

THE FANTASY OF MASCULINITY  
A STUDY OF MASCULINITY IN STRIP CLUBS ACROSS THREE MIDWESTERN  
METROPOLITAN AREAS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation interrogates the relationship between sex work and masculinity. The project was guided by the following question: how do female strippers and male customers (co-)construct and negotiate masculinities in strip clubs across three Midwestern metropolitan areas? Based on this question and 13 months of ethnographic field work, I make three main arguments.

First, I contend that the role of strippers is far from limited to providing opportunities for sexual arousal through physical stimulation or voyeurism. Through a range of interactional labor practices, strippers fulfill the emotional needs of male patrons and facilitate emotional expression, often concerning that which can compromise their masculinity. However, because these interactions are situated within the hypersexualized, masculinized environment of a strip club, male customers are shielded from the fear of being ‘insufficiently’ masculine or failing to adhere to masculine ideals.

Second, I argue that much of strippers’ labor revolves around productions of gender, wherein strippers enable and amplify male customers’ enactments of idealized masculinities. Furthermore, I contend that the fantasy customers seek within strip clubs is not necessarily or exclusively sexual; rather, it is a fantasy of *masculinity*, which compensates for customers’ perceived inadequacies in their masculinity and projects onto the customer an idealized masculine self which can never be realized across all dimensions of patron’s life. Thus, stripping is simultaneously a product and producer of masculinity.

Third, I maintain that male customers participate in the (co-)construction of gender by assuming a range of roles in relation to strippers, which are differentially experienced on the basis of class and enable customers to project an idealized masculine self. Thus, dominant

masculinities are sustained and enacted in classed ways through the vehicle of sex work. Within these roles, customers engage in manhood acts which are often seemingly innocuous or kind, though they function to claim gender power and privilege for the actor. In sum, strip clubs serve as critical sites of gender negotiation, wherein male customers meet the demands of masculinity and cope with the pressure it exerts.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: MASCULINITY IN STRIP CLUBS

There were 3,862 strip clubs in the United States as of 2019, employing 57,130 people. According to IBISWorld (2019), the strip club industry's annual revenue is projected to reach \$8.0 billion by 2024, with the number of employees climbing to 60,272 by 2023.<sup>1</sup> Though the industry has changed in recent years (IBISWorld 2019), it is clear that strip clubs are here to stay, offering "entertainment" that customers, particularly men, are eager to experience.

Strip clubs have captivated the public's imagination for decades, as evidenced by movies such as *Flashdance*, *Showgirls*, and *Hustlers* and songs including T-Pain's "I'm N Luv (Wit a Stripper)," Juicy J's "Bandz A Make Her Dance," Beyoncé's "6 Inch," and more. In the general population, the fact that (primarily) men patronize strip clubs has seemingly been taken at face value, as a matter of men's purportedly vast sexual appetites. When asking customers why they visited strip clubs, many echoed these prevailing understandings of men's interest in strip clubs (e.g., "I like girls; I go there, I look at them," "You go to see boobs"); notably, most customers I spoke at length with were able to push beyond these highly simplistic explanations. In sex work scholarship, strippers have long been the subject of academic inquiry; however, far less attention has been paid to those who consume this erotic labor and in large part sustain the industry – male customers. This imbalance in the literature seemingly reflects the fact that men's visits to strip clubs have been uncritically "taken as an expression of some natural male sexuality" (Frank 2002: 2). Undercutting the assumption that male patronage of strip clubs is simple and straightforward, this research interrogates the relationship between male customers, masculinity, and the labor of female strippers.

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<sup>1</sup> The global covid-19 pandemic will undoubtedly affect the industry outlook.

## *Research Question and Outline of the Dissertation*

Put another way, the guiding research question for this project is as follows: how do female strippers and male customers (co-)construct and negotiate masculinities in strip clubs across three Midwestern metropolitan areas? Based on this question and 13 months of qualitative field work, I make three main arguments (presented in the findings chapters, 4-6).

In the following chapter (Chapter 2), I provide a review of relevant literature, primarily that which concerns sex work and/or masculinities. By doing so, I highlight the space in which I make an academic contribution. In Chapter 3, I start by providing brief descriptions of the metropolitan areas in which I conduct my research as well as examples of what bottom-, middle-, and top-tier strip clubs look like. I then describe my data, methods, and approach to data collection and analysis.

In Chapter 4, the first substantive chapter, I highlight the scope and significance of strippers' labor. The role of strippers is commonly narrowly defined in sex work literature as strictly providing an opportunity for sexual gratification and voyeurism (e.g., Deshotels & Forsyth 2006; Enck and Preston 1988; Schweitzer 2001). However, I contend that a key component of strippers' labor is cultivating a "safe space" in which men can find human connection and expose their insecurities. Through a variety of interactional labor practices, strippers foster intimacy with and provide an emotional outlet for male patrons. Oftentimes, adherence to the ideals of masculinity impedes men's ability to freely express their emotions because emotions have been associated with femininity (Ahmed 2004) and weakness (Seidler 1999). However, because these exchanges occur within the hypersexualized, masculinized setting of a strip club, male customers are shielded from the fear of being perceived, by

themselves or others, as feminine or insufficiently masculine; in other words, the strip club environment ensures the relative “safety” of customers’ masculinities.

Chapter 5 builds on the idea that strippers’ labor goes beyond sexually stimulating customers and further fuels the argument that sex work is just as much about gender as it is about sex, if not more (Allison 1994; Frank 2002; Hoang 2015; Price-Glynn 2010; Schotten 2005; Wood 2000). In this chapter, I contend that the (co-)construction and negotiation of masculinity with male customers is a defining feature of strippers’ labor. More specifically, much of strippers’ labor revolves around enabling and amplifying male customers’ enactments of idealized masculinities. In doing so, strippers help create a ‘fantasy’ of masculinity for their customer, wherein they compensate for the customer’s perceived inadequacies in his masculinity and project onto him an idealized masculine self which cannot be permanently embodied. Thus, stripping is simultaneously a product and producer of masculinity; it is a response to the “anxious masculinities” (Schotten 2002: 215) of the male consumers who sustain the industry as much as it is a vehicle for the negotiation of those masculinities.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus primarily on the form and function of female strippers’ labor in relation to their male customers. Chapter 6, however, shifts focus to the role of customers in (co-)constructing their masculinity. In this chapter, I highlight not only the diversity of patrons’ gendered performances, but how the enactment of these masculine roles and the meanings associated with them vary depending the customer’s socioeconomic position. The behaviors and attitudes of patrons outlined in this chapter also illustrate how seemingly innocuous or kind manhood acts help sustain masculine privilege across socioeconomic lines. In sum, I contend that strip clubs serve as critical sites of gender negotiation, wherein male customers perform idealized masculinities with the aid of strippers’ labor and the resources of their class position.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I review the major findings of the dissertation and consider the implications of these findings for sex work and masculinities scholarship. This research undermines sex work theories which portray female sex workers as patriarchal pawns and locate power exclusively in the hands of male customers. These essentialist discourses fuel the stigma surrounding sex work, which helps sustain unsafe work environments for persons who sell their erotic labor (Willman 2010). In addition, this dissertation underscores the extent to which men rely on women's labor to assuage their "anxious masculinities" (Schotten 2002: 2015) and further fuels the argument that sex work is very much about gender. Finally, this research interrogates how dominant masculinities are sustained and enacted in classed ways through the vehicle of sex work. To end, I make recommendations for future research on online forms of sex work.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews scholarly literature on sex work and masculinity, highlighting three gaps in the literature. First, much of sex work research draws upon deficit-based understandings of sex work and workers and anti-sex work theories, which undermine the agency of sex workers and the validity of positive, pleasurable, or empowering sex worker experience. Historically, sex work has been considered a deviant occupation (Thompson & Harred 1992; McCaghy & Skipper 1969; Wood 2000), while sex workers have been characterized as unstable personalities (Greenwald 1970; Skeen 1991), drug users (Cusicki & Hickman 2005; Green, Day, & Ward 2000; Lavin 2014), victims of physical and sexual violence (Barnard 1993; Church et al. 2001; Farley & Barkan 1998; Romans et al. 2001; Simons & Whitbeck 1991), and carriers of sexually transmitted infections (Self 2003), involved in unhealthy romantic relationships (Bradley-Engen & Hobbs 2013) and plagued by mental illness (Chudakov et al. 2002; Roxburgh, Degenhardt, & Copeland 2006). Literature of this sort fuels assumptions that sex-work is inherently dangerous or damaging to sex workers and that sex workers are universally, equally, and unequivocally victimized by their gender and profession. This is not to say that individual sex workers have not struggled with drug or alcohol addiction, contracted an STI, endured violence at the hands of an intimate partner, client, or law enforcement officer, etc. However, deficit-based understandings of sex work and workers derived from data regarding the alleged depravities and deficiencies of sex workers bolster and inspire anti-sex work theories. Anti-sex work theories proliferated during the “sex wars” of the early to late 1980’s; in this tradition, sex workers were cast as victims of a patriarchal and oppressive order and sex work regarded as an industry which is

distinct in preservation of gender inequities (Barry 1984; Dworkin 1981; MacKinnon 1989, 1993; Radin 1987; Pateman 1988; Overall 1992; Satz 1995). Though less prevalent today, anti-sex work sentiments are assuredly not absent from academic discourses. Oftentimes, they are simply more covert.

This research will advance theories of sex work beyond “individualistic explanations of deviance and psychopathology” (Frank 2002: 2) and beyond discourses which deny agentic power, pleasure, and dignity to female sex workers; these discourses fuel the stigma surrounding sex work which, in part, sustains the unsafe work environments individual sex workers encounter (Willman 2010). Furthermore, I intend for this research to undermine theories of sex work which locate power and influence exclusively in the hands of male customers and further scholarly understanding of female sex work as legitimate work.

Second, the role of sex workers in relation to their customers is frequently narrowly defined in social scientific literature as merely providing an opportunity for sexual arousal through physical stimulation or voyeurism (e.g., Deshotels & Forsyth 2006; Enck and Preston 1988; Schweitzer 2001). And yet, multiple studies have confirmed that not all men patronize sex workers seeking only sexual gratification and/or a voyeuristic experience (Allison 1994; Birch, Baldry, & Hartley 2017; Frank 1998, 2002; Hoang 2015; Huysamen & Boonzaier 2015; Milrod & Weitzer 2012; Wardlow 2004; Wood 2000). In fact, a number of researchers have argued that sex work is just as much about gender as it is about sex, if not more (Allison 1994; Frank 2002; Hoang 2015; Price-Glynn 2010; Schotten 2005; Wood 2000). If sex work is a “symptom or function of various masculinities” (Schotten 2005: 213), then sex work research ought to interrogate masculinity, and its relation to the practices of sex workers, including strippers. However, few scholars have explored how sex workers participate in productions of gender

(Frank 2002; Hoang 2015). Through this research, I delineate how expansive the role of stripper is; more specifically, I highlight the ways in which strippers facilitate the construction of idealized masculinities among customers and enable customers to full their emotional needs without compromising their masculinity.

Third, strip club research most often addresses the attitudes and behaviors of strippers, not customers. Several researchers (Allison 1994; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Frank 2002, Hoang 2015; Price-Glynn 2010) have identified interactional patterns among customers; however, there is much yet to be learned about how customers manage their self-presentation in strip clubs, specifically the roles they assume in relation to strippers. Through this research, I highlight the diversity of patrons' gendered performances and how the enactment of these masculine roles and the meanings associated with them may vary depending upon a customer's socioeconomic position.

### *Defining Terms*

A sex worker is one who sells their erotic labor for monetary or material gain (Leigh 1997). I employ the term sex worker for a number of reasons; aside from its growing popularity in academia, the term implies commonality between sex workers and other laborers, emphasizes that sex work is indeed *work*, and allows for variability in the particulars of the erotic labor sold. I theorize strip clubs as touristic sites and masculinized entertainment (Frank 2002). Although gender is often thought to originate in biological differences, "Male and female bodies do not automatically result in socially meaningful 'men' or 'women,'" (Nagel 2000, p. 114). According to Butler (1999), gender is accomplished through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, or a natural sort

of being” (p. 43). Thus, gender is understood not as a state of being but as a practice (Butler 2004).

Masculinity “is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (Connell 1995: 71). Individuals of all sexes may “embody in different ways and to different degrees” the “configuration of practices and discourses” which comprise masculinity (Pascoe 2007: 5). Masculinity is a relational construct, emerging through and experienced within social interaction (Connell 1995, 2000) and situated within social and historical configurations of power (Kimmel 1997), both “temporally and geographically contingent...unstable, [and] contested” (Berg & Longhurst 2003: 352).

Masculinity is generally ascribed to persons with male bodies; however, masculinity exists not only in the domain of men. Masculinity is not a finite list of attributes and activities enacted by male bodies. Masculinity is enacted in diverse forms and accomplished through and within female, male, and intersex bodies. As Pascoe (2007) suggests, “Defining masculinity as ‘what men do’ reifies biologized categories of male and female that are problematic and not necessarily discrete categories to begin with” (p. 7). In the case of strip clubs, certainly not all customers identify as men; thus, I do not equate maleness to customer status. However, I expect a vast majority of female strip club customers to identify as men and to enact practices and discourses associated with masculinity. Still, I do not expect the masculinities of customers to be homogenous. Masculinizing practices are “practices that are governed by a gender regime, are embedded in social relations, and work to produce masculinities in particular settings and by certain institutions” (Connell 2000, as cited in Frank 2002: 20). Notably, to suggest that a

practice is masculinizing is not to suggest that the practice is not unproblematic or inevitably produces an enduring subjectivity (Frank 2002).

Connell (1995) theorizes not a unitary masculinity, but multiple masculinities which respond to individual ability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, race, national origin, etc. Hegemonic masculinity, according to Connell, is the amalgamation of “gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 1995: 77). Hegemonic masculinity is an ideal type, not fully or necessarily embodied by any one person. It is the “currently most honored way of being a man, [which] requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 832); in other words, hegemonic masculinity provides the yardstick by which performances of manhood are judged. Hegemonic masculinity is not static, but variable and contestable, dependent upon sociocultural and historical context. Connell (1995) identified subordinate, complicit, and marginal masculinities as configurations of gender practices which exist in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Connell’s theory of masculinity has received its fair share of criticism.

Moller (2007) and Horschelman and van Hoven (2004) contend that Connell’s theory lends itself to oversimplification or the tendency to neglect specificities in constructions and presentations of masculinity. According to Moller (2007), scholars too easily misinterpret Connell’s theory as a typology of masculinities classified by a fixed set of attributes. Masculinities are not only mutable and wildly diverse, but hierarchies of masculinities may not be as distinctive or decipherable as Connell would suggest. According to Schrock & Schwalbe (2009), the concept of multiple masculinities, which grew out of the theory of hegemonic

masculinity, is useful in that it “sensitizes us to differences and inequalities among groups of men” (p. 280); however, it has also encouraged scholars to endlessly catalogue masculinities (e.g., Black masculinity, working-class masculinity, gay masculinity, etc.), and in so doing, obscures what these gendered performances have in common: manhood acts.

According to Schrock & Schwalbe (2009), signifying membership in the dominant gender group necessitates putting on a manhood act. This task is aided by being male-bodied due to the association between maleness and manhood; however, having been assigned male at birth is not a sufficient or necessary condition to establish credibility as a man. Of course, what is constructed as masculine varies historically and cross-culturally; moreover, the ways in which one signifies a masculine self may vary depending upon the actor’s social position, the resources available to them, and the circumstances of their interaction.

Schrock & Schwalbe (2009) propose three fundamental features of manhood acts, which include: “(a) differentiation from women and femininity, (b) signifying a capacity to assert control, and (c) demonstrating resistance to being controlled” (Morris & Ratajczak 2019: 1991). Through this identity work, individuals claim gender power and privilege and reproduce gender-based inequalities, be that intentionally or unintentionally. The theory of manhood acts places emphasis on the practices and processes through which males construct the category “men” and themselves as its members, shifting focus from static categories of masculinities. In addition, the perspective is arguably less abstract than hegemonic masculinity, centering on “what men actually do in everyday life” (Morris & Ratajczak 2019: 1991). Further, the perspective addresses the ““Why should we care?” question of gendered practice generally and masculine practice in particular” (Moloney & Love 2018: 605) by highlighting the role of these interactive strategies in the reproduction of inequality. The theory of manhood acts is particularly suited to

an exploration of how male customers construct and negotiate masculinity in interaction with female strippers.

Sexuality will hereafter be conceptualized as “multifaceted: involving social and personal constellations of identities (who or what people think and say they are), ideologies and fantasies (beliefs about what sex is and means), and practices and prohibitions (what people actually do with their body parts)” (Frank 2002: 22). Sexuality goes beyond sexual identity and sexual activity, but “encompasses a range of meanings associated with these acts and identities” (Pascoe 2007: 10). Sexual meanings are produced through and regulated by cultural and political formations (Pascoe 2007; Egan 2006), vary depending upon one’s social location (Mahay, Laumann, & Michaels 2005), and may be more significant than sexual acts themselves (Weeks 1996). Notably, a female sex worker’s occupational activities are not necessarily reflective of her sexuality. Sex workers are not necessarily complicit with hegemonic constructions of sexuality; in fact, sex work may even be a site of resistance for marginalized sexual identities and practices (Califia 1994). Similarly, we cannot necessarily infer the sexual identity of persons who visit strip clubs.

### *Sex Work Theory and Literature*

Anti-sex work discourses proliferated during the “sex wars” of the 1980’s; undercurrents of these discourses still pervade sex work literature today. Anti-sex work discourses are generally identified with radical feminism, though some have coined alternative designations; for clarity’s sake, I will refer to these discourses in the most unambiguous way possible - as being anti-sex work. During the sex wars, activists and scholars entrenched in anti-sex work discourses characterized the industry as uniquely positioned to uphold and perpetuate gender inequities within a patriarchal order. Pateman (1988) maintained that sex work affirms and sustains the

original sexual contact, which entitled men to women's bodies through a system of property rights. Consequently, men retain mastery over female sexuality through sex work. Thus, according to Pateman, sex work is both a consequence and cause of patriarchal capitalism. According to Satz (1995), sexual/sexually related services are not available to women as they are to men; therefore, Satz concluded that due to a lack of reciprocity in the sex industry, sex work inevitably perpetuates gender inequalities, including ideals of female subordination and female sexuality. Deshotels, Tinney, and Forsyth (2012) submitted that female strippers or exotic dancers are uniquely responsible for sustaining oppressive gender ideologies and economic relations which harm all women: "dancers recreate the normative definition that women earn economic support in the bodily service of men" (p. 146). Relatedly, St. James (1987) maintained that sex work stalls women's progress towards equal rights.

Scholars of the sex wars often characterized sex work as inherently and irrevocably oppressive, exploitative, and/or de-humanizing (Barry 1995; Hunter 1993; Jarvinen 1993; Jeffreys 1997; MacKinnon 1993; Pateman 1988; Dworkin 1993). The principal founders of Women Against Pornography, Mackinnon and Dworkin, maintained that explicit sexual imagery not only encourages violence against women but is in itself a form of violence, which all women endure, and all men benefit from. Accordingly, ridding society of pornographic material would alleviate gender inequality and other social ills (MacKinnon 1993; Dworkin 1996). Pateman (1988) differentiated sex work from other forms of labor, reasoning that the sexual contract which underlies and informs sex work is inherently exploitative and oppressive. According to Pateman, sex work is unlike marriage, wherein a woman provides sexual services in exchange for financial gain and protection. Pateman claimed that sex workers are offered no such protection in exchange for their services. Pateman failed to acknowledge that wives are at risk

for sexual, psychological, and physical abuse from their partners. Furthermore, married women are not guaranteed financial security, as many are denied financial support from their spouses. According to anti-sex work scholars, sex work takes no form in which it is safe, empowering, or mutually beneficial for all parties involved; legalization cannot alter the fact that sex work is an intrinsically harmful and oppressive practice (Farley 2004; Jeffreys 2008; Barry 1995; Dworkin 1981; MacKinnon 1989; Raymond 1998). According to Farley (2004), decriminalization or legalization will normalize egregious acts, safeguard perpetrators against legal prosecution, and further endanger all women and children.

Overall (1992) suggested that predominantly female occupations, including sex work, generally entail a loss of agency and independence. However, Overall maintained that sex work, as the “definition of the commoditization of sex” (1992: 717), is commoditized in a way that other forms of labor are not. Overall implied that the sale of sexual/sexually related services is necessarily different and worse than the sale of any and all other services. Moreover, exchanges of erotic labor for financial compensation, according to Overall, are inherently asymmetrical. Additionally, sex workers are unavoidably women who sell their services to men, which differentiates sex work from other forms of labor, wherein the laborer and the recipient of services may be of any gender. Overall failed to mention that men sell erotic labor to all gendered bodies and women not only sell erotic labor, but purchase it, from cis men, cis women, and trans folks. Overall concluded that “sex work is an inherently unequal practice defined by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy . . . [which] epitomizes men’s dominance” (p. 724).

Buttressed by anti-sex work discourses, researchers regarded sex workers as universally, equally, and unequivocally victimized by their gender and profession. According to Barry (1995), Raymond (1998), and Carter (2003), among others, one cannot distinguish between free

or forced prostitution, as prostitution is invariably a practice not freely engaged in, one which violates all rights to human dignity. A woman's decision to engage in prostitution is necessarily not her own, but one which is coerced or forced upon her. Dworkin (1996), Mackinnon (1982), and Pateman (1988), among others, contested that women who participate in the sex industry are not sex *workers*, but sex *objects*, objectified at the expense of men's sexual gratification.

Pateman (1988) maintained that those who engage in prostitution are unambiguously subject to their customer's demands; the customer exercises mastery over that which becomes his sex object. Accordingly, there "is no desire or satisfaction on the part of the prostitute" (Pateman 1998: 198). Similarly, Satz (1995) characterized sex workers as sexual servants to (typically) male clients. Carter (2003) equated prostitution to slavery and pro-prostitution activists to pimps and slave owners by extension. Carter (2003) maintained that male customers purchase sex workers as property, to be used to fulfill "their desires, no matter how perverted, degrading or humiliating" (p. 315). According to Pateman (1988), a woman's selfhood is intimately bound to her sexual activity: in other words, "womanhood . . . is confirmed in sexual activity" (p. 207). Pateman suggested that female sex workers sell 'themselves' in the exchange of erotic labor for financial gain. Similarly, Radin (1987) maintained that sex work "promotes inferior forms of personhood" (p. 1884). Further, Radin suggested that sex work devalues and distorts both affection and intimacy. Women invariably turn to sex work for survival but cannot thrive within it (Raymond 1998). Ultimately, a number of activists and scholars entrenched in anti-sex work discourses advocated for the abolition of all commercial sexual exchange (Dworkin 1981; Barry 1979; Wynter 1987; Russel 1993).

Anti-sex work theories, which thrived in the 1980's and beyond, both propelled and were inspired by research which highlighted the deficiencies of sex work and sex workers. Sex

workers have been characterized as unstable personalities (Greenwald 1970; Skeen 1991), victims of trauma (Farley & Barkan 1998; Simons & Whitbeck 1991), and the carriers of sexually transmitted infections (Self 2003). Researchers have stressed the incidence of violence and/or abuse (Church et al. 2001; Bradley-Engen & Hobbs 2013; Barnard 1993; Romans et al. 2001), drug use (Cusicki & Hickman 2005; Green et al. 2000; Lavin 2014), and mental illness among sex workers (Chudakov et al. 2002; Roxburgh et al. 2006).

Data regarding the alleged depravities and deficiencies of sex workers has in the past been unjustly and universally applied to all persons employed in the sex industry. Farley (et al. 1998), for instance, drew upon a sample of former prostitutes, the majority of whom were homeless. Of this sample who had ‘escaped’ prostitution, Farley asked only questions regarding the dangers of prostitution. Not all sex workers work the streets or consider their work dangerous. Not all sex workers are homeless or impoverished. Thus, it is unreasonable to generalize these findings to all sex workers. More recently, Jeffreys (2008) analyzed media reports to find that those who operate strip clubs are involved in organized crime and that strippers are frequently victims of sex trafficking and grossly exploited by their employers. Sensationalist media reports (or anecdotal evidence) are a flimsy basis on which to conclude that exploitation and oppression are endemic to the stripping industry, particularly as few, if any, mainstream media outlets highlight all facets of the sex worker experience. As in the case of Farley (et al. 1998) and Jeffreys (2008), anti-sex work scholars often describe the worst of sex work and regard it as representative.

‘Feminist’ discourses of sex work have overwhelmingly characterized the sex worker experience as de-humanizing, traumatizing, coerced, and/or victimizing. Sex work is presumed harmful to all women in all places. Hence, it is argued that no sex worker can conceivably

experience pleasure in their work. Sex workers who regard their work as fulfilling, pleasurable, and/or empowering are denied space in the conversation. They are thought to be disillusioned, ignorant of what is best for themselves or persons of their gender. Either their very existence is overlooked, or their experience discredited as the product of false consciousness. Through these discourses, female sex workers are characterized as victims in dire need of rescue from those who would abolish the sex industry. Claims that sex work compromises one's self refer exclusively to female sex workers. As Kesler (2002) points out, "Male prostitutes, or for that matter, promiscuous men, are not seen as 'selling their humanity'" (p. 226). Only female sex workers are scrutinized in this way. To suggest that sex work alienates a woman from herself or compromises her very personhood is to essentialize what it means to be a woman and to localize womanhood in sex or sexually related activities. These claims are merely attempts to regulate female sexuality by dictating to women when, where, and with whom it is appropriate to engage in sexual activity.

The assertion that sex workers are uniquely complicit in patriarchal domination implies women outside of the sex industry have little to no part in patriarchy and are able to avoid entrenchment in or interaction with patriarchal institutions. Patriarchy does not selectively pervade institutions or industries. All arenas of social life are informed and affected by patriarchy. Yet, few feminist scholars condemn women who participate in the institution of marriage or partake in the industries of fashion or fitness. The sex industry is not the "quintessential expression of patriarchal gender relations and male domination" (Weitzer 2010: 5), nor is it solely or disproportionately responsible for patriarchal oppression. Abolishing sex work will not destabilize the patriarchy. Conversely, abolishing the patriarchy will not ensure the demise of the sex industry. The fact that sex workers are generally female and the clients

typically male is a consequence of inequality, not its cause. It is unreasonable to equate an industry with the structures of domination and oppression within which the industry occurs and operates. Moreover, to suggest that sex work is inherently dangerous or degrading is to deny all consequence of the sociocultural historical context within which the labor is situated.

In recent decades, fewer researchers have maintained that sex work is invariably traumatizing, destructive, or exploitative<sup>2</sup> (Deshotels et al. 2012; Farley 2004; Jeffreys 2008, 2004). More often, scholars recognize that is not the case (Vanwesenbeeck 1994; Chapkis 1997; Sanders 2002, 2004, 2005; Brents & Hausbeck 2010; Willman 2010; Koken 2013). However, anti-sex work sentiments still inform much of the literature regarding sex work and workers, though less explicitly so. Contemporary anti-trafficking scholars often fail to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary sex work, thereby characterizing all sex workers as victims of deception and coercion (Barry 1995; Chuang 2010; Weitzer & Ditmore 2010). However, there are significant differences between “the kinds of powers that are exercised over a debt-bonded child prostitute and those exercised over an adult who prostitutes independently or voluntarily enters into an employment contact with a third party” (Davidson 1998: 18). Additionally, a sizable segment of sex work literature seeks to explain why men and women engage in sex work (Barton 2002; McKeganey & Barnard 1993; Brewis & Linstead 2000b; Willman 2010). Though not explicitly stated, underlying this literature is the assumption that sex work is a deviant, undesirable occupation and only those who are desperate, deviant, or deficient in some way would participate (Frank 2002). While contemporary sex work literature less often overtly characterizes the occupation as deviant or the workers as deficient, researchers nonetheless trivialize the role of a sex worker, disregarding any and all nuance or skill which the profession

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<sup>2</sup> Growing activism among sex workers, in part, accounts for this shift in theorizing sex work.

demands. Oftentimes, scholars define the role of sex worker as merely providing an opportunity for sexual release or dominance and/or a voyeuristic experience (e.g., Deshotels & Forsyth 2006; Enck and Preston 1988; Schweitzer 2001).

A popular position of recent years is to condemn sex work without condemning sex workers themselves (Kesler 2002). In this latest twist on traditional anti-sex work theory, scholars attempt to differentiate between the labor and the laborers. Sullivan (1995) suggests that sex work is not about individual women, but the labor itself. Sullivan re-directs attention to from individual sex workers to labor rights and working conditions within the sex industry. Overall (1992) defends the rights of sex workers to freely engage in the labor of their choosing, while simultaneously decrying the sex work industry as an exhibition of patriarchy. Kesler (2002) contends that sex workers are not so easily set apart from their labor. Academic and populist discourses of sex work are necessarily relevant and consequential for sex workers. A defense of individual sex workers is arguably meaningless in light of a condemnation of sex work as a practice and an industry. One cannot advocate for the criminalization of sex work and recognize the rights of sex workers to engage in the labor of their choosing. To do so would mean supporting only those sex workers who wish to leave the sex industry, not those who find their work empowering and/or pleasurable. One cannot claim to be pro-sex worker and recognize or legitimize only the segment of the sex worker population which shares in their beliefs. It is not possible to be authentically pro-sex worker and anti-sex work simultaneously (Kesler 2002).

In sum, deficit-based understandings of sex work, anti-sex theories (whether explicit or implicit) and narrow conceptions of sex work deny agency to and flatten the complex personhood of sex workers, undermine notions of sex work as *work*, and fuel the stigma

surrounding sex work which, in part, sustains the unsafe work environments that endanger individual sex workers (Willman 2010).

In stark contrast to anti-sex work theorists, pro-sex work scholars and activists theorize sex work as emancipatory, empowering, and “subversive of patriarchy's definition of conventional femininity” (Barton 2002: 586) and support the rights of sex worker to sell their erotic labor (Califia 1988; Chapkis 1997; Rubin 1984; Schweitzer 2002; Perkins 1991). Pro-sex work discourses are generally associated with sex radical feminism or sex positive feminism; again, as designations vary, I will refer to these discourses as being pro-sex work, to mitigate confusion or ambiguity. According to Schweitzer (2000), stripping or exotic dancing enables women to subvert or transgress traditional gender roles and exercise power over their male customers: "With men the suckers, and women pocketing the cash, the striptease becomes a reversal of society's conventional male/female roles. Striptease is, at its core, a form of role removal" in which women are "clearly in charge" (p. 71). Similarly, Perkins (1991) contended that “Female prostitution is a social situation in which women have more power over sexual interactions than in any other circumstance involving both sexes interacting” (p. 389). Perkins concluded that sex workers exert exceptional control over their labor, ensure their economic stability, and acquire intimate knowledge of male sexuality.

Surely, some sex workers are able to secure financial independence, determine their working hours and conditions, and obtain sexual satisfaction. However, this is not the case for *all* sex workers. Moreover, the full spectrum of male sexuality may not be represented in interactions with sex workers. A given sex worker may not knowingly or otherwise come into contact with persons of diverse sexual orientations, tastes, and preferences. Additionally, the desires and behavior exhibited by male customers are not necessarily indicative of the sexuality

they claim outside of their interactions with sex workers. Thus, sex workers are not necessarily indisputable experts on all male sexualities.

Select pro-sex work theorists, such as Schweitzer (2002) and Perkins (1991), fall prey to the same assumption as anti-sex work scholars: they assume sex work is a monolithic enterprise. This is simply not the case. Sex work exists in a multitude of forms across a wide array of contexts, carrying different meanings for individual sex workers. The sex worker experience is not uniform, but multifaceted. Glick (2000) reasoned that unequivocally pro-sex work theorists valorize sex work as having liberatory, transgressive, destabilizing potential. This is not to say that sex work can “be dismissed as a possible form of feminist resistance or an exercise in female agency” (Frank 2002: 16). However, sex work is neither universally nor necessarily liberating. According to Glick (2000), both anti- and pro-sex work scholars “have a liberatory view of sexuality that is grounded in an ahistorical and individualistic concept of freedom as freedom from repression. While [anti-sex work] feminists see female sexuality as repressed by the patriarchy, the [pro-sex work] movement sees repression as produced by heterosexism and sex negativity” (p. 21).

With the claim that both anti- and pro-sex work theories are essentialist and reductionist, I employ the polymorphous paradigm of sex work, to move beyond utter condemnation or romanticization of the sex industry. The polymorphous paradigm “holds that there is a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences [within sex work] ...Polymorphism is sensitive to complexities and to the structural conditions shaping the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and workers’ control” (Weitzer 2010: 6). With this paradigm, I recognize that sex work is a legitimate form of work, deeply embedded in sociocultural inequalities, not unlike all other areas of social life. However, the sex industry is

not solely or disproportionately responsible for these inequalities. Sex work is neither inherently oppressive nor fundamentally empowering (Vanwesenbeeck 1994, 2005; Sanders 2002, 2004, 2005; Koken 2013; Brewis & Linstead 2000a, 2000b); rather, “there is sufficient variation across time, place, and sector to demonstrate that sex work cannot be reduced to one or the other” (Weitzer 2010: 6). Moreover, the well-being of sex workers is dependent upon a number of range of factors, both personal and professional (Barton 2002; Vanwesenbeeck 1994, 2005; Koken 2013). As Brents and Hausbeck (2013) suggest, empowerment and exploitation are not mutually exclusive. Sex workers, as neither fully liberated from patriarchy nor passive victims of it, may experience pain and pleasure, frustration and fascination, boredom and excitement, liberation and subjugation, all in a matter of hours. According to Weitzer (2010), “victimization, exploitation, choice, job satisfaction, self-esteem, and other dimensions should be treated as variables” and not constants, “that differ between types of sex work, geographic locations, and other structural and organizational conditions” (p. 6).

Chancer (1993) maintains that a defense of sexual pleasure and empowerment does not preclude the contestation of sexism, whether structural or interpersonal. It is possible to challenge sexism within sex work while simultaneously refuting anti-sex work theories and corroborating the agentic power of sex workers. Scholars of sex work may interrogate power dynamics within the sex industry as well as support and legitimize the decisions and experiences of sex workers (Sullivan 1994). So long as the researcher recognizes that patriarchy pervades all work and personal relations, it is possible to investigate gendered structures of power within sex work, as within other arenas of social life, without condemning the industry as especially oppressive or patriarchal.

