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Sticking to Your Moral Guns: Cultivating Intimacy and Constructing Codes of Conduct in Relationships Between Exotic Dancers and Their Regular Customers

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Sticking to Your Moral Guns: Cultivating Intimacy and Constructing Codes of Conduct in Relationships Between Exotic Dancers and Their Regular Customers

Abstract

[From the introduction]

Strip clubs are unique sites of human interaction where fantasy, sex, and intimacy are all made public and offered as a service to be temporarily purchased. In so-called “heterosexual” clubs catering to a male clientele, the exchange of this particular service for cash is at times quite explicit, while it remains couched within a recognizable routine of flirting and intimacy similar to non-commodified romantic relationships. Past research indicates that one of the most important aspects of the fantasy experience for customers lies in their belief in the authenticity of the interaction (i.e. that the dancer’s attention is genuine and not guided by lucrative motives). Because of this, a dancer’s professional performance involves the constant production of the appearance of authentic interest and emotional engagement with customers to the same extent as dancing itself (Frank 1998). The need to give a convincingly authentic performance is even more pronounced when dancers are working with regular customers, who are often crucial in ensuring a dancer’s steady income, because these relationships usually require consistent and increasingly intensive emotional performances that in many ways mimic non-commodified intimate relationships.

[...]

This study examines in depth not only the emotional labor dancers put into maintaining relationships with regulars, but also the work that goes into dancers’ accounts of these relationships. Rather than taking at face value explanations in which dancers reduce their feelings about regulars (‘I only think of him as a friend’) or their motives for dancing and the emotional labor that accompanies it (‘I only do this for the money’), it shed light on the nuances of the emotional management involved in and reasons for producing these downplayed responses. This study responded to the following inquiries: (1) To what extent do dancers experience and/or desire being ‘authentic’ with regular customers? (2) Do exotic dancers experience complex emotions as they engage in relationships with regular customers? (3) How do dancers manage their emotions as they navigate and sustain (cultivate) relationships with regular clients? (4) ‘What is the role of dancer’s emotions as they navigate interactions with their regulars?’

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Sticking to Your Moral Guns: Cultivating Intimacy and Constructing Codes of
Conduct in Relationships Between Exotic Dancers and Their Regular Customers

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Sociology

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INTRODUCTION

Strip clubs are unique sites of human interaction where fantasy, sex, and intimacy are all made public and offered as a service to be temporarily purchased. In so-called “heterosexual” clubs catering to a male clientele, the exchange of this particular service for cash is at times quite explicit, while it remains couched within a recognizable routine of flirting and intimacy similar to non-commodified romantic relationships. Past research indicates that one of the most important aspects of the fantasy experience for customers lies in their belief in the authenticity of the interaction (i.e. that the dancer’s attention is genuine and not guided by lucrative motives). Because of this, a dancer’s professional performance involves the constant production of the appearance of authentic interest and emotional engagement with customers to the same extent as dancing itself (Frank 1998). The need to give a convincingly authentic performance is even more pronounced when dancers are working with regular customers, who are often crucial in ensuring a dancer’s steady income, because these relationships usually require consistent and increasingly intensive emotional performances that in many ways mimic non-commodified intimate relationships.

While stripping as a type of sex work deals at surface level in the exchange of erotic performance for cash, underlying this sexualized service is a multitude of emotional exchanges between dancers and customers. Like in many service industry professions (especially those where workers earn tips), workers are obliged to perform emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). Emotional labor is a prominent characteristic of strip club work as it deals not only in the sensitive territory of customer sexuality but also in reproducing normative scripts around dating, including flirting and intimacy; furthermore, workers’ income is earned entirely from tips, increasing the need to perform emotional labor on the job.

As with other jobs in the service industry such as bartending or working as a barista, regular customers are an integral component of an erotic dancer’s job. Unlike bartenders or baristas, however, erotic dancers tend to earn a large portion or even the majority of their income from regular customers. It is thus necessary for dancers to maintain steady and profitable relationships with multiple regulars at all times. These continued interactions with regulars are markedly different from those with both ‘bar regulars’¹ (customers who frequent the club but do not come to see one specific dancer) and passing customers, with whom dancers interact relatively briefly at the club as they attempt to earn tips onstage and sell private dances.

