

Sexy Ladies Sexing Ladies: Women as Consumers in Strip Clubs

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Recent shifts in the consumer base of the sex industry have involved greater female attendance in strip clubs. This article examines how strip clubs and dancers incorporate female patrons into a sexualized space traditionally designed for men by identifying three interactional processes: passing over, sidestaging, and tailoring. We suggest dancers pass over women because they perceive female patron behavior to include resistance to “buying the game” and spending patterns that diverge from male customers. Drawing on Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis, we suggest the dynamic relationship between dancer and female patron involves what we term sidestaging, which refers to both dancers’ disclosure and how the club’s spatial organization inhibits the construction of women as customers through sharing gendered spaces, such as the bathroom. We argue that when a dancer tailors her lap dance for a female patron, she succeeds in acknowledging the female customer’s sexual subjectivity and potential same-sex desires by providing an individualized avenue for exploring an erotic experience. Finally, we discuss data implications for understanding how same-sex desire and sexual identity operate in an environment that eroticizes the female form, and how the strip club becomes a potential space for engaging in same-sex eroticism that includes elements of play.

The sex industry, which includes strip clubs, is controlled by and primarily intended for satisfying the sexual desires of heterosexual men. As the industry continues to commodify sex through print, live bodies, and Internet technology, however, the consumer population is also expanding (Egan, 2006). Gay and female-centered pornography, female-friendly sex shops, and male exotic dance clubs provide an opportunity for men *and* women of various sexual orientations to participate as consumers in the sex industry (Montemurro, 2001; Smith, 2002). Women with same-sex attractions who are interested in participating as consumers in male-oriented strip clubs pose a unique challenge for such establishments to meet the needs of their “new” and diversified customers (Clements, 2003; Yancey, 2003).

Most strip clubs that feature female exotic dancers allow both male and female patrons to enter, although the majority of customers are men (Thompson & Harred, 1992). Previous studies consequently have focused on male customers, although research has noted the presence of women in strip clubs by including a brief

sentence in reference to a woman present in the audience during field research (e.g., Ronai & Cross, 1998). While several have researched female patrons in clubs with male dancers (Dressel & Petersen, 1982; Liepe-Levinson, 2002; Montemurro, Bloom, & Madell, 2003), a recent shift in the consumer base of strip clubs featuring female dancers has involved women attending in larger numbers. Contemporary researchers have yet to fully assess the experience of the *female* patron in male-oriented strip clubs. As more women frequent strip clubs, how do dancers and clubs integrate them into a sexualized space traditionally targeted to male customers? How do interactions within the strip club facilitate or inhibit the erotic experience for female patrons?

The majority of research on strip clubs has focused on the strippers themselves: how strippers manage stigma (Thompson & Harred, 1992), who strips and why (Skipper & McCaghy, 1970), and how strippers negotiate their interactions with clients and customers (Boles & Garbin, 1974; Enck & Preston, 1988; Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997). Research also has focused on the emotional labor involved in sex work, how exotic dancers construct their narratives, and what is entailed in the performance of eroticism (Barton, 2002; Bell & Sloan, 1998; Chapkis, 1997). Given that most studies

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involve male customers by default, our research attempts to align itself with a diversifying sex industry that has a growing female consumer base.

This study examines the negotiation of female customers in a space designed for male sexual subjectivity and consumption. Data were gathered through ethnographic methods at four strip clubs and in-depth interviews with eight exotic dancers. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis to probe the interactional dimensions between dancers and customers, we find that dancers interact with female patrons through *passing over* and *sidestaging* rather than recognizing them as viable customer marks. We argue that only when a dancer *tailors* a lap dance to fit the needs of a female patron is the woman able to engage as an active customer in the strip club. We also consider how the strip club may foster an environment conducive to women exploring same-sex desires through eroticism and play.

Is It All About the Money? Generating Profit by Qualifying Viable Marks in Strip Clubs

Since strip clubs are profit-oriented businesses like restaurants and other retail establishments, the objective of both owners and dancers is to make money (Brewster, 2003; Erickson & Tewksbury, 2000; Pasko, 2002). Dancers make most of their profit from giving lap dances or VIP dances (Barton, 2002; Ronai & Ellis, 1989). The dancers must therefore continually interact with the customers in the club by walking around and attempting to solicit drinks and lap dances, usually scanning the floor of a club to find the best (i.e., most lucrative) customer to target. Pasko (2002) likens this exchange to a confidence game (Goffman, 1952; Schur, 1958), wherein the dancer "qualifies" the customer or "mark" by sizing up his appearance and personal characteristics. Once the dancer approaches her mark, she creates a false social relationship with her customer using calculated interactions and manipulations that eventually result in monetary gain (Pasko, 2002, p. 53). Such tools typically are gendered, meaning the dancer appeals to the customer's masculinity and attempts to fulfill his sexual desires (Frank, 2002).

Dancers rely on cues such as clothing, shoes (Massey & Hope, 2005; Murphy, 2003; Ronai & Ellis, 1989), age, and even race (Brewster, 2003) to identify their marks, which make certain customers more appealing (i.e., more profitable) prospects than others. Some studies focus on the ability or power dancers have to "choose" their mark based on these cues (see Massey & Hope, 2005), while others concentrate on the social relationship that develops after a mark has been chosen (Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997; Frank, 2002; Ronai & Ellis, 1989). Such research exemplifies how a customer, upon entrance into a strip club, is sized up and therefore negotiated accordingly in order to ensure the most profit.

Since the stripper's main objective is to make money, *any* customer with money who walks into a strip club is, theoretically, a potential mark. It is clear from previous studies that while the primary focus of the dancer is to maximize revenue, the *way* such profit is achieved through interactions between dancers and their potential customers is complex. Most research has focused on the dancers' perspective, noting motivation, narrative, and strategy in this process (Deshotels & Forsyth, 2006; Egan & Frank, 2005); however, none have explored gender as a cue in qualifying the mark. And while some (such as Frank, 2002) do underscore customer practices, we argue that research has yet to acknowledge how being a woman impacts the customer experience within the strip club.

Our study examines the strip club experience from the customer's perspective, offering a much-needed glimpse into the erotic experience through active participant observation as *female* customers. Dancers continually qualify marks through profitable cues with *male* customers. What happens when women enter the strip club and seek to engage as active customers? How do dancers negotiate female customers in qualifying the mark and performing the erotic exchange?

Performing the Erotic: A Dramaturgical Approach to Strip Club Interaction

Our research builds on the many strip club studies that use Goffman to analyze stripping and strip club interactions (e.g., Enck & Preston, 1988; Erickson & Tewksbury, 2000; Pasko, 2002). When a stripper interacts with a customer using the confidence game, dances on a stage, or gives a lap dance, she ultimately is performing an act. Goffman (1959) suggests that individuals continually perform during everyday interactions; what observers see is rarely a person's "true self" but rather a contrived set of behaviors and props used to complete the performance¹ through the "front stage" (pp. 22–24). The "back stage" rarely is seen by others; it is where the performer can relax, step out of character, and drop the act in an attempt to be more real (p. 112).

Since vital secrets of the "show" or performance are visible in the back stage, and performers behave out of character, the passages between back stage and front stage (where everyone can observe) must be kept closed to members of the audience. An individual may unintentionally expose elements of the back stage, however, during interaction with an audience member. This "break in character" demonstrates that our interactions are in fact performances that occasionally suffer from

¹We use Goffman's (1959) definition of performance to refer to all the activities that occur during an actor's continuous presence before a particular set of observers designed to influence those particular observers in a specific way (p. 22).

spontaneous and unexpected peeks into our back stage areas (Goffman, 1959).