Feminists are often preoccupied with whether or not it is possible to *choose* sex work. As with all other choices we make, sex work is never “freely chosen in the truest sense of the word” (Kesler 2002: 223). Sex workers do not labor in the absence of structural or cultural constraint, nor are their activities entirely determined by it. They are neither free agents capitalizing on their most valuable resources nor victims of structural determination. Assuredly, fields of opportunity are structurally constrained; however, it is possible to choose sex work among select opportunities for financial security and/or pleasure. As Kesler (2002) pointed out, “Just because someone cannot imagine why a woman would choose prostitution, does not mean that this is not in fact exactly what has happened.” (p. 223). Moreover, “To tell women that their choice in this situation is always an illusion is to force victimization on women, many of whom are no more victims than non-prostitute women under our current patriarchal capitalist system” (Kesler 2002: 223). Sex workers are more than patriarchal pawns, physical objects, or hyper-sexual bodies, but are agentic and sexual subjects in their own right (Kesler 2002; Frank 2002; Koken 2013; Chapkis 1997; Sanders 2002, 2004, 2005).

As previously stated, the role of sex workers in relation to their customers is frequently narrowly defined in social scientific literature as merely providing an opportunity for sexual arousal through physical stimulation or voyeurism (e.g., Deshotels & Forsyth 2006; Enck and Preston 1988; Schweitzer 2001). And yet, the role of sex workers extends beyond sexualized movement or touch, as gendered identities and performances are constructed and negotiated through sex work (Allison 1994; Frank 2002; Hoang 2015; Price-Glynn 2010; Schotten 2005; Wood 2000). Through this research, I seek to highlight the significance and scope of strippers’ labor, as it relates to productions of gender.

A fair amount of research has explored how sex workers manage their personal and professional identities (Brewis & Linstead 2000a, 2000b; Chapkis 1997; Sanders 2002, 2004, 2005; Jeffrey & MacDonald 2006; Sallmann 2010; O’Neill 2001; Orchard et al. 2013; Price-Glynn 2010; Willman 2013). However, the ways in which sex workers negotiate the gender identities of their customers is not often the subject of academic inquiry (Frank 2002; Hoang 2015).

Employed as a hostess in hostess bars across Ho Chi Minh City, Hoang (2015) explored how male customers and female sex workers, specifically hostesses, “negotiate[d] their perceptions of Vietnam’s repositioning in a global economy” (p. 12) within multiple segments of Vietnam’s sex industry. According to Hoang, hostesses engaged in a range of practices and discourses which enabled men to assert their masculinity and either reaffirm Western superiority in markets which catered to Western clientele or proclaim Asian ascendancy and deny Western dominance in markets which catered to non-Western men.

For example, in clubs that catered to Western backpackers and businessmen, hostesses consciously constructed themselves as Third World subjects, as impoverished and dependent upon Western aid. Thus, they alleviated anxieties surrounding their clients’ masculinities; these anxieties were borne of Western economic decline and their inability to support women in the Global North. Hostesses capitalized upon racialized desires and traditions notions of masculinity by inviting male clients to fake village families, where they concocted false stories of financial crisis to elicit monetary support. Thus, hostesses facilitated their clients’ desires to fulfill traditional and patriarchal notions of masculinity wherein the male partner is the financial provider. Moreover, hostesses strategically darkened their skin with bronzer and other beauty products, thus enabling their clients to construct their masculinity in relation to the trope of the

sexualized, impoverished Asian woman. Hoang (2015) argued that the niche market of the hostess club and the socioeconomic positions of patrons affected how hostesses engaged with their clients and capitalized on their erotic labor. Similarly, I expect the caliber of strip club (e.g., bottom-, middle-, or top-tier) and the socioeconomic status of male customers to affect the discourses and practices strippers here in the United States employ to enhance performances of particular masculinities.

### *Masculinity Literature*

As modes of production and consumption change and evolve, so too do social relations and subject positions, thus affecting individual and collective constructions of masculinity (Nayak 2006; Kimmel 1996, 2005; Morris 2008; Campbell, Bell, & Finney 2006). As an example, secure industrial and manufacturing jobs across the Rust Belt, which afforded one's family a comfortable lifestyle, served as traditional outlets through which masculinity could be constructed and negotiated. Industrial employment "accrued its own type of 'body capital,' forged through notions of the patriarchal 'breadwinner,' physical 'hardness,' and a strict sexual division of labor that split the public 'masculine' world of work from the private domestic realm of women's unpaid labor" (Nayak 2006: 814). In cities across the Rust Belt, however, enviable manufacturing jobs were replaced with insecure, inflexible, ill-paying service jobs which provide little to no benefits. For working-class men in particular, the loss of a steady family wage yielded feelings of anger and the perception of emasculation, as ideals of traditional masculinity could no longer be achieved through conventional means (Weis 1990; Weis, Proweller, and Centrie 1997).

By contrast, in cities which transition to knowledge-based economies, wherein employment traditionally associated with physical prowess and a strict sexual division of labor is less common, masculinity is re-imagined and re-articulated (Cooper 2000). For example, in the

case of knowledge workers in Silicon Valley, “technical skill and brilliance are more important than looks and athletic ability. In the Valley, competition isn’t waged on the basketball court or by getting girls. Here men compete in cubicles to see who can work more hours, who can cut the best code, and who can be most creative and innovative” (Cooper 2000: 383). In the transition to service- or knowledge-based economies, men may adapt their masculine identities to their changing circumstances and/or attempt to realize ideals of traditional masculinity through alternative means.

Studies suggest that in times of economic uncertainty or transition, men forge masculine identities through the repudiation of marginalized populations (Fine, Weis, Addeleston, & Marusza 1997), verbal and physical altercations (McDowell, Rootham, and Hardgrove 2014), gun ownership (Carlson 2015), home improvement projects (Moisio, Arnould, & Gentry 2013), criminal activity, and alcohol consumption (Nayak 2006). Men too turn to leisure pursuits in times of economic restructuring, including hunting, baseball, and outdoor clubs, to re-negotiate their masculinity (Campbell, Bell, & Finney 2006; Kimmel 2005). Frank (2002) claims that “strip clubs are more about sexuality and gender identity than about sex” (p. 21). If that is the case, then strip clubs, as a form of masculinized leisure, may serve as critical sites of gender negotiation, particularly for those living through times of economic uncertainty or transition on either a personal or structural level.

On an individual level, masculinities vary per one’s location in the social hierarchy. In other words, an individual’s socioeconomic status, as well as their age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, etc. inform and affect how they conceive of and enact masculinity (Connell 1995). Adopting an intersectional theoretical perspective here is key. Intersectionality draws attention to how various social identities intersect and influence one’s experience of power and oppression in

society. Under this framework, race, class, gender, etc. are compounded, intermeshed systems of oppression and privilege; thus, social identities are never fully isolatable, but give meaning to and structure individual experience simultaneously. With regards to gender specifically, the meanings and consequences associated with one's gender identity and expression differ depending upon their other social positions; that is, race, class, sexuality, etc. not only interact with gender but transform gender altogether (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2019).

### *Customer Self-Presentations*

As previously stated, sex workers have long been the subject of academic inquiry, while far less attention has been paid to the consumers of erotic labor (Frank 2002); and so, this research shifts focus to those who sustain the sex industry – male customers. Existing research (Allison 1994; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Hoang 2015; Price-Glynn 2010) has identified interactional patterns among customers; however, there is much yet to be learned about how customers manage their self-presentation in strip clubs.

Frank (2002) conducted interviews with regular male customers and engaged in participant observation in five strip clubs, ranging from bottom-tier to top-tier, in a large Southern city. Frank indicates that male customers perform the role of desiring male, in which they publicly express sexual desire for women, thus 'proving' their heterosexuality. Frank also mentions in a footnote that customers may assume other roles, including that of big spender or stripper protector. However, the roles customers assume in relation to strippers is not a primary focus of Frank's research. Erickson and Tewksbury (2000) engaged in covert participant observation in two upscale clubs in a major Midwestern city and developed a six-category typology of patrons based on their interactional patterns, including the Lonely, the Socially Impotent, Players, Bold Lookers, Detached Lookers, and Sugar Daddies. Though this typology

delineates behavioral patterns among customers, Erickson and Tewksbury do not examine patrons' interpretations of their roles or relationships to strippers.

Allison (1994) engaged in participant observation in a high-end Japanese hostess club and interviewed subjects ranging from the manager of a hostess club to a sex counselor. According to Allison, customers at high-end Japanese hostess clubs commonly assume the role of a *sukebei*, that of a lewd and lustful man. Allison also suggests that patrons may assume other subjectivities, including that of singer or linguistic authority. The majority of customers I observed and/or spoke with did not perform or claim the role of a lewd and lustful man, at least not consistently. This is especially true of customers who did not go to strip clubs in large, all-male groups.

Price-Glynn (2010) created a typology of customer masculinities based on interviews with customers and participation observation in a strip club in a small, rural U.S. town. According to Price-Glynn, the masculinities documented most often were those of (1) men seeking affirmation, (2) men seeking group connectedness, or (3) men performing aggression. Price-Glynn acknowledges that patrons may occupy more than one of these categories in a given day. While indicative of how patrons manage their self-presentation, I observed greater diversity in the roles male customers assume in relation to strippers. Though research on patron behavior does address masculinity, to varying extents (Allison 1994; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Frank 2002, Price-Glynn 2010), the relationship between customers' self-presentations and constructions of gender can be more clearly elucidated.

### *Sex Work and Social Class*

Though strip clubs attract patrons of diverse social classes, there is little research that examines class in the context of sex work (Bernstein 2007; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Schiff

2001; Trautner 2005). Erickson and Tewksbury (2000) addressed the class composition of three of these categories in their typology: Bold Lookers, Detached Lookers, and Sugar Daddies. Bold Looks are typically of a lower socioeconomic status, Sugar Daddies are more affluent, and Detached Lookers represent the full range of socioeconomic statuses. Though Erickson and Tewksbury did consider socioeconomic status in their typology, they did not delve into the classed or gendered meanings underlying these roles.

Outside of Erickson and Tewksbury's (2000) typology, there is little research that examines linkages between social class and customer behavior. Other studies (Bernstein 2007; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Schiff 2001; Trautner 2005) that interrogate social class in sex work largely do not address constructions of masculinity. Trautner (2005) examined classed performances of sexuality in sex clubs; she argued that middle-class strip clubs exemplify a "voyeuristic sexuality," while working-class clubs are characterized by a "cheap thrills sexuality" (p. 776). Bernstein (2007) explored the experiences of middle-class sex workers and transformations in segments of the sex industry which cater to middle-class clientele. Schiff (2001) theorized on the function of nude clubs. He argued that fully nude clubs, which attract more working-class men, constitute a "symbolic form of class opposition to the dominant neo-puritan norms" (p. 16). Hoang (2015) explored the relationships between the labor of female hostesses and patrons' performances of class-based masculinities, thus interrogating intersections of race, nation, gender, and class. Of course, the transnational processes that create and inform dynamics of class and gender in U.S. strip clubs differ from those in Ho Chi Minh City hostess clubs. There is need for further research which interrogates not only the relationship between socioeconomic status and U.S.-based sex work, but productions of gender as well. With the recognition that gendered performances among men are far from uniform, this research

highlights the ways in which gender intersects with social class<sup>3</sup> within customer-stripper interactions.

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<sup>3</sup> Social class became especially salient as the research was conducted in three economically diverse cities and in different segments of the strip club industry (bottom-, middle-, and top-tier clubs) which attract customer bases of different social classes.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CONDUCTING AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF STRIP CLUBS

On June 4<sup>th</sup> at roughly 8:00pm, I entered Titillations in the Maylin metropolitan area. I sat at my usual spot at the bar between the stage and the entrance to the strippers' dressing room. A few moments later, the DJ announced that Crimson would be taking the stage. A young, white, male customer in a red baseball cap said loudly from across the bar, "Sounds like a fake name." I chuckled and nodded. Crimson was nowhere to be seen. In fact, there were no strippers on the main floor. So, the DJ went into the dressing room to notify Crimson that it was her time to perform. In the meantime, I walked to the other side of the rectangular bar and introduced myself to Logan, the customer in the red baseball cap, and his cousin, Andrew.

Logan and Andrew seemed amused that I was conducting research in strip clubs. Logan refused to take my business card. He said that he was not interested in doing an interview, but he would give me his number because he would like to see me again. He then gestured to the stage where Crimson had begun to dance. He asked me if I was "into that," seemingly questioning my sexual orientation. I replied that I was not. He asked what I was drinking. I said that I was drinking water. He asked if I was "only here" for research and if I ever had "fun" while at strip clubs. I responded that research is fun. By this point, I could tell that I wasn't going to have a productive conversation with Logan, so I told him and his cousin to have a good night and I returned to my seat. Logan proceeded to shout across the bar to me for much of the night. He asked if I had a boyfriend. I said that I did. He asked for his name and I gave it. Logan didn't seem to believe me. He kept asking if I had a boyfriend and what his name was, as if he were testing me or waiting for me to slip up and forget my partner's name. He asked what I did during the day. I explained that I was a graduate student and instructor at the University of Illinois. He

asked if I entered graduate school because I didn't like "work." I replied that I did work. He said that it wasn't "really work." Logan said that if his girlfriend was visiting strip clubs, he would accompany her carrying a gun. He said that my boyfriend was a "pussy" for not being here with me. He asked if my boyfriend was a "homosexual" and if he flew a multicolored flag in his yard, presumably referring to the gay pride flag. He said that "anyone" could print a business card, suggesting perhaps that my business card was not authentic or that it did not make me special. Logan then asked about my partner's height. I said that he is 6'4." He said 6'4" must be my "go-to number," again implying that my partner does not exist. He suggested that I had rehearsed these lines. He said multiple times, "Matt ain't real."

Logan then pestered Angel, a stripper I had met the week prior, to ask me my boyfriend's name and height. Angel ignored him. Logan said that he would pay her to give me a lap dance. Angel grabbed my hand and started to pull me away from the bar. Logan asked how much it would cost. She said it was \$40. Logan hesitated. Angel said he could purchase a floor lap dance for \$20. Logan was clearly not willing to spend that. He handed Angel a few dollars to "take care" of me. So, Angel sat and talked to me for a while. Angel lied and told Logan that she'd known me for "three or four months." Logan asked Angel if she would be willing to lie for me. She said that I seemed like a nice person and she would be willing to lie for me. Logan asked where my "ring" was, presumably referring to an engagement or wedding ring. I was engaged in conversation with Angel, so I ignored him. She told him to leave us alone because we were having a conversation. She leaned in close to talk to me. I could hear Logan over my shoulder calling me a "liar." Angel said that she would kick his ass if he called me a liar one more time. I left shortly after Angel was called to the stage to perform. I never saw Angel again after that night.

I returned to Titillations once more on July 9<sup>th</sup>. Dale, a white, middle-aged, male customer, offered to buy me a drink. I declined his offer and said that I was only drinking water. Dale then offered to drive me home. I declined this offer as well. Out of the blue, Dale said, “You’re turning me on.” He then insisted that I show him my breasts. He said that he would give me an interview if I showed him my breasts. He said that afterwards I would regret not showing him more. I refused his offer. I told Dale that I have a boyfriend and he replied that my boyfriend is “stupid” for letting me go into strip clubs by myself. He said that he’s “not afraid of him [my partner].”

I suggested several times that Dale go and speak to a stripper who may be willing to show him her breasts. He said that he was not interested in doing that. He said that strippers are “paid to do that.” Dale said that I didn’t have to tell my boyfriend. After refusing him a few more times, Dale finally said that my breasts are “average” and that it’s “no big deal” if he doesn’t see them. Later on, Dale came up behind me, and asked if he could put his hands on my hips. Before I could respond, he put his hands on me. I said, “No thank you.” Dale replied, “No thank you means yes.” I then said “No” more firmly and Dale let go. Unfortunately, Angel was not there to rescue me that night. I left shortly after this exchange and I haven’t been to a strip club since.

Over the course of 13 months<sup>4</sup>, I conducted 56 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female strippers, male customers, and staff members and engaged in 180 hours of ethnographic observation in strip clubs across the metropolitan areas of “Hanksville,” “Princeton,” and “Maylin.” On multiple occasions, customers suggested to me that women choose to be strippers because it is “easy money.” Going into this project, I was quite confident that being a stripper was no walk in the park. Not long into my field work did I realize just how physically, mentally,

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<sup>4</sup> My field work began in May of 2017 and ended in July of 2018. I took two months off during that period to visit family and recoup from the late nights and customer harassment.

and emotionally taxing their work can be. Beyond the physical demands of being a stripper<sup>5</sup>, the social tact and skill required to manage customer interactions, as Angel showcased above, is considerable and can take quite a toll, especially when abusive customers are involved. During my 13 months of field work, I met customers who were incredibly kind to me. I also met customers who made explicit comments about my physical appearance, who touched me without my consent, who insulted my significant other, who pestered me to date them or have sex with them, who accused me of lying, etc. One customer even followed me to my car; thankfully, he was so inebriated that he posed little physical threat. I burned out after 13 months, and I was only a researcher; I could leave a club whenever I pleased without fear of being reprimanded or fired and I was at much lower risk of being assaulted or stalked. Ideally, the findings I present in the forthcoming chapters will highlight just how much labor is involved in being a stripper.

#### *Hanksville, Princeton, and Maylin Metropolitan Areas*

I chose three Midwest metropolitans for the sites of my research. I refer to these cities using the pseudonyms Hanksville, Princeton, and Maylin. I chose these sites, in part, because most strip club research has been conducted in other regions of the country (Barton 2002; Egan 2006; Forsyth & Deshotels 1997; Frank 2002; Thompson & Harred 1992; Rambo & Ellis 1989). Additionally, I grew up in the Midwest and knew of several people who could introduce me to potential contacts in these cities. It was also comforting to know that I knew people in each city who could pick me up if I was too afraid to walk to my car because a customer was harassing me.

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<sup>5</sup> I met a number of strippers who had bruises from pole dancing or working the stage. I also met strippers who had incurred more serious injuries from falling during a pole routine. Customers can also pose a physical threat to strippers. Based on my observations and conversations/interviews, the most common physically aggressive behaviors that customers engage in include slapping strippers' butts while they are performing (sometimes so hard they leave bruises) and groping or fondling strippers without their consent. For strippers who feel compelled to drink alcohol to appease customers, work up the courage to interact with customers, or perform on stage, regular alcohol consumption can also adversely affect their physical health.

I chose multiple sites because I wanted to visit a wide range of clubs and verify that my findings were applicable beyond a single city. I also consciously chose cities with diverse economic settings, to ensure exposure to bottom-, middle-, and top-tier clubs as well as customers of diverse economic backgrounds. Before I dive into the categorizations of strip clubs, I will provide additional context for these three locations.

Princeton county's<sup>6</sup> population in 2019 was roughly 1,265,000. In terms of racial and ethnic demographics, 68.4% of the population was white in 2019, 13.8% was Black, 7% was Latinx, and 7.5% was Asian. Between 2014 and 2018, the median household income in Princeton county was \$74,113. In 2019, 10.3% of the population lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2019a). According to the Milken Institute, the Princeton metropolis was the 98<sup>th</sup> best performing large city<sup>7</sup> in 2020 of the 200 largest cities in the U.S., as determined by an outcomes-based set of metrics—including job creation, wage gains, and technological developments (Milken Institute 2020). Princeton has been declining in rank since 2013 when it held the 29<sup>th</sup> spot (Milken Institute 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020). According to the Economic Innovation Group, of the 100 largest cities in the United States, Princeton is the 67<sup>th</sup> most distressed with 31.7% of the population living in “prosperous zip codes” and 14.3% living in “distressed zip codes” (Economic Innovation Group 2019). The Economic Innovation Group determines these rankings using measures of educational attainment, housing vacancy, unemployment, poverty, median income, change in employment, and change in business establishments.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I chose to provide county, not city, data for Princeton, Maylin, and Hanksville, because I visited strip clubs outside of the city limits in all three locations.

<sup>7</sup> Notably, the Milken Institute pairs Princeton with two adjacent cities in its analysis.

<sup>8</sup> The Distressed Communities Index is constructed from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and Business Patterns datasets.

Hanksville county's population was roughly 945,000 in 2019. In terms of racial and ethnic demographics, 50.6% of the population in 2019 was white, 27.2% was Black, 15.6% was Latinx, and 4.7% was Asian. Between 2014 and 2018, the median household income in Hanksville county was \$48,742. In 2019, 19.1% of the population lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2019b). According to the Milken Institute, Hanksville was the 160<sup>th</sup> best performing large city in 2020 out of the 200 largest cities in the U.S (Milken Institute 2020). Hanksville is fairly consistently ranked in the high-150's to mid-160's, with its highest ranking in the past ten years being 123<sup>rd</sup> in 2011 (Milken Institute 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020). According to the Economic Innovation Group, of the 100 largest cities in the United States, Hanksville is the 8<sup>th</sup> most distressed with 1.1% of the population living in "prosperous zip codes" and 40.8% living in "distressed zip codes" (Economic Innovation Group 2019).

Maylin county's population was roughly 990,000 in 2019. In terms of racial and ethnic demographics, 65.3% of the population in 2019 was white, 25% was Black, 3% was Latinx, and 4.7% was Asian. Between 2014 and 2018, the median household income was \$65,300. In 2019, 10.5% of the population lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2019c). According to the Milken Institute, Maylin was the 113<sup>th</sup> best performing large city in 2020 out of the 200 largest cities in the U.S (Milken Institute 2020). Prior to 2020, Maylin was consistently ranked lower than 125<sup>th</sup> since 2012, reaching its lowest ranking of 170<sup>th</sup> in 2015 (Milken Institute 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020). According to the Economic Innovation Group, of the 100 largest cities in the United States, Maylin is the 25<sup>h</sup> most distressed with 9.6% of the population living in "prosperous zip codes" and 39.2% living in "distressed zip codes" (Economic Innovation Group 2019).

### *Bottom-, Middle-, and Top-Tier Strip Clubs*

The kinds of clubs located within these cities vary in accordance with their economic landscapes; and of course, different kinds of clubs attract different kinds of customers. Princeton, the most economically prosperous city, is home to the most top-tier clubs and a good number of middle-tier ones as well. In Hanksville and Maylin, cities that are less economically secure, bottom- and middle-tier clubs dominate the markets. Judging by the conversations I had with customers, the attire of customers, and the willingness of customers to spend money within these clubs, bottom-tier clubs host more working-class customers while middle- and top-tier clubs host more middle- to upper-class customers. Of course, not all customers conform to this pattern. There are middle-class customers who prefer bottom-tier clubs, for example.

In categorizing clubs as either bottom-tier, middle-tier, or top-tier, I considered the décor of the club, the attire of staff members and strippers, the availability of valet and coat check services, the level of security and surveillance, the location of the club, the price of drinks and erotic services, the quality of lighting and sound systems, the caliber of pole tricks, and the kind of food available for purchase. In Hanksville, I visited three bottom-tier clubs and one middle-tier club. In Maylin, I visited one bottom-tier club, two clubs that walked the line of middle- and top-tier<sup>9</sup>, and two firmly middle-tier clubs. In Princeton, I visited two bottom-tier clubs, one middle-tier club, and two top-tier clubs. I am excluding clubs that I was kicked out of after a single visit and after having spoken with management, of which there are two. However, I did

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<sup>9</sup> As an example, there was one club in the Maylin metropolitan area that would have been categorized as middle-tier, if not for the VIP section. Customers could pay an annual membership fee and enter through a separate back entrance to the VIP section. There was a separate bar and bartender in this section, leather couches, taxidermy animals, an indoor water feature, private rooms, etc. And so, the club walked the line between middle- and top-tier, because the VIP and non-VIP sections were significantly different.

not exclude the two other clubs I visited several times before management changed their minds and kicked me out. In the following, I will describe one bottom-tier club, one middle-tier club, and one top-tier club I visited, to give a better sense of what these categories mean.

Titillations in the Maylin metropolitan area is an excellent example of a bottom-tier club. Titillations was located outside of the city of Maylin. The exterior was grey sheet metal and grey brick. There was a thick red and white stripe near the roof painted around building. The club's name was featured on a white sign with black and red writing on the front of the building. There was also a red awning over the entrance. The parking lot was relatively large and rather dimly lit. Behind the club was a field and a forested area. Across the street sat a small white building that looked as though it was once a family home. At the time, it was a massage parlor with "Oriental" in its name. The white paint was peeling, and the windows were boarded up with white planks. Down the road was a predominantly Black strip club and another massage parlor that fairly recently removed "Oriental" from its name. Past the front door, there was a metal detector. Inside, the club was exceptionally dark. Small recessed red lights were scattered across the ceiling. There were also a handful of small recessed lights around the stages that changed color. The main floor was quite small. The stages and the rectangular bar consumed most of the space. Two, small flat screen TVs were positioned at either end of the bar. The walls were wood paneled, and the ceiling was covered in white drop ceiling tiles. Dark carpet with small red shapes covered the entire main floor. The carpet appeared worn and thin. There were a handful of slot machines near the entrance of the club. Near the side of the bar furthest from the stages, there were a handful of bar tables with stools. Behind these tables was a wall of red and green drapes. The drapes were slightly sheer, and a light machine made it seem as though light was trickling down the drapes. Private lap dances took place behind these drapes. The barstools

around these tables and around the bar itself had grey plastic frames with worn grey cushions. The chairs around the stages were made of the same materials, only they weren't barstools. Black mirrors lined the wall behind the stages. A few grey armchairs lined the wall behind the stages. A few more were located just past the slot machines. The club did not serve food and I did not spot any top-shelf liquor. Most customers appeared to be drinking beer.

At Titillations, the bouncers wore all black, usually in the form of black jeans or pants and a t-shirt. When business was slow, the bouncer would leave their post at the front entrance. The female bartenders wore a black leather corset and a black leather mini skirt. Presumably, this was their uniform. Every time I visited Titillations, there was either one or two female bartenders. Titillations was a fully nude club, meaning that strippers were allowed to remove all of their clothing. The strippers wore an assortment of outfits, which were generally not the most high-end; for example, one evening I spoke with a stripper who was wearing a one-piece made of black fishnets and another who was wearing sparkly silver boots with sparkly silver tassels and a purple bikini. I met several strippers who wore noticeably heavy make-up, sometimes with glitter. I witnessed few strippers performing pole tricks. Most simply leaned against the pole and danced around the stage. Customers and strippers openly smoked cigarettes around the bar. Admission for adults 21 years or older was between \$5 and \$15, depending on the day of the week and the time of night. Notably, I was never once asked to pay admission, regardless of when I entered the club. Adults between the ages of 18 and 20 were allowed in the club, though they had to pay \$20 for admission and \$10 for a bright yellow t-shirt that read "Minor."

The Edge in the Hanksville metropolitan area serves as a fine example of a middle-tier club. The club is located off of a highway, next to a used car dealership, an auto body shop, and a waste management building. The exterior of the building is a mix of grey cement and brick

painted beige or brown. The club's name is spelled out in beige letters on the front. There are minimal security cameras and lights in the parking lot. There was a large U-shaped bar past the main entrance. The walls of the bar were lined with ribbed aluminum panels. The bar stools had black pleather cushions. The club's walls were lined with medium color wood paneling; it appeared rather dated and not necessarily upscale. The carpet was dark brown with a tan pattern; it too seemed dated. Large flat screen TV's were positioned around the U-shaped bar. There was a row of slot machines and a pool table located to the side of the U-shaped bar. On the walls around the U-shaped bar, there were pictures in large black frames; all of the pictures were of a women's bodies and none featured a woman's face. For example, one was of a woman's butt with the tops of her legs and waist in the frame, while another was of a woman's arched back. These photos were all black and white.

There were two stages and three poles in The Edge. Tan patterned arm chairs were positioned around the stages and around small black tables on the main floor. Yellow lights hung from the club's drop ceiling tiles. Lights that changed color were positioned around the stage. Overall, the club was quite dark. There were two VIP sections which were raised from the main floor. There were hanging sheets of beads obscuring the VIP sections. Each VIP section had its own small bar. In the Marquee Lounge, one of the VIP sections, the wall behind the bar was lined with black frames with pictures of celebrities. These pictures were not of celebrities in the club, but were either still shots from movies or pictures of celebrities on red carpets. The celebrities included Marilyn Monroe, Will Smith, Matt Damon, Sylvester Stallone, Paul Newman, and Robert Redford. I assumed these were just a few celebrities that management liked.

The bartenders and bouncers were all dressed in casual black clothes. There was always more than one bartender working whenever I was there. The cover charge was \$5 during the day and \$12 at night. A half an hour in a private room cost \$300 at the time. The private rooms were located at the back of the club. The Edge was a topless club, meaning that strippers were only allowed to reveal their breasts. On the whole, strippers' attire was generally more upscale than at bottom-tier clubs, but not as high-end as the ensembles found in top-tier clubs. For example, one evening I met a stripper wearing a nude strapless bra with multi-colored fake jewels attached to it and dark maroon bottoms, a stripper who was wearing a stripped light green and white one-piece bathing suit, and a stripper who was wearing a bright red set of bra and underwear with small fake diamonds attached to the bra.

Uptown Dolls Gentleman's Club, situated in central Princeton, was quickly categorized as a top-tier club. The club was once a bank; its exterior is quite stately and unlike most other strip clubs. The exterior was made of light grey stone with large columns surrounding arched doorways and intricate detailing around the windows and rood. The club was surrounded by multi-story/high-rise buildings, many of which were office buildings. A white awning covered the club's entrance and featured the club's name in red font on all sides. Purple nights shone on the exterior and made the building glow. If not for the purple lights and the awning, no one would guess this building housed a strip club. Valet service was available if a customer did not wish to find street parking or a parking garage. Coat check service was also available inside.

The inside of the building was equally impressive and quite spacious. The back wall of the club, behind the main stage, featured blocks of colored lights, so that the strippers were lit from behind and casted shadows onto the wall of light. The pole on the main stage was connected to the tall ceiling, so that strippers could climb to a considerable height. Light grey

arches, like those outside of the building, framed the main stage. There was another smaller stage located closer to the entrance. The main floor was lined with beige and black marble tables and beige and brown patterned armchairs. The ceiling above the main floor was vaulted in the shape of a dome. The dome itself was dimly lit. The top of the dome was lined with an imitation of stained glass. Backlit golden sconces and golden arch supports lined the bottom of the dome. An immense and intricate chandelier hung from the center of the dome. The carpet was blue, white, and brown, patterned octagons, squares, and circles. The carpet appeared upscale and modern. Off to one side of the club, booths with black leather sofas and dark coffee tables are raised off the main floor. Half walls paneled with dark wood surround these C-shaped sofas so that the customer is allowed some privacy. The club was dimly lit. Smoke machines made it seem as though everything was occurring in a blue and purple haze. In some places, the walls were lined with dark wood, though most walls were lined with large slabs of marble.

Opposite of the booths, there was a bar. The bar area was elevated from the main floor. The bar itself was not terribly large; roughly 8-10 barstools lined the bar. Near the bar, there were also a few sets of armchairs surrounding circular marble coffee tables. Fake candles were placed in the center of each coffee table. Above the marble slabs behind the bar, the walls were lined with dark wooden bookshelves that reached to the ceiling. Hundreds of books lined the shelves. Very large flat screen TV's were scattered around the bar area. More imitation stained-glass lined the ceiling above the bar area. Blue and purple lights shone through. Depending on where you sat in this section, your view may be obscured by stone beams which were lined with mirrors. A velvet rope strung between two gold posts separated the area of the bar where waitresses come to place their orders, pick up their food, drop off used plates, etc. The bar was well stocked with top-shelf liquor and other expensive drinks. The club served a full menu,

including appetizers, salads, sandwiches, pizzas, burgers, and other entrees, with most dishes costing roughly \$10.

Customers could purchase bottle packages and exclusive services, including a personal VIP hostess for the evening, which ranged from \$250 to \$5,500. Admission ranged from \$8 to \$15, depending on the day of the week and the time of night. The waitresses wore black dresses or black blouses and skirts. The bartenders wore all black as well, though generally pants and a shirt. There were always multiple bartenders and waitresses working when I visited. The bouncers wore black suits; a few stood at the entrance while others were scattered throughout the club. The level of surveillance exceeded that of most middle- and bottom-tier clubs. Uptown Dolls was a topless club, meaning that strippers were only allowed to reveal their breasts. The strippers' attire generally appeared more high-end; for example, one evening I spoke with a stripper who was wearing a black lace one-piece with an open back and another stripper who was wearing matching white lace lingerie, multiple (likely faux) pearl necklaces, and white stockings.

Generally speaking, bottom-tier clubs featured more strippers of color and were visited by more customers of color. The strippers of color who were employed in middle- and top-tier clubs were often exceptionally attractive and skilled at pole dancing, the implication being that strippers of color had to be especially strong candidates to be hired in such establishments. In each club, the demographics of patrons varied depending upon the day of the week and time of day. In the late evenings and on weekends, customers tended to be younger and more racially and ethnically diverse. During daytime or early evening and on weekdays, customers tended to be older and primarily white. Only one of the strip clubs, Jet's Place in the Hanksville metropolitan area, featured male strippers. However, the male strippers were relegated to the

basement and only performed on select weekends when a bachelorette party or other group RSVP'd.

### *Gaining Access*

The fourteen strip clubs I visited were chosen based on several factors. First, I made a conscious effort to visit a mix of bottom-, middle-, and top-tier in each city; that was not possible in Hanksville, however, because there was no top-tier club within the metropolitan area. Second, I only visited clubs in which one or more managers had given me explicit permission to be there or allowed me to stay until the owners gave the green light. As I mentioned before, a few strip club managers denied me access to their club on my first visit, while others revoked access after several visits. Their reasons for doing so were generally vague. They seemed to have trouble grasping the fact that I was not a journalist looking to uncover nefarious activity in strip clubs. On each occasion, I tried to re-articulate my research interests and aims, but their decisions were made, so I left and did not return.

Third, I either did not enter or limited my time within select clubs based on ethical or safety concerns. For example, I steered clear of a few clubs that were being investigated for sex trafficking. I also made an effort to visit a few clubs only during early evening hours or on weekdays, either because the lack of security made me feel uncomfortable or because I'd heard of recent violent incidents at the club and wanted to stay safe. For example, the manager of the Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area instructed me to leave the club by 10:00pm, because a man had recently been shot and killed in the parking lot and he was concerned for my safety. Strip clubs are generally less crowded and rowdy in the early evenings and on weekdays, so leaving early seemed to be a reasonable option.