Relationships with regulars are often characterized by frequent contact both within and outside of the workplace, lavish gifts, and expressions of profound emotional attachment (including love) on the part of customers (Egan 2005). Furthermore, dancers and regulars typically spend much of their time together discussing aspects of both the dancer’s and the customer’s life in detail, including topics pertaining to the client’s personal life, such as marital troubles, workplace pressures, and stress-inducing children (Egan 2005; Frank 1998). While this could describe many romantic relationships, previous research has indicated that the commodified nature of the dancer-regular relationship distinguishes it for the dancer (though not always for customers) from an authentic intimate relationship (Frank 1998).

¹ For the purposes of this discussion, “regular”, unless otherwise specified, will refer to dancers’ personal regulars, rather than regular customers of the club in general.

This study examines in depth not only the emotional labor dancers put into maintaining relationships with regulars, but also the work that goes into dancers' accounts of these relationships. Rather than taking at face value explanations in which dancers reduce their feelings about regulars ('I only think of him as a friend') or their motives for dancing and the emotional labor that accompanies it ('I only do this for the money'), it shed light on the nuances of the emotional management involved in and reasons for producing these downplayed responses. This study responded to the following inquiries: (1) To what extent do dancers experience and/or desire being 'authentic' with regular customers? (2) Do exotic dancers experience complex emotions as they engage in relationships with regular customers? (3) How do dancers manage their emotions as they navigate and sustain (cultivate) relationships with regular clients? (4) 'What is the role of dancer's emotions as they navigate interactions with their regulars?'

This research works toward gaining a more complex, detailed, and accurate understanding of dancer-regular relationships. Drawing from broader discussions in sociology about emotional labor and emotion management, identity management, and the pure relationship, particularly within the context of sex work, this study demonstrates the complexity of dancer-regular relationships, which before have been treated as merely commodified by scholars. By taking an inductive approach and allowing for a novel understanding of the relationships between dancers and regulars, this study allows room for a new representation of the commodified intimate relationships that oftentimes characterize sex work and the perspectives of women sex workers. In an attempt to gain new insights into the lives of sex workers, increase awareness of the tolls and pleasures of sex work, and eventually reduce the stigmatization of stripping and non-normative interpersonal relationships in general, it sheds light on the complex ways that regulars influence sex workers' workplace experiences. Specifically, I highlight some potential ways that the presence of regulars and the ad-hoc codes of conduct that dancers construct to facilitate interactions with them can serve to increase their enjoyment of their work. In what follows, I will explore how regulars allow dancers to experience greater authenticity with regard to their emotional performances, which they frame as a positive emotional respite from the day-to-day tolls of their work; how dancers manage their emotions with regard to regulars; and how they construct unique boundaries around interactions with specific regulars by drawing from their emotional experiences with those people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Erotic dance clubs, performers, and their customers have been topics of serious academic interest since the 1960s, appearing as the subjects of more than a hundred studies in social research within the last 20 years (Lewis 2000; Frank 2007). Despite an exceptional focus on gendered power dynamics in the sex work literature (Deshotels and Forsyth 2006; Frank 2007; Lewis 2006; Price 2008; Wood 2000), a growing number of sociologists have begun to analyze stripping as a type of emotionally intensive labor, or work that requires selling feeling. According to Hochschild, *emotional labor* becomes a part of work when "display is what is sold" or is "required by the job"; workers often then have to do *emotion work* to manage their own emotions on the job as they try to display specific emotional states to customers or even to inspire their customers to change their emotional states (1983:90).

Emotional labor is characteristic of many service industry positions and, since its introduction into sociological theory, has been used to analyze the subjective experiences

of workers in an array of fields, from flight attendants to *tuina* masseuses in China to prison officers (Chan 2012; Crawley 2004; Hochschild 1983). Research has indicated that when an outside influence such as a job requirement demands the display of certain feelings, a worker will have a different relationship to her feelings. In order to reduce “emotive dissonance,” or the estrangement of *actual* from *feigned* emotions, we often change either what we feel or what we feign to feel in order to bring the two closer together. However, “when display is required by the job, it is usually feeling that has to change” (Hochschild 1983:90).