Within the context of the strip club, dancers sometimes give the impression that they are revealing privacies, or the “back stage” to a customer in order to play the confidence game and increase profit. A customer often wants a dancer to “drop the act,” which makes him feel special and desired (Frank, 2002; Ronai & Ellis, 1989, p. 278). Dancers are aware of this, and a dancer therefore will give off the impression that a customer is seeing her back stage, when in reality it is just part of her act (Frank, 2002). Dancers also maintain their “front” by creating an illusion of attractiveness and sexual appeal for customers in the club. Dancers use props such as make-up, clothing, costumes, and perfume to complete their character. Customers rarely if ever see the preparation of these props; they are denied access to the figurative *and* physical back stage of a dancer’s performance through the layout of the club.

In the strip club, there is a clear separation of the categories “customer” and “dancer” through the stage, curtains, chairs, and restricted access to certain areas in the club, such as dressing rooms and bathrooms. This division, however, is gendered; for example, many clubs have a separate bathroom for male customers but share one bathroom between dancers and female patrons. As part of our broader research question on how women’s presence is negotiated in the strip club, we consider the extent to which the spatial organization of the setting contributes to the overall interactions between customer and dancer. We assess what happens to the relationship between customer and dancer when customers, specifically women, have access “behind the scenes.” We further question if such spatial integration contributes to dancers’ perceptions of female customers and affects the possibility of women as sexual subjects.

The Study

Data were gathered through ethnographic research and in-depth interviews. We conducted more than 50 hours of participation observation at two fully nude and two topless exotic dance clubs in southern California over a 4-month period, attending each location during both midweek and weekend nights. We actively participated in tipping at the main stage, purchasing lap dances, and conversing with the dancers and other employees such as bouncers, DJs, and waitresses. Eight in-depth interviews were later conducted with local dancers obtained through snowball sampling to supplement our ethnographic data.

Our ethnographic research methods, while similar in certain ways to some previous researchers (see Wood, 2000), are actually quite different from most in that we actively participated in purchasing lap dances and

stage tipping. For example, Adler and Adler (1987) and Erickson and Tewksbury (2000) adopt a “peripheral-member researcher” role, where they refrain from engaging in the setting’s core activities in order to obtain observable data. Our data, however, are driven by our active participation as *customers* in the club’s activities, which is an underrepresented perspective in previous literature on strippers and strip club interactions. Further, since we assess primarily how dancers react to women in the clubs, we rely on our own experiences as female customers as key components of our data collection and analysis.

Drawing on feminist methodologies, we acknowledge that our personal characteristics (such as gender, race, age, sexual orientation) may have had an impact on our data, and we concede that our “selves” are intimately a part of knowledge production. Therefore, we note that we are both relatively young women, White, and open to sexual variation. We did not reveal our researcher identity during our participant observation, however, because we believed it would affect the outcome of the data. We attempted to adopt the role of a typical female customer open or interested in participating in the usual strip club activities. We wore appropriate clothing, similar to the range of clothing worn by other female customers we observed in the clubs, sometimes dressing more casually while other times in nightclub attire. As we later discuss in our findings, physical characteristics such as clothing or hairstyle (which may, for example, connote sexual orientation) are not seen to be a factor in affecting our treatment by dancers, nor that of women in general in the club.

During each visit to the strip club, we paid an entrance fee and entered the establishment.² We mostly sat together, although we did separate on occasion in order to give tips, obtain lap dances, and observe the interaction between customers and dancers. We each obtained at least one lap dance per visit to the field sites. On several occasions we were not approached at all by the dancers, and we resorted to requesting dances from available dancers in order to collect sufficient data. The loud music and dimly lit atmosphere made it difficult to hear conversations with others, and notes were not physically taken on the floor of the club since we did not wish to reveal our position as researchers. Therefore, we held an extensive debriefing session with each other immediately after each visit, talking through the entire evening’s events in detail. We tape-recorded each of these debriefing sessions, recounting a chronology of our activities, thoughts, experiences, and other observations while in the field. Any interaction with dancers that was experienced by one author but not the other (such as during individual lap dances) was reported and included in the final set of field notes for each site. This method of data collection worked well because

²Funding was provided through a research grant from the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine.

together we could recall the most details about the setting, the dancers, and any interactions we experienced and observed. These sessions later were transcribed and used to construct sets of field notes for the purposes of coding and analysis.

Since we entered the field with a general interest in the negotiation of women's presence in strip clubs, we used open coding to analyze our field notes with broad themes such as actors (dancers, bouncers, male customers, female customers), physical spaces (bathroom, mainstage, the club floor), and relations between actors (exchanges between customers and dancers, dancers and employees, and among customers) (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Then we performed focused coding on emerging patterns specific to interactional processes, which later informed our in-depth, semistructured interview questions with dancers (Charmaz, 2001).

Eight follow-up interviews were conducted with dancers via telephone, which ranged between 45 and 60 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, and data were subsequently organized through a similar process of open and focused coding. An initial interview subject was obtained through one of the authors' local contacts, who then referred several of her current coworkers and acquaintances at other strip clubs who possibly would be willing to participate in an interview. The eight interview subjects ranged between 19 and 31 years of age, and a majority of the dancers (75%) were White. Four of the dancers currently worked in fully nude clubs, while the rest worked in topless clubs, although most had been employed in both types of clubs throughout their dancing careers. While most had been dancing for more than 2 years, tenure of employment ranged from 1 year to more than 8 years. In terms of sexual orientation, three dancers openly identified as bisexual, while two identified as heterosexual but "played with women," and three indicated their sexual orientation to be heterosexual.

Field Settings

The four clubs that we include in our study were of similar, middle-class status. The clubs were not high-class gentlemen's clubs, but would also not be considered seedy. We determined the class status by looking at clientele indicators, such as cars in the parking lot and customer apparel, as well as the prices of drinks, admission, and lap dances (Trautner, 2001). The interiors of the clubs also had similar floor layouts and décor. All four had fairly dim lighting, cocktail chairs sitting next to small, round tables, and displayed nude art such as paintings and waterfalls with mermaids.

We chose to incorporate both fully nude and topless clubs into our research in order to assess what setting factors, including alcohol availability and general bar atmosphere, influence dancer–customer interaction. We referred to several Internet websites that listed a majority of exotic dance clubs in southern California,

finding four clubs of similar description. Each listing included the club's admission prices, drink prices, lap dance prices, and a brief description of whether the club is topless or fully nude. The name of each club and dancer has been changed in order to ensure anonymity.

Mermaids is a fully nude strip club composed of a small bar counter area and a main dance stage with chairs around the stage perimeter and cushioned seating lining the walls of the room. The lighting is extremely dim. The music is loud and rhythmic; most of the songs are mainstream hip-hop, rap, and rock and currently are played on area radio stations. To the right of the main stage area is a red velvet curtained entrance to the VIP lounge. This area is composed of private sofas, where clients are required to purchase a minimum of four lap dances for \$40. The overall atmosphere is somewhat serious, dark, and focused primarily on the main stage where dancers perform.

Erotique is also a fully nude strip club located a few miles from *Mermaids*. The interior is dimly lit with black lights surrounding the perimeter of the club. There is a main stage with two brass poles and ample seating around its perimeter. The walls are lined with mirrors, and there are small cocktail tables with padded chairs that faced the main stage. To the left of the entrance is a seating area partitioned by a half wall where dancers perform both lap dances and VIP dances.

The Princess is a topless club with a bar, video games, video-gambling machines, and a large raised dance stage area with a brass rail. The club is moderately lit, with music ranging from hip-hop to top-forties hits. The overall atmosphere is light and playful, much like a sports bar. Customer attention seems to be equally focused on having a few drinks, talking with friends or coworkers, and being entertained by dancers on stage.