Fourth, I did not visit clubs that were considered by locals to be “Black strip clubs,” or clubs with predominantly Black strippers, staff members, and patrons.<sup>10</sup> As a white woman, I recognized that I would have a harder time blending in in such a setting, and I wanted to avoid customers flocking to me to ask questions or talking amongst themselves about me, because that may have diverted attention away from the strippers. I already stood out in predominantly white and racially and ethnically diverse clubs simply because I was a female customer. Female customers are far less common in strip clubs which primarily or exclusively feature female strippers. When women did enter the club as customers, they were generally accompanied by a man and looked to be on a date. Occasionally, I encountered small groups of women celebrating a birthday or wedding. On rare occasion, I would see an unaccompanied woman or two women who seemed to be in a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Oftentimes, however, I was the only female customer in a club or one of two to three.<sup>11</sup>

Strippers and customers in predominantly white and racially and ethnically diverse clubs would not infrequently approach me to ask me why I was there. Customers would occasionally gawk at me rather than initiate that conversation. A number of strippers and customers assumed I was either friends with the bartender, sexually interested in women, or waiting to audition as a stripper. I made a concerted effort to become friendly with regular customers, staff members, and strippers in order to better blend into the environment. If I had entered a club locally known to cater to a Black audience, I likely would have had a much harder time blending in. In that case, I may have become a distraction, and the last thing I wanted to do was to impede upon strippers’

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<sup>10</sup> In each city, I was told by customers and strippers which were the “Black strip clubs.” No one ever made mention of a club that catered to another racial or ethnic group.

<sup>11</sup> Notably, some strip clubs do not permit women to enter without a male escort; supposedly, they fear prostitutes entering to find customers and non-sex worker women accosting or assaulting their male partners for being at the club and/or strippers for interacting with their partners. Only one club ever gave me hassle for not having a male escort and I eventually sorted things out with management.

ability to earn money. This is not to say that the fourteen clubs I visited catered to all-white audience or featured only white strippers. Again, in the late evenings and on weekends, clubs tended to be more racially and ethnically diverse, particularly bottom-tier clubs. On several occasions, I entered clubs where customers of color outnumbered white customers and/or strippers of color outnumbered white strippers. However, based upon what strippers and customers said of clubs in each city, none of the fourteen clubs I visited were known for catering to a non-white audience. Moreover, I was never the only white person in a club and never felt I stuck out because I was white. And so, I stuck to predominantly white or racially and ethnically diverse clubs where I felt I could more easily immerse myself in the environment.

Throughout the data collection process, I tried to remain cognizant of my social identities and how they might affect the data I obtained (Heyl 2001). My position as a white, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class, cisgender, female researcher undoubtedly influenced my observations and interviews. Though being a woman did make me vulnerable to harassment, it also meant that customers were more likely to approach me with questions because seeing an unaccompanied female customer was unusual. If I were not a white woman, but a woman of color, I suspect that some customers would have avoided me due to racial bias, particularly older white male customers. The fact that I am a woman very likely informed what customers shared with me; for example, customers may have been more willing to discuss their marital troubles or divorce, but less willing to discuss the sexually charged conversations they had with strippers or their preferred physical features in strippers. A few customers admitted that it was strange speaking to a woman about strippers' bodies or about "dirty talk" during lap dances, though I did my best to reassure them that I was interested in whatever they had to say and would not think less of them for it. Often, as a segue into these more personal conversations, customers would

share what they knew about strip clubs, ranging from strippers' status as independent contractors to how much strippers were expected to tip DJ's and bouncers; my guess is that they assumed I was less familiar with the industry than they were because I am a woman.

If I were a male researcher, I suspect that most strippers would have been less willing to speak with me at length in the club without payment or meet with me outside of the club, as they may have been more wary of my intentions. Male customers routinely try and monopolize strippers' time without paying them and ask strippers to meet outside of the club, so a male researcher may have been lumped into one of those categories and rejected. The fact that I am white and middle-class may have impeded upon my ability to build rapport with working-class or non-white strippers and customers. However, my whiteness and middle-class status, arguably evident in my appearance and graduate student title, likely made managers more willing to grant me entry. In conversation with strippers, I was most aware of the fact that I have never worked as a stripper or other sex worker. Some strippers were likely unwilling to speak with me because of this, which I completely understand. I was honest about the fact that I had little experience with strip clubs prior to the project and had a great deal to learn about the industry. When asked, I shared how many strip clubs I'd visited, but I never sought to convey that I was expert on the subject of strip clubs. Ultimately, my identities affected the data collection process in ways I cannot fully account for, though I made an effort to be cognizant of my position, particularly my privilege, while in interaction with others.

### *Data and Methods*

For this project, data were collected through participant observation and interview. I interviewed 27 strippers who identified as female, all but two of whom were stripping at the time

of the interview.<sup>12</sup> Notably, one of the strippers I interviewed identified as female but was grappling with whether to identify as gender-nonconforming or gender fluid. Another stripper identified as female during the interview, though I later found out that they changed their identification to non-binary and gender fluid in the year or two following the interview. The majority of strippers I interviewed were white, working-class, young adults. A majority also identified with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual or straight, most commonly bisexual. Some did not claim a particular label but indicated they were not ‘strictly’ heterosexual, with phrases such as “I love people. So...I don’t know” and “It’s kind of all over the board, you know.” Additionally, I interviewed 18 customers who identified as male. A majority of customers I interviewed were white, middle-aged, and working-class. I also interviewed 11 staff members, with 6 identifying as female and 5 identifying as male. The majority were white, heterosexual, working-class, young adults. The data collected reflect this demographic makeup. Tables with the demographic information of participants have been included in Appendix A. To protect the confidentiality of study participants, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms, including customers and staff members. Additionally, all strip clubs and cities have been assigned pseudonyms, to further safeguard participants’ identities.

Interviews generally lasted an hour, with a few lasting 30-45 minutes and others over 2 hours. Interviews focused on interactions between strippers and customers. I always had an interview guide with me, but the exact questions I posed varied with each interview. For example, some strippers had never had a regular customer and had very little to say about regulars, while others spoke at length about customers they’d known for years.

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<sup>12</sup> Two women I interviewed in Maylin had recently quit stripping.

I met all but one of the male customers I interviewed at a strip club. I made initial contact with one male customer online because he had recently reviewed a Maylin strip club on Facebook. I contacted other customers via Facebook who had recently reviewed strip clubs in Hanksville, Princeton, or Maylin, but they did not respond or were unwilling to meet in person for a formal interview. Some were willing to answer a few questions via Facebook chat, but I considered that data supplemental. I made initial contact with several strippers through the Facebook pages they used for work, in which they used their stage names and made their occupation and employer public. In Princeton, I posted a handful of flyers in lingerie/sex shops which sold the high heels strippers are known for wearing. One stripper contacted me and agreed to an interview because they spotted a flyer. Other strippers I contacted through social media were only willing to answer a handful of questions via Facebook chat; I considered this data supplemental. I met a majority of staff members while at a club, but also made contact with a few via Facebook.

In addition to interviews, I engaged in 180 hours of ethnographic observation, through which I encountered innumerable strippers, customers, and staff members. Observation of these encounters was first recorded as jottings and then elaborated as field notes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). I took jottings on my phone; since plenty of customers and even strippers used their phones in the clubs, this did not set me apart. Only one club did not permit cell phones use beyond the entrance, so I had to enter the restroom each time I wanted to use my phone. Jottings were turned into detailed field notes within 24 hours of the observational session; often, the field notes were completed the same night or the morning after. In my observations, I paid particular attention to how strippers and customers interacted with one another, what customers said about strippers and other customers, and what strippers said about customers. Notably, I was never able

to observe the interactions between strippers and customers in private lap dance stalls<sup>13</sup> or private rooms, so I made sure to ask about these encounters in the interviews.

While engaged in observation, I typically sat at the bar. I did so for a number of reasons. For starters, I had greater opportunity at the bar to strike up conversation with customers, strippers, and staff members. Obviously, bartenders and servers were very accessible from that vantage point, and they would occasionally introduce me to strippers and customers. Additionally, I may have been regarded as strange for sitting near a customer on the main floor of a club, especially if the area was not crowded and plenty of other seats were available. At the bar, however, I could sit near a customer without attracting much attention, because customers often sat two to three seats away from one another, concentrated around an attractive bartender or in places with the best view of the pole or a sports game on TV. Sitting two to three stools away from a customer also put me in a good position to strike up conversation or listen to his exchanges with strippers and staff members. When strippers were not seated with a customer or performing on stage, they normally either returned to the dressing room or sat at the bar and surveyed the scene, checked their phone, or chatted with the staff. Both customers and strippers who were not seated at the bar often made trips to the bar for drinks or to chat with staff members they knew, which allowed me to introduce myself. Additionally, sitting near the stage regularly may have given strippers the impression that I was interested in them sexually, which could have made them less willing to meet with me outside of the club.

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<sup>13</sup> Some clubs permitted lap dances on the main floor, often for a reduced price.

### *Methodological Approach*

I utilized a grounded theory approach with this project. I did not enter the field with a specific hypothesis to test, but allowed findings to emerge through the process of data collection (Corbin and Strauss 2008). In analyzing my jottings and field notes, I uncovered and conceived of themes and theories inductively. Consequently, the nature and content of the field notes evolved over the course of the project as themes and theories became more apparent and precise (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Background research was conducted prior to entering the field and throughout the project. Given the previous research on sex workers, it was anticipated gender that would be central to the findings. Interview questions were designed to explore gendered meanings and experiences of strip clubs, though I never introduced the terms gender or masculinity outside of demographic questions; I only utilized these terms when and if an interviewee brought them up. Interview guides with specific questions can be found in Appendices B and C. Interview transcription occurred during and after field work. Data was first coded for general themes, then again line by line. The themes presented in this paper emerged during this process (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MEETING HIS NEEDS: EMOTIONAL INTIMACY & STRIPPER THERAPY

#### *Introduction*

Jet's Place, located in Hanksville, was the first strip club I patronized for this research and one of the clubs I patronized most frequently – well over two dozen times. Jet's is nothing like the strip clubs featured in movies and music videos. Customers are not brandishing cash to summon strippers to give them lap dances and they very infrequently throw stacks of cash on stage. On several occasions, strippers and customers alike described Jet's as a local bar, that happens to have poles and strippers. Within a few weeks of frequenting Jet's, the bouncers no longer checked my ID or charged me admission, the majority of service staff and strippers knew my name, and one of the bartenders stopped charging me for drinks. I was a regular of sorts.

When I first entered Jet's on the evening of Friday, May 5th, 2017, a handful of customers were seated at the bar and two were seated at tables in different corners of the club. None were seated around the stage. Throughout the night, very few customers sat at the stage, and never more than one at a time. Those that did approach the stage sat for a short period of time before returning to their seat at the bar. When I returned on Sunday, May 14<sup>th</sup>, roughly half of the customers gazed at the stripper on stage from their seat at the bar. The other half were paying no attention to the performance. Some were talking to the bartender, some were scrolling through their phones, and some were talking to a stripper.

When Lilly, a 22-year-old, Latinx, female stripper, exited the stage, she introduced herself; we spoke for roughly an hour before she introduced me to Craig. Craig looked to be white and claimed to be in his 60's. Straight away, Craig said he wasn't a "typical" customer so

he wasn't sure he could be of any help to me.<sup>14</sup> I replied that I wanted to speak with both typical and atypical customers. Craig said he was a former professor and a current therapist. He said that a number of strippers at Jet's had given him the phone numbers of their boyfriends so that he could call and help them.

I did not prompt Craig to start talking about why he patronized Jet's or strip clubs more generally. He started musing on the question himself. He said he initially came out of "curiosity." He admitted that "nudity" must have played a role. He said that he had not been in a relationship for some time and that "at my age" he would like to keep the "part of me alive" that appreciates the "female body." He concluded that coming to Jet's may have been about "titillation" at first, but now he comes to socialize. Eventually, he said that he would need to think more about why he comes. He wondered out loud if he was "part of the problem." I asked Craig what he meant by that. He said this was part of the sex industry and he wasn't sure if he was helping to sustain the sex industry and just making "these guys over here [gesturing to the managers sitting at a table to our left] rich." Craig said that, unlike other customers, he could distinguish reality from "fantasy." He said that the "fantasy" was gone for him and that he does not pay for lap dances. Craig claimed later in the conversation that the best strippers will make "eye contact" with you during their performance and make you believe "you're the only man in the room," even in a room of two dozen people. Evidently, Craig did not consider this part of the "fantasy."

From the time Craig arrived, to the time we parted ways, I did not see Craig so much as glance at any of the strippers performing on stage. He sat at the bar, ordered water<sup>15</sup>, spoke with

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<sup>14</sup> Quite a few customers told me that they were not 'typical' customers and were unsure of how much help they could be.

<sup>15</sup> Craig identified as an addict and said that he only ordered water.

Felicity for a few moments, and then spoke with me for nearly an hour, all while facing away from the stage. This conversation with Craig on my second visit to Jet's marked the point in which I realized that patronizing strip clubs is not always or exclusively about sexual stimulation.

### *Literature Review*

A considerable number of researchers contend that not all men patronize sex workers seeking only sexual gratification or a voyeuristic experience (Allison 1994; Birch, Baldry, & Hartley 2017; Frank 1998, 2002; Hoang 2015; Huysamen & Boonzaier 2015; Milrod & Weitzer 2012; Wardlow 2004; Wood 2000). However, the role of strippers in relation to their customers is frequently narrowly defined in social scientific literature as providing an opportunity for sexual arousal through physical stimulation or voyeurism. For example, Deshotels & Forsyth (2006) stress that female strippers “stimulate the sexual fantasies of patrons for financial remuneration” (p. 226). Schweitzer (2001) contends, “The best strippers...become a feminine ideal in which natural sentience and vitality have been replaced with a monolithic eroticism serving male fantasy” (p. 68). Enck and Preston (1988) similarly suggest that “The successful waitress-dancer manipulates the sexual fantasies of her customers through the creation of ‘counterfeit intimacy’ (Boles & Garbin 1977), the illusion that sexual intimacy is possible if the customer has the seductive finesse to gain her participation” (Enck & Preston 1988: 370). The list goes on. If, however, patrons do solicit the services of sex workers for reasons outside of sexual arousal, then the role of a stripper is not nearly so limited.

Based on the survey responses of 309 men who procured sexual services in New South Wales, Birch, Baldry, and Hartley (2017) reported that the most common reasons men cited for patronizing sex workers were as follows: thrill/excitement, the attractiveness of the sex worker,

being single, being lonely, and the lack of responsibility involved in purchasing sex. Of this larger quantitative sample, 13 men agreed to be interviewed. The main reasons they cited for soliciting sex revolved around gaining self-confidence and experiencing closeness to women. Birch, Baldry, and Hartley (2017) concluded that “the purchasing of sex is not just to have physical intercourse. Men often are seeking an emotional and intimate experience” (p. 116).

Earlier research confirms that clients do often desire intimacy within their relationships with sex workers. Huysamen and Boonzaier (2015) interviewed 14 male clients of female sex workers in South Africa and found that participants commonly sought intimacy as well as “the power to choose any woman they wanted to have sex with” (p. 547), in addition to “sex without commitment” (p. 544) and sex ‘cheaper’ than casual sex, in terms of anticipated investment of time, energy, and money. Milrod and Weitzer (2012) analyzed 2,442 postings on TheEroticReview.com, a publicly accessible website devoted to client reviews of sex workers and discussions of commercial sex. Milrod and Weitzer found that a significant proportion of clients express a desire for emotional intimacy in client–provider relationships.

Wood (2000) engaged in ethnographic research in two New England strip clubs and interviewed twelve female strippers. Wood concluded that men patronize strip clubs for a voyeuristic experience as well as “to talk to them [strippers], in a world removed from the reality of complex, multidimensional identities and lives” (2000: 17). Wood maintained that the most well-paid strippers are proficient at “conveying feelings of intimacy, interest, and desire for her customers” (p. 12). According to the strippers interviewed, making customers feel desired is key to generating revenue.

According to Frank (2002, 2005), regular patronage of strip clubs is motivated by a range of desires, including “a desire to publicly display a particular ‘masculine’ self, free of obligations

and commitments, a desire for ‘adventure’ by mingling with Others who are seen as ‘wild’ or visiting spaces believed to be ‘dangerous,’ a desire to feel desirable (at least in fantasy), or a desire to have a sexualized interaction with a woman that does not involve the vulnerability of actual sexual activity” (Frank 2002: 118). Embedded in several of these desires is a search for intimacy, be it physical or emotional. According to Frank (2005), “The regulars gave me many reasons behind their presence in the clubs which implied that the *illusion* [original emphasis] of intimacy provided by the interaction was more desirable than an outside relationship, sexual or otherwise” (p. 493).

Erickson and Tewksbury (2000) engaged in covert participant observation in two top-tier strip clubs in a major Midwestern city and presented a typology of strip club customers, including demographic characteristics, behaviors, and perceived motivations for patronage. Erickson and Tewksbury concluded that customers *do* pursue connection and companionship through strip clubs, however, these customers are in the minority, comprising just 20% of strip club clientele. According to Erickson and Tewksbury, 80% of men patronize strip clubs in pursuit of a “voyeuristic/pornographic experience” (p. 290), with little concern for being “stigmatized or sanctioned for openly expressing their sexual desire and objection of women” (p. 290).

Outside of intimacy, researchers have documented additional reasons why men patronize sex workers. Allison (1994) engaged in participant observation in a high-end Japanese hostess club and interviewed subjects ranging from the manager of a hostess club to a sex counselor. According to Allison, hostess club customers seek to be “relieved of [their] everyday persona[s] – the one[s] to which various expectations are attached” (1994: 21). Rather, customers long to

see themselves as a *sukebei*, a lewd and lustful man. Hostesses, in turn, project an image of the customer as powerful and desirable, reassuring him of his “masculine worth” (p. 25).

Hoang (2015) engaged in participant observation in four hostess bars representing different niche markets in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and interviewed clients, hostesses, and madams. According to Hoang, Western men in the two lowest-paying markets sought to remake masculine selves “modeled on older tropes of Western global power” (p. 60). Conversely, local Vietnamese and other Asian businessmen and Viet Kieus sought to assert masculinities rooted in “the rising prominence of non-Western nations in East and Southeast Asia.” (p. 60).

Wardlow (2004) examined the practices of “passenger women” among the Huli in Papua New Guinea, women who engage in sexual relations with numerous men and typically receive money in exchange. According to Wardlow, Huli men maintain that they occasionally pay for sexual contact with passenger women in order to engage in nontraditional sexual practices that they are reluctant to request from their wives. In lasting relationships with passenger women, Huli men pay for “a kind of physical and emotional intimacy that they say is not always possible in marriage” (Wardlow 2004: 1028). More broadly, however, Wardlow claimed that Huli men pay passenger women in order to assert a masculinity they associate with being modern, in which men can engage in sexual relations with women without being entangled in kinship obligations.

I do not contend that sexual stimulation and/or voyeurism never factor into customers’ decisions to patronize strip clubs. However, based upon prior research, customers’ motivations are seemingly not so limited in scope. It was never my intension to catalog all possible types of customers and all of their possible motivations for visiting strip clubs. I recognize that customers, as well as the impetuses for their behavior, are diverse and dynamic. A customer’s patronage may be motivated by multiple forces, not all of which they may be conscious of, and those forces

may change over time, throughout the years or over the course of a single interaction with a stripper. However, two themes regarding patrons' motivations were especially prominent in my interviews with male customers as well as my observations and interviews with female strippers: customers patronize strip clubs in search of intimacy and, relatedly, stripper "therapy." Strippers, in turn, routinely engage in practices aimed at fulfilling these desires which are not necessarily sexual. Thus, I contend that strip clubs provide more than an opportunity for sexual arousal through voyeurism or physical stimulation; strip clubs serve as a "safe space" for some men to experience human connection and expose their insecurities and vulnerabilities without compromising their masculinity.

Notably, I recognize that conceptions and enactments of masculinity vary by race, class, ability, nationality, sexuality, etc. (Connell 1995). Therefore, I regard these findings as especially, if not exclusively, applicable to white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, natural-born citizen, working- and middle-class male customers. The vast majority of the customers I interviewed fit this description, and though I cannot attest to the demographics of all customers I observed or informally spoke with, the majority presented as white, working- or middle-class males, most of whom were likely able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, natural-born U.S. citizens. However, I should note that the men of color I observed and interviewed did not noticeably deviate from these findings. In addition, I acknowledge that the labor practices of strippers may vary depending upon their location in the social hierarchy, though I found no evidence of that in my research.

### *In Search of Intimacy*

A significant share of customers acknowledged that they sought intimacy in strip clubs, specifically emotional intimacy with women. Gaia (2002) reviewed literature conceptualizing

emotional intimacy within interpersonal relations and found that emotional intimacy is most commonly defined as consisting of at least some degree of the following qualities:

“(a) Self-disclosure (a sharing of personal information), (b) Emotional Expression (telling one another about the concern, worry or affection felt); (c) Support (experiencing physical and emotional support, especially during times of crisis); (d) Trust (feeling confident that the other person will not expose personal information); (e) Physical Intimacy or Touch (e.g., hugs, kisses, hand-holding, etc.). Feeling "touched" emotionally may also involve sexual contact but can; (f) Mutuality (the experience of intimacy seems to be described as a shared experience resulting from an interaction between two people). This often involves the removal of emotional and physical boundaries; and (g) Closeness...However, it seems that people consider closeness to be a definite antecedent of intimacy” (2002: 160).

Gaia claims that not all of these dimensions are “simultaneously necessary for intimacy to be experienced within a relationship” (p. 160); however, these dimensions are common across social scientific conceptions of emotional intimacy experienced within sexual and non-sexual relationships.

Customers pursuing intimacy within strip clubs were disproportionately single, divorced, or unhappily married and over the age of 30. Both men and women generally lose friends as they age (Gillespie, Lever, Frederick, & Royce 2015), which may factor into the age of these customers, as they may have fewer opportunities to experience emotional intimacy with friends.

A majority of these customers explicitly tied their lack of a fulfilling romantic relationship to their desire for intimacy. Peter, a 47-year-old, white, male regular customer at Allure

Gentleman’s Club in Hanksville, said the following of strip clubs:

Definitely, for me, part of the deal is, you just get to hang out and be cool and talk to a girl about whatever you want to. And they pretend to care, I guess. I don’t know. But it’s not just, “Wow boobies.” You know, I’m just trying to hang out and have someone to talk to. I’m not trying to say, even though my marriage was bad in some ways, the good parts I miss like just having someone to talk to and you know get back scratches and stuff like that...All my female friends are all married so I don’t really have a lot of choices...I’m on dating sites, I talk to these girls, they never actually want to go out, and if they do it’s once or twice and [groans] I don’t know what they are looking for, but it

doesn't seem to be me. And it's like, you know what, I'll just pay girls to like me [laughs].

According to Peter, he did not patronize Allure simply to gaze upon women's bare breasts;<sup>16</sup> rather, he appreciated having "someone to talk to." Peter acknowledged that, while his marriage was imperfect, he missed the companionship his ex-wife provided. Peter then lamented his inability to find a romantic and/or sexual partner. He had seemingly abandoned hope that he would find a partner via online dating and concluded, with his usual self-deprecating humor, that he would "pay girls to like me" instead.

Notably, I witnessed Peter on multiple occasions engaged in prolonged conversation with strippers, massaging the shoulders/back of strippers, and sitting or standing with his arm around a stripper's shoulders or waist. On one occasion, Peter massaged a stripper's temples because she had a headache; on another, a stripper who didn't feel well buried her head in Peter's shoulder at several points throughout the evening. Moreover, the conversations that I overheard or participated in involving Peter and one or more strippers were all of a relatively personal nature. These interactions affirm that Peter sought out and, on some level, was able to achieve emotional intimacy with multiple women at Allure.

Later in his interview, Peter acknowledged that, because all of his friends are married, he has few opportunities to spend time with them. Peter stated,

You can get stuck in a rut pretty easy and end up sitting at home every night and this gets me out of the house, keeps the, I don't know, keeps me from getting sad. Because when you sit at home every day of your life, you get sad. And it's something to do by yourself. You don't have to have someone to go with. To me, it feels too weird to go to a movie by yourself or go to a baseball game by yourself. Clubs are different.

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<sup>16</sup> As with all strip clubs in Hanksville, Allure Gentlemen's Club was a topless club that did not permit strippers to remove their underwear.

According to Peter, Allure Gentleman's Club provided him with an opportunity to venture outside of his home by himself. Peter felt uncomfortable going to a movie theater or baseball game by himself but did not feel "weird" going to a strip club alone, perhaps because it is quite common for individual men to visit strip clubs by themselves. As a consequence of Peter's friends being preoccupied with their families and Peter being unable to establish a romantic and/or sexual relationship in the wake of his divorce, Peter sought intimacy, including physical touch and personal conversation, within strip clubs, as well as a refuge from loneliness and depression. And because Peter was comfortable patronizing Allure alone, intimacy was more accessible to him at Allure than other locations for leisure activities.

Similarly, Jason, a 56-year-old, white, male regular customer in Hanksville, acknowledged that he sought out companionship at Jet's:

I've gained some comradery with women who would never speak to me outside the club. See, if I'm talking to a girl like I talked to the girls at the club, I'm not talking, just talking, I'd be the dirty old man hitting on the young girls. That isn't the point you know. You work at night basically alone. You need to talk to people. You know? I don't know. I have fun. I've made a lot of friends.

Jason expressed a need for human interaction and a desire to speak with beautiful, youthful women whom he believed "would never speak to me outside the club." Jason claimed that he would be perceived as a "dirty old man" if he attempted to socialize with such women outside of the club but did not believe that to be the prevailing perception at Jet's. Jason, who never spoke of his wife or marriage in especially positive terms, later said, "I've been married 30 years. Attention from any woman...is awesome." Jason frequented Jet's for female attention and companionship, which he believed to be lacking and unable to attain elsewhere.

Through my observations, I noted Jason regularly engaged in prolonged conversation with female strippers as well as female staff members. I overheard and participated in multiple

conversations in which Jason disclosed personal information and/or demonstrated prior knowledge of the personal lives of strippers and staff members. Jason often hugged the strippers and staff members he was closest with, occasionally provided back rubs, and sometimes stood with his arm around the shoulder or waist of a female staff member. Through the “friends” Jason had made in Jet’s, he was able to achieve a degree of emotional intimacy.

Regular and non-regular customers alike were able to find female companionship through strip clubs, though the level of intimacy regulars achieved with strippers was generally greater. Unlike non-regular customers, however, regulars were able to find community through strip clubs, upon establishing relatively close ties to multiple strippers and staff members. Greg, the former police chief of a village near Maylin, informed me he had been going to Buck Wild Cabaret since the day it opened. He said that the bartender was his close friend and had caught the garter at his wedding. Every time I saw Greg, he was standing at the end of the bar near the entry to the stripper’s locker-room; nearly every stripper who entered the locker-room at the start of their shift greeted Greg with a hug or a “Hello!” or at the very least touched his arm as they passed. Greg nearly exclusively faced away from the stage on the nights I saw him. He informed me that he did not come to see the strippers perform or to purchase lap dances or private rooms. Greg said that Buck Wild was essentially his “local bar.” Greg had found a sense of community at Buck Wild, or a feeling of belonging to a group.

John, a single, 63-year-old, white, male customer, has been patronizing Uptown Dolls in Princeton for 26 years. Regarding the community he’d found at Uptown Dolls, John said,

I get there, maybe, about once every three to six months. But it’s like a break. And you can tell, I get to know the people who work there, the managers, and the bartenders. [James], a great bartender, I forget, his son has Hodgkin’s disease or something, so I always take care of him, financially. Then the nice thing is, when you’re away that long, all of a sudden someone’s like, “Hey, look who’s here!” [said in an upbeat tone of voice].

John was friendly with a number of the staff and strippers at Uptown Dolls. Throughout our interview, he shared personal information of strippers and staff at Uptown Dolls, including a stripper's age and birthday, the fact that one bartender was adopted, the native country of a stripper and the number of languages she spoke, the college major of another stripper, the age of the champagne room manager's child, etc. John seemed quite pleased that he knew so much about the staff and strippers of Uptown Dolls and sought to showcase that knowledge. Moreover, John appreciated being recognized at Uptown Dolls and having staff members and strippers express delight or excitement at his presence in the club.

Customers who found community in strip clubs did so over a considerable length of time, by first developing a degree of emotional intimacy with multiple strippers and staff members. Though community is distinct from intimacy, both fulfill significant emotional needs which may be difficult for some customers to satisfy outside of the strip club. For men in search of intimacy or community, strip clubs may serve as ideal sites for cultivating these connections, not only because strippers are incentivized to satisfy customers' desires, but also because men commonly patronize strip clubs alone. Consequently, some men may feel more comfortable seeking intimacy or community in strip clubs than they would elsewhere in the company of friends, relatives or colleagues. Additionally, for men who are retired or work irregularly, as in the cases of Greg and John, feeling as though one belongs in a space and to a group may be especially meaningful.

A fair share of strippers acknowledged that customers like Peter, Jason, Greg, and John, patronized strip clubs in search of more than sexual gratification or a voyeuristic experience. Thus, many of these strippers consciously cultivated intimacy in their interactions with

customers, which subsequently convinced customers that their relationship, however brief, was exceptional and enjoyable for both parties.

To foster a sense of intimacy in their interactions with customers, strippers employed a range of practices. For instance, across Hanksville, Princeton, and Maylin, I observed strippers physically touching customers while conversing with them; this took the form of strippers running their hands through customers' hair, sitting on customers' laps, placing their hands on customers' legs, touching customers' arms, etc. While engaged in observation at Allure Gentleman's Club in Hanksville, Vegas, who'd been a stripping for over 8 years, introduced me to her younger sister, Luna, who had recently been hired as a shot girl<sup>17</sup>. Luna asked her sister for advice on securing tips from customers. Vegas instructed her to ask customers questions about their lives and to touch their leg, arm, or shoulder while engaging them in conversation. Vegas said that if I were a customer, she would be facing me, leaning in, with her hand on my thigh and her eyes locked onto mine; she demonstrated for Luna. For Vegas, establishing intimacy through physical touch and close physical proximity ensured customer satisfaction.

Demi, a 28-year-old, white, female stripper at Jet's Place in Hanksville, utilized physical touch and eye contact during lap dances to build intimacy. According to Demi,

So, when I do [lap] dances...I'm able to create an intimate setting...I'll tell them "Let's go somewhere private." But like in the lap dance area, my lap dances I guess are more intimate than just like, "Here's my boobs, here's my butt, whatever." ...But to me, there's this connection thing where like I'll look a guy in the eye which most girls I guess won't. I've had people comment, "Whoa, you really look at me." And I'm like "Yeah. You're here too. Hi." ...But to me it's a lot like sex. So, I just kind of translated that, so it makes it intimate because it's more...like physical touching and even just touching your arms or I'll put my hands in their hair or play with their ears. Being back there and not trying to be sexy. I giggle. I'll talk. I'll make jokes as if I would as if I were with a partner.

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<sup>17</sup> Shot girls are typically employed by middle- and top-tier strip clubs. They carry trays of alcoholic shots and ask customers seated on the main floor if they would like to purchase a shot. Shot girls may wear lingerie or a staff uniform, depending upon the club's guidelines and the shot girl's personal preferences.

Rather than suggesting to customers that they enter the room reserved for lap dances, Demi proposes exiting the main floor for more privacy, highlighting the intimacy of the interaction, as opposed to the widely available, monetized service of a lap dance. Once in a lap dance stall, Demi looks into her customer's eyes, giggles, caresses their arms, makes jokes, runs her hands through their hair, etc., to create a more "intimate setting" that feels different from generic lap dances.

Outside of physical touch, close physical proximity, and eye contact, strippers hastened the development of camaraderie or closeness with customers by discussing customers' interests. Regularly, I overheard strippers asking customers about their occupation, their children, their latest vacation, their hobby, etc. Demi, for instance, considered herself well-suited for stripping because of her knack for identifying and discussing customers' interests:

...that's why [stripping is] the perfect job for me because I can find something interesting in everybody. I've always been someone who is like I have a lot of interests. I can connect. Well, you like sports; cool, let's talk sports. Or you like history. And a lot of people that come in there that don't have high like social skills, they have a lot of interests, but they don't know how to breach that subject. So, I'll sit there and talk to them and I'll be like, "Oh, you like that?" And the minute you find something that someone is intrigued by and they are so excited to find someone to like, "Oh you like playing this video game too? That's awesome!" And just sit there for two hours and you're like their new best friend because they're like "Finally someone that I can like talk to!"

According to Demi, customers, particularly less socially adept customers, appreciate finding someone who shares an interest of theirs. By finding a common interest, Demi is able to develop rapport with customers. Vegas similarly sought to connect with patrons through conversation of shared interests. To build her conversational repertoire, Vegas read the newspaper every morning and checked various news sites so that she could discuss current events with customers. She said that even though she is not interested in golf, for instance, she can discuss the sport with customers and sound as though she knows all about it. She said that this ability to speak on a

myriad of topics that may interest customers distinguishes her from other strippers at Allure and garners her a good deal of business.

Strippers, including Demi and Vegas, often utilized physical touch, close physical proximity, eye contact, and/or conversation driven by customers' lives and interests to satisfy customers' desire for intimacy. Doing so convinces customers that they are not 'just another customer' and that their relationship is significant or special in some way, which yields monetary reward for strippers and justifies customers' continued patronage.

Outside of working hours, strippers routinely seek to fulfill customers' need for intimacy by meeting or communicating with customers outside of the strip club.<sup>18</sup> Several strippers spoke of calling, texting, and/or Facebook messaging their customers, particularly their regulars, in between shifts. Some contacted customers purely to invite them to the club and/or inform them when they were working next. Others contacted customers, not to share their work schedules, but to socialize. Lexie, a 28-year-old, white, female stripper at Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area, joked that "Every single stripper has business cards stacked up to here [gestures above her head], like a baseball card collection."

Lilly, a 22-year-old, Latinx, female stripper at Jet's in Hanksville, recalled utilizing a designated work phone to text a regular when she was leaving for work as well as flirt with him occasionally. Lilly cut ties with this customer after he spotted her at her day job, for she feared the possibility of a "dangerous situation." Cherri, a 29-year-old, Black, female stripper at Devil's Point in Maylin, stated:

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<sup>18</sup> Importantly, strippers oftentimes purchased burner phones or established separate social media profiles under their 'stripper name' so that they could better maintain boundaries with customers and ensure their safety. Furthermore, the strippers I spoke with were generally quite selective with the customers they chose to meet outside of the club; oftentimes, they'd known these customers for months if not years.

It's to where, right now I'm in [Midwestern city], there's a club here I could go work at right now, and I would have people there waiting there for me, waiting to see me. I leave that impression. It's all about...it depends on how you take your job or how serious you are. I'll call them, I'll text them, outside of necessarily seeing them outside of work, because that's not always safe. But I do try to make it like a job. Really like a job and take it seriously. Because it's like if you can entertain them throughout the week, you're going to have that guaranteed customer possibly for life.