Hochschild provides a framework for understanding how we perform emotion management in all situations (commodified or otherwise) to orient our emotions in relation to *feeling rules*, which are “the side of ideology that deals with emotion and feeling” (Hochschild 1979:551). We can identify feeling rules as the sense that we should ideally feel a certain way in a given situation, which can be influenced by normative scripts and even structural constraints (e.g. job requirements). Furthermore, “framing rules,” or how we ideologically understand situations, shape how we understand and respond to the feeling rules of the situation (Hochschild 1979:566). Although erotic dancers understand the expectations for their display of feeling with their regulars, it is unclear what they should *actually* feel about their regulars, given the unofficial and non-normative nature of dancer-regular relationships. Researchers have overlooked how dancers ‘let themselves feel’ and/or ‘try to feel’ in relationships with regulars.

Strip club researchers have consistently found that the pronounced emotional labor erotic dancers perform as they build and maintain a clientele of regular customers is an extremely tiring emotional toll of stripping (Frank 1998; Egan 2005). Egan proposed that dancer-regular relationships are built upon a continuous give and take of “emotional consumption” on the part of regulars and emotional labor on the part of dancers as they discuss the details and difficulties of customers’ personal, everyday lives (2005). Similarly, Frank (1998) found that dancers’ relationships with regular customers were characterized by performances of deep, albeit commodified, emotional intimacy thus often requiring internal emotion work and emotional labor on the part of dancers.

Customers’ sustained belief in the authenticity of the emotions displayed by workers is of the utmost importance in spaces of consumption that require emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). In the context of a strip club, the issue of authenticity is perhaps heightened because of the cultural taboo restricting commodified intimacy or sex. Given that the interaction between dancer and customer *is* explicitly sexual and commodified, the dancer’s emotional performance must seem authentic, as this is a part of the escape into fantasy for which the customer pays (Wood 2000). As Egan writes, “regulars fetishize the performance of emotional labor of dancers. As such, it is imperative that dancers, in order to continue earning the money regulars provide, perform emotional labor as authentically as possible” (2005: 88). Furthermore, the emotional labor a dancer performs with regular customers takes place over a series of prolonged interactions, involving more intense customer scrutiny and their questioning or even “testing” the authenticity of the relationship—specifically by seeking proof that the relationship would continue even if the customer ceased to pay for her time and attention (Egan 2003; Egan 2005:102). Negotiating this territory often involves delicately reminding customers of the relationship’s commodified nature while sustaining the fantasy of authentic intimacy, a tiring exercise for most workers (Egan 2005).

Although her presentation of self and her display of emotional intimacy must appear authentic, it is largely understood in the literature that the erotic dancer thinks of it primarily as an insincere performance (Egan 2005; Frank 1998; Wood 2000; Barton 2007). This is in part because she is selling an image of herself that can shift depending upon the customer's own erotic fantasy; therefore, she may not feel she is being completely herself in all exchanges. Furthermore, in contemporary American society we have deeply rooted conceptions of love and intimacy, namely that these relationships, once commodified, cannot be 'true' (Frank 1998). Hochschild describes this pressure that the emotional laborer faces as "the task of managing an estrangement between self and feeling and between self and display" (1983:131). One of the questions a worker must face is: "How can I feel really identified with my work role and with the company without being fused with them?" (Hochschild 1983:132). Sex workers are in a unique position of performing intense emotional labor as a part of a highly stigmatized profession, which has led researchers to understand it as virtually impossible for most to do the deep acting necessary for complete integration of their 'real selves' and their 'work role' (Bradley 2007). This study demonstrates that in order to perform deep emotional acting and resist feeling fused with either a stigmatized role defined by mainstream society or one vaguely set out for them by club owners, dancers exercise autonomy in reframing and redefining their workplace roles on their own terms in the context of regular relationships.

Previous research on identity and the presentation of self in the workplace has indicated that service workers performing emotional labor often draw upon multiple 'roles' in the client interaction. Sometimes the roles they enact come from both their 'front stage' and 'backstage' identities, as with highly trained *tuina* masseuses who perform the 'expert' role as a part of both their front stage (with a client) and back stage (with coworkers and researcher) presentations of self as strategies to maximize their earnings (Chan 2012; Goffman 1961). Due to the stigmatization of sex work, it is often problematic for workers to reach such a fluid and dynamic integration of back stage roles into their front stage, workplace identity and presentation of self and they instead feel the need to perform stringent identity management to differentiate between their 'real' and 'stripper/prostitute' selves this has been framed largely as a result of the stigmatization of sex work (Sanders 2005). Barton's study of strip club dancers framed boundary setting with customers as a way to manage this particular "toll of stripping" (2007).