The Mystic Club is also a topless strip club with a full bar, pool tables, and loud music. The main stage is located at the back of the room, with small tables and lush petite armchairs scattered around them. Around the perimeter of the stage is a row of chairs attached to the floor, following the edge of the stage. The carpet is black with pink neon pictures of naked women and film reels splashed across the floor. The entire left side of the club's main room is partitioned off with private booths for VIP dances. Each booth has a curtain drawn back, and at the top of each is a green light that is on when the booth is unoccupied. The DJ booth sits to the right of the main stage, and the dancers often congregate in front of the DJ between songs and before performances on the main stage.

Dancers at all four clubs practice similar routines, such as stage dancing, walking around the floor of the club, and giving lap dances to customers. At all of the clubs, each dancer must perform onstage for two songs; the first is danced fully clothed, and the second is either finished topless or completely nude. There is at least one pole on the stage that dancers use for various tricks and

spins. After every few dancers, the DJ reminds the customers that the ladies are available for lap dances, sometimes offering 2-for-1 specials. When not on stage dancing, each dancer walks around and interacts with customers seated around the periphery of the room or seated at small cocktail tables next to the main stage. The dancers try to sell lap dances to customers, with more expensive dances available in a separate VIP lounge. Lap dances usually last the duration of one song, and customers within the VIP lounge have the opportunity to purchase subsequent dances at reduced prices.

Data and Discussion

Female Patron Presence in the Strip Club Setting

In addition to us, there were several women present as customers in each of the clubs we visited, although we observed more female patrons in attendance during weekend nights. Women entered the club in one or more of the following ways: (1) accompanied by a man, (2) within a mixed male/female group, and (3) within a group of other females. On one occasion we observed a woman enter the club alone; however, based on her familiarity with other dancers, we deduced that she was an off-duty stripper. Dancers are aware of female patron presence, as expressed during in-depth interviews:

I have noticed more females in the club lately. They usually come in at night, but not very many during the day. During the day it is business guys and people on their lunch break. The majority of the time they come in with their husbands or their boyfriends. Sometimes, there's a mixed group of girls and guys.

—Darling

When asked why more women are going to strip clubs targeted to male patrons, the interviewees offered speculation:

There are definitely more women in the clubs, just because it has become more socially acceptable to go the strip clubs. It's, it's become more socially acceptable to be gay or to be bi, so . . . they're like, "Oh, yeah, let's go!" instead of hesitating and being like, "Oh, that's weird."

—Ruby

Madonna popularized it with her *Hollywood* video or whatever it was. She made it cool—it was cool after she did it.

—Toni

For female customers, it's almost always in a party situation, like birthdays or bachelorette parties. You know, just out to have a good time.

—Raquel

Based on observation, interviews, and informal conversations with dancers, we find that women attend male-oriented strip clubs as part of a couple, a mixed group, or even a bachelorette party. During our fieldwork, we witnessed interactions between dancers and male customers, dancers and female customers, and also recorded our own interactions with the dancers. We observed and experienced three main interactional processes that negotiate the participation of female customers in strip club activities: *passing over*, *sidestaging*, and *tailoring*. *Passing over* and *sidestaging* both reinforce the invisibility of female sexual subjectivity; *tailoring* is an attempt to recognize women as viable participants in the process of selling erotic experiences.

Interactional Processes Between Dancers and Female Customers in the Strip Club

Passing over. At all four of the clubs, dancers walked around the main floor and approached customers sitting at small tables or on padded seating that lined the periphery of the club. Sometimes a dancer would sit down and begin chatting with a customer, while at other times she would stand in front of him or rub herself on his lap and ask if he wanted to purchase a dance. At one of the clubs, the Princess, it is standard for the dancer who has just performed on the main stage to walk around the room, asking each customer if he liked her dance, and subsequently receive a dollar or two as a tip. Other dancers would ask customers to purchase drinks for them while they were sitting and chatting or after a lap dance. We identified the practice of "circling the floor" to describe when dancers walk around the floor approaching customers for chatting and to solicit drinks and dances.

During our fieldwork we were passed over by dancers circling the floor. This is contrary to the visibility of male customers who were continually approached; instead, we were almost *invisible*. We experienced passing over in three main contexts: when dancers would sit and chat with customers, when dancers would approach customers to purchase dances, and when dancers would attempt to get free drinks from customers. Sitting and chatting with customers is a main way that dancers make their money and solicit dances. A dancer would usually sit down next to a customer and strike up a conversation. The dancer would subsequently ask the patron if he would like to purchase a dance. If he declines, she may choose to return later to spend time with him again. During our fieldwork, the dancers did not attempt to sit and chat with us; in fact, dancers often would sit with men next to us and avoid conversation with us altogether. We repeatedly were passed over by dancers whom we observed using the "sitting and chatting" technique with other male customers.

Dancers also circle the floor, approaching customers and asking them directly if they would like to purchase a lap dance. Sometimes the dancers would move from customer to customer indiscriminately around the room, while others would target certain customers such as those who had been to the main stage and already had tipped them. When we were approached, we already had been in the club for some time, and had gone to the main stage and actively tipped each dancer. The following excerpts from our field notes at The Princess and Erotique illustrate how dancers passed us over by not approaching us to purchase dances:

We walked out into the club, got our drinks, and sat around the right side perimeter of the room. A dancer approached the men to our left, walked right past us without even looking at us, and approached the men on our right.

I kept trying to smile at the dancer with the teal bikini. Every time I tried to catch her eye, she would turn the other way and talk to another dancer. I even laid out \$20 on the table—and I know she saw it—but she never came over.

During a visit to the Mystic Club, all of the dancers participated in a promotional event that included a free magazine with the purchase of a lap dance:

At least five dancers were walking around with magazines in hand, trying to find a customer to approach to buy a dance. All the men in the club were taken, although I had not yet been approached. The dancers walked around my table several times before returning to the DJ booth area next to where I was sitting alone. One girl caught my eye, the one with the red lacy panties and black bra, looked at me, hesitated, looked away, looked again, and then turned to stand with the rest of the dancers.

These excerpts show that although we were present for some time in the club, dancers would pass over us without attempting to generate conversation or to solicit lap dances.

Dancers would also ask customers to purchase drinks for them, which was a way to obtain free alcohol as well as to generate more money. Previous research shows that when dancers are sitting with male customers, it is not uncommon for them to say something like, “I’d love it if you bought me a drink before our dance,” and the customer typically would purchase a drink for her (Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997; Ronai & Ellis, 1989; Pasko, 2002). On several occasions when dancers were seated and chatting with male customers, we observed cocktail servers approach them and asked, “Would you like to buy the lady a drink?” We never experienced dancers who asked us to purchase drinks for them directly, and on one occasion a dancer actually waived away a

cocktail server who started to ask us to buy her a drink. Our data suggest that because we were women, the dancers discouraged us from buying drinks for them. The purchase of drinks for dancers by female patrons was experienced as a violation of a cultural norm that *men* purchase drinks for women. Take for instance this example from a visit to the Mystic Club:

While I was sitting outside with Sasha on the patio, she said, “I could really use a shot” and looked directly at the guy sitting with us. He said, “I spent all of my money.” She asked how he spent it all, and he went through a long, convoluted story about how he spent part of it at the bar and part of it on dances. At no point, however, did she ever turn to me and suggest that I should buy a shot. The plan was to get the guy to buy her a shot, not me. When I offered to buy her one, she was surprised. She was surprised that I would be willing to buy one for her. Then later, when I paid for the shot at the bar (which turned out to be an expensive one), she apologized for it being expensive, as if she would have ordered a cheaper one if she had known.

Several interviews with dancers confirm that men, not women, typically buy drinks, although at some clubs, depending on the drink quota, women may be asked to purchase drinks:

No, girls don’t usually buy me drinks. And the waitress never really goes up to the girls, either. They usually just go up to the guys.