Cherri calls and texts customers "to entertain them throughout the week" and maintain her relationships with them, so that these individuals will visit her whenever she picks up shifts at their local strip club. Both Lilly and Cherri communicated via phone calls and/or text messages with customers outside of the strip club to ensure close, personal ties as well a steady income.

Among the strippers who met in-person with customers outside of the club, was Nova, a 26-year-old, white, former female stripper at Ruby's Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area. Nova said of one of her regulars, "I'd gone out to dinner with him a few times. I'd taken him to dinner with all my friends before, that were also strippers that knew him from the club." Nova maintained contact with this customer for roughly five years. Similarly, Kiera, a 24-year-old, black, female stripper at The Edge in the Hanksville metropolitan area, shared that she'd gone to dinner several times with a regular of hers whom she has known for two and a half years.

Frank (2005) observed that the "most successful and profitable dancers [strippers] developed ways of convincing each regular that he was special through personalized contact of some sort," including "cell phone calls or lunch dates" (p. 496). By socializing with customers outside of the club, strippers can sustain the level of intimacy they've achieved with customers even when they are not technically 'on the clock.' They can reassure customers, particularly regulars, that they are not 'just another customer,' whether or not that is the case.

According to Schweitzer (2001), "The stripper's performance depends on the implication of distance and inaccessibility.... Less distance means greater intimacy, and intimacy is the least

of what this show is about. Intimacy is an image destroyer” (p. 67). My findings contradict this argument. Surely, plenty of customers do not seek intimacy within strip clubs. However, plenty *do* desire intimate interactions with strippers who are not distant or inaccessible. In such cases, the effectiveness of a stripper’s performance depends upon the fostering of intimacy.

By cultivating intimacy in their interactions, strippers encourage customers to believe that their relationship is special or exceptional. Prior research (Davidson 1998; Egan 2006; Milrod & Weitzer 2012) suggests that clients of sex workers oftentimes believe this to be the case. Egan (2003), for example, engaged in participant observation in two strip clubs in New England and found that, as a consequence of strippers’ labor, “male regulars come to believe that dancers really do care about and want to have a relationship with them” (p. 118). Similarly, Davidson (1998) interviewed women and children involved in prostitution as well as clients of prostitutes across nine countries and concluded that “Clients often want to believe that, although the prostitute is a paid actor, in *their* [original emphasis] particular case she enjoys her work and derives sexual and/or emotional satisfaction from her encounter with them” (p. 158-9).

John serves as a fine example of this. Again, John had been patronizing Uptown Dolls in Princeton for 26 years. John said,

I'll tell you, it's gotta be a rough life, I swear...[Other customers] they say horrible things, they do horrible things, and I'm the sort...I've found that I just, it's funny, I'll introduce the ladies to something like tantra, or tantric techniques, these very gentle touching techniques. And they think that's awesome, because typically you get these guys who are just loaded in booze, and they just want to paw all over it. So, I'd say, "Have you ever had your eyebrows massaged?"...“Or would you like to do synchronized breathing?”

According to John, strippers enjoy interacting with him as opposed to other customers who behave inappropriately and drunkenly “paw all over” them, because he introduces these women to tantric techniques which they allegedly appreciate. Later in the interview, John spoke of purchasing two hours in the champagne room with Kai, a former stripper and current champagne

room manager at Uptown Dolls. He introduced her to “the whole tantra thing, tantra sex, and she really enjoyed it. I could just tell.”

A number of customers I spoke with, regulars and non-regulars included, expressed that their interactions with strippers were exceptional and enjoyable for all involved. Though this may be the case for some customers, particularly regulars, other customers may simply draw this conclusion as a consequence of strippers consciously fostering intimacy in their interactions with customers.

Strippers, recognizing that customers commonly desire intimacy within strip clubs, provide male patrons with a means of experiencing emotional intimacy within the confines of a masculinized, hypersexualized space, wherein their masculinity is unlikely to be called into question. I refer to these environments as masculinized and hypersexualized because strip clubs primarily cater to cisgender, heterosexual men<sup>19</sup> and feature women in various stages of undress who move in sexualized ways on stage, during lap dances, and in private rooms, and at times talk about sex with customers. Given that emotional expressiveness is generally considered inconsistent with masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), many male patrons may feel uncomfortable exposing their emotional and relational needs in other settings, making strippers’ labor surrounding the promotion of intimacy especially significant.

Furthermore, as Frank (2005) suggests, strippers provide male patrons with the opportunity to interact with women most would be unable to interact with elsewhere, “for a number of reasons – lack of attractiveness, age differences, class differences (in either direction), availability, and the women’s willingness to interact outside of the clubs, for example” (p. 492).

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<sup>19</sup> There are exceptions to this rule, including gay strip clubs which feature male performers and cater to a male audience and male strip clubs which feature female performers and cater to a female audience. However, the most common club is a female strip club, featuring female dancers and catering to a male audience.

Substantial research suggests that the sociocultural association between heterosexuality and normative masculinity remains strong (Anderson 2008a; Bridges 2014; Pascoe 2007; Skelton 2001). By engaging with a personable, beautiful, scantily clad woman who is incentivized to facilitate intimacy, customers can affirm their heterosexual identity and desire, and thus their masculinity.

### *Stripper Therapy*

Throughout my observations in Hanksville, Princeton, and Maylin, I overheard customers share details of their personal lives with strippers, including that which was troubling them. Customers detailed everything from the circumstances of their divorce to their frustrations with online dating. In fact, a fair share of strippers compared stripping to counseling or therapy. Alexis, a 21-year-old, white, female stripper at Jet's Place in Hanksville, was one such person. Alexis stated, "I feel like every customer that I've ever come into contact with, all they want is for someone to listen to them. They want to be heard. And it's a lot easier to talk to a complete stranger about your life problems than it is a close friend." According to Alexis, strip clubs afford customers the opportunity to divulge highly personal information to a stranger, and in her experience, customers seize this opportunity and share their "life problems" with strippers.<sup>20</sup>

Shay, a white, 32-year-old, female stripper at Sapphire Gentleman's Club in Princeton,<sup>21</sup> claimed, "Sometimes it's kind of like we're their therapist or their counselor. You get guys going through a breakup, guys going divorces, guys who have been married for a really long time and they'll basically just tell you they are sick of their wife, that happens a lot." Shay equated

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<sup>20</sup> I recognize that few strip club customers are likely seeking genuine therapy, but a pop culture understanding of what therapy is.

<sup>21</sup> I observed fewer strippers providing "stripper therapy" in top-tier clubs like Sapphire Gentleman's Club. However, fewer customers congregated around the bar in top-tier clubs, which is where I often overheard such conversations in bottom- and middle-tier clubs. Moreover, customers in top-tier clubs may be more likely to pay for private rooms in which to have those conversations.

strippers to therapists or counselors for customers who are oftentimes experiencing difficulties or disappointments in their romantic relationships. Relatedly, Melanie, a stripper I met at 4Play Cabaret in the metropolitan area of Maylin, said of her work, “What makes me good at my job is my ability to *listen* [original emphasis]. A lot of patrons just want someone to talk to who will listen to their problems. We are like therapists.” According to Melanie, her knack for listening comes in handy as patrons regularly wish to speak about their personal problems.

One evening at Ruby’s Cabaret in Maylin metropolitan area, I overheard a customer tell a Black female stripper that he was experiencing relationship problems and that she was taking his mind off of them. When the stripper left the bar to perform on stage, the customer turned to me. He introduced himself as Axel. Axel looked to be white and in his late 30’s to late 40’s. Axel asked if I was a stripper and I replied that I was not. He did not ask why I was in the club. Instead, he told me that he and his wife are separated and likely divorcing. He said that he was at home “crying” and sulking and decided that visiting a strip club was “better than being depressed.” According to Axel, he told his wife with conviction that he wanted a divorce. He said that he felt “confident” in the moment but did not feel “confident” after the fact. So, Axel and his friend Dave headed to Ruby’s Cabaret. Axel went on to detail how he’d met his wife, how his wife had once been a stripper, how his wife’s stripping had affected their relationship, and finally how his wife’s growing religiosity had affected their relationship. He even showed me pictures of his wife and spoke about how beautiful she was. He said that his wife would regret her decision to leave him and that it was she who had changed, not him. Eventually, Axel left the bar and sat down at the stage. The stripper on stage ended her performance early to lay in

front of Axel to talk to him.<sup>22</sup> When Axel returned to his seat at the bar, he told me that he had asked the stripper whether she was supporting her family or paying for schooling. He then told her about his impending divorce. Axel concluded that he had spent “hundreds of thousands of dollars” on his wife but could spend “dollars” to get “love” at Ruby’s instead. Judging by our conversation and Axel’s interactions with strippers that evening, Axel was eager to talk about his separation from his wife and found women willing to listen at the strip club.

Knowing that customers routinely seek to disclose personal information, strippers will not uncommonly assume a role comparable to that of a counselor or therapist, by listening attentively and offering encouragement, reassurance, or advice. And as with licensed counselors and therapists, these relationships are oftentimes not reciprocal. Nova, a 26-year-old, white, former female stripper at Ruby’s Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, spoke to me about a customer of hers who was married, had a child, and was a partner at a consultant firm. According to Nova,

He wasn’t a sleaze ball. He wasn’t somebody who would touch my vagina or, as a matter of fact, I danced for him on one occasion over a five-year regular relationship. I didn’t dance for him. We tried to dance for each other one time and I was like, “This is really weird” and he was like, “This *is* [original emphasis] really weird.” Like okay. It was definitely a therapist relationship. He wanted to call me, and he wanted me to make him feel better and, in return, I would get money for that. So, based on how long or whatever problem he was going through, that would determine how much money I could ask for, how much he offered me at the end of this long conversation.

Nova later stated that she rarely saw this customer at Ruby’s; instead, he would call and text her to discuss his personal life. Nova’s relationship with this particular customer was non-traditional in that he was uncomfortable with and/or uninterested in receiving lap dances from her. Their

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<sup>22</sup> I regularly observed strippers ending their performance and sitting or lying on the stage to speak with a customer, particularly when clubs were scarcely populated with customers.

relationship was *not* unconventional, however, in that he shared his fears and misfortunes with Nova, and she raised his spirits in exchange for payment. As an example, Nova noted during our interview that one conversation with this customer revolved around him worrying that it might be his fault that his child Googled “boobs.”

Claire, a 26-year-old, white, female stripper at Uptown Dolls in Princeton, similarly assumed a role comparable to that of counselor for a customer. Claire said of one of her regular customers, “...my only local one [regular], he lives in [suburb of Princeton], is divorced, works for a bank. He likes to drink a lot. We kind of met because...he needed somebody to listen and he was bummed out about his divorce and stuff and I did really well with like counseling him.” A number of strippers, including Claire, spoke of listening to and advising customers who wished to discuss issues related to their romantic and sexual lives, including dating difficulties, divorce, etc.

Though select customers do solicit strippers’ opinions and advice when disclosing personal information, strippers must consider the repercussions of being forthcoming. Harlow, a 19-year-old, white, female stripper at Allure Gentleman’s Club in Hanksville, faced the following dilemma with Peter, a regular of hers: “He will come in saying how he’ll be on this date, he’ll be on that date, that it fails, why does it fail? I obviously can’t straight up tell him why it fails 'cause it would be rude and he would take it harshly and he would probably never come back and spend money on me.” Peter repeatedly lamented his dating failures to Harlow and requested her opinion; however, Harlow feared that being honest with him would mean losing a reliable source of income, so she ensured that her responses would not displease him.

Prior research (Egan 2003, 2005, 2006; Frank 2002, 2003) indicates that female strippers provide emotional recognition and support to male customers. Frank (2002), for example,

suggests that, “Stoic masculinity...can prevent emotional sharing in male friendships” (p. 118), thus encouraging men to rely upon women for emotional support. Frank maintains that female strippers provide such a service. According to Frank, many strippers joke about being therapists and “explicitly understand their jobs to be about boosting a man’s ego by convincing him that he is desirable, masculine, and successful” (p. 119). According to Egan (2006), strippers “mix eroticism and the therapeutic service of listening to a customer’s problems” (p. 131), thus supplying “overworked, lonely, and upper-middle-class men guaranteed relationality and eroticism” (p. 131). I contend, however, that the provision of therapeutic services within strip clubs fills another function, beyond relationality and improved self-image or self-esteem.

By assuming the role of ‘counselor’ for customers, strippers enable customers to express a wide range of emotions, often in relation to that which compromises their masculinity, including rejection from women. Expressing oneself in this way is generally considered incompatible with ideals of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005); however, as previously stated, doing so in such a hypersexualized, masculinized space to beautiful women in lingerie<sup>23</sup>, who are incentivized to sympathize with the customer, ensures that the customer’s masculinity is not compromised. Moreover, through receiving “stripper therapy,” customers are able to form emotionally intimate bonds with strippers, bonds which they be lacking in other arenas of their lives.

Prior research confirms that male clients fulfill their emotional needs via sex work. Lucas (2005) conducted interviews with 30 female prostitutes in the middle- to upper-levels of the profession in the United States from mid-1996 through mid-1997. According to several of the

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<sup>23</sup> Even in full nude clubs, or strip clubs which permit strippers to remove all clothing, strippers are typically not nude when conversing with a customer at the bar or on the main floor.

women Lucas interviewed, for many of their clients, “sex is the pretext for the visit, and the real need is emotional” (p. 531). These women recognized that they were capable not only of fulfilling a client’s sexual desires, but making them “feel happy, more confident, relaxed, and less alone” (p. 534). As with other sex workers, strippers can provide a much-needed emotional outlet for customers and improve their emotional well-being. However, they also have good reason not to alienate or anger a customer by providing feedback that is critical of the customer or contrary to the customer’s desires. Being honest with a customer may mean losing out on hundreds if not thousands of dollars, depending upon the strength of the stripper-customer relationship.

### *Discussion*

Not all men in this study patronized strip clubs seeking only sexual stimulation or release. Rather, male customers commonly desired emotional intimacy within strip clubs. Select customers who achieved a degree of intimacy with multiple strippers and staff members at a single strip club were able to find a sense of community as well. Many strippers acknowledged these motivations and, in turn, consciously cultivated intimacy in their interactions with customers. Strippers accomplished this by utilizing an array of practices, including physical touch, close physical proximity, eye contact, conversation driven by customers’ lives and interests, communication via cell phones or social media, and/or meeting outside of the club. These practices assured customers that they were not ‘just another customer’ and that their relationship, however brief, was exceptional and enjoyable for all involved. Ultimately, strippers provided male patrons with a means of experiencing emotional intimacy in a space where their masculinity was unlikely to be called into question.

Additionally, it was not uncommon for customers to share personal information with strippers, including that which burdened them, and subsequently solicit encouragement, reassurance, or advice. In response, many strippers assumed a role comparable to that of a counselor or therapist. In providing their opinion, however, many were careful not to say anything that could potentially jeopardize their relationship with the customer, as angering or alienating the customer could result in a considerable loss of income. Customers thus attended to their emotions, often concerning rejection, failure, or loss, through the labor of strippers.

Adherence to the ideals of masculinity impedes often men's ability to express emotions because emotions have been associated with femininity (Ahmed 2004) as well as weakness (Seidler 1994). The consequences of men's unwillingness or inability to discuss negative emotional experiences (McNess 2008; Thompson 1997) are significant, including the underreporting of mental health issues (Branney & White 2008; Cleary 2012; Monaghan & Robertson 2012). However, evidence of men's increasing capacity to express themselves emotionally (Anderson 2008b; Allen 2007; Forrest 2010) has led scholars to conclude that masculinity is being redefined or 'softened' (Anderson 2009; Forrest 2010; Lomas, Cartwright, Edginton, & Ridge 2016; Roberts 2013; White & Peretz 2009).

Though men have an active understanding of their emotional lives (Galasinski 2004), this does not necessarily mean that all men who patronize strip clubs are willing or able to express themselves emotionally in all settings. Moreover, the redefining or 'softening' of masculinity is not so fast-paced that the association between emotions and femininity has dissipated overnight, thus enabling all men to express themselves freely and without fear. Thus, the strip club provides a "safe space" for some men to find emotional intimacy and/or an emotional outlet, as the

hypersexualized, masculinized environment shields customers from the fear of being ‘insufficiently’ masculine or failing to adhere to masculine ideals of stoicism and self-control.

Prior research (Frank 2002, 2005) conceptualizes strip clubs as a safe space, though for different reasons. Frank (2005) theorizes strip clubs serve as “a safe space in which to be both married (or committed) and sexually aroused (or at least, interacting with other women in a sexualized setting)” (p. 494). Furthermore, Frank (2005) posits that strip clubs grant men safety from the struggles of initiating and maintaining relationships with non-sex worker women as well as safe opportunities to engage in traditionally masculine behaviors discouraged at home and at work. I contend that strip clubs provide more than a “safe space” for men to be sexually aroused by women who are not their wives, to be “‘rowdy,’ vulgar, or aggressive” (Frank 2005: 492), to be spared the struggle of attracting non-sex worker women, or to escape the demands of non-sex worker women “on their time and emotions” (p. 495). While I do not deny that strip clubs may serve these purposes, highlighting *only* these functions perpetuates reductionist notions of men as hyper-sexual, uncivilized, and incapable of relating to women, which ultimately encourages narrow conceptualizations of masculinity. I contend that one significant function of strip clubs is to provide a safe space for men to experience human connection and expose their insecurities and vulnerabilities.

With regards to the appeal of “stripper therapy,” there are several possible reasons why male customers turn to strippers for counseling as opposed to mental health professionals and other service industry workers, such as bartenders. For one, strippers are more easily sexualized than most other service providers; there are a few reasons for this: their profession is associated with sexual stimulation and arousal, they perform sexualized movements (e.g., twerking, fondling, etc.) on stage, often to sexually charged music, they either expose their breasts on stage

or perform nude, and they typically interact with customers while wearing lingerie. Stevie, a 31-year-old, white, female stripper at Jet's Place, speculated that male customers do not seek out licensed therapists or counselors because "they can't connect with someone unless they're able to sexualize them." The ability to easily sexualize strippers may shift the perceived power dynamic between service provider and service recipient in a way that is difficult to replicate with mental health professionals or other service industry workers. In other words, the ability to sexualize strippers may shield customers from the perception that they are losing power through emotional vulnerability, and thus compromising their masculinity. In addition, some male customers may have internalized popular discourses that strippers are hapless and powerless and are thus comfortable exposing their vulnerabilities to strippers because they perceive a power imbalance which skews in their favor. These perceptions are surely gendered, rooted in assumptions that men are more powerful than women. Furthermore, seeking help from a licensed professional may not appeal to all customers, due to the stigmatization of mental health services (Vogel, Wade, & Haake 2006; Wade & Lai 2008). Lastly, professional counseling may be inaccessible to certain customers for financial reasons.<sup>24</sup>

The implications of male customers fulfilling their emotional needs through the labor of strippers are potentially quite significant. Strippers are incentivized to appease customers, though the lengths they will go to achieve those ends are variable; moreover, strippers who satisfy customers' emotional needs oftentimes do not experience their relationships with such customers as reciprocal, meaning that they generally do not receive emotional support equivalent to that which they provide. As a consequence of this, male customers may struggle to develop and maintain reciprocal relationships with individuals outside of service provision, specifically

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<sup>24</sup> Depending on the club and the stripper, time spent with a stripper may be significantly cheaper than time spent with a licensed therapist.

individuals who have no economic investment in their happiness and well-being. In other words, relying upon strippers for emotional support may adversely affect customers' ability to participate in reciprocal relationships. This may especially be the case for customers' relationships with women outside of the club, as they may come to expect women to willingly participate in non-reciprocal relationships and engage in considerable emotion work. Thus, strip clubs may not be an ideal model for the facilitation of men's emotional expression. However, until masculinity is re-defined in such a way that enables greater emotional expression among men across contexts, strip clubs will continue to serve a significant function for particular men.

### *Conclusion*

Based upon these findings, I contend that the role of strippers is far from limited to providing opportunities for sexual arousal through physical stimulation or voyeurism. This is, in large part, a consequence of customers' desires extending beyond that which is erotic. The hypersexualized, masculinized environment of the strip club, in combination with the purposeful interactional labor of strippers, enables male customers to fulfill their emotional needs without compromising their masculinity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE WORK OF FANTASY

#### *Introduction*

When I interviewed Demi, a 28-year-old, white, female stripper at Jet's Place in Hanksville, she shared with me her strategy for initiating conversation with patrons she doesn't know. She starts by asking if they'd like to hear a joke. If they say yes, which they always do, she proceeds to tell them "three really terrible dad jokes," ending with "How much does a polar bear weigh? Enough to break the ice. I'm [Demi]." Strippers typically approach customers with questions along the lines of "Is this seat taken?" "Are you having fun tonight?" or "Did you like my dance?" Demi intentionally avoided these generic openers to set herself apart and make her customers more comfortable.

Demi's jokes, though memorable, are but one example of the diverse practices strippers employ in their interactions with customers. As with Demi's jokes, much of strippers' labor does not revolve around sexually stimulating customers. Though corny jokes may seem, on the surface, unrelated to gendered processes in strip clubs, I contend that, through interactional practices like these, strippers participate in productions of gender. More specifically, much of strippers' labor involves enabling and amplifying male customers' enactments of idealized masculinities, which may not be realizable for many customers outside of the club. In other words, strip club customers heavily rely upon the labor of strippers to fulfill a 'fantasy' of masculinity.

#### *Literature Review*

A number of social scientists have argued that sex work is just as much about gender as it is about sex, if not more (Allison 1994; Frank 2002; Hoang 2015; Price-Glynn 2010; Schotten

2005; Wood 2000). Data which supports this claim derives from across the globe and across segments of the sex industry. For example, Wardlow (2004) examined the practices of “passenger women” among the Huli in Papua New Guinea, women who engage in sexual relations with numerous men and typically receive money in exchange. Wardlow suggests that Huli men pay for sexual contact with passenger women in order to assert a masculinity they associate with being modern, wherein men can engage in sexual relations with women without being entangled in kinship obligations. Employed as a hostess in four hostess bars across Ho Chi Minh City, Hoang (2015) explored how male patrons and female sex workers, specifically hostesses, “negotiated their perceptions of Vietnam’s repositioning in a global economy” (p. 12) within multiple niche markets of Vietnam’s sex industry. According to Hoang, female hostesses engage in a range of practices and discourses which enable male patrons to enact idealized masculinities and “affirm Western superiority or assert Asian capitalist ascendancy” (p. 39). Huysamen and Boonzaier (2015) interviewed 14 male clients of female sex workers in South Africa and found that their transactions with sex workers “represented more than just an avenue for ‘relief’ from their sexual urges” (p. 551). According to Huysamen and Boonzaier, these clients paid for sex, in part, because it afforded them the opportunity to affirm their gender and sexual identities.

If sex work is just as much about gender as it is about sex, as other researchers have claimed, and strippers’ labor goes beyond providing an opportunity for sexual arousal through physical stimulation or voyeurism [see Chapter 4], then the construction and negotiation of masculinity with male customers may be a defining feature of strippers’ labor.

Price-Glynn (2010) conducted interviews and engaged in participant observation in a strip club in a small, rural U.S. town. Price-Glynn concluded that the gendered organization of

work at the club enabled the performance of particular masculinities among male patrons.

According to Price-Glynn, the masculinities she observed among customers fall into three broad categories, which are as follows: (1) masculinities “seeking affirmation, such as desirability and individual worthiness of attention and affection,” (2) masculinities “of group connectedness or enactments of male bonding and identification,” and (3) masculinities “of aggression or acts of verbal and physical force toward female workers” (2010: 70). Price-Glynn suggests that multiple masculinities may be exhibited by the same man in one day. While I encountered masculinities that may be categorized according to this typology, I argue that these three categories do not do justice to the array of masculinities found within strip clubs. However, this typology does shed light on the fact that strippers must contend with multiple masculinities in their encounters with customers.

As evidenced in previous research (Hoang 2015; Frank 2002), sex workers employ particular practices in co-constructing and negotiating masculinities. I refer to these practices as masculinizing practices – “practices that are governed by a gender regime, are embedded in social relations, and work to produce masculinities in particular settings and by certain institutions” (Connell 2000, as cited in Frank 2002: 20). Within the context of Vietnamese hostess clubs, for example, Hoang (2015) documented an array of masculinizing practices employed by hostesses in interaction with male clients. Within upscale clubs, for example, Hoang observed hostesses assist Vietnamese and Asian businessmen in shaming their Western business rivals by passing the bill, per request, to their Western guests, whom their Vietnamese and Asian clients suspected of not carrying enough cash to cover the tab. Given that credit is not accepted in such clubs, the local businessmen were compelled to flash large sums of money before their rivals, mocking them in the process. Additionally, hostesses openly discussed the

many gifts they received from their Vietnamese and Asian clients before their Western guests, to fortify their clients' class-based masculinities. Hostesses also learned to identify the client of highest standing in groups of businessmen and clinked their glass lowest on the glass on the man in question, as a show of respect. Through these and other practices, hostesses simultaneously contested global racial hierarchies while bolstering their client's class-based masculinities.

Though U.S. Midwestern strip clubs are distinct from Ho Chi Minh hostess clubs, across both contexts, the labor of sex workers underlies the construction and negotiation of masculinities. Schotten (2005), in a feminist analysis of sex work, contends that prostitution is a "symptom or function of various masculinities" (p. 213), which I maintain to be true of strip clubs as well. Schotten goes on to suggest that sex work exists "to meet the defensive demands of anxious masculinities" (p. 215), and not solely to perpetuate gendered expectations for women. The outward show of sexual stimulation and voyeurism masks male patrons' fear of being insufficiently masculine and their need for validation of their gender presentation. If sex work is in fact a function of masculinity, then sex work research ought to interrogate masculinity, and its relation to the practices of sex workers, including strippers. Here, I outline ways in which strippers facilitate the construction of idealized masculinities among customers.

Once again, I recognize that conceptions and enactments of masculinity vary by race, class, ability, nationality, sexuality, etc. (Connell 1995). Thus, I regard these findings as especially, if not exclusively, applicable to white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, natural-born citizen, working- and middle-class male customers. The majority of the customers I interviewed fit this description, and though I cannot attest to the demographics of all customers I observed or informally spoke with, the majority seemingly fell within these categories. Moreover, I acknowledge that the labor practices of strippers may vary depending upon their

age, race, sexuality, etc., though I found no evidence of that in my research.

### *No Hustlers Here*

Male customers commonly expressed an aversion to strippers who are seemingly only interested in their money and not in them as individuals. Doug, a 39-year-old, white, male, strip club DJ in Princeton, frequented strip clubs for entertainment as well as networking. When I asked Doug what makes a good stripper, he responded,

Obviously, it's going to be a physical thing that attracts you to a dancer first. I don't know, the overall persona, does she seem into me? You know I like, if I'm going to give away money to a dancer for their time, for their entertainment that night, I like a girl that seems you know into me or attracted to me, so it's definitely going to come down to personality. Are they funny? Are they quirky? Are they someone I can hold a conversation with? Are they just there to get my money and take it from me? I don't know, I don't feel so satisfied in those types of scenarios, so I don't know, just someone, I don't know, puts in a little bit of time, I guess that's kind of the thing about service or entertainment, if you go the extra mile, willing to converse and kind of get my aspect of life and stuff, and I think that's just a winning situation.

Doug expressed a preference for strippers who are seemingly attracted to him, who showcase a likable personality, and who are willing to engage him in conversation. He indicated that he is not "satisfied" by exchanges with strippers who are "just there to get my money," or strippers who do not express sufficient interest in him personally. Similarly, Carlos, a 32-year-old, Latino male customer I met at Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area, distinguished between strippers who try to "hustle" him or "harass" him for money and those who are willing to make conversation before asking if he'd like to purchase a lap dance.

Justin, a 32-year-old, Latino, male customer at Treasure Trove, echoed these sentiments:

I think if they cut into what they're looking for right away in the conversation, that's a bad way to start things. Because the customer is obviously there to look for that. You don't need to get to it right away. If they're interested, they're interested. Try to make it a little more interpersonal. Like "Oh, how are you?" Well, besides, "How are you?" "What you interested in? What do you like? What have you been up to today? What are some of your interests outside of coming here?" leads to more, leads to better business. Compared to "Hey babe, how are you? Would you like a dance? Would you like to

dance?" I'm like, well duh, I'd like dance. That's why I'm sitting here. What the hell do you think?

According to Justin, strippers ought to recognize that customers are interested in a lap dance and therefore not feel the need broach the subject of a lap dance straightaway. Justin advises that strippers "make it a little more interpersonal" and proposes questions that strippers might ask customers before seeking payment. Doug, Carlos, Justin, and others expressed disdain or distaste for strippers who do not feign ample interest in them before soliciting a tip, drink, or payment for erotic services.

Stan, a white, middle-aged, male customer I met at Ruby's Cabaret in Maylin, intentionally penalized strippers who straightaway asked him if he'd like a lap dance by asking if they'd give him a "blowjob" and "swallow." Stan said that strippers will angrily refuse him and walk away, which is the outcome he intends. He said that strippers ought to discuss topics that interest *him*, including "sports, horses, and blowjobs," and make him feel "important." According to Stan, he will only spend money on a stripper if he enjoys their conversation.

Frank's research (2002) validates these findings. Frank conducted interviews with regular male customers and engaged in participant observation in five strip clubs, ranging from bottom-tier to top-tier, in a large Southern city. Frank found that regular customers were similarly averse to 'hustlers,' or strippers who did not sufficiently minimize the transactional nature of their interactions. Regular customers, according to Frank, expected strippers to demonstrate sincere personal interest in them, and quickly, or else be labeled a hustler.

Several strippers I spoke with acknowledged that customers are oftentimes averse to strippers who promptly request the purchase of services or drinks. Summer, a 31-year-old, white, female stripper at Buck Wild Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, was among them. She said,

You've got to know when to say, "Do you want to dance?" Some guys don't like it when girls are super aggressive, when they just come up and ask for a dance before making a connection. Like there's, it's like a game. There's a way to do it. And not all girls do it right. And I've heard guys [customers] get pissed about it. So, you've got to make a connection, make them comfortable, know when to say what, you know, to get the money out of them.

Summer was aware that customers can become upset when strippers fail to engage in sufficient conversation before seeking payment. And so, Summer sought to establish a "connection" with customers through conversation, to make them feel more comfortable, before inquiring about the purchase of her labor, which I found to be common practice among strippers.

A few strippers took steps beyond making small talk to assure customers that they cared about more than money. When I asked Roxie, a white, 26-year-old, female stripper at Uptown Dolls in Princeton, if she had any strategies for connecting with customers, Roxie replied,

Just be real warm. And be very touchy. Just like, "How are you doing, sweetie?" [said in an affectionate tone of voice]. And a lot of eye contact, and also not seem like you're just there for their money. If there's a couple customers there that give you a lot of money one night, make sure you go back when they're there, and even offer to buy them a drink, maybe, which thrills guys, because it just shows that you're not just there for the money, you just actually like them. You know, wink, wink. Which isn't always true, but it feels good.

In addition to being personable, maintaining eye contact, and initiating physical touch, Roxie strives to assure customers that she is not solely interested in their money. To convince customers of this, Roxie flips the script and purchases *them* a drink, as opposed to the other way around. Roxie reserves this strategy for customers who have previously spent a considerable amount of money on her, likely because drinks at Uptown Dolls are too expensive to be purchased for every customer who walks through the door. According to Roxie, this practice leads customers to believe that she is not simply interested in their wallets, but in spending time with them.

Claire, a 26-year-old, white, female stripper, was working at Sapphire Gentleman's Club in Princeton at the time of our interview, because she was suspended from her usual club, Uptown Dolls<sup>25</sup>. Claire took things a step further than Roxie and fabricated information about herself to convince customers that she was not out to "hustle" or "harass" them for money, as Carlos put it. Claire shared with me,

The other thing I do with guests [customers] is I tell them that I own a business that's successful and that I don't really *need* [original emphasis] to strip. I just do it because I want to hang out and party. And that actually makes me more money. Because then they don't think that I'm relying on them.

Claire braided hair at a salon and occasionally styled hair at home but told me that she did not own a business. When I asked Claire why this lie appealed to customers, she replied, "Because then it doesn't feel like they are getting used. Then they just think we're here to party. It's like hanging out. Tricks, man, tricks. The shit I didn't know when I was a baby stripper." According to Claire, customers pay her more when they are led to believe that she is financially secure and stripping for pleasure, not out of necessity. Because if Claire has other economic prospects and does not "*need* to strip," but *chooses* to do so, she must enjoy the customer's company; otherwise, she would just walk away – or at least that's what they're led to believe. Notably, this tactic does not discourage payment altogether; Claire is still paid by her customers. However, the practice is effective because it not only decenters the monetary exchange, but likely appeals to persons who are biased against low-income or working-class women who "*need* to strip."

Shay, a white, 32-year-old, female stripper at Sapphire Gentleman's Club in Princeton, similarly sought to prove that she is not purely motivated by money. According to Shay,

Obviously, my main goal is to get money from them, but I don't make them feel like that. So, it makes it easier for them to pay me. You know? ...They don't necessarily think I'm

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<sup>25</sup> Claire's manager accused her of being routinely late for her stage performance. Claire disputed this claim, but her manager told her to go home. A DJ messaged her later that night to say that she was not fired, only suspended. She was instructed to "take some time" before returning to Uptown Dolls.

not doing it for the money, but I think...I make it seem like when they're there, they are the only person there. And I'm like, I'll convince them to like pay the DJ extra money so that I don't have to go on stage so I can spend time with them. So, make them feel like, they are here now, so I don't want to dance for anybody else, because I like *you*. You know?

Shay seeks to assure each customer that she is not principally interested in their wallet; she does this by making them feel special, by giving the impression that she is uninterested in other customers (and their cash). On occasion, Shay even requests that customers pay the DJ so that she can sit out her stage set, where she could potentially earn money from other customers, so that she can continue socializing with or dancing for the customer in question.

According to Frank, discourses surrounding masculinity and sex worker patronage indicate that "men who frequent strip clubs (except on 'legitimate' occasions such as a bachelor party) are pathetic because they 'have to pay for it,' that is, because they are purchasing female companionship that other men can obtain without providing direct financial compensation to the woman" (p. 194). Put another way, these discourses associate sex worker patronage, including the frequenting of strip clubs, with weakness, which is constructed as feminine and thus undesirable. To contest these discourses, customers sought validation that their interactions and relationships with strippers were exceptional and not simply motivated by monetary gain, as with other customers. Having recognized this, many strippers employed labor practices to obscure to commodified nature of stripper-customer relations; these practices, in other words, de-emphasized the fact that, without financial transaction, there would likely be no relationship. For male customers, to acknowledge the centrality of currency in their interactions with strippers is to simultaneously acknowledge that they are paying women for companionship and/or visual/physical stimulation; given the aforementioned discourses surrounding sex worker patronage (Frank 2002) and the enduring sociocultural association between heterosexuality and

normative masculinity (Anderson 2008a; Bridges 2014; Pascoe 2007; Skelton 2001), such an acknowledgement could severely undercut their performance of an idealized masculinity.

