the daily work of the interviewees despite none of them having formal management training. What we observe is a process of ordinary management, in which marketing practices are unconsciously integrated into their routines to set themselves apart from other service providers and retain clients.

"When I want to work, I undress and turn my back to the door. Then the man comes to the doorway and sees me. He walks in without a second thought." (Karla)

"When I really need money, I wear a very sexy outfit. I let the guys touch me, I shake hands with them at the door, and I say all sorts of things... Men can't resist that. Almost always, they'll come into the room when I do that. Once we're inside, I turn into a hurricane, an Oscar-winning actress." (Patrícia)

"Sometimes I play the *ingénue*, treating them like masters. My lord commands, and I obey. Men love that. They always come back." (Nanny)

These client-acquisition strategies reveal a process of differentiation of the body-sign-commodity in a market of imperfect competition shaped by the preferences of consumers (Sheth & Koschmann, 2018). We must consider that in prostitution, purchasing decisions are strongly driven by emotional factors, as clients' choices are often influenced by desire and pleasure, which go beyond basic survival needs (Carvalho, 2009; Cerqueira & Misoczky, 2021) and reflect experiential aspects of consumption.

It is also worth noting that the interviewees' focus on fulfilling their clients' more hedonic desires is noteworthy, as Cavenacci (2008) points out that commercial exchange presupposes ownership. In prostitution, the body is transformed into a commodity to fulfill the clients' desires and fetishes. From there, the provision of services becomes performative, aiming to satisfy these desires and foster client loyalty. This serves as a competitive advantage (Cossío-Silva et al., 2016), increasing the perceived value of the service and maximizing the number of sessions performed daily.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis in this study identified a discursive position among the prostitutes interviewed, reflecting a form of resistance to the hegemonic social discourse surrounding sex, which is heavily influenced by moral notions. This hegemonic discourse, in turn, stigmatizes sex work and extends even into academic circles, where topics related to prostitution, such as those discussed in marketing, are often considered taboo.

This subject is particularly intriguing because it involves relationship dynamics that affect both society and academia. Unlike other professions, where new workers undergo formal training, in prostitution, learning is isolated. Prostitutes rarely meet in collective environments. Instead, these spaces are typically private, involving only the service provider and the client from the very first session. Consequently, techniques that foster competition are often learned through experience in the environment rather than through conversations with peers.

The attempt to commodify the body and all its complexities is worth noting, as it becomes an item sold at negotiable prices depending on additional services offered, much like any product in a marketplace. Just as accessories increase the price of a given object, the more services added, the higher the cost. However, like any commodity, price is distinct from value, which remains individual and laden with symbolism.

The interviewees' accounts underscore the importance of visual appeal in attracting clients – whether through showcasing their bodies, which are viewed as more competitive than others, or by using visually provocative objects. Other heightened senses in this market are related to touch, especially when the professionals refer to the word *feira* (“fair” or “market”), evoking the idea of product commercialization, which is precisely how they feel when they are touched and to the sense of hearing, which is linked to the verbalizations made during sexual acts. These findings suggest new directions for future studies, focusing on sensory elements within the environments where the body is marketed.

One critical insight from the interviews is that, in the context of low-end prostitution, the market dynamic revolves around the price paid for the body, which can range from more refined to less refined services. A clear distinction between purchase and consumption also emerges – only after the body has been “bought” can it be consumed. This is a form of tacit rule: all negotiations take place beforehand. This mirrors traditional models of consumer behavior, where the purchase phase is distinct from the consumption phase. Indeed, in this prostitution market, different stages of the decision-making process – ranging from the search for the product to its consumption – are illuminated.

The analyses also reveal that the complex relationship between the commodity and the body goes beyond the marketing of tangible, easily recognizable attributes, likely because this form of consumption is imbued with symbolic meanings rooted in cultural constructs. The commodification of the body leads to the commercialization of professional identities, which are shaped and marketed according to client demand. This strategy not only helps prostitutes attract and retain clients, thereby increasing their earnings but also serves as an attempt to mitigate the impact of commodification on their personal identities. From this perspective, the commercialization of the body and sexual services blurs the boundaries of formal organization typically studied in marketing, challenging the limits of what can and cannot be publicly and legitimately commodified.

An important issue that arises is whether the final stage of the decision-making process – disposal – relates to the moment when the client leaves the room after consuming the purchased body. At that point, the prostitute is left waiting for the next client, as the consumer no longer desires the product. This appears to be a crucial question for, unlike studies in marketing that examine the proper disposal of products, in prostitution, the body is discarded but remains attached to a subject who continuously re-signifies herself. Indeed, this perspective invites further exploration, particularly in discussing the life stories of these women and the construction of their identities. It is worth highlighting that for these professionals, the present reflects the current conditions of the body, while the future, still unknown, brings with it the prospect of a body that will soon be considered too old for consumption. Investigating this theme could explore possible actions to delay the aging process of the body and further the understanding of the work's meaning for these individuals.

There is, therefore, ample room for reflection on the consumption of prostitution in the contemporary world. Although it falls beyond the scope of this study, it is likely that the commodified body is in constant flux, adapting to the demands of each era – whether through changing styles of dress (or undress), the language used, or the physical appearance itself, which could be of interest for future research.

As a focus for future studies, new forms of body consumption and their implications could be examined, particularly those involving virtual environments, artificial intelligence, and the metaverse.

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**Caissa Veloso e Sousa:** Conceptualization (Lead); Data curation (Supporting); Formal analysis (Supporting); Validation (Supporting); Writing – original draft (Lead).

#### DATA AVAILABILITY

The entire dataset supporting the results of this study is available upon request from the corresponding author, Jefferson Rodrigues Pereira. The dataset is not publicly available as it contains information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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