—Dorothy

These examples illustrate that a majority of the dancers negotiated our presence in the club by passing over us instead of recognizing us as viable marks. We did not experience dancers sitting and chatting with us, nor did we experience dancers approaching us regularly in order to purchase dances or solicit drinks. While dancers do, on occasion, pass over a male customer in qualifying their mark due to bad personal hygiene or looking like they do not have money to spend, most men, at some point, do get approached. Dancers who continually pass over female patrons essentially prevent them from engaging in customer activities, such as getting a lap dance or even buying a dancer a drink. There were some dancers, however, who eventually approached us during our field work; thus we explored during in-depth interviews both dancers’ perceptions of female customers and the decision to approach them.

Approaching female customers. From opinions expressed through interviews and discussions with dancers during fieldwork, we can surmise that women entered the strip club for a variety of reasons. When they entered as part of a couple, most women came in to be turned on and have an erotic experience with their male

companion, while others came to keep an eye on their boyfriends/husbands. When entering in a group, either mixed-gender or all female, some women came on a lark but were “sexually curious,” while others actively claimed a bisexual or lesbian identity, and still others were distinctly resistant to participating in strip club activities.

As the dancer encounters each of these types, it is up to her to decipher the female patron’s intentions. In interview data, dancers referred to using various “cues” to try and determine if women in the setting were resistant or interested in same-sex erotic contact. According to the dancers, they do not actively search for sexual orientation cues that denote whether a woman is lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual. Instead, we find that a dancer’s decision to approach a woman on the floor is based on the female customer’s attitude, whether she is deemed profitable, or both, which data suggest generally is indicated by male companionship.

According to interviewees, when female patrons have a noticeably positive attitude or an almost exaggerated interest in actively participating in the club’s activities, dancers are more likely to approach them:

There are two different kinds of female customers. There are the ones who come in who aren’t that excited to be there, and then there are the ones that want to have a good time. . . . A good female customer is sitting at the stage. That’s the first cue, because she’s up close and personal. And she is tipping money and clapping for you, and she’s yelling. You do a pole trick and she screams, and you come over, like, “HI,” and she’s excited and having a good time. It’s their attitude.

–Raquel

Raquel’s description was echoed by other dancers who remarked that they approach women who are smiling, sitting comfortably with open body language such as uncrossed arms, yelling with the crowd, laughing and engaging with their male companion or fellow group mates, and applauding for dancers at the main stage. They tend to avoid women with sour facial expressions or visibly hostile body language. Such interview data confirm our experiences in the field; when we were most involved in the strip club through cheering at the main stage during a dancer’s show, laughing and smiling, or getting into the DJ’s audience prompts for applause, we were subsequently approached. Therefore, in order to become approached, men must indicate financial potential through their appearance, and women must actively demonstrate their good attitude and willingness to participate in club activities. Enthusiastic intentions, however, still might be insufficient for dancers to recognize and therefore attend to a female customer’s same-sex curiosity or desires.

In addition to attitude, a woman’s perceived profitability is also a factor in a dancer’s decision to approach a

female patron. According to interviewees like Shaunay and Calista, a female customer’s profitability is indicated by the presence of male companionship:

As long as they’re with a man who’s got money, women are profitable.

–Shaunay

If there is a woman with men, then I would talk to the woman in the group of men. Because there’s men there, there’s a lot of money to be made. And then, it also made me more comfortable to approach a group of men if there was a woman there. But a woman sitting by herself, well, I guess if I talked to her it would depend on, I don’t know. It would depend on how friendly she was towards me. Um, just the vibe I got. But I wouldn’t waste my time and sit there and talk to, like, a single female customer unless she was paying.

–Calista

Such interview data reinforce our observational notes; on one occasion we entered the fully nude club *Erotique* with three male companions. Only after we had been to the main stage, tipped the dancer, and sat down all together did the following occur:

As soon as we stepped away from the main stage, we were approached by several dancers, one after another. I assume that once they realized that we were “willing to participate” and that we might be interested in lap dances, they came right up to our group. I personally was approached three times within a span of one minute. The first girl (Sierra) who approached me was a short girl with light brown skin, medium length dark hair, and a crooked tooth. She asked me if I would like a lap dance, and smiled brightly at me. I agreed to the dance, and I followed her to the private couch area on the other side of the room.

Since the strip club operates within a heterosexualized framework similar to outside the club’s doors, men are perceived to have more financial resources than women and customarily are able to spend their money in the sex industry. The female patron is not perceived as profitable unless she is, essentially, sitting next to her boyfriend’s wallet.

Finally, we maintain that neither appearance nor perceived sexual orientation factored into a dancer’s decision to approach a female customer. As we later discuss, dancers generally make few assumptions about a woman’s sexual orientation based on either her presence in the club or her appearance when she enters. While cues of being a lesbian may include short hair, “butch” clothing, and masculine mannerisms, bisexuality is often less visually defined and more difficult to assess using cues like hair or clothing (Wosick-Correa, 2006). We asked Darling if a woman’s weight, height, or attractiveness factored into the decision to approach her, to which she stated, “No. Girls are girls.” When probed, “Does it

matter to you if they look butch or feminine, or wear skirts or pants?" Darling replied, "No, but it's kind of fun if they're wearing skirts—'cause I can try and peek up them!"

Based on ethnographic and interview data, we suggest that dancers in general tend to pass over women based on their gender. When dancers *do* decide to approach women for interaction on the floor for a lap dance, however, they use cues of (a) the woman's attitude or mood, and (b) the women's profit potential (mostly a function of whether they are accompanied by a man). While a woman's good attitude and male companion may help her get approached sooner, we later demonstrate how dancers' perceptions of female spending patterns also may be a contributing factor in how women are accommodated on the floor of the club. In the next section, we suggest that the physical layout of the strip club also affects how dancers negotiate female customers through an interactional process we term "sidestaging," based on Goffman's dramaturgical framework.

Sidestaging. Performers in theater seldom if ever allow the audience to witness "behind the scenes" activities such as preparing costumes, applying make-up, building the set, or rehearsing lines. Exposing what specifically goes on behind the stage inevitably reduces the ambience of a performance and introduces a reality that is intentionally avoided during a stage performance. What the audience does see is a finished product revealed to them on the front of the stage.

Goffman (1959) adapted the concepts of back stage and front stage in his dramaturgical analysis of how individuals interact with one another. A person's front stage includes what she allows others to see, while her back stage is what she keeps private—for her eyes only. Using the terms back stage and front stage in their literal sense, the back stage of a strip club includes the dancer's dressing room and other off-limits spaces designated by club management; the front stage includes the club floor, VIP area, drink bar, entrance, and main stage area. Using the terms back stage and front stage more theoretically, we see that each individual dancer also has her own front stage persona that she allows the customers to see and retains a set of personal qualities she may choose to reveal to customers she trusts or to others who are not customers.

We have created a third kind of staging that is neither front stage nor back stage, which we term "sidestaging." Sidestaging is the second interactional process that occurs between dancers and female patrons in the club. Sidestaging occurs when customers get to see a side of the dancers (and the club) that is not part of the performance; it is a glimpse into the back stage without presuming to have revealed its entirety. We maintain that we experienced sidestaging during contact with dancers

because we were women in a club designed to attend to male customers.

Wood (2000) suggests that men who frequent strip clubs think of the dancers as "paper dolls," who exist within the realm of the club and do not have outside lives with boyfriends/husbands, children, or other commitments. According to Wood, when dancers reveal that they have spouses, children, or both, it takes away from the mystique of the dancer and introduces a reality that many male customers would rather avoid or deny.

We loosely adapt Wood's concept of paper dolls to contextualize how dancers negotiate their stage presence with costuming, more specifically with make-up, clothing, and preparing the act for the strip club floor. Dancers do not reveal these processes of preparation ("back stage") to their customers because it will destroy the perfected image most men take for granted when the dancers are on the main stage or circling the floor ("front stage").