Thus, the practices outlined here construct a ‘fantasy’ of masculinity for customers. A fantasy, according to Silverman (1992), is used to compensate for inadequacies in individuals’ lives and casts as whole what can only ever be fragmented and partial. These conscious practices compensate for customers’ inability or struggle to fulfill masculine ideals and project onto the customer an idealized masculine self which can never be fully realized across all dimensions of a patron’s life.

Prior research confirms that strippers strive to convince customers that their interaction is motivated by more than the prospect of payment (Egan 2003; Frank 2002; Price-Glynn 2010). Egan (2003) engaged in participant observation in two strip clubs in New England and concluded that strippers strive to produce for regular customers “the subjectivity of a man who is worth being listened to regardless of the money he pays her” (p. 190). I found that strippers attempt to construct this subjectivity in non-regular customers as well, though not as consistently as with regular customers. This is likely due to the fact that generating such a subjectivity can be a time-consuming, trying endeavor that strippers are unwilling to engage in for each and every customer, particularly without the assurance of a pay-out.<sup>26</sup> What’s more, regular customers are oftentimes a significant and reliable source of income for strippers. For strippers with regular customers, then, it’s only logical that they would invest more time and energy in constructing these subjectivities for their regulars.

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<sup>26</sup> It is not uncommon for non-regular customers to consume strippers’ time without tipping or purchasing a lap dance or time in a private room. Some customers will promise to tip or purchase services but never do. Others will refuse to pay for services they’ve already received.

Across bottom-, middle-, and top-tier clubs, strippers made an effort to assure customers, particularly regulars, that their relationship was not simply transactional, but based on mutual interest and/or affection. These efforts, however, took on more extreme forms in top-tier clubs. One explanation for this may be that strippers at top-tier clubs, including Claire, are aware that some men prefer high-end clubs because they assume the women are not desperate for money and will not hassle them for it, which Frank (2002) found to be the case for some strip club regulars. Additionally, Frank (2002) found that select regulars respected strippers at top-tier clubs more because they believed these women were putting themselves through college and not stripping for their career. As previously stated, the largely middle- to upper-class clientele of top-tier clubs may harbor class prejudice against women who “*need* to strip,” or are reliant on stripping to survive; thus, convincing patrons that they are not poor may be an effective approach.

A second explanation may be that strippers in top-tier clubs feel the need to reassure customers that strip clubs and strippers can be high-class and that patronizing a strip club is no more disreputable than patronizing a high-end bar or night club. After all, stripping has long been regarded as a low-status occupation, with stereotypes abound of strippers as depraved and deficient (Skipper & McCaghy 1970). Only in the past decade have upscale strip clubs begun to spread across the country (IBISWorld 2018), which may be altering public opinion of the occupation and the industry, however slowly.

Third, practices such as purchasing overpriced drinks for customers or lying about owning a profitable business may be more likely to alienate customers of bottom- and middle-tier clubs, as the men in those clubs may be especially eager to approximate masculine ideals of financially providing for women [see Chapter 6]. Thus, efforts to convince customers that their

financial support is unnecessary may be less effective or unwelcome in bottom- and middle-tier clubs. In top-tier clubs, however, where customers are often more affluent, many of the patrons may fulfill the provider role outside of the club and therefore wish to experience a different gendered performance, such as that of entertainer [see Chapter 6], inside the club. Consequently, these over-the-top tactics de-emphasizing the need for compensation may be more appealing to customers of top-tier clubs.

### *Escaping Rejection*

Roughly one year after #MeToo began trending on Twitter, in late October of 2018 in the metropolitan area of Princeton, I sat at the bar of Treasure Trove with Jordan, a Black male in his mid-20's to mid-30's. For well over an hour, Jordan questioned me on how he was supposed to initiate a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a woman without being accused of harassment.

First, I suggested Jordan create an online dating profile. Jordan maintained that only men who lie about themselves are able to secure a date online. Second, I suggested Jordan meet someone through work. He said that if he told a female co-worker that she was “beautiful” and that he wanted to be her “companion,” she would report him. I told Jordan that if the female co-worker was not his subordinate, if he got to know her before asking her on a date, and if he did not pressure her, he may be able to initiate a relationship. Jordan replied that he knows “feminists” who will report him if he asks them on a date even once. Third, I suggested that Jordan meet women at a bar. He informed me that he knows women who are “super into feminism” who would be offended by him even approaching them at a bar. Jordan asked why men cannot “catcall” women in order to meet them. He asked what was wrong with men complimenting women. Jordan concluded that men cannot initiate romantic and/or sexual

relationships with women at work, cannot catcall women on the streets, and cannot secure a date online unless they “catfish” a woman or lie about who they are. Finally, Jordan claimed, “Now you see why places like this [Treasure Trove] exist.”

In the #MeToo era, some men, including Jordan, fear being accused of sexual harassment for behaviors they consider socially acceptable and normal (Boyle & Rathnayake 2020; Soklaridis et al. 2018). Beyond fear of unanticipated repercussions, Jordan conveyed confusion and frustration surrounding the perceived changing nature of gender relations, including contemporary codes of conduct for mixed-sex interactions. Jordan simply did not understand how to engage women he wished to pursue a romantic and/or sexual relationship with, without causing offense or getting in trouble. For men like Jordan, strip clubs serve as a space in which they can seemingly behave toward women in a manner they desire or are accustomed, without the fear of sexual harassment or assault allegations being levied against them. On several occasions, I encountered men in strip clubs across Hanksville, Princeton, and Maylin who conveyed a sense that “The rules don’t apply here,” or the norms governing public behavior are suspended. Multiple strippers, including Miley, a white, 21-year-old, female stripper at The Edge in the Hanksville metropolitan area, confirmed this about customers. Miley said,

“...it’s the ugly parts of men that make you really scared about other men in your life. Because I think like as a dancer there...you feel very comfortable with your sexuality, for example, but the guys think at the same time, it’s a strip club, anything goes, you know? Whatever happens, it’s all okay, because it’s a strip club.”

As indicated by Miley and others, customers often believe they can do and say what they like (within ‘reason’) without repercussion, because, after all, “it’s a strip club.”

Not only were some customers drawn to strip clubs because they could interact with women with little regard for how their behavior would be perceived by or affect the women receiving it, but also because they did not fear strippers rejecting them, as they often do with

women outside of the club. In late August in Princeton, I stood at the bar of Allure Gentleman's Club with Rich, a white male in his mid-20's to mid-30's who identified as a member of the Air Force. Rich asserted that meeting women in bars is challenging because they assume all men want to "get in their pants." He stated that he needs to overcome that assumption in talking to women at bars and he does not want to bother with that. Rich said that he has to deal with rejection in bars, but not in strip clubs. For Rich, strip clubs served as a refuge from the rejection he anticipated experiencing elsewhere. Frank (1998; 2005) also found that strip clubs shelter customers, specifically regular customers, from the challenge of initiating relationships with women outside of the club. Relatedly, according to Huysamen and Boonzaier (2015), male clients of female prostitutes indicated that paying for sex was preferable to pursuing sexual relations with a non-sex worker, for it consumed less time, effort, and money. Additionally, clients acknowledged that, regardless of the time, effort, or money spent on a woman outside of the sex industry, she may still refuse him as a sexual partner, while paying a sex worker ensures sexual contact.

Several strippers I spoke with acknowledged that male customers do not expect to be rejected at a strip club. During my interview with Claire, she said that strippers must maintain "more of a fantasy" for customers. When I asked her what this fantasy was about, Claire replied,

I would say the fantasy is just that they [customers] have their choice of women and what they prefer and their type and stuff and they're not, the woman is not going to say "No" to them, potentially. They get their pick... and they get to treat them however they want to treat them, depending on how they feel or whatever...so some of them will come in there and the fantasy is that they can be picky...even though they are no fucking prize to look at.

Claire indicated that customers relish the opportunity provided by strip clubs to not fear rejection from women of their choosing<sup>27</sup> and to be able to treat these women however they please.

Huysamen and Boonzaier (2015) echoed a similar sentiment regarding male clients of female prostitutes: “Paying for sex afforded men the power to choose any woman they wanted to have sex with, with a guaranteed outcome of actual sex” (p. 547).

Jesse, a 27-year-old, white, female stripper at Allure Gentleman’s Club in Hanksville, made a similar remark:

Most of those guys [customers] don't want to be left in the dust when it comes to your intellect. They don't want to be insulted. They don't want to be told “No.” They don't want to feel like they're out of their element because most of them are out of their element just by the sheer fact that they're not, that on any other day or in any other situation, they would never be able to get your time or attention. Because most of the women are 30 years younger and very beautiful. Obviously, not every single person there, but even the ugliest girl at the club, or I shouldn't say ugly, but the least appealing, still probably wouldn't...talk or flirt with most of the men that come in there.

According to Jesse, customers do not want to hear the word “No.” They do not want to be made aware of the fact that many, if not most, of the strippers they interact with would have little to no interest in initiating contact with them outside of the club. Rather, their desire is to enact a fantasy of masculinity in which they are deemed desirable by all women they encounter.

Summer, a 33-year-old, white, female stripper at Buck Wild Cabaret in Maylin, said that some of her customers wish to discuss their sexual fantasies with her, some attempt to get to know her, and some attempt to convince her to start “seeing them outside of the club.” Of the latter, Summer said:

So, they're like, “Let me get to know you” [said in a whiny voice] and saying what they can do for me and what they have to offer...And I'll sit there and play the game with them because that's what I'm there for, but in reality, they came to a strip club, they know they are dealing with a dancer, so when they get disappointed in the end and it doesn't turn out that way, that's common sense, you should have known better. I'll take a

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<sup>27</sup> At many middle- and top-tier clubs, patrons can request that a staff member bring them women who meet certain physical requirements (e.g., hair color, skin color, breast size, etc.).

guy's number, but I'll throw it in the garbage at the end of the night. They are there for a fantasy. Their fantasy isn't to hear a girl say "No" ... So, I will say, "Yes, yes, yes" to things and, in reality, I'm not going to do any of it. It's a fantasy when they walk in there to be, get close to a female and feel special and all that stuff.

Summer characterized interactions with customers who seek to date her as a "game," in which she entertains the possibility of entering into a relationship with these customers outside of the club. According to Summer, customers seek "fantasy" in strip clubs, and their fantasy does not entail rejection. And so, Summer plays along, with no intention of pursuing sexual or romantic relationships with customers and with the belief that customers should know better than to trust a stripper's promises. Kacey, a 25-year-old, white, female waitress and occasional stripper at Ruby's Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, adopted a different approach to patrons who asked to see her outside of the club. She fabricated a story about how she lived over three hours and thus could not meet with them during her free time, all to avoid expressing disinterest in customers; according to Kacey, "I try not to hurt anybody's feelings because obviously they are coming there not wanting to be rejected."

Strippers, recognizing that customers do not want to be rejected or denied, seek to satisfy their customers while preserving their personal boundaries. To unambiguously refuse a customer's advances, be they physical or verbal, is likely to undercut the customer's enactment of an idealized masculinity – a masculinity to which rejection and failure are foreign. And yet, a customer exceeding a stripper's boundaries may compromise the stripper's physical and/or psychological well-being. Thus, many strippers avoid unequivocally declining their customers' advances in favor of more subtly guiding their customers' behavior so that it more closely aligns with their expectations for the encounter.

Jade, a 21-year-old, white, female stripper working at Uptown Dolls in Princeton, said of one of her regulars:

He's the one I met [with] last night [at Uptown Dolls]. Very touchy. But if I tell him to stop, he will. But it gets hard because if you are too like "Don't touch me," you'll lose the person. So, you know if he gets me into one of those back rooms, he's feeling all over me. Not in my crotch. There were a few times he tried to reach down into my crotch, and I like stopped it there but all over the boobs, legs, all of that. And he'll ask if it's okay. He tries to kiss me. He was really trying to kiss me last night and I was like using all of these excuses like "I've got this dark lipstick on; I can't, people will know, blah blah blah."

Here, Jade explains that she recently made excuses for why she could not kiss a regular customer in a private room, so as to not patently refuse his affection. Egan (2006) similarly found that strippers regularly used cameras and bouncers as an excuse not to engage in behavior that was officially prohibited<sup>28</sup> by the club, which I too found to occur. Jade acknowledges that if she were to repeatedly say, "Don't touch me," that customer would likely cease to be a reliable source of income.

Summer, a 33-year-old, white, female stripper at Buck Wild Cabaret in Maylin, adopted a slightly different practice for denying customers' physical touch:

I get annoyed with people that are like non-stop...like grabbing on you...And it's not like they don't get to touch. I grab their hands, I put them on me. They can do it by themselves. But then I'm moving. You're not going to just sit here and just do that. That I don't like. So, and I tell them, I don't necessarily say something, I just move, but if they're not getting the hint, I'll say something to them. But I laugh when I say it. I don't usually be mean to people with my tone. I kind of laugh when I say stuff to people because I want to keep it light and not, the only time I have copped attitude is if it's really, really necessary, but I try not to be like that, to get too serious.

Summer utilizes laughter and levity to instruct customers on how to behave during a lap dance. She avoids becoming "too serious" or "mean," with customers who grope her. Only when the violation of personal boundaries becomes too egregious does Summer no longer "keep it light."

In addition to managing the physical touch of customers, strippers also guide their conversations with customers, away from unsavory topics or private information. Customers

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<sup>28</sup> Some behaviors are officially prohibited by the club but unofficially permitted.

commonly pry strippers for personal information, including their “real” name, their relationship status, the city or neighborhood in which they live, etc.<sup>29</sup> Gi, a Korean American, 42-year-old, female stripper, informed me that she tells customers that she lives in the suburbs, but they often press for a more specific location. Gi said,

They push though. I’d say 80% of them push. “Where?” “Suburbs of what?” ...I’m a bad liar. So, I say, “Suburbs of [Princeton], way, way north.” I say, “Not quite Canada.” When they start pushing, I start trying to make light of it and trying to make a joke out of it. That’s when I start saying “Not quite Canada, but far. Takes me awhile to get here. I’ve got to fill up the tank,” you know and then it usually makes them laugh...and even after that I have a lot of them still pushing...They are trying to get a town. I can tell when they push...I’m usually able to switch it from there to do they fish, camp, that kind of stuff. Just like talking with a child and I have lots of experience with kids and it works with men. Distracting. Like when you flash the lights when you’re trying to get their attention, right?... What’s that shiny object over there? What’s that shiny thing?

In conversation with customers, Gi declines to identify the neighborhood or town in which she and her family live. In doing so, however, she cloaks her refusal to answer customers’ inquiries with light-hearted humor and charm. Gi then steers these conversations in more a favorable direction, toward discussion of hobbies, for instance. Gi, as with other strippers, strategically steers conversations with customers in such a way that they do not detect rejection and thus continue to tip or purchase services.

In strip clubs, customers seek refuge from a world in which their treatment of women could be considered inappropriate or offensive. Rather than change their behavior, they patronize strip clubs, where they believe they can treat women however they wish, with impunity. Outside of being a purported refuge from accusations of assault and harassment,<sup>30</sup> strip clubs appeal to

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<sup>29</sup> Strippers commonly divulged supposedly “private” (and sometimes fictional) information to customers in order to maintain their interest.

<sup>30</sup> Notably, strippers and staff members may press charges against customers for criminal conduct. However, judging by how strippers characterized club management, it seems likely that many managers would discourage strippers from involving the police.

customers because they provided a supposed escape from the possibility of female rejection. Prior research confirms that male patrons do not anticipate rejection from female sex workers (Frank 2005; Huysamen & Boonzaier 2015; Price-Glynn 2010). Price-Glynn (2010), for example, conducted participant observation in a strip club in a small, rural, predominantly white town and found that patrons assumed no request was off-limits and expected strippers to acquiesce to their requests if payment was offered. More broadly, strip clubs appeal to customers who are frustrated or confused by contemporary gender relations in the United States (Frank 2002). In strip clubs, male patrons are relieved of the expectations surrounding mixed-sex interactions outside of the club, which some patrons find bothersome and unreasonable.

Previous research reinforces the conclusion that sex workers engage in strategic practices to subtly deter unwelcome contact or conversation (Hoang 2015). Hoang (2015) observed hostesses of Vietnamese hostess clubs encouraging handsy patrons to drink more alcohol, so that they would become too inebriated and need to leave the club. Here, hostesses avoided explicitly rejecting customers, while managing to end their problematic behaviors. Strippers, acknowledging that customers do not wish to be told “No,” tactfully cloaked their rejection of customers using humor, levity, excuses, etc.; consequently, strippers avoided contradicting customers’ masculine performances which oftentimes hinge upon the premise that they can say and do as they like with women who are delighted about it.

### *Stripper Persona*

According to Schweitzer (2001), strip club customers “don't want the real thing,” the full story of who a stripper is; they only want the illusion, the seductive siren who is “just out of reach, just out of ‘real’” (p. 67). Schweitzer goes on to say, “The performer stays unreal by becoming the vamp, the coquette, the rock star, the rodeo queen, the Barbie doll, the Southern

belle, the Grecian goddess, the femme fatale, the dominatrix, the virgin bride, the nun – the possibilities are endless” (p. 67-8). A minority of strippers I spoke with adopted such a strategy to appeal to customers’ perceived tastes.

Raven, a 19-year-old, white, female stripper at Buck Wild Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, told me that she pays attentions to the “social cues” of customers and determines what “demeanor and “dialect” to adopt. She reads the “body language” of customers and “eavesdrops” on their conversations with their “buddies” before interacting with them so that she knows how to present herself. She listens to their accents, asks what they do for a living, and adjusts her performance accordingly. Raven said that she puts on a Southern accent for men who work in a “factory” or perform manual labor and come from a small, rural town. She demonstrated how she would speak to a blue-collar worker from a rural town. She said, “Hi baby, how ya doing?” in a sweet voice with a noticeable Southern drawl. For this demographic, Raven said she will mention her “momma” and being from a “real small town in Southern [State]” and say that she is “peachy keen” if they ask how she is doing. She said that for older Southern men, she will kneel down next to them and ask sweetly “Can I have this seat?” For this demonstration, Raven maintained the Southern drawl but was demurer and more soft-spoken. For a “party dude” attending college, Raven will say, “Oh my, you must play football. Look at you” [mimics touching customer’s arm]. In this demonstration, Raven was more energetic and had no discernible Southern accent. Raven informed me that she is a “car salesman,” only “I’m the car.”

With a majority of customers, excluding regulars, Roxie, a 26-year-old, white, female stripper at Uptown Dolls in Princeton, adopts a persona quite unlike her own. When I asked Roxie to describe herself, she replied,

So, describe myself is completely different when it comes to me at work, as a dancer. As a dancer, I even talk in a higher pitch voice when I talk to customers...isn't that funny? So, I'll be like, "Hi guys, how's it going?" [said in a high-pitched voice]. And I flip my hair back and forth. "Oh my god, let's go do some shots!" [said in a high-pitched voice]. And you dumb yourself down. Guys like that. They want party girl.

Roxie has a low- to medium-pitched voice, is "kind of a tomboy," has a master's degree from a relatively prestigious university, and typically wears "flannels and jeans" and "next to no makeup" outside the club. Inside the club, Roxie presents herself quite differently. Roxie said, "...at the club, you look like a Barbie doll. You put on fake tan, and fake eyelashes, and wear clothes that flatter cleavage and your ass." Within the club, Roxie speaks in a high-pitched voice and pretends to be unintelligent and simply interested in partying. Notably, Roxie does not masquerade as the ditzy "party girl" with her regular customers. For many strippers, enacting a clichéd stripper persona with a customer they may only see once or twice is one thing; maintaining that façade with a customer they've known for months if not years is quite another. Very few strippers I met were able to achieve such a feat.

Frank's (1998; 2002) research supports the finding that some strippers adopt workplace personas to generate customer interest. For these strippers, adopting alternate personas served as an effective means of generating income and enabling customers to project a complimentary, hyperbolic masculine self. Of those who strategically enacted a stripper persona unlike their own outside of the club, few adopted personas that were not hyper-feminine, unless a customer expressed interest in BDSM humiliation and degradation. Masculinity is socially constructed in relation to femininity (Connell 1995); therefore, by enacting an exaggerated femininity in the form of a Southern belle or a ditzy party girl, for example, strippers like Raven and Roxie provide male customers with an opportunity to perform an exaggerated masculinity or, at the very least, ensure that their gender performance will be amplified by contrast.

Beyond changing their vocal pitch or incorporating the phrase “peachy keen” into their vocabulary, select strippers staged performances that catered to customers’ desires for an exoticized, even racialized ‘Other.’ On November 15, 2018, Gi, a 42-year-old, Korean American, female stripper, stepped out of Treasure Trove’s dressing room, wearing a short, red cheongsam dress with black detailing and high slits on either side. Gi had chopsticks sticking out of her bun and was carrying a white bag covered in what looked to be Chinese characters. Gi was adopted from South Korea at one and a half years old. Her ensemble, though inspired by Chinese fashion, was not meant to signify her heritage, but to attract customers. I spoke to Gi briefly that evening, before she excused herself to sit with a white male customer who had been staring at her. Right away, I heard him mention that he’d once been married to a Thai woman, likely indicating his attraction to Asian women.

During my interview with Gi, I mentioned that no matter what strip club I entered in Hanksville or Princeton<sup>31</sup> there were never more than two Asian strippers working at one time; more often than not, there was one or none at all. Gi informed me,

I’m the only Asian [at Treasure Trove]. And I knew that when I came here, I knew that would be a plus. When you said, “You know, there’s no other Asians,” I’m like, *yes* [original emphasis]! Every girl [stripper] knows that when you are unique to something, to anything, that’s a plus.

For Gi, being the token Asian stripper at Treasure Trove was a significant advantage. Gi said that from the moment she began stripping, she was “busy” because so many customers were interested in her.<sup>32</sup> She attributed this to “being the only Asian in the place.” According to Gi,

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<sup>31</sup> I had yet to travel to Maylin.

<sup>32</sup> Notably, being Asian and performing racial otherness garnered Gi a good deal of business, due to customers’ fetishization of Asian women; however, this also made Gi the target of racist remarks from customers. For example, William, a young adult Black male customer, told me while Gi was performing that he suddenly felt the need to binge karate movies. His friend, Isiah, another young adult Black male customer, then referred to Gi as “chow lo mein.”

roughly “80 to 90 percent” of customers would ask upon meeting her, “‘Where are you from?’ And I knew they were not talking about what city.” She informed these customers that she was from Korea.

During our interview, Gi expressed concern about her stage name or ‘stripper name.’ She said,

Now it’s almost getting too late to change my name, because for a while when I first started girls were saying “Yeah you should go with something sounding really Asian.” I spent some time at home researching that. That is harder than you would think, finding a name that’s catchy, that sounds cute and attractive, that a DJ can easily say, and that is tied in with your own heritage, because Chinese names are different from Korean names, are different from Hmong, are different from... So I’m like well, everything I said to my husband, he was like, “No that’s Chinese.” I’m like, “It doesn’t matter. It sounds Asian. And nobody really cares as long as it sounds Asian.” It was almost making him mad. So, I’m like, “Okay, fine.” I had a girlfriend in college that always called me Ming and that sounds very Chinese, but everybody knows things ending in –ing [are Chinese], or I shouldn’t say everybody, a lot of people know.

When Gi decided on her stage name, other strippers told her the name “‘almost sounds Black.’” Gi was dismayed by this, because “80 percent of the employees” at Treasure Trove are Black, according to Gi, and her intention was to stand out against the crowd. Despite this, Gi’s Korean heritage and racialized performance, including her attire and stage name, seemingly appealed to customers who fetishized Asian women.

Stevie, a 31-year-old, white, female stripper at Jet’s Place in Hanksville, told me that she occasionally pretended to be Eastern European to attract customers. She said,

...there are occasions, I’m not Eastern European at all, but sometimes people think that I am, just from appearance, and so occasionally, and I grew up around a lot of Eastern Europeans and so I know how to fake their accent, so I do occasionally pretend to be like Russian or Ukrainian and for some reason men usually prefer Eastern European women so occasionally I just do that for fun... Usually I’ll use an accent to introduce myself and they’ll say “Are you from Russia? Ukraine?” And I’ll say, “Yes” and then I’ll just pretend like I can’t answer a lot of questions because of my language barrier and I’ll just say the same things that I say in my regular voice, but I’ll say them in the accent. So, I’ll say something really dirty to them and look them in the eyes and then it’ll work.

Now and then, Stevie introduces herself to customers using an Eastern European accent and claims that she is either from Russia or Ukraine. She does this because she believes that customers “prefer Eastern European women.” If this is the case, it may be because Eastern European women are exoticized, though still, importantly, white [Belleau 2003]. For Stevie, this performance of white exoticism is an effective way to fulfill customers’ desire/fetish for the ‘exotic.’

Camila, a stripper I met at Vixen’s Exotic Club in the Hanksville metropolitan area, described herself as a “chameleon” in a “jungle of fat, ugly motherfuckers.” According to Camila, she is able to gauge what a customer desires and adopt that persona, based upon the customer’s behavior, attire, speech, etc. Depending upon the customer, Camila acts either “classy” or “hood.” If the customer looks like “they just crossed the [Mexican] border,” she will adopt a thicker accent. Camila’s performances are clearly racialized, intended to attract customers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Prior research (Davidson & Taylor 1999; Hoang 2015) has found that white Western men do travel to non-Western countries in order to enact “racially fantasized male power” (Davidson & Taylor 1999: 38). Hoang (2015) found that hostesses who catered to Western backpackers and businessmen in lowest-paying markets “worked to project poverty and dependence to help men negotiate their personal sense of failed masculinity in the context of Western economic decline” (p. 5). These women performed to the trope of the sexualized, impoverished Asian woman, dependent upon Western support; many consciously darkened their skin with makeup, fabricated stories of financial crisis, and/or invited male clients to phony village families so that their clients could position themselves as white saviors and financial providers. In further support of this finding, in the United States, Egan (2003) found that some strippers fulfill customers’ fantasies

for a fetishized, racialized ‘Other’ by performing to racialized tropes.

Notably, though select strippers are able to generate interest and income through exoticized or racialized performances, many strippers of color, particularly Latinx and Black strippers, were at a significant disadvantage when interacting with customers. When I asked customers to describe their ideal stripper or to identify what makes a good stripper, no customer stated explicitly that they were more or less attracted to strippers of a particular racial or ethnic identity. That does not mean, however, that customers did not discriminate on the basis of race. As Taysha, a 19-year-old, Black, female stripper at Allure Gentleman’s Club, recounts,

People are either like, they like everybody or they have their specific type. I sat by [a customer], and he’s like, “I’m not trying to say this to be rude, but I don’t like Black girls.” I’m like, “That’s fine.” And I just walked off. They each have their own preferences. Can’t get mad at them for it... There was these [customers] that came in, it was like 6 guys, they came for their friend’s bachelor party and none of them were into Black girls except one of them. And when I would go around for the tip walk, all of them would be like, “No, no, I’m fine. I’m good.” And then that guy [the one attracted to Black women] would be talking, and they’d be like waiting for me to walk away. And I’m just like, “Well, alright then.” So, I just wanted to see if it was just like me. So, me and two other Black girls, we told these two white girls “Hey, go over there. Go talk to them.” Soon as they went over there, they took them straight to dances. And I was like [sighs] it happens, you know?

I should note that, in middle- and top-tier clubs, the Black strippers I observed or interacted with were, by and large, more conventionally attractive and possessed greater pole dancing skills than their white counterparts. It was rare for me to observe a Black stripper at a middle- or top-tier club unenthusiastically meandering about the stage or twisting around the pole, which is something I cannot say of white strippers. It seemed as though, in order to be hired at middle- or top-tier clubs, Black women needed to be exceptional. Taysha was an exceptionally beautiful and skilled entertainer. And yet, she’d been rejected by plenty of customers on the basis of her skin color. She referred to their racism as their “preferences,” and though she seemed

disappointed by these discriminatory encounters, she was not angered by them. According to Taysha, she “can’t get mad at them [customers] for it.” She had grown accustomed to customers rejecting her one moment and purchasing a lap dance from a white stripper the next. And so, the fact that certain racialized performances appeal to some customers does not negate the reality of discrimination that women of color endure in the strip club industry.

Though a minority of strippers assumed alternate personas, racialized or otherwise, to attract customers, the vast majority did not. And yet, this majority still appealed to plenty of customers, though for arguably different reasons.

### *Managing Authenticity*

Customers’ expectations of strippers are oftentimes quite extensive. Unsurprisingly, customers expect strippers to be attractive, though what is considered attractive varies somewhat depending upon the customer. Justin, a 32-year-old, Latinx, male customer at Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area, for example, expressed a preference for strippers with a “trim physique”:

The caliber of dancers aren’t as high [at Treasure Trove] though, in terms of like “good looking.” I used that in quotes just to make sure you remember that part. Because other places, like well-known places like [Vivid Cabaret] and [Angels Cabaret], they look for those kind of physical characteristics to make their club more appealing. But [Treasure Trove] is kind of mainstream, run-of-the-mill place. It’s like yeah...if you can dance, you can apply and if you can dance pretty well, you can stay here, and you can pay your way. Because I’ve seen pretty [sigh] I don’t want to be mean here, but pretty grotesque women working there. I mean this is hard for me to say because you’re a woman too doing this, and I don’t want to be finger pointing to body identity and all this you know. It’s like, that’s part of the business, you know. It’s like...I don’t think a customer, I’m sorry, but I don’t a customer wants to see you [general you] compared to someone who has a more trim physique.... You can’t dwell on it too much about feeling bad because they [strippers] are here, they are here in the first place.

Justin indicates a strong preference for slim strippers and describes those who are not ‘sufficiently’ slim as “grotesque.” Justin was not alone in favoring strippers who conform to

dominant beauty ideals or harshly critiquing strippers who fall far from those ideals. By contrast, the strippers I spoke with established much lower standards for customers; they wanted customers who do not expect or attempt to solicit sex and who did not assault or rape them.

There was a general consensus among customers that strippers ought to be relatively thin and otherwise conventionally beautiful. However, several customers expressed an aversion to strippers who appear “fake.” For example, Miles, a 46-year-old, white, male customer at Jet’s Place in Hanksville, said that he was not a fan of the “environment” at Allure Gentleman’s Club. When I probed for more information, Miles responded,

...when you hear their ads or see their advertisements and stuff it’s always fake, made-up people, as opposed to when you go to the smaller clubs, they look like it could be your neighbor.... You know what I mean? It’s more fake boobs, fake legs, fake lashes, everything seems to have been manufactured as opposed to just being who they are.

From Miles’ perspective, strippers who wear heavy makeup and whose body parts appear surgically augmented are unattractive. According to Miles, these women are not “just being who they are;” in other words, they are not being authentic. Nolan, a 34-year-old man who identified as “Black and white,” expressed similar thoughts on the strippers at Allure<sup>33</sup>. He said that the strippers are all “19-year-old girls who already have fake boobs,” which gives the club a “Barbie dollhouse feel.” Nolan also referred to the women with “fake” boobs as plastic. In support of this finding, Frank (2002) stated that regular customers often regard strippers with implants or bleached hair as fake, and thus sought out more ‘authentic’ strippers, or strippers without implants or bleached hair. Relatedly, Allison (1994) claimed that patrons of a high-class hostess club in Tokyo valued the hostesses because they were physically attractive “but not so fantastic either as to remind men of their own limitations and insecurities” (p. 63). Perhaps strippers who

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<sup>33</sup> Nolan’s preferred club was Jet’s Place, a bottom-tier club in the Hanksville metropolitan area.

heavily conform to beauty standards similarly make patrons feel self-conscious about their own appearance or ability to attract such women outside of the club.

Outside of strippers' physical appearance, customers' expectations of strippers regularly encompassed personality traits and conversational skills. Several customers echoed a sentiment similar to that of Austin, a customer I met at Uptown Dolls in Princeton who looked to be white and in his mid-20's to mid-30's: that the ideal stripper is "confident" but not "too confident" and does not act as though she is superior to the customer. Tyler, a 58-year-old, white, male customer, said that Titillations was his favorite strip club in the Maylin metropolitan area for the following reason:

...because the girls there are more down-to-earth, not as pricey. More down-to-earth and not as pricey. Although some of them are, but in general. The girls at [Paradise City] and [Buck Wild Cabaret] more so think they are God's gift to mankind. And I'm not sexist. Just talking about girls in this context.

According to Tyler, strippers at the two middle-tier clubs he'd visited thought too highly of themselves, unlike the women at the bottom-tier club that was his favorite. Austin and Tyler's preference for a stripper that is not "too confident" is likely rooted in gendered expectations that women be lesser than men, including less self-assured, or that women's confidence is dependent upon the approval of men. A stripper whose confidence exceeds that of her customer and is not dictated by a man's opinion may pose a threat to patrons' anxious masculinities.

In addition to being outwardly beautiful and striking the perfect balance between confident and "too confident," customers commonly expected strippers to showcase a likeable personality. Tyler, the aforementioned customer, expanded on what he looks for in a stripper with the following:

When it comes to a dancer, for me, it's not so much about the looks, it's about her authenticity; is she sincere, does she lie to me, is she down-to-earth, sincere, and most of all though, not pushy. I've had more dancers than I can count come up to me, "Oh hi,

what's your name? What do you do for work? Uh huh. Want to go back and do some private dances?" Always within 3 to 4 minutes of meeting them. Now why would I want to do that? That's rhetorical I know. Not pushy, oh and somebody who can hold a conversation. One gal at Centreville, she's only 21, still even me, Mister Chatty, she can't engage me. Not that she won't, she can't. She doesn't know how to talk or engage anyone. You've got to have half a brain in your head. I'm sure with some guys who have less of a brain than I do, that's okay. But for me, half a brain, decent looks, down-to-earth, and not pushy.

For Tyler, a stripper's physical appearance is not enough to spark his interest. As previously mentioned, customers are oftentimes put off by strippers who request the purchase of drinks or services within moments of meeting the customer, and Tyler was no exception. Tyler prefers a stripper who is authentic, "sincere," honest, "down-to-earth," relatively intelligent, and capable of engaging in conversation.