Much of the literature has framed sex workers' internal emotion work as involving the separation of feigned and authentic emotions (whilst convincing their customers that what they appear to feel is their genuine feeling). This leads to strategies of "depersonalizing" situations and relationships at work, such as reframing the meaning of sexual or emotional interaction (Hochschild 1983:132; Sanders 2005). A common strategy is to develop distinct workplace and 'real' identities. The workplace identity often becomes a sort of character with an invented name, appearance, and even life story tailored to capitalizing on the worker's sexuality (Sanders 2005; Barton 2007). For some sex workers, such as those found in Barton's (2007) and Sander's (2005) studies, the structure of their work allows them to protect their 'real' identity by developing boundaries, such as restricting customers' access to truths about themselves, developing "body exclusion zones" (parts of the body or sexual acts to which customers never have access), and avoiding emotional attachment to long-term customers (Barton 2007; Frank

1998; Sanders 2005).

However, for erotic dancers that engage in relationships with regular customers that desire an authentic interaction with a 'real' person and not a manufactured personality, maintaining a definite boundary between two roles becomes impossible. Thus the process of protecting their real identity often involves weaving a medley of near-truths in order to enhance their image to suit the customer's interests while maintaining a convincingly genuine and cohesive presentation of self (Frank 1998). Furthermore, the very boundary setting sex workers employ to maintain a mental distinction between their 'feigned' and 'real' emotions and between their 'workplace' and 'real' identities can end up backfiring and blurring into their personal lives (Deshotel and Forsyth 2006). Sex work researchers have not considered the importance of interactions with regulars in operating as a middle ground for dancers where a certain amount of blurring between their real and workplace identity can serve as an alternative strategy to ease the toll of maintaining polarized 'real' and 'feigned' identities and emotional performances.

Much of the research on interactions and relationships between sex workers and their customers has not considered regulars as distinct from random customers (Barton 2007; Lewis 1998; Sanders 2004), or, when regulars have been the focus, researchers have primarily explored the perspectives of customers (Frank 2003; Egan 2005). Although previous studies have addressed the ways exotic dancers and other sex workers navigate the challenges of their work with regard to emotion and identity management, none has explored these issues in reference to the relationships dancers maintain with regular customers (Egan 2005; Deshotel and Forsyth 2006; Sanders 2005; Bradley 2007). Those studies that have directly addressed the dancer-regular relationship (namely Egan 2005; Frank 2003) focused primarily on the perspectives of regulars in these relationships. Furthermore, analyses of the way dancers talk about and interact with customers took at face value indications that dancers maintained a stoic, depersonalized attitude about their regulars, without exploring how or why dancers feel differently about different customers, set boundaries in terms of mixing personal life with work, and navigate relationships with regulars when there are no set rules to guide them (Frank 1998).

Notably, Frank (1998) argues that the ideal of the "pure relationship" as theorized by Giddens (1992), in which he argues that contemporary intimate relationships are characterized by mutual vulnerability and "sexual and emotional equality," does not map clearly onto these intimate yet commodified relationships (Frank 1998:175). Specifically, Frank urges us not to consider dancers' relationships with regulars in terms of dichotomous ideas about counterfeit intimacy or the pure relationship, as dancers do not experience such a clear-cut distinction. While the women in Frank's (1998) study faced the difficulty of negotiating intimacy with regular customers within the confines of a 'gentleman's club', customers' payment for private 'dates' with dancers, which took place during their scheduled hours at the club, were dictated by the club policies. Structurally, this club differed from many in the United States in which dancers are forced to be more pro-active in negotiating both intimacy and payment with their regulars. However, Frank provides a useful framework for understanding the particular challenges this negotiation of both intimacy and payment for intimacy presents for dancers operating within a larger society that understands intimacy as incompatible with

commodification (1998). However, researchers have not seriously considered the potential benefits of working with regulars for dancers, nor the unique challenges of extending this work beyond interactions inside the club.