Spivey (2005) further articulates the notion that the strip club's back stage is a distinct area offering respite from performance. "Customers are not allowed in the dressing area back stage. Consequently, behavior is quite distinct from the staged area and conversation is usually frank. As dancers are no longer simply living embodiments of male desire in this environment, the on-stage [front stage] façade is relatively nonexistent in the dressing room. As Decker states, 'We don't have to live his [the customer's] fantasy back here'" (pp. 427–428). The back stage becomes a sort of safe space that the dancers occupy away from customers.

During our fieldwork, however, we had access to the dancers' private dressing rooms, and also we witnessed a number of dancers as they prepared their costumes (make-up, clothing, hair) for performance. We call this sidestaging because we are afforded glimpses of their preparation without presuming that we see every behind-the-scenes detail. We argue that sidestaging occurs specifically between dancers and female patrons, and we note that dancers may have little control over how and when sidestaging occurs due to the club's physical layout. We also suggest that female patron behavior is a key component to sidestaging, as we later discuss. We observed sidestaging in two distinct areas: in the *bathroom* and *on the floor* of the club.

The Bathroom

The bathroom is the main location where we experienced sidestaging in relation to the dancers. All of the clubs in our study had a women's bathroom that was connected to the dancers' dressing/locker room. We used the same toilets and sinks as the dancers, and when we entered the bathroom we often encountered dancers using the mirrors and counter space to apply make-up and do their hair. It was a common occurrence for one of us to enter a bathroom and see curling irons, hairdryers, and feminine products sitting on the sink

basin. The physical organization of the club, therefore, forced dancers and female customers to utilize the same space, for example, in the bathroom at Mermaids:

There was a curling iron sitting out on the sink, and there was a door that was propped open that went directly into the dressing room for the dancers. I could see directly into the dressing room; there was lots of stuff in there—lots of bags and personal items (purses, makeup, hair ties, clothes) and right next to the door (around the corner) there were three or four backpacks or small suitcases.

We also observed that the dancers were not distracted by our presence in the bathroom, and often talked with us while we used the facilities in the bathrooms at the Princess and Erotique:

In the bathroom, a door was propped open that went directly into the dressing room for the dancers. I could see directly into the dressing room; there was a Latina-looking woman who was walking around without a top, exposing her large, full breasts that she was massaging, which she continued to do so absentmindedly while asking me my name after she caught my eye.

I went into the bathroom, and the tall girl with red lacy shorts went in there too. I noticed that her breast was hanging out of her top, exposing her nipple, and she wasn't making any effort to fix it. I chatted with her, commenting that it looked like it was a slow night. She agreed and then said, "Oh, I really like your earrings!" I said, "Thanks," and commented that I had just received them as a gift.

In these examples, the dancers were undeterred by our presence and interacted with us as "girls." The club's physical design forced dancers and female patrons together, reinforcing the notion that women are not fully considered to be customers. Two separate experiences at the Mystic Club and Mermaids further illustrate how we related to the dancers through sidestepping:

I went into the bathroom, and when I came out of the stall there was a very tall blonde dancer with a white bikini and white see-through gown. When I was in the stall, I thought I heard the dancer say my name, and I replied, "Yes?" The dancer said, "Oh, no...excuse me, I was saying that you can see my armpit stain [and pointed to her armpit area]." I explained that I thought she said my name, and she asked what it was. I told her [author's name], and the dancer complimented me on my name. She introduced herself as Goldie. She said, "Can you see my armpits are stained?" and I said, "No, it's dark out there, don't worry." She said something about the makeup on her body, that she has makeup all over her body, and pulled down her bikini and I could see the areas below her bikini line and that it didn't have makeup. We chatted for a minute about how it was slow that night, then we both left the bathroom.

We went down to go to the bathroom, and while we were sitting and talking another dancer came into the bathroom, wearing a black bikini and holding a box of baby wipes, and tried to go into the handicap stall. She asked if either one of us had a tampon, and we told her no, that we can't bring our purses in, and she was really surprised. I asked if they usually dance if they have their periods, and she said, "Yeah, sure, you just hide your string." But then she said that it sucks because of cramps and bloating and stuff, but she just smoked a joint so she was fine.

In these two candid examples, the dancers revealed personal hygiene problems to us, which we can assume they did not reveal to male customers. Our presence in the bathroom was not unusual to the dancers, nor were we seen as intruders when we entered the dressing rooms. As Raquel nonchalantly notes, "I mean, there's one female bathroom and they have to go too, you know?" As Spivey (2005) notes, the "safe space" of the back stage area necessitates the absence of customers, yet we (as *female* customers) were in fact allowed free access to such areas.

In addition to the physical organization of the club, the management further marginalizes female customers by both restricting women's access to the restroom and also failing to attend to the restroom facilities. We noted on several occasions that the women's restroom in Mermaids was roped off, forcing us to enter through the dancers' dressing room. At Erotique, the public entrance to the women's bathroom was actually locked:

When we entered the club, we went directly to the bathroom. As we jiggled the handle, we realized that the door was actually locked. We looked to the bartender on our left, who motioned us toward a door marked "Dressing Room." When we walked in, we realized it was the dancers' private dressing area, as there were backpacks and clothing and shoes strewn around the room. Two dancers were sitting and talking, and failed to acknowledge us as we walked through to the toilet area. I was surprised that the dancers were not bothered by our passing through their private space. When we entered the bathroom, we realized that the door was blocked by a woman sitting on a chair sewing a bikini top. There was a large clothing rack full of stripper outfits hanging on it, and the woman smiled and nodded as we used the facilities. She stayed in the restroom for the remainder of the evening, and the door to the women's restroom remained fully blocked.

During each of our visits to the four research sites, the bathrooms remained unserved, even though there were other female customers in the club on the same nights we were there. Consider this field note example taken from our visit to the Princess:

The women's bathroom doesn't have an attendant. It is gross; it has ashes in the sink, no toilet paper, no locks

on the door, and the men's bathroom has an attendant, with cologne, and even a bowl of candy for the men to have.

Women in the strip club experience sidestaging through their access to behind-the-scenes aspects of the dancers' performance. The bathroom, due to the club layout and management's neglect of the restroom facilities, became the main locations where sidestaging occurred. The physical organization of the club reflects and actively reconstructs preexisting and pervasive differentiations between female patrons and male customers. We note that such gendered integration, however, is not necessarily the choice of the dancers and rather architecturally reflects the former exclusively male customer base of strip clubs. Because women are allowed access behind the scenes through this process of sidestaging, however, they ultimately are prevented from constructing and maintaining the fantasy world of the strip club afforded to men. The second site where we experienced a similar form of sidestaging was on the floor of the club.

On the floor. A majority of the interactions between dancers and customers occur on the floor of the club. The dancers communicate with customers while on the main stage, giving lap dances and VIP dances, and also while sitting and chatting. We observed that dancers on the floor often disclosed personal information to us, such as clothing issues, and also complaints about male customers. We suggest that these disclosures are moments of slippage, much like what Goffman terms "breaks in character," and may occur because the dancers perceive us as cohorts rather than customers (Goffman, 1959, p. 113). Such commiserations seem comparable to interactions between women on a more general social scale. Consider the following example of sidestaging through personal disclosure that occurred during one of our visits to the Princess:

We were sitting at the main stage watching the third dancer perform. She was a white woman with crinkly blonde hair and wore a salmon colored lacey bikini with a gold chain wrapped around her waist, reminiscent of Madonna from the 1980s. When she first came up to us, she looked at me as she adjusted the underwire of her bra, saying, "Ugh... my bra!" in a way that suggested I would know how uncomfortable and/or annoying bras are because I am a woman and have breasts myself.