When I asked Justin, a 32-year-old, Latinx, male customer at Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area, what makes a good stripper, he responded,

I think, here's the thing, going back to the comparison of good physique and good personality. I think if you have a combination in both, that makes a good stripper. If you have even you know, in your opinion, not so much good physique, but a good personality, you're going to lean toward more of that person a little bit. That's my personal opinion. Compared to a woman who may have a really great physique but has a poor rapport with customers. Because I could ask for a dance from a really hot woman, I'm like, okay if she tries to cheat me out of my money somehow, like "Okay, that was two dances," "No that was one dance. That was one song." I'm more inclined to stop with her and find somebody else, that may not be as "attractive" [uses air quotes]....Just because, you know, you're trying to put your best foot forward as a dancer and you can't be mean to people because they're paying you... First and foremost, from my perspective, if they are seemingly honest and down-to-earth, I guess, I'll spend more money, compared to someone who's just looking for a quick few bucks, to sum up what I'm saying.

Justin is not only averse to hustlers, but prioritizes personality over appearance. He would rather interact with a stripper who is less attractive but "honest and down-to-earth," as opposed to a stripper who is more attractive but only interested in his wallet. For Jason, having a poor personality means being unmistakably interested in payment.

Customers, particularly those who patronized bottom- and middle-tier clubs, identified specific non-physical, character traits that they sought in strippers. In fact, some cared about a stripper's personality just as much, if not more, than her physical appearance. Personality may be of greater concern to customers of bottom- and middle-tier clubs because they spend more time simply conversing with strippers than receiving lap dances or tossing dollars on stage. In support of the finding that physical appearance is a secondary concern for some clients of sex workers, Allison (1994) found that patrons of a Japanese hostess club noticed a hostess' physical appearance first but appreciated her behavior the most. Traits that were commonly referenced by strip club customers included being honest or authentic, able/willing to engage in conversation, and down-to-earth.

To these customers, 'down-to-earth' strippers seemed to be those with little to no expectation of being showered in cash. Their appeal to customers of bottom- and middle-tier clubs in many cases may be related to their inability to purchase multiple lap dances or time in a private champagne room. The concern with strippers being 'authentically themselves' and honest may stem from customers' need to believe that they are not 'just another customer' being deceived into paying large sums of money. If a stripper seems honest and authentic, a customer may assume their relationship is not superficial or part of a calculated transaction, but pleasurable for all involved. Again, customers commonly seek assurance from strippers that their relationship is special or significant in some way, and not purely motivated by monetary gain. Such assurances often come in the form of conversation, as many customers are ill-disposed to strippers who promptly request payment upon meeting them. Thus, ability and willingness to engage in conversation is unsurprisingly a valued characteristic in strippers.

Prior research (Frank 2002; Rambo & Ellis 1989) confirms that strip club customers commonly desire a sincere performance. Frank (2002) contends that regular customers value authenticity in strippers because it assuages “doubts about the commodification of interaction” (p. 201). According to Frank (2002), some regular customers dislike top-tier clubs specifically because they believe the strippers are inauthentic, using the same few ‘lines’ on each and every customer. These customers believe that strippers at bottom- and middle-tier clubs are more authentic because they are more willing to engage in prolonged personal conversation and are thus not ‘hustlers.’

Though select strippers adopt alternate personas while at work, including exoticized and racialized ones, the vast majority of strippers that I met did not assume such one-dimensional, clichéd personas as the Southern belle or ditzy party girl. Even for those who did assume an alternate persona within the club, that persona was not necessarily maintained at all times, with all customers. This finding contradicts Wood’s (2000) claim that all strippers “become two-dimensional paper dolls (to allow the customers to see what they want to see)” (p. 28). Many strippers believed that being ‘authentically themselves’ would attract more customers than adopting a stereotypical stripper persona. Contrary to what Schweitzer (2010) suggests, however, strippers do not respond only to their audience in crafting their performance. There are considerations for how to do the job that go beyond the customer. For one, presenting oneself as “the rodeo queen” or “the femme fatale” for hours on end can be exceptionally draining. Secondly, many strippers are unwilling to adopt a persona that is so unlike their own, whether on principle or out of discomfort. Notably, those strippers who refused to assume an alternate persona or did so irregularly were still able to interest customers. This may be because many customers long for authenticity and fear ‘fakeness.’

When I asked Taysha, a 19-year-old, Black, female stripper at Allure Gentleman's Club, if she adopted a different persona in the club, she replied that she did not. She said,

Yeah, it's just always like, because I feel like a lot of girls, they like fake it. They put on a smile and they're like "Oh my god, hi! I'm this person!" [said in an upbeat voice] and they walk away and they're like [long sigh] ...I'd rather be myself. It takes less effort to be myself. When you're faking it, you're just like [sighs] "I have to do what this person likes." Just be yourself. The people who are going to gravitate to you, they're going to come to you regardless, so then it's like you don't have to try to be this way. And then they come in two weeks later, and it's like oh, you don't know who you were last week.

According to Taysha, she would rather be true to herself than adopt a false persona, which she characterized as tiresome. She pointed out that when a stripper presents various personas to customers, she has to recall which persona she presents to each customer, in case a customer encounters her again, which can be quite challenging.

Chrissy, a 21-year-old, white, female stripper at 4Play Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, regarded her refusal to adopt an alternate persona as a strength. She said that, for strippers, "personality sells." According to Chrissy, customers are looking for more than a "ditzzy stripper." She said that acting like a "ditzzy stripper" does not ensure a stripper will be successful. She said she is a "sarcastic asshole" who laughs at customers when attempt to talk "dirty" to her. For Chrissy, being herself, or acting as she would in other settings, is a more effective strategy for enticing customers than assuming a stereotypical stripper persona.

Though they do not adopt personas entirely unlike their own, other strippers merely exaggerate or accentuate a particular quality in order to entertain patrons. Harlow, for example a 19-year-old, white, female stripper at Allure Gentleman's Club in Hanksville, said that she is simply "a little more extravagant, especially on the stage" but is otherwise "just me." When I asked Veronica, a 30-year-old, white, female stripper at Sapphire Gentleman's Club in Princeton, if she varied up her persona when interacting with customers, she responded,

I've tried to do that, but I'm a very true-to-me kind of person, so that didn't. And I think most girls will do that a little bit here and there, but they keep going back to their normal thing. For me, I wear sequined, rhinestone-d kind of outfits and my light-up shoes...If I wear an outfit that's all black, which is more my outside-of-the-club persona, it's my normal. I'm a little quieter in normal life. I write and sing music...I'm a very reflective, yoga, meditation, that kind of stuff. So that's more like my normal personality, but my dancing personality, for some reason, is just really bubbly...It's all me, but it's just, anywhere you go, you're going to do a little bit different version. It's like an outlet for that part of you, I guess. So, dancing, that part of me, is like the happy, energetic part of me, I guess.

Veronica attempted to adopt a specific stripper persona, but no longer tries because she is “a very true-to-me kind of person.” Veronica considered her “dancing personality” more “bubbly” than her “normal personality” but still “part of me” or representative of who she is.

While there's only so much strippers can do to seem down-to-earth (a.k.a. having little to no expectation of being showered in cash), because this is in fact their job, strippers can manage their performance of authenticity. Thus, the authenticity strippers present to customers is not necessarily achieved without effort or conscious choice. When I asked Demi, a 28-year-old, white, female stripper at Jet's Place in Hanksville, if she had a “gimmick” that set her apart from the other strippers, Demi claimed that “part of [her] gimmick or [her] hustle” is that she “purposefully pick[s] music that [she] really like[s]” so that customers get the impression she's “having so much fun up there.” She also said that she acts “really personable” and talks to staff members even when sitting with a customer to give that customer the impression that she is especially friendly. As previously mentioned, Demi often initiates conversation with customers through “dad jokes:”

I go up and my opening line if I can't judge a person is “Oh do you want to hear a joke? I've got three jokes for you.” And I'll tell three really terrible dad jokes. And if they laugh, I'm like “They're funny. You laughed. It counts!” And then if they're like laughing and more loose, then I can sit down and be like okay. And that's a good invite in. Some girls will go up and be like “Oh is this seat taken?” And it puts it on them, where I kind of am like, okay made you laugh, okay you're comfortable with me. I always tell the same three jokes. “What's invisible and smells like carrots? Bunny farts.”

“Where do salmon keep their money? In a riverbank.” And the last one is: “How much does a polar bear weigh? Enough to break the ice. I’m [Demi].” They’ll laugh on that one and then I’ll sit.

Demi utilized corny “dad jokes” to introduce herself to customers that she otherwise did not know how to connect with. Throughout her interview, Demi described herself as “bubbly;” these jokes were seemingly compatible with the personality she presented within and outside of the club<sup>34</sup>. This is perhaps why her “gimmick” proved effective with customers, because it appeared to be a genuine expression of her personality. Moreover, the awkwardness of these “lame jokes” may have given customers the impression that Demi was not masking her ‘true’ personality with a suave stripper persona and was, therefore, authentic. Additionally, these jokes may have assured customers that Demi is not an expert hustler; because she avoids the introductory lines that strippers oftentimes use (e.g. “Did you like my dance,” “Is this seat taken,” etc.), Demi’s introduction may not seem as routine or practiced.<sup>35</sup> The conscious choices that Demi made regarding her stage performances, her interactions with staff members, and her introductions to customers allowed her to manage her authenticity in such a way that appealed to a considerable number of customers, who were potentially averse to hustlers and ‘fake’ strippers. The authenticity customers perceive in some strippers is not necessarily a natural byproduct of these women simply ‘being themselves.’ Rather, even those who refuse to adopt an alternate stripper persona must still make conscious and strategic choices to manage their authentic presentation.

Part of presenting oneself as ‘authentic’ is sharing personal information, which many strippers were willing to do, to varying degrees. When I raised the issue of stripper personas with

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<sup>34</sup> I became acquainted with Demi years prior outside of the club, so I am somewhat familiar with her ‘everyday’ persona.

<sup>35</sup> Unbeknownst to them, Demi developed these jokes while waitressing third shift as a way to deal with “disgruntled” and “drunk” customers.

Candy, a 19-year-old, “white and Chinese,” female stripper at Buck Wild Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, she said, “I don’t have that kind of personality. I am myself through and through. And if a customer doesn’t like that, you know what? I’ll miss out on that money.

Because I don’t want to act like someone that I’m not because I have a damn good personality.”

With regard to how honest she is with customers, Candy went on to say,

Generally, with [romantic/sexual] relationships, I keep that out of the club. I don’t tell my customers, because it kills part of the fantasy. But if they ask me questions that aren’t super invasive and probing, I’ll answer them honestly. I’ve straight up told customers where I’m from. I’ve even told customers my real name before. I kind of feel like, yes, it’s the fantasy world, but honesty is still the best policy. Because I would hate it if a customer just came up in there and lied and lied and lied to me, to be what I wanted him to be.

Candy refused to adopt a stripper persona, to the extent that she was willing to lose out on tips and other payments if a customer did not like her everyday personality. By and large, Candy was candid with customers, though she refrained some disclosing information on intimate relationships, in an effort to appear sexually or romantically available to her customers. Thus, Candy chose the route of authenticity, with minor lapses in honesty to maintain customer interest.

Though I met several strippers who did not withhold any personal information from patrons, the majority were candid only with regulars and disclosed few personal details to non-regulars. This was done, in part, for safety reasons; strippers are not uncommonly stalked by men they’ve met at the club, and disclosing personal information may enable a customer to uncover where they live or work or attend school. Several strippers I met also pointed out that it is difficult to grow and maintain a relationship with a regular customer over the course of months or years without disclosing personal information. From a practical standpoint, it can be challenging, if not impossible, for a stripper to keep track of the lies and half-truths told to a

customer over an extended period of time; failure to do so, however, will likely alienate the customer and jeopardize the relationship. Furthermore, strippers may fear losing a regular customer, and thus income, if they do not disclose at least some personal information; after all, regulars often share a good deal of private information and may become frustrated by a stripper who refuses to disclose anything at all. From a more personal standpoint, many strippers are quite fond of their regulars and may feel uncomfortable outright lying to them, if not also keeping information from them.

According to Schweitzer (2001), Wood (2000), and Frank (1998), strip club customers are uninterested in honest conversation with strippers or conversation that revolves around a stripper's personal troubles. According to Wood (2000), a stripper who shares details of her life impedes upon customers' "ability to see her as a sexy, sensual, and most important available woman" (p. 10). I found that this is not always the case. Undoubtedly, there are customers who could care less about honesty in strip clubs and/or are only interested in conversation that revolves around themselves. That does not change the fact, however, that many strippers are truthful with customers, particularly regulars, and those customers do not inevitably shy away from those relationships. Some customers are very much willing, if not eager, to be told details of a stripper's life, at times including the fact that the stripper is in a committed relationship and thus 'unavailable.' Further, some regular customers pride themselves on their knowledge of strippers' personal lives and use that knowledge to not only suggest that strippers prefer their company to the company of other customers [see Chapter 4], but also that their interactions with strippers are more authentic.

For many strippers, refusing to assume a distinct stripper persona and being truthful with customers garnered a good deal of business. This may be due to the fact that customers often

expressed an aversion to ‘fake’ strippers and an interest in honest and authentic ones. The appearance of authenticity in strippers can help to assure customers that these beautiful women are not interested in their wallets, but in them as individuals. Notably, however, the production of the authenticity that customers seek is not necessarily unintentional or natural. Strippers commonly make conscious and strategic decisions about how to manage their authenticity, including when they must walk the fine line between being honest and authentic and affirming customers’ anxious masculinities.

According to Wood (2000), strip club customers fabricate personal information or stories about themselves to seem more desirable and successful. Though customers did not admit this to me, many strippers said this was a common occurrence. Veronica, a stripper at Sapphire Gentleman’s Club in Princeton, informed me,

I'll buy whatever they're selling. I've been told many times, "I own this strip club somewhere else. You should come work for me." And I know they're full of shit. I know they're trying to impress me, but I'll play along. If that's the reality they want to live in, I'll go there. It's a fantasy, it's a fantasy, being there. They say you're the fantasy, so if this customer's fantasy is for them to be a hotshot, they own a strip club somewhere, they have lots of money, that's their fantasy? I buy into it and I'll play along. I don't have to believe it because I'm never going to see this person again, anyway.

Veronica acts as though she believes customers when they say they own a strip club, though she firmly believes they are lying. By not calling their bluff, Veronica aids customers in projecting an idealized masculine self, that of a successful businessman.

Much like Veronica, Jesse, a stripper at Allure Gentleman’s Club in Hanksville, refrained from undermining or questioning customers. Jesse said,

You get told lies all the time and you, you are just sitting there listening to these guys inflate themselves. You know that in any other circumstance, that you wouldn't be talking to them, you wouldn't be giving them your time, you wouldn't be letting all of their bullshit statements to be gone unchecked.

According to Jesse, customers tell lies “all the time” in order to “inflate themselves” or make themselves appear to be greater than they are. Jesse said that she would not allow such lies to go “unchecked” outside of the club. As a stripper, however, she did. Regarding a customer who paid for a membership card at Allure, Jesse went on to say,

So, this guy is particularly, he's one where he's into the intellect, but he's a narcissist and not a very smart narcissist. So, he can tell by looking at me that I'm Jewish. He likes to talk me up about things he thinks he knows about my culture and ethnicity and it's irritating because he's wrong. He'll be like, "Oh, this little fact that I know about Jews." ...I remember when I first met him, I would correct him. I'd be like, "Well, actually, it's this." And he would be very insistent that he knows what he's talking about. I'm like, alright, he's a customer. Whatever, I'm going to let him think whatever the fuck he wants to think for him to give me money.

In early interactions with this customer, Jesse corrected him when he made false claims about the Jewish community. Eventually, Jesse stopped correcting him and allowed his misconceptions to go unchecked, because she did not want to jeopardize her chances of receiving payment from him. Thus, Jesse strengthened the patron’s gendered performance as a man of superior intellect.

According to Allison (1994), hostesses of Japanese hostess clubs must avoid becoming visibly upset by customers’ physical or verbal gestures. When strip club customers behave poorly, strippers generally strive to mask their displeasure, though there are limits to what they are willing or able to accept from customers. In the case of Jesse, for instance, she is willing to smile and nod along as a customer touts his purportedly vast knowledge of the Jewish community. Nonetheless, Jesse’s tolerance has its limits. Jesse said to me,

As a survivor of sexual assault, it just makes it difficult to deal with guys that are actively participating [in] and propagating rape culture. But I just have to remind myself that there's a limit to that. There's certain things that they can't do and that they can be punished for. If they grab me, I can tell a bouncer and have them thrown out. If they try to solicit prostitution, I can have them thrown out. If they disrespect me, I don't give them my time. Anything that I accept, I'm accepting in exchange for money. Any sort of disrespect or slight or perceived personal attack, I'm only doing it for money.

Jesse struggles to entertain customers who are “participating [in] and propagating rape culture” but is comforted by the knowledge that she can have customers thrown out of the club for assaulting her or attempting to solicit prostitution. At first, Jesse claims that she does not interact with customers who treat her with disrespect; she then acknowledges that the disrespect she does tolerate, she tolerates only for money.

Demi spoke openly about how she does not endure abuse from customers<sup>36</sup>. One night, for example, she once joined a veteran stripper and a novice stripper in a private room with three men in their mid-20’s. According to Demi,

One of them was really nice. The other two were like “Oooh, we’re partying on a Tuesday. This is great!” So, we do the room, and the poor girl, I’m sitting there with the cool guy, talking to him or whatever. I look over at her face and it’s like...I can tell something is wrong. So, I like call over and I whisper “What’s going on?” And she’s like “He whipped his dick out.” So, I look down and sure enough he did. He was sitting there and I was like “He’s going to call me a bitch. Just go with it. Say that I’m the worst.” So, I turn around and I’m like “What the fuck is your problem? Put that shit away!” [mimics yelling] and I like go off on him. So, he’s like [mimics customer gasping] and I told her, “Just keep calling me a bitch. Say you want to do it but you can’t because I’m here.” And that’s what she went along with and did. The dude ended up tipping her well and he cussed me out. I told her, “No, do not allow that.” He doesn’t like me anyways.

Demi recognized that the novice stripper did not know how to respond to a customer exposing himself, so she yelled at the customer herself and coached the beginner to object. By doing this, Demi enabled the beginner to mask her rejection of the customers’ sexual advances, while at the same time standing up against sexual misconduct. On this occasion, Demi was unwilling to minimize or mask her honest reaction for the sake of customer’s comfort and satisfaction.

Customers commonly expect strippers to be honest and thus authentic. However, strippers’ honesty and authenticity must be carefully managed to ensure customer satisfaction and thus cash flow. True honesty can easily derail a customer’s negotiation of their masculinity,

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<sup>36</sup> Not long before our interview, Demi gave a customer “a black eye for his wedding day” because he slapped her so hard it left a bruise.

by exacerbating anxieties surrounding their masculinity, as opposed to alleviating them. And so, many strippers strive to satisfy customers who fear the “fake” stripper while simultaneously fortifying customers’ idealized masculinities, even when that means being a bit “fake.” However, strippers can only tolerate so much. At times, strippers do feel the need assert themselves, whether out of personal conviction or to ensure their own or another’s safety and well-being.

### *Discussion*

A number of customers expressed an aversion to “hustlers,” or strippers who are only interested in customers’ wallets and not in them as individuals. The most common practice strippers utilized to assure customers that they cared about more than money was to engage them in conversation before raising the issue of payment. Others adopted more drastic practices, including purchasing overpriced drinks for customers or lying about owning a profitable business. I found these more extreme measures to be utilized only in top-tier clubs. One possible explanation for this may be that strippers of top-tier clubs are aware that some customers prefer these clubs because they assume the women are not desperate for money and thus will not hassle them for it. Another explanation may be that strippers of top-tier clubs feel the need to reassure customers that strip clubs and strippers can be high-class. A third explanation may be that these strategies are less effective in bottom- and middle-tier clubs, wherein select customers seek to assume the role of supporter [see Chapter 6]. These strategies serve to mask the commodified nature of stripper-customer relationships. Without these strategies, customers would be forced to grapple with the fact that they are paying women for attention, affection, and/or stimulation, which, given the enduring sociocultural association between heterosexuality and normative masculinity (Anderson 2008a; Bridges 2014; Pascoe 2007; Skelton 2001), could significantly disrupt their performance of an idealized masculinity.

In the #MeToo era, some men fear being accused of sexual harassment or assault for behavior they deem normal and acceptable; this was not the case in strip clubs. Some customers believed that they could treat strippers however they pleased without fear of repercussion. Relatedly, some customers were drawn to strip clubs because they did not anticipate rejection from strippers, regardless of how they behaved. Strippers recognized that customers do not wish or expect to be rejected and sought to satisfy their customers while preserving their personal boundaries. Many strippers avoided unequivocally declining their customers' advances in favor of more subtly manipulating customers' behavior. By cloaking their rejection of customers with humor, levity, excuses, etc., strippers were able to avoid undercutting customers' gender performances.

A minority of strippers I spoke with adopted distinct 'stripper personas' to appeal to customers' perceived tastes, ranging from the Southern belle to the ditzy party girl. By enacting such hyper-feminine personas, strippers ensured that customers' gender performance was amplified by contrast. Beyond adopting a Southern accent or acting dim-witted, several strippers enacted racialized personas to fulfill customers' desire for the fetishized, exoticized 'Other.'

For the majority of strippers, simply acting as they would in other settings or 'being themselves,' at most exaggerating a trait or two about themselves, served them well in satisfying customers. Customers commonly expressed an aversion to "fake" strippers and an interest in honest and authentic ones, likely because the perception of honesty and authenticity in strippers enables customers to believe that their interactions with strippers are exceptional and beyond transactional. This may explain why the 'authentic' approach to stripping proved so effective for many strippers. Some strippers were 'authentically themselves' for strategic purposes, while others refused to assume a clichéd, one-dimensional persona on the grounds that being

themselves was simply more comfortable or enjoyable. Regardless of the motivation, many strippers routinely made conscious and strategic choices about how to manage their authenticity, including with whom to share personal information, how much personal information to share, and when to set aside honesty. Some strippers recognized that true honesty, and thus authenticity, could easily undermine a customer's negotiation of their masculinity. And so, some strategically curtailed their honesty in order to fortify customers' gender performances, thus becoming, however briefly, the "fake" stripper so many customers purportedly fear. There were limits, however, to what strippers were willing or able to tolerate from customers and many were not always able to rein in their honest reactions to the customers' behavior.

I contend that the aforementioned practices employed by strippers are masculinizing practices -- "practices that are governed by a gender regime, are embedded in social relations, and work to produce masculinities in particular settings and by certain institutions" (Connell 2000, as cited in Frank 2002: 20). Strippers' practices involved in managing authenticity and convincing customers that they are not hustlers serve to conceal the impetus for their interactions (a.k.a. cash) and solidify the impression that their relationship is based upon mutual interest and/or affection. This, in turn, enables customers to enact idealized, compulsively heterosexual masculinities, rooted in the fantasy that they do not *need* to pay for the attention or affection of women. By sidestepping the outright rejection of customers' advances, strippers avoid undercutting patrons' gendered performances, affirming the view that they can say and do as they like with women who are delighted about it.

Through these masculinizing practices, rooted in cultural concepts of gender, strippers construct a fantasy. Throughout my observations and interviews, strippers and customers alike referenced fantasy; some maintained that strippers construct a fantasy for customers, while

others referred to strip clubs and/or strippers themselves as a fantasy. Most assumed that this fantasy pertained only to sexual desire. I did not find this to be the case. A fantasy, according to Silverman (1992), is used to compensate for inadequacies in individuals' lives and casts as whole what can only ever be partial. I contend that the fantasy customers seek within strip clubs is not strictly sexual; rather, it is a fantasy of masculinity, which compensates for customers' inability or struggle to fulfill masculine ideals and projects onto the customer an idealized masculine self which can never be realized across all dimensions of a patron's life. Thus, the "service that is purchased, then, is an eroticization less of the woman than of the man" (Allison 1994: 22).

### *Conclusion*

I contend that much of strippers' labor revolves around enabling and amplifying male customers' enactments of idealized masculinities, which may not be realizable for particular patrons outside of the club. In other words, strip club customers heavily rely upon the labor of strippers to fulfill a 'fantasy' of masculinity. Strippers consciously and strategically employ an array of practices, to cultivate intimacy with customers, to counsel customers, to reassure customers they're not being 'hustled,' to shield customers from having to hear "No," to adopt a hyperfeminine stripper persona or perform to racialized tropes, and/or to perform the appropriate amount of authenticity. Through these strategies, strippers aid customers in negotiating and meeting the demands of masculinity. Thus, stripping is simultaneously a product and producer of masculinity; it is a response to the anxious masculinities of the male consumers who sustain the industry as much as it is a vehicle for the negotiation of those masculinities.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CUSTOMER ROLES AND COMPARISONS

#### *Introduction*

Thus far, I've addressed how female strippers fulfill the emotion needs of male customers and aid male customers in negotiating their masculinity. Some may interpret the labor practices strippers employ to meet these ends as deceptive or false and may therefore conclude that stripper-customer relationships are inauthentic. This is not my interpretation, though prior research has characterized these relationships as such.

Several researchers (Boles and Garbin 1974; Enck and Preston 1988; Erickson and Tewksbury 2000; Pasko 2002; Teela 2005) have utilized the term "counterfeit intimacy" to characterize stripper-customer relations and the interactional practices therein. According to Enck and Preston (1988), counterfeit intimacy is the misimpression or "illusion that sexual intimacy is possible if the customer has the seductive finesse to gain her participation" (p. 370), stemming from verbal and nonverbal ploys enacted by both strippers and customers. According to Enck and Preston (1988), when "legitimate" institutions are not able to provide individuals with the benefits they seek, individuals "will seek those benefits elsewhere, even if they have to pay for a 'counterfeit'" (p. 370); the counterfeit in the case of strip clubs is intimacy.

By characterizing the intimacy achieved within strip clubs as counterfeit or illusory, strippers are cast as "tricksters" (Wahab, Baker, Smith, Cooper, & Lerum 2011) and the perceived differences between sex work and other "legitimate" forms of work are reinforced. For example, Forsyth and Deshotels (1997) suggest that strippers "use strategic flirting in order to control the customer by manipulating his fantasies and hustling the patron into spending his money" (p. 236). Here, strippers are not characterized as skilled laborers or service providers, but

as liars and hustlers. It is of course not uncommon for stripping to entail some degree of deception or manipulation, though this alone does not make stripping distinct from other forms of work. Countless professions entail deception and manipulation, to varying extents.<sup>37</sup> Pierce (1995), for instance, found that male lawyers use charm and flattery to reshape service-recipient emotions, values, and ways of thinking. Leider (1993) found that insurance agents employ compliance and concealment techniques to guide service-recipient behavior and disguise the routine nature of their interactions. As with other relationships between service providers and recipients, the extent to which stripper-customer relationships are based on deception and manipulation is enormously variable.

Moreover, to suggest that stripper-customer interactions are counterfeit, and thus inauthentic or not real, also implies that “real” and “authentic” interactions are clearly defined. If the commodified nature of the relationship between strippers and customers alone makes it inauthentic, then any and all human service providers, including therapists, doulas, physicians, elder care workers, etc., are all incapable of developing authentic or real relationships with their clients – which few would claim to be the case (Burks & Robbins 2012). The mere exchange of money or material goods for services, in and of itself, cannot preclude strippers from having authentic interactions and relationships with customers.

If a relationship is personally satisfying or meaningful to one or more parties involved, then who is to say it is not authentic or real? Lilly, a 22-year-old, Latina stripper, told me of a male customer she had awhile back while working at Vixen’s Exotic Club in the Hanksville metropolitan area. The customer’s wife had dementia and he was responsible for her care. He was willing to speak about his wife at the bar, but not in a private room. According to Lilly,

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<sup>37</sup> There is a reason why so many strippers I spoke with compared stripping to sales.

being in a private room was “about escaping for him” and being intimate with someone. Who is to say this relationship was anything less than real, when the customers’ desire for intimacy and/or temporary relief from tremendous responsibility and stress were, in all likelihood, very much real?

Nova, a 26-year-old, white, female former stripper at Ruby’s Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area said one of her regulars “was in the military” and “shot a ton of people.” This customer would purchase a private room for one to three hours, “pull the cushions off the couch and lay them down on a bed setting, and then he would lay there, and I would rub or walk on his back while he talked to me.” According to Nova, “I never danced for him. I didn’t get naked. I didn’t take my top off. I would massage him...Next, he’d fall asleep...He’d wake up and be like [sigh] I feel so much better.” Nova recalled these interactions with fondness, saying “he was a good one.” And judging by Nova’s account, the customer enjoyed their time together as well, relaxing to the point of falling asleep in a private room which costs \$600 an hour. Nova did not characterize the relaxation or therapeutic touch experienced by the customer as inauthentic, so neither shall I, as I was not present in these private rooms.

Lexie, a 28-year-old, white, female stripper at Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area, spoke of a relationship with a customer that was seemingly meaningful to both parties:

I’ve met people there [at Treasure Trove] that I am genuinely close friends with now. I have a friend who I met there; he started forcing himself to go there like once a week to work through anxiety issues and I talked to him that first day and we’ve just been friends ever since. I was just hanging out with him last night. Like really cool dude.

Lexie clearly valued this relationship, and judging by her account, the customer did as well. Only these two are in a position to determine the authenticity of their relationship.

In preceding chapters, I drew upon the concept of “fantasy,” not because stripper-

customer interactions are invariably inauthentic or unreal, but because customers' gendered performances within strip clubs may not be feasible beyond those establishments or outside of sex work altogether. And yet, the fact that these exact masculine performances are so often confined to the contexts of sex work, does not negate the possibility of authentic connection between strippers and customers.

Again, this is not to say that strippers and customers do not manage their presentation of self in order to achieve desired ends, which are generally not identical. Thus far, I have addressed how strippers manage their self-presentation and interactions with customers. However, these relationships are not one-sided; customers manage their self-presentation in interaction with strippers and favorably compare themselves to other customers in order to assert an idealized masculine self.

### *Literature Review*

Strip club research more often addresses the behavior of strippers; however, several researchers (Allison 1994; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Frank 2002, Price-Glynn 2010) have identified interactional patterns among customers. For example, Erickson and Tewksbury (2000) engaged in covert participant observation in two upscale clubs in a major Midwestern city and identified a six-category typology of patrons based on their behavior. The "Lonely" seek the companionship of strippers, are intense conversationalists, are less physical with strippers, and display the least evidence of objectifying strippers. The "Socially Impotent" similarly patronize strip clubs in pursuit of companionship and are not especially physical with strippers; however, they lack the social skills to maintain companionship, and so they spend more money to ensure continued interaction. In contrast to the Lonely, the Socially Impotent openly gaze at strippers' bodies rather than their faces. Much like the Lonely and Socially Impotent, "Players" pursue

conversation and companionship. Unlike the Lonely and Socially Impotent, however, they seek to secure a stripper's attention through flirtation and charm. "Bold Lookers," by contrast, are in pursuit of a voyeuristic/pornographic experience, seek the "best" view of a stripper's sexual anatomy during stage performances, attempt to touch strippers when tipping, and generally do not converse with the strippers, aside from flirtatious and/or crude banter while tipping.

"Detached Lookers" also pursue a voyeuristic experience, though they exhibit a more passive, indifferent demeanor and are unlikely to aggressively pursue the "best" view. They also show little interest in conversation or companionship and rarely tip or purchase drinks or dances. The "Sugar Daddy" pursues companionship as well. They are often met at the door by their favorite strippers and taken to a table far from other patrons. Strippers are more physically intimate with Sugar Daddies, often because they have a relationship with these men outside of the club. This typology highlights interactional patterns among customers but provides little detail on how customers interpret their relationship to strippers or their role within the strip club.

Frank (2002) conducted interviews with regular male customers and engaged in participant observation in five strip clubs, ranging from bottom-tier to top-tier, in a large Southern city. Frank outlines motivations among regulars for frequenting strip clubs. However, these stated motivations revolve around what strippers or strip clubs can offer them and shed little insight on the actual behavioral patterns of customers. Frank also highlights how regular customers frequently claimed that their relationships with strippers were authentic, for one reason or another. In the process of claiming authenticity, customers revealed their perception of strippers, but not how they manage their own self-presentation with strip clubs. Frank indicates that male customers perform the role of desiring male, in which they publicly express sexual desire for women, thus 'proving' their heterosexuality. Frank also mentions in a footnote that

customers may assume other roles, including that of big spender or stripper protector. However, the roles customers assume in relation to strippers is not a primary focus of the research.

Allison (1994) engaged in participant observation in a high-end Japanese hostess club and interviewed subjects ranging from the manager of a hostess club to a sex counselor. According to Allison, customers at high-end Japanese hostess clubs commonly assume the role of a *sukebei*, that of a lewd and lustful man, by commenting on the physical attributes of hostesses, propositioning hostesses, sharing fictional or hyperbolic stories of sexual exploits, etc. Allison (1994) also suggests that patrons may assume other subjectivities, including that of singer or linguistic authority. Though Japanese hostess clubs are undeniably distinct from Midwestern U.S. strip clubs, patrons of both kinds of establishments may enact the role of a lewd and lustful man. However, the majority of customers I observed and/or spoke with did not perform or claim this role, at least not consistently. This is especially true of customers who did not go to strip clubs in large, all-male groups.

Price-Glynn (2010) created a typology of customer masculinities based on interviews with customers and participation observation in a strip club in a small, rural U.S. town. According to Price-Glynn, male customers who seek affirmation of their desirability value conversation and companionship, lack self-esteem and experience loneliness outside of the club, and seek relief from the pressures of the outside world, including interactions with women. Male customers who seek group connectedness in the form of male bonding are primarily interested in other male patrons, not strippers, and perform their masculinity for other men's appreciation. Regulars who seek group connectedness form relationships with staff and other patrons and are primarily interested in those relationships, not strippers. Male customers who perform aggression speak favorably of violence and heavy drinking and verbally or physically abuse female workers.

White patrons who fall under this category may also engage in racist dialogue. Price-Glynn suggests that patrons may occupy more than one of these categories in a given day. While indicative of how patrons manage their self-presentation, I observed greater diversity in the roles male customers assume in relation to strippers. Though research on patron behavior does address masculinity, to varying degrees (Allison 1994; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Frank 2002, Price-Glynn 2010), the relationship between customers' self-presentations and constructions of gender can be more clearly elucidated.

Though strip clubs attract patrons of diverse socioeconomic classes, there is little research that examines class in the context of sex work (Bernstein 2007; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Schiff 2001; Trautner 2005). Of the aforementioned researchers, Erickson and Tewksbury (2000) were the only scholars to address linkages between socioeconomic status and patron behavior. According to Erickson and Tewksbury (2000), "Bold Lookers" are typically of a lower socioeconomic status, while "Sugar Daddies" put on the "most obvious displays of affluence" (p. 287), suggesting that they are upper middle- to upper-class. "Detached Lookers," on the other hand, represent the full range of socioeconomic statuses.<sup>38</sup> Though Erickson and Tewksbury did consider socioeconomic status in their typology, they did not delve into the classed or gendered meanings underlying these roles. Thus, literature on customers' self-presentations and how they are affected and informed by class is in need of further development.