Dancers would sometimes make comments to us about their real names, such as "My name is Gigi, but my real name is Hannah." Revealing "real" names (although usually still fake) is often a part of the game that dancers use with their male customers to make them feel special (see Frank, 1998), in part because

men often ask dancers their real name, which we did not do. We surmise from observation and interview data that dancers were perhaps not as careful in maintaining their "fake" names in the presence of female customers. Interviews suggest that some dancers are open to revealing real names to women since they feel female customers posed little threat to their personal safety. Other dancers, however, fully protected all private information from customer, regardless of gender.

Dancers often complained to us about other male customers. Again, for those who doubt the importance of this type of personal disclosure, we emphasize the way in which the dancers discussed their horror stories with male customers that conveyed to us that we were not customers, we were women. During this type of sidestaging, we offered a sympathetic ear while dancers detailed their complaints. Such behavior reflects sidestaging as an interactional process, insofar as it relies on both the dancer's and the female customer's involvement. The following field note excerpts are from discussions with dancers after they had given one of us a lap dance. The first two examples occurred at *Erotique*, while the latter is from the *Princess*:

"These guys don't realize that this is a job to us, we're not doing it because we *want* to be here, we're doing it because we *have* to be here, you know? I get guys who ask for my phone number, want to take me out to dinner, pick me up in their car and go for a date. Sometimes they wait outside the club until I'm done with work. I hate that. This is my job, I'm not looking to date any of them or hook up with them, you know?" She started to get a little worked up when she was saying this; her voice got stern and her eyes widened as she talked to me.

Kelly said that sometimes the guys really annoy her because all they want to do is talk to her, and she needed to learn to deal with that. She said that it wasn't worth it for her for \$10 to sit and listen to an annoying guy talk to you, one who is all over you and keeps asking you out on a date. She said those guys are really annoying.

"The guys don't understand that this is just a job. Like, you have a job, right? [She motioned to me, and I nodded my head.] Well, this is my job, and I don't want to fuck the guys who come in here, and most of us have boyfriends or husbands. We're not even interested in the men who come in here, but sometimes they don't understand that, you know?"

These examples illustrate that dancers sidestage women in the club by disclosing personal information and complaining about male customers. Some may argue these slippages in the form of personal disclosure or complaining are part of the game or an act that a dancer may use to establish a connection with a customer, or even that male customers enjoy being permitted such access (Frank, 2002). Our data strongly support the claim that the disclosure occurring between dancers

and women in the club, however, is not part of the moneymaking process. What disclosure we did witness was not “sexy”; we saw armpit stains, were asked for tampons, and heard about disrespectful male customers.

While we listened to dancers complain, and routinely shared bathrooms and walked through their dressing areas, we also attempted to obtain lapdances from these same dancers on the floor of the club. We argue that sidestaging may impact the experience of female patrons in the strip club because they interact with dancers behind the scenes. To consider this process in Marxian terms, when consumers fetishize a commodity, it comes to possess magical qualities and the labor involved in the production of such a commodity becomes erased in the process of consumption (Marx, 1976 [1867]). Egan (2005) finds that among dancers and their regulars, the regular engages in a delusion and fails to recognize that the performance in which the dancer takes part is a product of her labor (p. 96). The process of sidestaging precludes the female customer’s participation in the fetishization process, since she sees (and sometimes participates in) the process of labor involved in the production of the commodity. While we recognize the negative implications of commodity fetishism and its alienating impact on both the consumer and producer, the central activities of the strip club *are* based on fantasy and the sale of erotic experiences. Since female patrons are privy to the process of labor during sidestaging, this may affect women who wish to participate as customers in strip clubs.

Tailoring

We refer to the third interactional process dancers use to negotiate women’s presence in strip clubs as “tailoring.” When a dancer tailors her behavior, she is doing so specifically because the customer is a woman. Once a female customer agrees to purchase a lap dance, the dancer attempts to fulfill her responsibility of providing a pleasurable dance. The dancer tailors her technique and behavior to what she thinks the customer wants (Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997; Pasko, 2002; Wood, 2000). Many of the dancers who gave us lap dances tailored their moves and gave us sexualized dances specific to a woman’s body.

When a dancer gives a lap dance, she has certain techniques that may either be her own or ones she has learned from other dancers. Most dancers use touching, grinding, and other forms of physical contact during the actual dance. Regardless of an individual dancer’s technique, there were certain actions that we experienced as being more “female oriented.” We identified a lap dance as female oriented according to the following three criteria: (1) placement of head between legs rather than on top for simulation of oral sex; (2) hip grinding between legs rather than on the lap,

or none at all; and (3) use of hands to touch breasts and nipples.

We received both nonfemale-oriented as well as female-oriented lap dances. Gigi, a dancer who has been working at the Mystic Club for a little over 3 months, gave a very nonfemale-oriented dance:

She took off her high black platform shoes, and climbed on top of me. She spent a lot of time grinding on me, with her butt between my legs, and put one of her legs over the outside of my legs, and put her small breasts close to my face. Dancers are supposed to be completely clothed while they do the lapdances, but she adjusted her bikini top so that part of her nipple was exposed. She didn’t touch with her hands at all during the dance, nor did a lot of her body touch me except for her butt when she was grinding. She never put her face between my legs, which I noticed in other dances that I thought were more female oriented.

Another dancer who worked at the Princess, Jade, also gave a nonfemale-oriented dance:

The music was a guitar blues song . . . slow and gritty and sexy . . . and Jade kicked off her shoes and started grinding her butt into my lap, rubbing back and forth as if I had a penis. While she was dancing, she said that she had only given one other girl a lap dance before. I asked her if there was a difference, and she told me, “The only difference is that I have boobs in my back.” Jade kept using the same few moves on me, lying on my lap and putting her leg behind my neck. At the very end of the dance, she knelt down and mimicked giving me oral sex. What I noticed was that she did it as if I were a *guy*, not a girl. She put her head on top of my lap and moved her head around like she was sucking on a penis. This was different in the way Candy [another dancer] mimicked oral sex, because Candy put her face *between* my legs instead of on top of my lap. When the song was over, Jade grabbed onto my left knee and balanced herself against me as she slipped her shoes back on, saying something about it being a slow night and how she was ready to go home.

We considered these two dances by Gigi and Jade nonfemale-oriented because they failed to incorporate the three criteria established for a woman-specific dance. The following dance, however, was decidedly female oriented:

She started dancing and used her hands a lot, and put her hand in between my bra and my breast and started rubbing my nipple. She crawled down my body and knelt on the floor, putting her head between my legs and simulated performing oral sex over my jeans. She reached around and scratched the backs of my legs and my butt and put her face up close to mine, turned around, and then pulled down her bikini. She rubbed her breasts against mine, and also did a lot of grinding in between my legs rather than on top.

She was really playful, and ended the dance by purring in my ear.

Interview data confirm a distinction between male- and female-oriented lap dances. For example, Ginae describes that when she gives a female-oriented lap dance, she does not grind on them like she would a guy, noting, “I’m mostly just touchy, but not in such a way that I think they have a dick.” Additional characteristics of female-oriented lap dances include being more sensual with women and involve more talking than with men:

Guys, you know, just want you to grind on their lap. Girls are much more sensual, and my dances for girls tend to be a lot more sensual. Like, I’ll lean forward and breathe in her ear, grab her behind the back and pull her to me, and it’s much slower and more sensual. And, with a guy, there’s something there [laughs] to be dancing on. For a girl, you can’t really get a whole lot of sexual tension built up with clothes on, because there’s not a big protruding thing. So for girls I tend to be a lot more sensual.

–Raquel

I definitely touch the females more, like touching their breasts. But I also tend to talk more with women when I lap dance, like I’ll lean over and whisper things like, “Are you enjoying this?” or, “Do you like this?”

–Julie

We received 15 lap dances from different dancers at all four research sites. We coded each dance utilizing the three criteria to differentiate between female-oriented and male-oriented lap dances. Based on both observational and interview data, we find that a dancer’s efforts to tailor her female-oriented lap dance depend on several factors that include duration of employment as a dancer, whether dancers prefer giving lap dances to women, and finally to some extent the sexual orientation of the dancer.

Results indicate that the longer the dancer has been dancing, the better she is able to tailor her dancing to allow for female sexual subjectivity. The dancers in both the ethnographic and interview components of this study ranged from being newly hired to having more than 8 years of experience, although the average length of employment as a dancer was about 1–2 years in the club. Since adaptation to the customer is an integral part of exotic dancing, tailoring a lap dance to a specific customer is essentially a part of providing him or her with what he or she wants. The longer a dancer is employed, the more interaction she potentially has with various customers, including female customers. As we previously noted, dancers do not automatically assume that a female customer in the club has same-sex desires, or even that she wishes to fulfill such desires in the context of a lap dance. One main way experienced dancers have

learned to assess a female customer’s needs is to begin her lap dance with probing questions:

Before I do a lap dance, I ask her, “Oh, do you actually like girls?” and her answer dictates the kind of dance I’m going to give her. Because some girls are there to get a dance because their boyfriend wants them to, and their boyfriends want to think about the dance. ‘Cause guys are like that—yeah, yeah, dance for my girlfriend. And she’s not really into girls, but she’s up for it only ‘cause her boyfriend wants her to.

–Raquel (dancing for more than 3 years)

The way I determine my dance for women is I’ll flat out ask them, “Do you like girls?” And if they say yes, then yeah, I’ll be all over them and let them touch me. ‘Cause chances are they’ve never been with a girl before and if they’re interested and they’re shy, this is the only time that it can be okay for them to like girls.

–Darling (dancing for 2 years)

When a dancer asks a female customer if she “likes girls,” she is able to inform her tailoring efforts while simultaneously acknowledging the woman’s sexuality. Interviewees who have been dancing over a year were more adept at asking female customers such questions. Tailoring therefore allows female patrons to voice their sexual curiosities, attraction, and desires in the process of consuming same-sex erotic contact in the strip club. Whereas female patrons are rendered peripheral through passing over and sidestaging, tailoring allows the female sexual subject visibility and the most fulfilling consumer experience in the strip club.

According to both our field research and interview data, dancers generally describe lap dances for women as being more comfortable and playful than dances for men:

As she continued to dance, she told me, “It’s fun giving girls a lap dance, because the guys take it so seriously. With a girl, it’s more playful. . . . You can have fun with it more.”

–Field note from Mermaids

I asked if she prefers giving lap dances to girls instead of guys, and she said, “Definitely, they are soft, and more respectful. There are guys who come in here and they are respectful, but the girls are always respectful.”

–Field note from the Mystic Club

I’d rather give a girl a lap dance; it’s more fun for me. I get to fool around and get that out of my system. Usually they’re so in awe of your body and you’re so appreciated.

–Julie

They’re usually nicer, more likely to want to chat and be responsive to you and not just your body. I think that women, when it comes to sexuality, are a lot more mental and emotional. With men, it’s just more about looks.

So I like giving lap dances to women. They're just nicer and sweeter and, you know, just better. Guys are just animals. They're terrible! Every once and a while you'll come across a guy who's cool to talk to and is a gentleman when you give him a lap dance, but for the most part, they're just sort of animals and they just want you to bounce on their lap and that's IT.

–Shauna

We find that elements of play, comfort, and sensuality were qualities that many dancers associated with female lap dances. Giving tailored dances to women, according to the dancers, is often more fun and playful than seriously sexual, which adds an unexpected dimension to interactions between dancer and female customer. We also asked dancers at the clubs and during interviews about their sexual orientation and how it possibly impacts the tailoring process. Field work and interview subjects suggested that while a good portion of fellow dancers are bisexual or lesbian, there are some heterosexual dancers who do not enjoy or prefer to engage in same-sex erotic interactions, even for money. Conversely, other dancers like Dorothy indicated that being bisexual actually helps in her ability to tailor a female lap dance because she is attracted to women and knows how to “please them.”

Finally, we suggest that for many dancers, an element of tailoring a female lap dance involves both allowing or, in some instances, even encouraging “more” touching, which is often reciprocal. Both dancers in the clubs and interviewees describe how women continually “get away with more” than men would in receiving a lap dance (even though certain kinds of touching are illegal). One interviewee mentioned that this can be a source of frustration for heterosexual dancers who feel uncomfortable with women touching them. For other dancers, it can be a way to further enjoy their occupation. We find that such permissiveness during female lap dances is due in part to the management and bouncers deliberately monitoring female lap dances less than male lap dances. This occurred on several visits to both topless and fully nude clubs; male customers and even dancers often were cautioned to “behave” during lap dances on the floor and in the VIP room while we were skimmed over or simply ignored while receiving quite “risqué” tailored lap dances. When asked if women are patrolled like men during lap dances, interviewees confirmed:

No, they don't. I've totally noticed that! It's like they don't [patrol women] because they don't feel the women as a threat to the dancers. Like, they only look to see if the men are going too far. They don't see the women that way.

–Shaunay

They definitely are strict about guy customers. 'Cause we do have cameras in every lap dance booth, and so

there's people in the camera room that are watching at all times. But I can say I've never gotten in trouble for a girl-on-girl dance where she has tried to grab my boob or tried to lick me or something. They don't care. I don't know if that's the policy in the club, but they're not strict with female dances. But with the guys, they really watch you. I guess it's because you're not going to have sex with girls in the back room. [laughs] And probably cause they like to see girl-on-girl action.

–Darling

Some dancers allow female customers to explore their same-sex curiosities with them in the strip club setting. Ruby offers similar thoughts on why she lets women get away with touching more than men during a lap dance:

It often depends on her attitude. I tend to let the shy girls get away with more. Like, I try to open them up [laughs]. I hate to admit that, but I'm totally sexist in that way.

For the female customer who is lesbian, bisexual, curious, or open to physical contact with dancers, this “bonus” component of tailoring may somewhat compensate for the general invisibility of female sexual subjectivity in the strip club setting. By allowing women more freedom, both dancers and club staff contribute to enhancing the fluidity of same-sex desire as both a possible engagement and even an observable “treat” by fellow male customers. It is important to note, however, that the reason female customers are granted more leeway by club staff during lap dances is that they are not taken seriously as customers who might become carried away in the heat of the moment and violate personal (or even legal) boundaries with dancers.

Tailoring is the one interactional process where female patrons are treated both as women and as viable customers, which does not occur with either passing over or sidestaging. When dancers pass over or sidestage women, and clubs force women to share spaces customarily reserved for employees (dancers), the female patron as well as her erotic intentions are rendered peripheral. This may remain unproblematic for some, but we argue that for those women who wish to fulfill same-sex desires and retain their sexual subjectivity, they are forced to interact and actually consume differently as a result.

“Buying(?) the Game”: Female Consumer Patterns in the Strip Club

While conducting in-depth interviews, we see a pattern emerge in how dancers perceived female customer behavior that, we argue, affects how dancers negotiate women's presence in the strip club. According to interviewees, female customers tend to purchase only one

lap dance on the floor, seldom tip afterward, and rarely enter the VIP room for multiple dances:

When female customers get lap dances, they don't spend a lot of money, because I think sexuality is very different for men than women. Like, for a woman, she gets a lap dance, it's fun, whatever, she's done. But a guy, it's such a sexual fantasy. A guy will drop hundreds of dollars on a dancer. I've never seen a female customer do that.

—Raquel

The straight girls that work here would often say that they prefer giving lap dances to men because they tip more and you're more likely to get a second lap dance from a man than a woman. Mostly, I think it's a money issue.