Furthermore, sex work research which interrogates class has largely not examined constructions of masculinity (Bernstein 2007; Erickson & Tewksbury 2000; Schiff 2001; Trautner 2005). Trautner (2005) examined classed performances of sexuality in sex clubs. She compared "working-class clubs" to "middle-class clubs" in terms of the physical appearance and

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<sup>38</sup> Erickson and Tewksbury (2000) did not address the class composition of the remaining categories in their typology, "The Lonely," "The Socially Impotent," and "Players."

attire of strippers and staff members, the stage performances of strippers, and interactions between strippers and customers. Trautner concluded that middle-class clubs are associated with “a sexuality that is voyeuristic, characterized by distance, gazing, and a formal sexual atmosphere” (p. 786). Working-class clubs, by contrast, are associated with a “cheap thrills sexuality” (p. 776), enabling customers to objectify women and experience sexual stimulation.

Bernstein (2007) explored the experiences of middle-class sex workers and transformations in segments of the sex industry which cater to middle-class clientele, “including the emergence of ‘bounded authenticity’ (an authentic, yet bounded, interpersonal connection)” (p. 474). Shiff (2001) theorized on the function of nude clubs. He argued that fully nude clubs, which attract more working-class men, constitute a “symbolic form of class opposition to the dominant neo-puritan norms” (p. 16).

Hoang (2015) examined multiple niche markets of Vietnam’s sex industry, catering to Vietnamese and Asian political and economic elite, overseas Vietnamese men (Việt Kiều), and Western businessmen and backpackers. Hoang explored the relationships between the labor of female hostesses, patrons’ performances of class-based masculinities, and the global exchange of money. Hoang’s research interrogated intersections of race, nation, class, gender, and local and global economy. Of course, the transnational processes that create and inform dynamics of class and gender in U.S. strip clubs differ from those in Ho Chi Minh City hostess clubs. To further understandings of how masculinity is (co-)constructed in U.S. strip clubs, customer behavior must be examined at the intersection of gender and class.

Through my research, I found that customers assumed a variety of roles in relation to strippers, which enabled patrons to project an idealized masculine self. Notably, I do not claim to have documented all roles enacted by customers; I imagine this to be an impossibility, given the

diversity of customers and stripper-customer relations. However, I will be highlighting two roles assumed by customers in clubs throughout Hanksville, Princeton, and Maylin – the “supporter” and the “entertainer” – which are not often addressed in strip club literature. These roles can of course overlap or be enacted by the same customer at different times. By highlighting these interactional patterns, I seek to illustrate how customers manage their self-presentation to fulfill a fantasy of masculinity; furthermore, I explore how the enactment of these masculine roles and the meanings associated with them vary depending the customer’s socioeconomic position. Thus, I seek to interrogate linkages between customers’ self-presentations, productions of gender, and socioeconomic status. Relatedly, I will address how customers negotiate an understanding of themselves and their place within the club by favorably comparing themselves to other customers. Again, I regard these findings as especially, if not exclusively, applicable to white, heterosexual, able-bodied, native-born American, working- and middle-class male customers. The vast majority of the customers I interviewed fit this description, and though I cannot attest to the demographics of all customers I observed or informally spoke with, the majority seemed to fall within these categories.

### *Supporter*

In clubs across Hanksville, Princeton, and Maylin, I encountered customers who “supported” strippers in ways they assumed were meaningful.<sup>39</sup> In other words, they offered gifts and/or favors that went beyond tipping or purchasing erotic services, which were intended to enhance a stripper’s or strippers’ quality of life. Jason, a 56-year-old, white, male regular customer at Jet’s Place in Hanksville, epitomized the “supporter.”

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<sup>39</sup> Notably, the vast majority of strippers who spoke of customers who supported them were either white or white passing, including one light-skinned Latina stripper at Jet’s. I met only one stripper of color who was not white passing, a Black stripper at The Edge, who told me of a regular customer who seemingly fit this description.

A few months prior to meeting him, Jason had started decorating strippers' shoes using vinyl paint free of charge. He indicated that he would soon start charging strippers for this service, though I never saw that occur. Last I spoke with Jason, he had decorated ten pairs of shoes for strippers at Jet's. On more than one occasion, Jason asked the strippers and staff members he was closest with<sup>40</sup> if they wanted anything from Taco Bell or McDonald's, which were both located within a few miles of the club. Jet's served only overpriced frozen pizza and fries, which the strippers and staff had grown tired of. And so, a little change of pace was appreciated by all. When he was strapped for cash, he would request that those who wanted fast food give him money, with the exception of Jemma, a stripper who was struggling financially. When Jason was comfortable spending a bit of money, he would offer the food free of charge. Jason would leave the club and return within twenty minutes with everyone's order. The strippers for whom he purchased food would then hug him and praise him.

On multiple occasions, Jason gave Jemma rides to or from Jet's. The first time he gave Jemma a ride home, she expressed concern that Jason was going to behave inappropriately or harm her. He said "She was so desperate for a ride. I felt bad for her after that because you shouldn't be that desperate for a ride that you're so worried you're in danger." Once while driving Jemma to work, Jason stopped at the Taco Bell drive-through to order dinner for Derek, a bouncer at Jet's. According to Jason, Jemma asked if he could order something for her as well, because she hadn't eaten in two days. Jason bought her dinner at Culver's and "she [Jemma] was all happy." Jason said, "Spending seven bucks on somebody and I make them smile. Damn. Takes a lot more than that to make the wife<sup>41</sup> smile." Jason claimed that on "Tuesdays she

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<sup>40</sup> Jason also asked me if I would like anything from a nearby fast food restaurant on at least one occasion.

<sup>41</sup> Notably, Jason never spoke in especially positive terms about his spouse. The most complimentary thing he ever said about her was that she "puts up pretty well with it," referring to his strip club patronage and relationships with

[Jemma] eats well,” because, at the time, Jason was going to Jet’s every Tuesday and regularly bought her food. He claimed that “[Jemma] doesn’t have the money. There is no food in the house. They’re barely making rent. She’s the only one working out for four people. One time I gave her tip-in just because I knew she needed it. So, it was a \$20 tip. Well, I can’t do it every week...” Jason not only provided Jemma with transportation and food but paid her fee to work at the club on at least one occasion.

Some customers, including Jason, provide the most support to strippers they believe are in need. One Tuesday evening, Jason told me that he “falls” for the strippers who “need saving,” the ones who will complain, “I’m broke,” and ask for assistance. Katie, a waitress at Jet’s, chimed in and joked that he was “Captain Save-A-Hoe;” Jason agreed that the title was appropriate. Jason admitted that he had a “savior complex” and enjoyed helping others. As an example, Jason told me that he was “gaga” for a stripper named Dallas who was fired from Jet’s awhile back. According to Jason, “Dallas, everything was a panic. ‘I need money for this’ and ‘I need money for that.’” Jason would offer to give Dallas money in exchange for a lap dance, but she would ask that he simply give her the money so that she could spend her time dancing for other customers; Jason would agree to this. He also bought Dallas a new tire and rim after she got into a car accident. Jason stopped associating with Dallas because he did not approve of her rekindling a relationship with a former boyfriend who Jason referred to as a “doper.” During our interview, Jason reiterated that had a “savior complex.” In regard to Jemma, he said, “I’m trying to fix something that’s already broke. And it ain’t going to happen.”

From fast food to new car parts, Jason offered support outside of tips or the purchase of lap dances for strippers he believed wanted or needed it. However, Jason did expect that this

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strippers. He said this after noting that his wife had removed a stripper from his Facebook account after repeated calls from her on Facebook messenger.

support, however small, would be appreciated. When a stripper did not express “sufficient” gratitude for his support, Jason became aggravated and threatened to withdraw his support. One Tuesday night, Jason gestured to Jemma who was seated with another customer. He informed me that he had bought her dinner and given her a ride to work last week. He complained that she had been late to work because she hadn’t asked him for a ride. He said that she knew full well that he would have given her a ride had she asked. Jason seemed frustrated. He waved his hand dismissively as if to suggest that he wouldn’t concern himself with her anymore. He asked me if he sounded “bitter” and admitted that he might be. Three weeks later, Jason told me that Jemma had contacted him and requested a ride to work. He agreed. When he arrived at her home, Jason messaged Jemma to let her know that he was waiting out front. She responded by saying that she no longer needed a ride and had already left. Jason was clearly upset by this. Jason uttered Jemma’s name once in this conversation; otherwise, he referred to Jemma as “you-know-who” and nodded in her direction, refusing to say her name. He said that he had created a design for Jemma’s shoes, but may no longer apply that design. He even threatened to tear the shoes apart. He then admitted that he would likely not destroy her shoes, but he remained adamant that he would not decorate them. Later that night, Jason told Jemma that he wanted to show her the design he’d created for her shoes. She agreed to look at the design. However, rather than sitting down with Jason, she approached another customer and took a seat next to him. Jason was clearly upset by this and said that he would not be doing her any more favors. During my formal interview with Jason, he griped that Jemma had been arrested for driving while intoxicated, even though he had offered a ride that very night. This frustrated Jason. He implied that he would no longer interact with her because of this. I was unable to ascertain Jemma’s perspective on the relationship, but I will note that a majority of strippers at Jet’s seemed to like Jason; several

strippers even jumped up and hugged him when he entered the club. I suspect that Jemma was unaware that Jason was upset, however, because I never saw him be rude to her or express to her that he was upset, and I saw them interact on multiple occasions.

Like Jason, other customers I met or heard of expressed frustration with strippers who did not express as much gratitude as they expected. Some even withdrew support from strippers they saw as ungrateful. Robert, a white, middle-aged, male customer I met at Ruby's Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, was one such customer. Robert told me that he had gone on multiple "dates" with strippers from Ruby's, wherein he would meet them at the mall and purchase clothes, shoes, or accessories for them. Robert said that in order for a stripper to proceed to the next store, she had to "share some of her Mac lipstick" with him. According to Robert, one stripper who had gone on several "dates" with him had been reluctant to kiss him each time she wanted to move on to another store. She also snuck more expensive shoes into boxes for less expensive shoes without telling Robert. For these reasons, Robert no longer associated with her. Robert's story indicates that he was displeased with the stripper for not showcasing her appreciation in the way he expected.

Support of strippers took a range of forms, including relatively inexpensive ones. Jade, a 21-year-old, white, female stripper at Uptown Dolls in Princeton, told me of a regular customer who was going to buy her something to fix a crack in her ceiling. Peter, a 47-year-old, white, male customer at Allure Gentleman's Club in the Hanksville metropolitan area, gifted Harley a hand-drawing of lavender flowers because he knew those were her favorite kind of flower; he then agreed to draw jasmine flowers for Skye because those were her favorite. For a while, Peter also brought in homecooked food for the strippers at Allure, before the manager instructed him to stop out of concern that he could poison the strippers. During our interview, Peter said, "[The

strippers] would be really happy because nobody ever brings them anything and they can buy food there, but it's expensive and they can't really leave to go get something, so they thought it was really nice of me to do that.... I made chocolate covered bacon. That got me famous. All the girls had that. They went crazy over that." Peter's support also took non-material forms, as he regularly massaged strippers' shoulders and even their temples if they had a headache.

Other customers provided more substantial monetary or material support. As an example, Alyssa, a stripper I met at The Edge in the Hanksville metropolitan area, told me she had one regular who gave her \$700 a week and another who gave her roughly \$1,500 a week. Alyssa regularly went to dinner with both of these men before starting her next shift. When Alyssa's grandmother died, one gifted her over \$1,000 and the other sent flowers. These men had also given her birthday presents and Christmas cards in the past three years she had known them. Claire, a 26-year-old, white, female stripper at Uptown Dolls in Princeton, said the following of a regular customer: "He got me a car and...he pays the insurance on it and everything. It's not like, a brand-new car or anything, it's like a beater, but that's fucking, I'll take it.... And I was having trouble with rent, so he wrote me like an \$800 check to my landlord, but he works a lot, so I haven't seen him in a while except he came to like fix something on the car." From monthly payments to the purchase of a car, customer support of strippers can be rather costly. Support of this kind generally came from customer who frequented middle- or top-tier clubs, which may be because these customers are, on average, better off financially. Regardless of expense, customers who assumed the role of supporter were almost exclusively regulars, which makes sense given the bond between regulars and strippers.

For working-class customers in particular, they may not be in a position to fulfill the role of breadwinner and/or sugar daddy, meaning they may be unable to financially provide for a wife

or girlfriend on their earnings alone or lavish a female companion with extravagant gifts. The strip club, however, provides such customers with an opportunity to meet women they may perceive as in need of support<sup>42</sup> and who are generally appreciative of favors and gifts. And so, men who are unable to assume the idealized masculine role of provider within their intimate or family lives may be able to approximate that role within the strip club.

In exchange for their support, customers may expect prolonged attention or physical affection. In fact, some customers may offer favors or gifts with the primary goal of receiving physical expressions of ‘appreciation,’ ranging from kisses to intercourse. However, all of the customers I encountered who assumed the supporter role seemed proud of what they had to offer and/or glad that they were helpful, even if they did expect attention or affection in return. Thus, their actions may have been motivated by more than the prospect of a stripper “[sharing] some of her Mac lipstick,” for example. This is not to say that customers who were not necessarily primarily or exclusively motivated by the prospect of physical intimacy did not become upset or threaten to withdraw support when a stripper did not appear sufficiently grateful.

Research suggests that in times of economic uncertainty or transition, men forge masculine identities through the repudiation of marginalized populations (Fine, Weis, Addeleston, & Marusza 1997), verbal and physical altercations (McDowell, Rootham, and Hardgrove 2014), gun ownership (Carlson 2015; Cassino 2018), home improvement projects (Moisio, Arnould, & Gentry 2013), criminal activity, and alcohol consumption (Nayak 2006). Men also turn to leisure pursuits in times of economic restructuring, including hunting, baseball, and outdoor clubs, to renegotiate their masculinity (Campbell, Bell, & Finney 2006; Kimmel 2005). For working-class or lower middle-class customers, perhaps especially those in economically distressed cities, strip

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<sup>42</sup> Customers may internalize popular discourse which suggests that strippers are disadvantaged or desperate.

clubs may serve as sites in which men are able to negotiate their socioeconomic precarity through performances of idealized masculinities. By assuming the role of supporter, customers like Jason, Robert, and Peter, are able to approximate the role of breadwinner, which remains central to dominant constructions of masculinity in the United States. In times of economic insecurity, white men in particular may deal with threats to both their masculine privilege and racial privilege (Kimmel 2013), which may, in part, make white male customers more likely to assume the supporter role to compensate for perceived threats to their social position.

Customers who are more financially secure and seemingly able to financially provide for their wife or girlfriend, may seek to support strippers because they are able to exert more control over those relationships than their relationships with non-sex workers. They may also enjoy adopting the role of “Captain Save-A-Hoe,” as Katie called it, where they ‘rescue’ strippers from their purportedly deprived or desperate lives. I met several strippers who spoke of such customers, including Jade, a 21-year-old, white, female stripper at Uptown Dolls Gentleman’s Club in Princeton, who said: “...a lot of them [customers] think they can *save* me from stripping and blah blah blah and it’s like we [strippers] chose to come in here...Because they think that we don’t want to be there and... some of them want to be our sugar daddies and for me that goes against a lot of what I’m there for. I’m there so I don’t have to have a sugar daddy.” Customers may also believe that strippers are more appreciative of their support than other women, particularly if they perceive a socioeconomic disparity or believe that younger women are less accustomed to gifts from men.

Prior research (Frank 2002; Hoang 2015) provides support for these findings. According to Hoang (2015), older, white, Western tourists to Vietnam who could not afford to be a breadwinner in the U.S. “hoped to re-create those relationships [in Vietnam], where they could

afford to shower hostesses with money and gifts” (p. 61). In Ho Chi Minh City hostess clubs catering to Western tourists, hostesses would bring clients to fake village families and concoct fictive stories of financial crisis to elicit monetary support. In doing so, hostesses enabled their clients to believe they were fulfilling traditional ideals of masculinity wherein the man is the financial provider, while simultaneously satisfying racialized fantasies of being a white savior. According to Hoang, “while these men may not have been able to provide for a wife in the United States, in Vietnam they could not only support a partner but also save a village” (p. 62). Though the contexts of these relationships differ, Hoang’s research would suggest that some consumers of sex work are eager to assume the role of supporter, including that of “Captain Save-A-Hoe.” Within strip clubs specifically, Frank (2002) similarly found that select regular customers provided support that went beyond tipping or purchasing erotic services, ranging from aid in the form of car payments to the provision of legal advice for strippers undergoing divorce to the landscaping of their yards.

Again, stripper-customer relationships are not one-sided; strippers are not the only ones who manage their self-presentation in order to meet desired ends. Through the role of supporter, customers are able to approximate masculine ideals of providing for women, including men whose economic means are relatively limited.

### *Entertainer*

The role of supporter is one of a multitude of roles that customers can assume in relation to strippers to fulfill idealized expectations of masculine performance. Again, I cannot possibly catalog all interactional patterns among strip club customers. However, I did observe or hear of several customers who assumed the role of “entertainer.” Within this role, customers sought to provide strippers with an especially pleasurable, even memorable, experience.

There is of course overlap between the roles of supporter and entertainer, as both may strive to see a stripper or strippers happy and prolong their relationship with said stripper(s). However, entertainers are not primarily concerned with offering favors or gifts to ensure the well-being of a stripper or strippers beyond the club. Rather, they seek to ensure that a stripper is enjoying her time with the customer as much as he is enjoying his time with her.<sup>43</sup> As previously stated, customers may assume different roles at different times, or potentially multiple roles at the same time. I distinguish between these roles for the sake of clarity, and because the majority of customers I met seemingly assumed the same role each time they visited a strip club.

Nolan, a 34-year-old man who identified as “Black and white,” was one customer I considered an entertainer. Nolan said of himself and his friend, Ben:

...me and [Ben] aren't terrible looking characters, so you're instantly like, [speaking from a stripper's perspective] “Okay, this isn't a 200-pound 40-year-old...” Me and a couple of my buddies dated strippers and whatever because you're decent looking, you go in there, you spend a little money, you're fun...I feel like it's the double-edged sword. On their end, [speaking from a stripper's perspective] “I like the attention, even though it comes from gentlemen I don't like, and I can't say that I don't like.” When me and [Ben] were there, it was like everybody wanted to talk to us. I'm sitting on a stripper's lap and all the guys were looking at us like a little bored over here in the corner and it's like that's not my fault man. So, I just enjoy it. And it's fun.

The stripper's lap Nolan referred to was Alexis's, a 21-year-old, white, female stripper at Jet's; on at least two occasions, she requested that Nolan sit on her lap and he happily obliged. After I turned off the recorder, Nolan told me that strippers have more “fun” interacting with him than other customers because he jokes with them and gives them “shit,” whereas other customers are mesmerized by breasts. He then impersonated a dumbstruck customer giving a tip to a stripper.

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<sup>43</sup> Most customers appeared rather indifferent to the experiences of strippers, so long as the stripper or strippers they were observing or interacting with appeared remotely contented or aroused.

According to Nolan, the strippers at Jet's enjoy being in the company of him and his friend Ben, because they are "fun" and more attractive and entertaining than other customers.

Nolan's friend Ben, a 33-year-old, white male, echoed a similar sentiment. Referring to strippers, Ben said:

So, it's their job to be friendly. And I understand that, and every time I go there's always one or two that are like really friendly and really like personable and hanging on you. But more often than not, it's usually two or three. It's like groups that like congregate whenever I go. Only because, I don't know, I treat them like people. I don't know if that's weird. You know what I'm saying? Like I try to make eye contact whenever possible. I always *listen*. I always crack jokes and I be myself.... Yeah, they're here to do a job, but at the same time, they don't want to be *on* all the time, and I get that....usually when I go, I find that they, the staff picks up on that, and like you said they, within seconds, they can kind of tell, and I bet when they see me they're like "Alright this a guy who I can have a good, have fun with."

According to Ben, "groups" of strippers "congregate" around him in strip clubs, because he makes eye contact, listens, tells jokes, and acts like himself. He suggests that with him, strippers do not have to adopt a false persona or pretend to enjoy his company. He believes strippers recognize immediately that he is someone they can have "have fun with."

Nolan and Ben's statements ring true to some extent; whenever I saw Nolan and/or Ben at Jet's Place, they were generally surrounded by or seated with at least two strippers. Also, Nolan informed me during our interview that Ben had recently met Ariel and Lola at a restaurant, Ben told me he had messaged with Lola on Facebook, and Quinn informed me that she had plans to get lunch with Nolan; so, at the time, several of the strippers at Jet's did seemingly enjoy their company. As entertainers, Nolan and Ben were relatively animated in their conversations with strippers and routinely told jokes. They also did seemingly silly things to elicit laughter, as evidenced by Nolan sitting on Alexis's lap or Ben allowing Quinn to twirl and tug on his mustache.

John, a 63-year-old, white, male customer at Uptown Dolls in Princeton, serves as another prime example of an “entertainer.” According to John,

So, I guess the nice thing is, usually they [strippers] are happy to be with me, so... Yeah, it is funny, because I guess I'm probably better educated than a lot of the women [strippers]. So, they enjoy the conversation. And I rarely lay a finger on the them on the floor. Sometimes I like to just stick my nose in their butt, just as a humorous thing to do, because I have a big nose. But like I said, it's kind of funny, you get people to sit around there [the stage] and they seem to be so serious... So I kind of lighten the spirit there.

John claims that the strippers of Uptown Dolls enjoy spending time with him, because he delivers stimulating conversation and is more educated than most of them. John also believes that he amuses the strippers and lightens the mood around the stage by inserting his nose between strippers' butt cheeks. As indicated in Chapter 4, John also introduced a few strippers to tantric techniques, which he believed the women appreciated. I was unable to confirm with the strippers John spoke of whether or not they enjoyed his company as much as he alleged.<sup>44</sup> What is clear, however, is that John assumed the role of entertainer and believed himself to be effective in that role, providing strippers with a purportedly pleasurable, even memorable, experience.

Strippers and staff members told me of other customers who took the entertainer role even further. For example, at The Edge in the Hanksville metropolitan area, a bartender told me that one customer paid to have six strippers in a private room with him and they played Monopoly and other board games.<sup>45</sup> Kiera, a 24-year-old, Black, female stripper at that same club, told me of another customer who said to her and another stripper in a private room that he could “take off his underwear without taking off his pants.” And with the help of Kiera and the other stripper, he did exactly that. The three of them also got into a “a water fight” using water

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<sup>44</sup> The strippers who sat next to or stood around John at the bar when I met him seemed happy, though that doesn't mean they were.

<sup>45</sup> The Edge is a middle-tier club, so it was somewhat surprising that a customer was willing and able to spend hundreds even thousands of dollars to play board games.

bottles with holes poked in the tops. According to Kiera, “that was probably one of the best times I’ve ever had [at The Edge].”

Surely, not all strippers enjoy being in the company of customers who assume this role. However, customers like Nolan, Ben, and John, who occupied the role of entertainer, seemed well assured that their relationships with one or more strippers were exceptional and enjoyable for all involved. As previously discussed, customers commonly seek assurance from strippers that their relationship is unlike what other customers experience and not purely motivated by monetary gain [see Chapter 5]. For customers to acknowledge the commodified nature of their relationship with strippers is to simultaneously acknowledge that they are paying women for companionship and/or stimulation. Given the enduring sociocultural association between heterosexuality and normative masculinity (Anderson 2008; Anderson 2009; Bridges 2014; Connell 2005; Pascoe 2007; Skelton 2001), such an acknowledgement could undercut a customer’s idealized gender presentation. Assuming this role, however, may help customers preserve the belief that their relationships with strippers are not only enjoyable for all involved, but reciprocal, with both parties providing entertainment; this belief may, in turn, help obscure the transactional nature of these encounters. Adopting this role may also give customers the sense of being a playboy, an idealized masculine identity popularized by *Playboy* magazine (Fraterrigo 2004; Ehrenreich 1987). Based on my observations, entertainers are not uncommonly seated with or surrounded by multiple strippers. Having multiple scantily clad, beautiful women seek out their company may give men such as Ben, Nolan, and John a sense of being a playboy, a non-monogamous, compulsively heterosexual man (Fraterrigo 2008; Ehrenreich 1987). Thus, whether through preserving the idea that their relationships with strippers are special and

reciprocal or by approximating the role of playboy, “entertainers” are able to affirm an idealized masculinity rooted in heterosexuality within the context of strip clubs.

### *Customer v. Customer*

Customers not only assumed particular roles in relation to strippers to negotiate their masculinity, but favorably compared themselves to other customers (Frank 2002) in a way that affirmed their place within the club. A man’s presence, as a paying customer, within an establishment where (primarily) men pay for the attention and affection of women, may be perceived as a threat to their masculinity. And so, by disparaging other customers and elevating their own status within the strip club, customers are able to guard against threats to their masculinity.

Nolan and Ben certainly engaged in a fair share of comparison with other customers. One Tuesday evening, Nolan told me that he enjoyed “laughing” at older men at Jet’s who were not in the company of a stripper while he was surrounded by several. He told me to “shoot” him if he is still frequenting strip clubs at the age of 40. In disparaging and distancing himself from middle-aged or elderly customers, Nolan framed his presence in the club as more appropriate or acceptable. He also mocked the inability of other customers to attract strippers, which was not something Nolan struggled with. During our interview, Nolan said, “I feel like some [customers] that’s their only contact [with women], so to speak. That suck but that’s the way it is. But overall for me...it’s drinks and fun with boobs [laughs].” Here, Nolan differentiated his motives for going to strip clubs from other customers who are lonely or socially inept and seeking social interaction with women.

While interviewing Ben, I asked him if he believed himself to be an average customer at Jet’s. Ben replied:

Well, I'm always going to feel like I stand out. I don't know, especially when you, you have this stereotypical ideal of strip club customer, you know? It's like the middle-aged dude who is a little unkempt and...you hear people say they go to strip clubs because they can't get girls to pay attention them anywhere else. That's what people think of as a stereotypical thing. So, in that respect, no, I will always think of myself as different than that obviously.

As a relatively attractive millennial, Ben considered himself distinct from the “stereotypical” strip club customer who is middle-aged and less appealing to women. Through these comparisons, Nolan and Ben were able affirm to themselves that strippers prefer their company over the company of others, and by extension affirm their role as entertainers.

Outside of Nolan and Ben, it was relatively common for younger customers, particularly those who did not consider themselves regulars, to mock older, more frequent customers. For example, Liam, a 26-year-old, white, male customer I met at 4Play Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, said that a lot of “old perverts” went to strip clubs. He said that he hadn't been to one since he was 18 years old and was baffled by customers who went regularly. He said, with pity in his voice, that such customers must convince themselves that strippers are attracted to them. Gavin, a 39-year-old, white male I met at Excalibur's Cabaret near Princeton, similarly derided other customers. When I asked Gavin if he got a sense of the atmosphere or average customer at Excalibur's, he replied:

The average customer is creepy...They were past 50. They are usually overweight and unattractive to the point where they don't get attention somewhere else. And they have huge amounts of money at that age, so they are there by themselves which is a huge red flag to me because I find that to be awkward...the overall crowd of the people that don't receive enough attention outside of the club. And they take their money there and they strive to get something they can't get anywhere else.

As a more conventionally attractive and slim man in his late 30's, Gavin clearly did not see himself as an “average” customer. He regarded older and less conventionally attractive customers to be “creepy” and desperate for attention they could not attain elsewhere.

Jason, one of the regulars at Jet's who assumed the role of supporter, favorably compared himself to the other customers on the basis of their inappropriate behavior or inexperience. For example, Jason relayed the following conversation with Jemma:

I was joking with her, half joking, and I said, "You know one of these days I'm going to have a dance with you again." She goes "Yeah." I said, "Is that okay?" She goes, "That's fine. That's great." I said, "Is it better me than somebody else?" [She replied] "Exactly." Because some [customers] go groping for everything.

Jason prompted Jemma to agree with him that giving him a lap dance was more enjoyable than dancing for other customers. Jason believed he behaved appropriately during lap dances, unlike other customers.

One evening, a younger man and his girlfriend were at Jet's. I spoke to them for a while before they went to sit near the stage. As soon as they left the bar, Jason approached me and told me that the young man looked like a "deer in the headlights" interacting with strippers. Jason said that he could tell that the young man was not accustomed to being in strip clubs and it was amusing. The younger man, from my view, simply seemed to be having a good time with his girlfriend, enjoying the stage performances; they both seemed impressed by the strippers' performances and were smiling, drinking, and joking around. By characterizing the man's inexperience as laughable, Jason framed his experience in strip clubs as a positive. Both cases demonstrate how Jason affirmed his role within the club as a regular and a supporter, by casting his comfortability with strippers and familiarity with codes of conduct as valuable.

Some customers disparaged others for not spending as much money as them. For example, James, a Black, middle-aged, male customer I met at Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area, asked me why customers came to the club with no intention of spending money. He referred to such men as "broke asses." Other customers did not necessarily speak poorly of customers who spend little money but made a point of telling me how well they tip or

spend on dances. For example, Ethan, a 40-year-old, white, male customer at Jet's, said the following:

I tip. See, and that's my thing. I've been around clubs for long enough, I value their time, so if they are going to sit and talk to me for most of the night, I'm going to tip. Last night I talked to [Ariel] for most of the night, for example, just sitting at the bar talking, and anytime she went on stage and got off her tip walk, I'd give her 20 dollars instead of 1 on a tip walk, because I'd been sitting there talking to her the whole night. I've been taking up her time.

Ethan claimed that tipping showcased how much he valued a strippers' time, the implication being that not all customers equally value their time. From what I could tell, the vast majority of customers at Jet's Place gave one to two dollars, if anything, to strippers who went around soliciting tips after their stage performance. Certainly, giving a stripper \$20 each time she went on her tip walk set Ethan apart from the other customers, which I am sure Ethan was well aware of, given the frequency with which he visited Jet's.

Conversely, several customers I spoke with demeaned customers who spent a considerable amount of money at strip clubs. Most of these comments were laden with racism.<sup>46</sup> Take Stan for example; Stan was a white, middle-aged, male customer I met at Ruby's Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area. Stan referred to other customers as "losers" and said that he would give a stripper 10 to 20 dollars for good conversation. The implication seemed to be that customers who were unwilling to spend as much as him were pitiable. Notably, I only saw Stan spend money after a stripper came to the bar and announced, "Someone should buy me a drink." She waited awhile before calling the bartender over; finally, Stan stepped in to pay before she

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<sup>46</sup> I heard a handful of customers make racist remarks about customers and strippers of color, including one customer who referred to a Korean American stripper as "chow lo mein." This is not to say that a majority of customers did not engage in racist thinking or behavior. I simply did not hear or observe all of it. As Taysha suggested in Chapter 5, racism is quite prevalent in strip clubs. For example, just because customers did not explicitly state that their ideal stripper is white, does not mean that they did not reject Black strippers who offered lap dances.

could. Later in the conversation, however, Stan criticized customers who spent more than him. He said that he was different from the other customers<sup>47</sup> and does not wave bundles of cash around the club; he said that Black customers do this. He said that he is “smart” with his money and knows how to “play the game to my advantage.” If a stripper offers him a lap dance for 40 dollars, he will counter with 25 dollars. Stan said that he likes to see how much they want his money. Similarly, Ken, a white, middle-aged, male customer I met at both Buck Wild Cabaret and Titillations in the Maylin metropolitan area, said that some Black customers throw money around and look foolish. Ken said that he wore his pants pulled up, not sagging to the floor. Stan and Ken engaged in racial stereotyping of Black men as flashier and more reckless with their spending to frame their own spending habits as more reasonable or respectable.

Younger and conventionally attractive customers favorably compared themselves to older and less handsome customers, regular customers favorably compared themselves to infrequent or less experienced customers, customers who were generous in their spending favorably compared themselves to customers who spent less, white customers favorably compared themselves to Black customers, and thriftier customers favorably compared themselves to big spenders. In support of this finding, Frank (2002) found that the vast majority of customers she encountered sought to be seen as *different* from other customers in some way. No matter the kind of customer, many were able to validate their behavior within the club, including the roles they assumed in relation to strippers. Moreover, if customers perceive themselves as distinct from, if not superior to, other customers, they may be able to assure themselves that their relationships with strippers are respectively distinct and/or superior. As previously discussed, the notion that one’s relationships with strippers are authentic and not simply transactional appears meaningful

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<sup>47</sup> Stan further distinguished himself from other customers by adding that strippers genuinely enjoy conversations with him, while they only “act” interested with other customers.

to many customers [see Chapter 5]. Through these comparisons, customers may also seek to distance themselves from the stigma of being a strip club customer, particularly a regular or semi-frequent one. For example, if a person believes that strip club customers are stigmatized because they are unattractive and desperate for female attention, they may assert difference between themselves and the “average,” lonely, and unattractive customer, as Ben, Nolan, and Gavin did, to avoid stigmatization.

### *Discussion*

Again, I do not wish to homogenize the perceptions, behaviors, or desires of strip club customers, as these are incredibly variable. Customers may assume a range of roles in relation to strippers, including more than one role over multiple visits or even within a single encounter. By outlining the roles of supporter and entertainer, I seek to highlight not only the diversity of patrons’ gendered performances, but also the fact that these relationships are not one-sided; strippers are not the only ones who manage their self-presentation in order to meet desired ends. This does not mean, however, that stripper-customer relationships are “counterfeit” or inauthentic. Only strippers and customers are in a position to determine the authenticity of their relationships.

By assuming the supporter role, customers are able to approximate the idealized role of provider or breadwinner within the context of strip clubs. For working-class or lower middle-class customers, perhaps especially those in more economically distressed cities, the opportunity to approximate a masculine role rooted in achieving and maintaining economic security may be especially meaningful. Furthermore, in times of economic insecurity, white men may perceive threats to their masculine privilege as well as their racial privilege (Kimmel 2013), which may make white men more likely to assume the role of supporter to compensate for perceived threats

to their social position. For customers such as Jason, strip clubs may serve as sites in which they are able to (momentarily) alleviate anxieties surrounding their socioeconomic precarity through performances of idealized masculinities. Men who are in a financial position to assume the role of provider or breadwinner within their intimate or family lives may seek to support strippers because they are able to exert more control over those relationships and/or because they enjoy ‘saving’ women widely considered vulnerable or desperate.