—Pamela

Usually females are not that compulsive; they don't come in and spend as much money as the guys do. Because you can manipulate a man into spending thousands of dollars, you can't manipulate a woman into doing that, you know? A man will walk away satisfied, a woman will walk away like, "Well, where's my handbag?"

—Toni

Female customers, according to the dancers, consume differently than male customers because they just "don't buy the game" like men do. Most dancers admit to having a "game" or "con game" they use to solicit multiple dances and drinks, help establish regular customers, or engage with patrons in the club. Studies such as those by Frank (1998, 2002) suggest this "game" involves a heteronormative approach to masculinity, male sexual fantasies, and female sexual objectivity in order to successfully engage men for profit. Many dancers learn how to play the game through experience, learning from fellow dancers, and trial and error:

For a while, I really had trouble. There was a lot of trying to figure out how to talk to people, how to be flirty. It's like learning a skill at any job. You're not going to go in knowing what to do. So it takes time. I would say by my first year I finally felt like I knew what I was doing.

—Darling

Darling later described how customers often need to be "schooled" in the ways of the strip club, and young or new customers often do not know the rules of the club, how to obtain lap dances, and so on. In order for the interactional game between dancer and customer to work—for the dancer to maximize her profit and the customer to maximize his or her erotic experience in the club—both must participate in ways that are in agreement. The success of the game is therefore contingent upon the agency of the dancer as well as the agency of the customer. This process, based on interview data

and our experience as female customers, was more difficult and, we argue, mostly unsuccessful between dancers and female patrons. We asked dancers if they ever use "the game" with female customers:

No, they don't really fall for that [laughs]. I don't usually work the girls.

—Ruby

Not nearly as much. I think women get it. I think women get the idea more that I'm there to do a job only. And that it's a job and they're there to have a good time and hang out for a little bit and they're good to go. But men come there looking for that fantasy. They come there alone, usually, by themselves, and they really want to believe you like them and you're interested in what they're saying, and it's a lot easier to fool them than a woman. I get the feeling that women, like, they get it. They come in and get one lap dance, like, "OK, thank you!" and then walk out.

—Pamela

I don't think I've ever tried to con a woman. They know what's going on, they know what's up. It won't work. Like a guy, you're sitting on his lap after a lap dance, and you whisper in his ear, "Hey, let's do another half hour. . . . I really like dancing for you." Like, I don't ever do that with women, because I feel like they know.

—Raquel

Dancers describe how they rarely if ever use "the game" on women, mainly because female customers don't "buy it." Dorothy described that it was comforting to have women in the club for precisely this reason; not having to "play the game" was actually a relief:

It was kind of comforting to have women in the club at some level because it was just like, you knew that you didn't have to play these games with the women that you have to play with the men. There are certain games that you play to get money.

Since dancers perceive female patrons to have different spending patterns in the strip club, they base their interactions with women accordingly. This data serve to highlight very clearly the precisely gendered nature of the game, confirming previous research (such as Frank, 2002) on the dancer/customer dynamic with an interactional analysis of female dancer and female customer. The female customer is seen as marginal, a peripheral patron in the strip club setting because she not only spends her money differently, but she also fails to purchase in the method that dancers are accustomed to selling. Strip clubs facilitate the sale of erotic experience to men who wish to fulfill their sexual fantasies; women produce and men consume. Female customers remain an element to be negotiated within a heterosexualized framework that includes the erotic dancer, the management, and the strip club's structural facilities.

Conclusion

Conventional strip club interactions involve female dancers and male customers who exchange money for erotic and intimate experiences. Whether alone or in groups, accompanying men or being accompanied by men to strip clubs, female patrons essentially step into a highly sexualized environment predicated upon male heterosexual fantasies and female sexual objectivity. This article explores how dancers engage in specific interactional processes while navigating the spatial organization of the strip club setting to negotiate the presence of women.

We find that dancers pass over female customers in strip clubs unless they actively demonstrate a positive attitude or potential profitability denoted by male companionship. Whether passing over is deliberate and rooted in perceptions of female customers as bad tippers, discomfort with same-sex erotic contact, or more of an unconscious inclination, such lack of interaction speaks to the continued invisibility of female sexual subjectivity both in the club and beyond its doors. For dancers who do interact with female patrons, their relationship is characterized by sidestaging. Through dancers' disclosure on the floor of the club, and the sharing of space in the strip club bathroom, sidestaging exposes women to the unsightly mechanics behind the erotic performance. Sidestaging, therefore, may inhibit female patrons from partaking in the structured erotic relationship between dancer and customer, since they are privy to the process of the labor. When a dancer tailors her lap dance for a female patron, however, she succeeds in acknowledging the female customer's sexual subjectivity and potential same-sex desires by providing an individualized avenue for exploring an erotic experience.

The mere possibility of female sexual subjectivity in the strip club setting has been a point of contention in previous research on female patrons in clubs with male dancers (Smith, 2002). While some suggest women in these clubs engage in sexually assertive and even, at times, exploitative behavior as customers, researchers are quick to point out that such behavior is clearly contextual and situational. Further, the male strip club is understood as actively constructing an "egalitarian" space wherein female patrons are encouraged to objectify men, albeit in a playful, entertaining context (Dressel & Petersen, 1982). Such studies are illuminating in terms of examining female sexual agency and female customer experiences, although their findings on female patrons of male strip clubs remain rooted in the heterosexual context.

According to our data, on the one hand, we suggest that women are not treated the same as men as customers in the standard female strip club. Women who enter the club looking for same-sex erotic attention have to work hard to get noticed and to get taken seriously as customers. For some women, this may impact

their ability to attain their desired erotic experience within the strip club. We argue that women tend to be ignored on the floor of the club in part as a function of the structure of the club, but also as a product of dancers' conceptions of female customers, perceptions of female spending patterns, and the invisibility of same-sex desire. The clubs do not actively encourage female sexual subjectivity (as found in clubs that feature male dancers); rather, they operate through the glossing over of female patrons in both strip club design and operation.

On the other hand, however, it is this invisibility of female same-sex desire that effectively creates a unique space within the strip club for same-sex play, which is further maximized during tailored lap dances. For women of all orientations, the lap dance is an occasion during which experimentation with individual same-sex desire can take place, where sexual identification and labels are not as relevant as curiosity or openness to same-sex eroticism (see also Johnson, 1999, for a discussion of how strip clubs can be places of sexual self-discovery for dancers). This is especially interesting for the studies of sexuality and the sex industry, insofar as we see in the strip club a rather fluid and situational quality to female same-sex eroticism. In other contexts, particularly among men, homosexual desire is perceived as highly threatening and disruptive to the heteronormativity of social life. Yet in the setting of the strip club, women have been permitted to enter yet are expected to blend in to the setting, which entails an eroticisation of the female form for the eyes of heterosexual men.

The elements of "play" and "entertainment" infused into the strip club environment invite the prospect for women of any orientation to be exposed to and potentially engage in a same-sex erotic experience. As we see from our data, women's presence in the club or even their willingness to get a lap dance is not necessarily related to their stated sexual orientation; dancers make few assumptions about orientation and even ask lap dance clients before dancing for them as a way to navigate the ambiguity of female patron intentions. The negotiations of women in clubs, as we have observed and addressed, foster an intriguing space in which play and same-sex experimentation are perceived as possible yet situational (in which it does not necessarily transfer to other settings). Perhaps this is a reflection of recent cultural trends in which a sort of "situational" bisexuality has been increasingly destigmatized and even encouraged for females, albeit one that often is enacted as a performance for the sake of enhancing sexual appeal to men (see Levey, 2005, for a feminist critique of this cultural milieu). We find that female patrons in male-oriented strip clubs are suspended in a sexualized environment that passively tolerates the fluidity of female sexuality, yet their presence must be mediated through spatial considerations and dancers' perceptions of women as customers.

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