By adopting the role of entertainer, patrons may be able to preserve the belief that strippers are not solely interested in their money but enjoy their company. Again, acknowledging the commodified nature of a customer’s relationship with a stripper may heighten anxieties surrounding their masculinity; thus, a customer (outwardly) entertaining a stripper, whose aim is also to entertain, may consolidate the impression that their relationship is special, reciprocal, and less monetarily motivated. Assuming the role of entertainer may also enable customers to approximate the idealized masculine, compulsively heterosexual identity of playboy. The culturally dominant image of a playboy is one of a man surrounded by beautiful, often scantily clad, women, and patron entertainers often do attract multiple strippers to their table or spot at the bar. Approximating the playboy role, even if only feasible within the context of sex work, not only affirms a customer’s heterosexuality and masculinity but enables customers to distance themselves from stigma associated with “average” strip club customers, who are considered desperate for attention and affection. Notably, in order to be an entertainer, a customer does not need to “make it rain” each and every time they enter the club, though without spending at least *some* money, the individual may be overlooked. Nolan was a kitchen supervisor and Ben was a restaurant manager when I met them; they weren’t wealthy, and they didn’t drop stacks of ones onto the bar, and yet strippers converged around their seats. Within bottom-tier clubs, such as

Jet's, the club Nolan and Ben patronized, assuming the role of entertainer may necessitate less spending than in middle- or top-tier clubs. Generally speaking, in middle- and top-tier clubs, customers needed to invest more money to ensure a strippers' company for prolonged periods. I say this because I often asked strippers how long they were willing to sit with a customer who didn't spend much money upfront; strippers at middle- and top-tier clubs were generally less patient and only willing to stick around for a song or two. This is likely because bottom-tier clubs tend to be less crowded and attract customers who are less able or willing to tip significant amounts or purchase multiple services; this encourages strippers at bottom-tier clubs to incentivize payment through the building of rapport, which takes time. No matter how gregarious or humorous the entertainer, however, if there is a good possibility that a stripper could earn more money off another customer, it is unlikely that she will stick around the entertainer for long, and there are more customers who are willing to spend that amount of money in middle- to top-tier clubs. Thus, entertainers must be willing to pay at least comparable amounts to other customers in the club.

The meanings associated with these and other potential roles may vary depending upon the customer's socioeconomic position. For a customer of modest means, for example, the strip club may be only arena in which he is able to approximate the valued breadwinner role; for an affluent customer, supporting young<sup>48</sup>, less economically secure<sup>49</sup> women may mean being able to exert more control over the relationship, relative to relationships with non-sex workers. In other words, the opportunity for a working-class customer to assume the role of supporter may be personally meaningful or fulfilling for different reasons than it is for an upper middle-class

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<sup>48</sup> Most strippers I met were between the ages of 18 and 30.

<sup>49</sup> The vast majority of strippers are independent contractors, so their positions are precarious and come with no benefits or protections. Strip club patronage also fluctuates with the season and the economy. Thus, most strippers experience some degree of economic uncertainty or instability.

customer. Moreover, how specifically customers enact these roles may also heavily depend on their socioeconomic status. For example, there's a significant difference between a supporter purchasing food from Taco Bell for his favorite strippers and writing a check to cover a stripper's rent for the month. There is also a significant difference between paying potentially thousands of dollars to play Monopoly with multiple strippers in a private room and sitting on a stripper's lap on and off throughout the night. Thus, the amount of disposable income a customer is willing and able to spend may greatly affect how they choose to enact their preferred role within the strip club.

Outside of the roles they assume, customers favorably compare themselves to other customers to validate their behavior within the club, including the roles they assume in relation to strippers. Moreover, by claiming that he is different from, if not superior to, other men in the club, a customer may become convinced that his relationships with strippers are similarly exceptional.

### *Conclusion*

As previously stated, stripping is simultaneously a product and producer of masculinity. Strippers not only engage in masculinizing practices, rooted in cultural conceptions of gender, but provide customers with the opportunity to assume one or more roles, including that of supporter and entertainer, which enable customers to negotiate or affirm their masculinity. For some customers, these roles may be less convincing or even unattainable outside of sex work. Jason, for example, derived considerable pleasure and pride from 'supporting' strippers at Jet's with Taco Bell and Culver's; this support garnered him warm greetings and prolonged attention from strippers. By contrast, Jason claimed, "Takes a lot more than that to make my wife smile," implying that his wife was less than thrilled with what he was able to provide her. Additionally,

if John were to stick his nose in between a woman's butt cheeks at a bar or tell a woman at the grocery store all about tantra, those women would likely not find him entertaining. A customer's ability to effectively enact such roles outside of the strip club may be limited by opportunity, financial resources, physical attractiveness, norms governing life outside of sex work, etc.

Within these and other gendered roles, customers employ manhood acts. According to Schrock & Schwalbe (2009), signifying membership in the dominant gender group necessitates putting on a manhood act. This task is aided by being male-bodied due to the association between maleness and manhood; however, having been assigned male at birth is not a sufficient or necessary condition to establish credibility as a man. Notably, that which is considered masculine varies cross-culturally and historically; moreover, how one signifies a masculine self may vary depending upon the actor's social position, the resources available to them, and the circumstances of their interaction. Through manhood acts, individuals claim gender privilege and power (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009), and they do so through three basic strategies: "(a) differentiation from women and femininity, (b) signifying a capacity to assert control, and (c) demonstrating resistance to being controlled" (Morris & Ratajczak 2019: 1991).

Many of the behaviors exhibited by supporters and entertainers seem innocuous, even kind; however, manhood acts do not necessarily entail aggression, coercion, or violence. By giving gifts and doing favors, supporters associate themselves with traditional ideals of masculinity wherein the male is the provider, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles rooted in oppositional and hierarchical conceptions of gender.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, supporters signify their

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<sup>50</sup> Moreover, supporters may perpetuate benevolent sexism, "a subjectively positive orientation of protection, idealization, and affection directed toward women that...serves to justify women's subordinate status to men" (Glick et al. 2000: 763). Benevolent sexism entails paternalistic attitudes toward women and presumes women's inferiority; it reinforces gender oppression by portraying women as dependent upon men's protection and provision.

capacity to control their relationships with strippers by threatening to withhold support whenever they are displeased. Entertainers, on the other hand, approximate the compulsively heterosexual and masculine identity of playboy, further demarcating the boundaries between themselves and the strippers who perform hyper-femininity. In their quest to provide strippers with an especially pleasurable, even memorable, experience, entertainers also demand the time and attention of strippers, thereby exerting influence and control over individual strippers and the environment of the strip club. Entertainers not only monopolize the attention of strippers, but signal to other customers, who are not encircled by beautiful women, that they dominate the space. By distinguishing themselves from women and femininity and signifying the capacity to assert control (Morris & Ratajczak 2019), customers who assume the role of supporter or entertainer (or another gendered role) engage in “identity work that both locates individuals within categories and reproduces the categories themselves (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009: 289). In other words, patrons (re-)produce dominant masculinities and maintain masculine privilege by way of manhood acts rooted in the gendered roles they assume within strip clubs.

To signify a masculine self, customers draw on the resources at their disposal, including the resources of their class position. Men with greater economic means can more significantly contribute to the welfare of strippers beyond the club; men who lack such means face barriers to exhibiting a convincing or credible manhood as a supporter, as they are less able to financially provide for strippers or dictate the terms of their relationship on the basis of the checks they write or gifts they give. More affluent men can tip in large quantities or purchase a private room to secure the company of strippers to listen their stories, laugh at their jokes, etc. Men who lack such resources must rely on their charisma, charm, youth, and/or physical attractiveness to procure a captive audience of strippers; however, an entertainer can only refrain from tipping or

purchasing services for so long, before strippers must seek their income elsewhere. Thus, manhood acts vary in form and degree of credibility, depending upon a customer's socioeconomic status. Despite these differences, however, customers from across socioeconomic lines engage in manhood acts to signify membership in the gender category of men and "affirm the social reality of the group" (p. 289). This is not to say that strip clubs are uniquely or disproportionately responsible for perpetuating gender inequalities [see Chapter 2]. However, this study sheds light on how dominant masculinities are sustained through seemingly benevolent acts, in this case, through the vehicle of sex work.

With these gendered performances, patrons utilize strippers as "masculinity resources" (Pascoe 2016: 150), relying on their physical bodies and interactional labor to assuage anxieties surrounding their masculinity. Thus, customers and strippers participate in the co-construction of masculinity, with customers enacting masculine roles and strippers employing masculinizing practices. In sum, strip clubs serve as critical sites of gender negotiation, wherein male customers can enact a fantasy of masculinity or an idealized masculine identity with the aid of strippers' labor and the resources of their class position.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION: SEX WORK, GENDER, AND SOCIAL CLASS

This dissertation was guided by the following question: how do female strippers and male customers (co-)construct and negotiate masculinities in strip clubs across three Midwestern metropolitan areas? To obtain the data for this project, I conducted 56 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female strippers, male customers, and staff members and engaged in 180 hours of ethnographic observation in strip clubs across the metropolitan areas of “Hanksville,” “Princeton,” and “Maylin.” In answer to this question, I make three main arguments.

In, Chapter 4, I interrogate gendered functions of strippers’ labor outside of sexual arousal. I contend that strip clubs provide a “safe space” for male customers to experience emotional intimacy and receive “stripper therapy.” Through their labor, strippers fulfill the emotional needs of male patrons and enable them to express a range of emotions, often concerning that which compromises their masculinity. However, the hypersexualized, masculinized environment of the strip club then shields customers from the fear of failing to meet some arbitrary masculine quota, as emotions have long been associated with femininity (Ahmed 2004; Seidler 1994).

In Chapter 5, I highlight the ways in which strippers participate in productions of gender. More specifically, I maintain that strippers’ labor revolves around (co-)constructing and negotiating the masculinities of their male patrons. Moreover, I outline specific masculinizing practices which strippers employ to amplify and enable male patrons’ idealized gendered performances. Furthermore, I contend that the fantasy customers seek within strip clubs is not necessarily or exclusively sexual; rather, it is a fantasy of *masculinity*, which compensates for customers’ perceived inadequacies in their masculinity and projects onto the customer an

idealized masculine self which can never be realized across all dimensions of patron's life. Thus, stripping is simultaneously a product and producer of masculinity; it is a response to the "anxious masculinities" (Schotten 2002: 215) of male consumers as much as it is a vehicle for the negotiation of those masculinities.

Lastly, in Chapter 6, I argue that male customers assume a range of roles in interaction with strippers, which are differentially experienced on the basis of class and enable customers to project an idealized masculine self. I highlight two such roles, that of supporter and entertainer, which customers adopt to negotiate and affirm their masculinity, utilizing strippers as "masculinity resources" (Pascoe 2016: 150) in the process. In addition, I maintain that male customers favorably compare themselves to other customers to validate their presence and behavior within the club. In sum, I argue that strip clubs serve as critical sites of gender negotiation for male customers.

Future sex work research ought to center the experiences of trans, disabled, queer, undocumented, and/or BIPOC sex workers and customers, as theories of sex work are primarily informed by the experiences of persons with considerable privilege. Sex work research must also address the experiences and perspectives of those who consume erotic labor, because they play a pivotal role in shaping the sex industry. Lastly, future research should interrogate how gender is reproduced, played with, or undone via online forms of sex work, including OnlyFans, Chaterbate, and NiteFlirt, among others, which have risen in popularity in recent years. The privacy these sites afford, in combination with potentially more diverse consumers and sex workers, may present new opportunities for contesting heteronormativity and the current gender order.

Before addressing the contributions of this research, I must highlight two important points. First, I regard these findings as especially, if not exclusively, applicable to white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, natural-born citizen, working- and middle-class male customers. The vast majority of the customers I interviewed fit this description, and though I cannot attest to the demographics of all customers I observed or informally spoke with, the majority presented as working- or middle-class, white males, most of whom were likely able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, U.S. citizens. However, I should note that I did not observe any significant deviations from these data across racial or ethnic lines, only socioeconomic disparities.

Second, I would be remiss if I did not address how taxing strippers' labor can be and the precarity of their positions.<sup>51</sup> Notably, many of the women I spoke with recounted positive experiences with stripping, including, but not limited to, forming meaningful relationships with other strippers, exploring and expressing their sexuality, earning a comfortable living, building body confidence, and alleviating social anxiety. However, as stated in Chapter 2, sex work is neither inherently oppressive nor fundamentally empowering (Vanwesenbeeck 1994, 2005; Sanders 2002, 2004, 2005; Koken 2013; Brewis & Linstead 2000a, 2000b). Thus, positive and negative experiences of stripping are not mutually exclusive and do not negate one another; a stripper may experience pain and pleasure, frustration and fascination, boredom and excitement, liberation and subjugation, all within a single shift. To highlight the dangers and strains of stripping, then, is not to discount those enjoyable, even empowering experiences.

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<sup>51</sup> In 2019 and 2020, strippers from Los Angeles, CA to Portland, OR to Columbus, OH, strippers combatted unjust labor practices (Braslow 2019; Cole 2020; Riski 2020; Safronova 2019).

As an example of the physical toll stripping can take, Raven, a white, pansexual, 19-year-old stripper at Buck Wild Cabaret in the Maylin metropolitan area, showed me a picture of her legs covered in bruises. Earlier that night, I had watched in awe as Raven performed athletic, graceful acrobatics using a large, metal ring suspended over the stage. Raven informed me that she has scoliosis and her routines cause her to bruise a considerable amount. Thankfully, Raven had never seriously injured herself falling from a pole or hoop, as others strippers I met had.<sup>52</sup>

On the subject of the emotional toll of stripping, Demi, a white, bisexual, 28-year-old stripper at Jet's Place in the Hanksville metropolitan area, told me that she is "emotionally" able to "deal with a lot of it." When I asked her to elaborate, Demi replied:

It's like, if you're having a bad day, it doesn't matter. You still have to be nice and also like yeah, there are times where you get physically abused, there's sexual abuse. And it's like part of the job. You're expected to. I remember I had some friends who didn't dance [strip] and I was bitching to them about "Oh yeah this guy came up and slapped my ass so hard I had a bruise. It was so rude." And they're like "Well, you're at a strip club, what do you expect?" And I'm like "Not to be sexually assaulted at work. Thanks."

Demi not only concealed her own emotions while managing the emotions of customers, but endured physical and sexual abuse as "part of the job." Demi, however, firmly rejected the notion that strippers should accept or expect abuse in their workplaces.<sup>53</sup> Notably, strippers who intervene in customers' aggressive or abusive behavior may receive little to no support from management. Stevie, a white, heterosexual, 31-year-old stripper, recalled that she once grabbed the arm of a customer who was repeatedly "slapping my ass" and told him to stop. The customer told the manager that Stevie had scratched his arm; he was put in the VIP section and given a

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<sup>52</sup> Many strippers consume alcoholic beverages while working and they do so for two primary reasons: (1) it loosens their inhibitions and (2) customers can become upset when strippers decline to drink with them. Over a prolonged period of time, high levels of alcohol consumption can also adversely affect a person's health.

<sup>53</sup> Here, Demi is referring specifically to violence at the hands of customers; however, I also heard plenty of stories from participants in which male managers and male staff harassed or assaulted strippers.

free bottle of vodka. The manager warned Stevie that if she ever did that again, she would be fired.

Jade, a white, heterosexual, 21-year-old stripper at Uptown Dolls in Princeton, also commented on their aggressive and criminal conduct of customers:

They [customers] think that they're nice. They don't see a problem with what they do. But...when you touch someone and you don't have permission, in my opinion, you're on the verge of entering that rape or physical assault you know, kind of. And they don't see it that way. They just think it's okay and I got my ass slapped in that back room last night I don't know how many times. And granted he was like "Is that okay? Do you like it?" And I'm playing these mind games like and I'm like "I don't know. Do I?" And fucking around with him. Because part of me has kind of gotten used to it. Part of me, as long as they aren't getting their fingers up my holes, I don't care [said through gritted teeth]. I don't know.

Jade became so accustomed to customers touching her without her consent that she endured even aggressive contact so long as the customer was not trying to penetrate her. Most certainly, experiences of assault can exact an emotional toll, leaving someone such as Jade gritting her teeth in anger and frustration recalling what "nice" customers do.

June, a Korean American, heterosexual, 42-year-old stripper at Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area, reduced her hours working as a substitute special education assistant because stripping was "so mentally taxing." According to June,

From the moment I wake up in the morning. My husband...he knows, the day I work, pretty much consumes me all day. Because I am like mentally getting ready. When the kids are around, it gets a little stressful. So, I need to remind myself I am a mother first. Just like if I were an accountant or a banker or a teacher, you can't be taking out your stress on your kids. It's not fair. You need to do your best to manage your stress. But I am mentally getting prepared to get into the role of the slut who goes into a club and teases and talks about sex all day and talks about fucking in the ass and that kind of trash talk all day.

For June, "mentally getting ready" to assume the role of stripper and interact with customers consumed many of her waking hours and caused her stress, particularly when she needed to juggle the role of caretaker. I highlight the words of Raven, Demi, Jade, and June to illustrate

just how strenuous and hazardous this work can be, in part, to counter the common sentiment that stripping is “easy money,” which I heard reiterated by multiple customers.

Beyond the difficulty of stripping, strippers are also combatting labor rights violations across the country. A majority of strippers are misclassified as independent contractors<sup>54</sup>; they are not salaried or paid an hourly wage<sup>55</sup>, are not compensated for injuries on the job, are not given health benefits, and are not protected under laws governing minimum wage, discrimination, and sexual misconduct, among other things (Braslow 2019; Safronova 2019). Additionally, strippers must pay steep fees to work at most clubs<sup>56</sup> and are generally expected to tip the (typically male) bouncers and DJ’s, even though these employees are paid an hourly wage; some clubs even enforce tipping minimums<sup>57</sup> (Safronova 2019). Multiple strippers informed me that if they do not tip enough, in the eyes of bouncers and DJ’s, they risk the DJ playing music they hate during their stage performances or the bouncer ignoring them while they are alone with a customer, leaving them vulnerable to assault. Many clubs also claim a portion of the money strippers earn from lap dances and private rooms<sup>58</sup> (IBISWorld 2018; Safronova 2019). The strippers I spoke with informed me that it is sadly not uncommon for strippers, especially those in bottom-tier clubs, to end the night with a few dollars, nothing at all, or be indebted to the club because they couldn’t pay their fee.

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<sup>54</sup> Since 2010, federal judges nationwide have ruled that strippers are employees under the Fair Labor Standards Act, because the club dictates prices for services such as lap dances, determines strippers’ work schedules, sets standards of conduct and appearance, etc. (IBISWorld 2018; James 2017).

<sup>55</sup> Only one club that I frequented paid their strippers an hourly wage. Treasure Trove in the Princeton metropolitan area paid \$9.50 an hour, but the strippers owed \$14 an hour for their stage fee, so they were essentially paid \$4.50 an hour.

<sup>56</sup> This is known as a stage fee or house fee. Oftentimes, the fee to work at a club varies depending upon when the stripper arrives; the earlier she arrives, the lower the fee. Some clubs charge the same fee regardless of the hour and others determine the fee based on how many strippers are already in the club. The fees for the middle- and top-tier clubs I patronized could climb to well over \$100.

<sup>57</sup> The highest minimum tip that I was informed of was \$20 for DJ’s and bouncers at a top-tier club in Princeton.

<sup>58</sup> IBISWorld (2018) estimates that clubs keep 25% of revenue generated from lap dances. I heard similar figures from strippers, particularly those in middle-and top-tier clubs.

Additionally, strippers can face serious health and safety risks in the club (Safronova 2019); for example, Nova, a white, bisexual, 26-year-old former stripper, told me that in one club where she worked, there was “a kitty pool in the back dressing room for the asbestos leaking ceiling to drip into” and staff wouldn’t clean “blood from a vein that got shot on the wall” for weeks. Neoliberal policies calling for a more flexible, contingent workforce, have detrimental effects on female sex workers around the globe (Fogel & Quinlan 2011). Misclassifying strippers as independent contractors heightens their vulnerability and minimizes their ability to earn an adequate, safe living.

With regards to the contributions of this research, these findings reinforce previous scholarship (e.g., Barton 2002; Egan 2006; Frank 2002; Sanders 2005, Wood 2000) that challenges sex work theories that portray female sex workers as patriarchal pawns and locate power solely in the hands of male customers. To deny agentic power to female sex workers is to mischaracterize power as a uniform force wielded only by men against women. However, as demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5, female strippers are not powerless; they can and do exercise agency and influence within their customer interactions<sup>59</sup>. Strippers strategically steer customer behavior and conversation and choose from among their interactional tools to fulfill customers’ emotional needs and facilitate the accomplishment of idealized masculine performances, all the while ensuring their income.

My findings also contribute to the literature by highlighting the scope and significance of strippers’ labor, thus contesting narrow conceptions of sex workers as simply providing opportunities for sexual gratification and voyeurism (e.g., Deshotels & Forsyth 2006; Enck and Preston 1988; Schweitzer 2001). As evidenced in Chapters 4 and 5, men heavily rely on the

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<sup>59</sup> Agency is, of course, always constrained by structural and ideological forces.

gendered functions of strippers' labor to meet the demands of masculinity and cope with the pressure it exerts. Relatedly, these findings strengthen the argument that productions of gender are integral to strip clubs specifically or sex work more generally (Allison 1994; Frank 2002; Hoang 2015; Price-Glynn 2010; Schotten 2005; Wood 2000).

Finally, this research contributes to the literature by exploring intersections of gender and class within stripper-customer relations. First, I analyze how customers' socioeconomic positions affect their experiences of masculine roles performed within strip clubs. Second, I address how a customer's social class may affect the form and credibility of manhood acts they employ within these gendered roles. The behaviors and attitudes of supporters and entertainers outlined in Chapter 6 illustrate that not all manhood acts entail aggression, coercion, or violence; rather, manhood acts may come across as innocuous, even kind. Regardless, all manhood acts function to claim gender power and privilege for the actor (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009). This study sheds light on how dominant masculinities are sustained in classed ways through seemingly benevolent acts, in this case, through the vehicle of sex work.

**APPENDIX A**

**INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHICS**

**STRIPPERS IN HANKSVILLE**

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Primary Club</b>     | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Race/ Ethnicity</b> | <b>Sexual Orientation</b> | <b>Education</b>    | <b>Socioeconomic status</b> |
|------------------|-------------------------|------------|---------------|------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Jesse            | Allure Gentleman's Club | 27         | Female        | White                  | Bisexual                  | Bachelor's degree   | Middle class                |
| Stevie           | Jet's Place             | 31         | Female        | White                  | Heterosexual              | Bachelor's degree   | Middle class                |
| Miley            | The Edge                | 21         | Female        | White                  | Non-heterosexual          | High school diploma | Working class               |
| Demi             | Jet's Place             | 28         | Female        | White                  | Bisexual                  | Associate's degree  | Working class               |
| Lola             | Jet's Place             | 21         | Female        | White                  | Heterosexual              | High school diploma | Working class               |
| Taysha           | Allure Gentleman's Club | 19         | Female        | Black                  | Non-heterosexual          | Some college        | Working class               |
| Alexis           | Jet's Place             | 21         | Female        | White                  | Heterosexual              | High school diploma | Working class               |
| Quinn            | Jet's Place             | 28         | Female        | White & Latina         | Heterosexual              | Some college        | Working class               |
| Josie            | Jet's Place             | 36         | Female        | White                  | Heterosexual              | High school diploma | Working class               |
| Kiera            | The Edge                | 24         | Female        | Black                  | Bisexual                  | Some college        | Working class               |
| Harlow           | Allure Gentleman's Club | 19         | Female        | White                  | Pansexual                 | High school diploma | Working class               |
| Lilly            | Jet's Place             | 22         | Female        | Latina                 | Heterosexual              | Associate's degree  | Working class               |

CUSOMTERS IN HANKSVILLE

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Primary Club</b>     | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender Identity</b> | <b>Race/ Ethnicity</b> | <b>Sexual Orientation</b> | <b>Education</b>   | <b>Socioeconomic status</b> |
|------------------|-------------------------|------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Jason            | Jet's Place             | 56         | Male                   | White                  | Heterosexual              | Associate's degree | Working class               |
| Peter            | Allure Gentleman's Club | 47         | Male                   | White                  | Heterosexual              | High school        | Working class               |
| Nolan            | Jet's Place             | 34         | Male                   | White & Black          | Heterosexual              | Some college       | Working class               |
| Miles            | Jet's Place             | 46         | Male                   | White                  | Heterosexual              | Bachelor's degree  | Working class               |
| Ethan            | Jet's Place             | 40         | Male                   | White                  | Heterosexual              | Bachelor's degree  | Middle class                |
| Nathan           | Jet's Place/The Edge    | 42         | Male                   | White                  | Heterosexual              | Some college       | Working class               |
| Ben              | Jet's Place             | 33         | Male                   | White                  | Heterosexual              | Bachelor's degree  | Working- to middle-class    |

STRIPPERS IN PRINCETON

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Primary Club</b>       | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Race/ Ethnicity</b> | <b>Sexual Orientation</b> | <b>Education</b>   | <b>Socioeconomic status</b> |
|------------------|---------------------------|------------|---------------|------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Lexie            | Treasure Trove            | 28         | Female        | White                  | Bisexual                  | Some college       | Working class               |
| Roxie            | Uptown Dolls              | 26         | Female        | White                  | Bisexual                  | Master's degree    | Working class               |
| Shay             | Sapphire Gentleman's Club | 32         | Female        | White                  | Heterosexual              | Associate's degree | Working class               |
| (Ky) June        | Treasure Trove            | 42         | Female        | Asian                  | Heterosexual              | Associate's degree | Working class               |
| Veronica         | Sapphire Gentleman's Club | 30         | Female        | White                  | Heterosexual              | Bachelor's degree  | Working class               |
| Jade             | Uptown Dolls              | 21         | Female        | White                  | Heterosexual              | Associate's degree | Middle class                |
| Natasha          | Sapphire Gentleman's Club | 38         | Female        | White                  | Heterosexual              | Bachelor's degree  | Working class               |

|        |              |    |        |       |       |                    |               |
|--------|--------------|----|--------|-------|-------|--------------------|---------------|
| Claire | Uptwon Dolls | 26 | Female | White | Queer | Associate's degree | Working class |
|--------|--------------|----|--------|-------|-------|--------------------|---------------|

### CUSTOMERS IN PRINCETON

| Pseudonym | Primary Club                 | Age | Gender Identity | Race/Ethnicity | Sexual Orientation | Education          | Socioeconomic status |
|-----------|------------------------------|-----|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Shane     | Sapphire Gentleman's Club    | 23  | Male            | White          | Heterosexual       | Some college       | Working class        |
| Christian | Treasure Trove               | 49  | Male            | Black          | Heterosexual       | Bachelor's degree  | Middle class         |
| Justin    | Treasure Trove               | 32  | Male            | White & Latino | Heterosexual       | Bachelor's degree  | Middle class         |
| Chase     | Treasure Trove               | 28  | Male            | White          | Heterosexual       | Bachelor's degree  | Working class        |
| Neel      | Treasure Trove               | 41  | Male            | Asian          | Heterosexual       | Master's degree    | Middle class         |
| Gavin     | None (out-of-state customer) | 39  | Male            | White          | Heterosexual       | High school degree | Working class        |
| John      | Uptown Dolls                 | 63  | Male            | White          | Heterosexual       | Bachelor's degree  | Middle class         |

### STRIPPERS IN MAYLIN

| Pseudonym | Primary Club            | Age | Gender | Race/Ethnicity | Sexual Orientation | Education             | Socioeconomic status |
|-----------|-------------------------|-----|--------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Tara      | Titillations            | 28  | Female | White          | Pansexual          | G.E.D.                | Working class        |
| Sadie     | (Former) Cheetah Lounge | 23  | Female | White          | Bisexual           | Less than high school | Working class        |
| Candy     | Buck Wild Cabaret       | 19  | Female | Asian & White  | Bisexual           | High school diploma   | Working class        |
| Nova      | (Former) Ruby's Cabaret | 26  | Female | White          | Bisexual           | Some college          | Working class        |
| Cherri    | Devil's Point           | 29  | Female | Black          | Bisexual           | Some college          | Working class        |

|        |                   |    |        |       |           |                     |               |
|--------|-------------------|----|--------|-------|-----------|---------------------|---------------|
| Summer | Buck Wild Cabaret | 33 | Female | White | Bisexual  | Some college        | Working class |
| Raven  | Buck Wild Cabaret | 19 | Female | White | Pansexual | High school diploma | Working class |

CUSTOMERS IN MAYLIN

| <b>Pseudonym</b>   | <b>Primary Club</b>          | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender Identity</b> | <b>Race/Ethnicity</b> | <b>Sexual Orientation</b> | <b>Education</b>    | <b>Socioeconomic status</b> |
|--------------------|------------------------------|------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| (Aaron) Steve      | None (one-time customer)     | 29         | Male                   | White                 | Heterosexual              | High school diploma | Working class               |
| (Frederick) Daniel | Ruby's Cabaret/4Play Cabaret | 38         | Male                   | White                 | Heterosexual              | Master's degree     | Middle class                |
| (Mike) Tyler       | Titillations                 | 58         | Male                   | White                 | Heterosexual              | Bachelor's degree   | Middle-class                |
| (Timothy) Luke     | 4Play Cabaret                | 27         | Male                   | White                 | Heterosexual              | High school diploma | Working-class               |

## APPENDIX B

### STRIPPER INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### Demographics

What is your age?

Gender?

Sexual orientation?

Race or ethnicity?

Are you single or in a relationship?

What is the highest level of education you've received?

That your parents received?

#### Background

Tell me a bit about how you were raised.

Where were you born?

What's your family like?

What brought you to \_\_\_\_?

How would you describe yourself?

#### Current and Previous Employment

Do you currently work anywhere else aside from \_\_\_\_?

How long have you worked at \_\_\_\_?

When did you first become a stripper?

What motivated you to start stripping?

What makes you good at what you do?

Can you walk me through some of the rules of the club you currently work at (for both employees and customers)?

Are the rules for employees reasonable?

For customers?

How do the club's rules compare to other clubs in the area?

What does your employer or manager expect from their employees that isn't outlined in the official rules?

Have you worked for any clubs other than the club you're currently employed at?  
What was your experience of these clubs?

If you have worked at other clubs, did you get along with management at those clubs?

Do you get along with your current manager or employer?

Do you get along with the strippers at your current club?

If you have worked at other clubs, were you close with the strippers?

What's an average workday like for you?  
How many hours do you typically work in a day?  
In a week?  
How much money do you typically bring in on a weekday?  
Over the weekend?

### **Customer Relations**

Describe the kind of people that visit the club you're working at now.

Describe your ideal customer.  
How many of those would you say you see in a day?

Describe the worst kind of customer you see.  
How many of those would you say you see in a day?

What's your average customer like?  
Describe the personality of your average customer.  
Are they male or female?  
What does s/he do for a living?  
Is s/he single or in a relationship?  
Is s/he well off financially?

How do you think an average customer at your club differs from an average customer from the other clubs in town?

Do you have regulars who come to see you?  
Tell me about your relationship with them and what they are like.

If you have worked at other clubs, do you remember any of your regulars from those clubs?  
Tell me about them.

What's the difference between interacting with a regular and a new customer?  
Or a customer who comes in only occasionally?

What's the difference between interacting with a single man and a group of men?  
Do men behave differently when they come in groups?  
How do you handle that?

Do you typically focus your attention on one member of a group or do you give all members your attention?

Can you pick out customers who are willing to spend a lot of money versus customers who aren't willing to spend much?  
How?

How do you handle the customers who aren't able to spend a lot of money on you?

Do you act differently in front of different customers?  
Why?  
How do you determine how to behave?

How can you tell what a customer is looking for or finds attractive?

What are some strategies you use when trying to connect with customers?

Do you think male customers ever pretend to be someone they are not?  
Do you have an example?  
Why do you think they do that?  
What do you do in those situations?

Are any of your customers very talkative?  
What do they like to talk about?  
What do they say about their lives outside of the club?  
Do they ever talk about their significant others or their family?  
Their personal finances or their employment?  
Their political views?  
Do they ever refer to different racial or ethnic groups? In what ways?

Do your customers ever get the impression that they are special to you in some way or different from your other customers?  
How do you handle that?

How do your customers generally treat you?  
If you had to guess, would you say your customers have a high or low opinion of you?  
Of other strippers?

Do your customers ever ask you about yourself or your personal life? What do you say?

Have you ever developed romantic feelings for a customer?

In general, why do you think men come to strip clubs?

What do they get out of coming to the club that they can't get off the internet?  
Or from their wives or girlfriends?

What sort of look do you think most of your male customers find attractive in women?

What sort of behavior do they find attractive?

Do you have many female customers?

What's different about working with them as opposed to working with male customers?

What keeps your customers coming back?

How do you make the experience memorable for them?

How do your customers see themselves?

In your opinion, do you affect the way your customers see themselves or think about themselves when they leave the club?

### **Experience of Stripping**

Can you recall the best experience you've had working as a stripper?

Your worst experience?

What's the most attractive thing about stripping?

The least attractive?

Are you currently satisfied with your job?

Why or why not?

Do you experience sexual arousal or pleasure while working?

Why or why not?

If so, under what circumstances?

Has stripping made an impact on you personally?

Do you see yourself differently?

Has your personal life been affected in any way?

How do you manage that?

How long do you see yourself at this club or stripping in general?

Why?

## APPENDIX C

### CUSTOMER INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### **Demographics**

What is your age?

Gender?

Sexual orientation?

Race or ethnicity?

Are you single or in a relationship?

What is the highest level of education you've received?

That your parents received?

Tell me a bit about how you were raised. Where were you born?

What's your family like?

What brought you to \_\_\_\_\_? How long have you been living in \_\_\_\_\_? Do you enjoy living here?

How would you describe yourself?

Where do you currently work? What is your job? How do you like it?

Are you currently single or in a relationship? Can you tell me a bit about your relationship?

#### **Experiences in Strip Clubs & Relationships w/Strippers**

When did you first visit a strip club? Can you tell me about that experience?

Is \_\_\_\_\_ the only strip club you visit in town? Can you name the others?

What keeps bringing you back to \_\_\_\_\_? On average, how often do you visit \_\_\_\_\_ in a week?

Do you usually go to the club by yourself or with friends?

Is there one stripper in particular that you like to visit? What's different about her?

Do you get along with the strippers at \_\_\_\_\_? Can you describe the strippers?

What is the atmosphere like at \_\_\_\_\_? Can you describe the other customers?

In your opinion, what makes a good strip club? A good stripper?

What is most attractive in a stripper? Least attractive?

Does \_\_\_\_\_ have rules regarding stripper and customer interaction at \_\_\_\_\_? In your opinion, are these rules reasonable? Have you ever broken one of these rules and been caught?

What do you get out of going to the club?