The discrepancy between erotic dancers' experiences in different studies demonstrates the importance of considering the structure and culture of strip clubs when performing qualitative research about strip club workers. Researchers have done commendable work analyzing how the structural organization and larger geographical context of strip clubs influence dancers' experiences (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009; Lewis 1998, 2006; Price 2008). Notably, Bradley-Engen and Ulmer developed a typology of erotic dance clubs in the United States in a large-scale study and explored the role the type of club plays in shaping dancers' experiences (2009). While past studies have indicated that the club environment and official policies play an important role in forming a dancer's workplace experience in terms of both her actions and interpretation of her work, informal socialization and structural constraints pertain mainly to work dancers do inside the club (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009; Lewis 1998).

However, as has been discussed, in order for exotic dancers to maintain the financial security of a regular clientele, they are often compelled to interact with customers outside their hours working at the club. Because of the unofficial nature of this important element of a dancer's job, it is scantily regulated, and dancers receive little or no instruction as to how best to navigate regular relationships. In the absence of policies or cultural scripts from which to draw, researchers have not explored how dancers come to develop codes of conduct or of feelings, a gap I hope partially to fill with this study.

The literature on sex work and exotic dance has done an exemplary job of analyzing how sex workers perform considerable emotional labor on the job as a way to maximize earnings as well as the emotion management strategies for navigating the tolls of stripping such as rejection and stigmatization. However, emotion work pertaining to interactions with regulars is exclusively framed as a "toll" of sex work, and researchers have not explored the possibility of variety in dancers' feelings toward or attachment to regulars, both in terms of differences between dancers and distinctions they make between customers (Barton 2006; Egan 2005). Given that the possibility of dancers' experiencing complicated feelings about their regular customers has been overlooked in the past, the question of what rules govern and shape these feelings has also been neglected.

What is needed in sex work research is a deeper understanding of why exotic dancers are compelled to draw boundaries around interaction with their regular customers in such a way and the impacts on their real lives (in terms of workplace experiences, earning potential, and personal lives outside of work), while noting what insights into ideals surrounding commodified and intimate relationships these somewhat subversive relationships offer us. The intersection of intensely emotional interactions and a cultural context that rejects the purity of commodified intimacy means that erotic dancers are left with little in the way of cultural scripts and ideology that match their lived experiences with regular customers. This study highlights how, in ambiguously defined situations where there is no code for behavior or emotions, people forge ahead to create their own, asking: how do they let themselves feel (and let others feel about them)? What existing ideologies form the backdrop of the feeling rules by which dancers make sense of their emotions about regulars?

METHODOLOGY

In order to address these questions, I conducted qualitative research focusing on the perspectives and experiences of exotic dancers in regard to their relationships with regular customers. My conclusions are based on a sample of nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the fall of 2012 and winter of 2013 with women who have experience working as performers in erotic dance clubs. The abundance of qualitative research on the experiences of sex workers highlighted above indicates that this methodology has specific qualities that lend strength to my study and others like it.

Procedures

I chose to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews because they are well-suited to gaining meaningful insight into the perspectives of participants while introducing as little researcher bias as possible. They would also lend depth and complexity to my data, allowing me to capture complex understandings of how dancers feel about regular customers (Esterberg 2002; Taylor and Bogdan 1998). I conducted interviews over the phone for the convenience of both my participants and myself, but also to ensure consistency throughout the process of data collection. I used an interview schedule, a digital audio recorder, a cable to connect the recorder to the phone, and both the landline of Pacific's sociology/anthropology research lab and my personal cell phone to conduct phone interviews.

I obtained informed consent before conducting each interview, which ensured that my participants thus understood the nature and objectives of my project and that their identities would be protected. My participants were kept completely anonymous; from the point of transcription they were de-identified and the audio recordings were erased along with any record of our correspondence.

Sampling

I used convenience sampling, a method based on "reliance on available subjects," along with snowball sampling techniques in order to recruit participants that fit the relatively specific eligibility requirements of my study (Babbie 2010:192). Initial participants were my personal contacts and their referrals. I asked each interviewee for referrals to potential participants who fit the eligibility requirements of being female, over the age of 18, and having experience working as an exotic dancer for at least three consecutive months in the same establishment (the latter eligibility requirement helped ensure that participants had had sufficient opportunity to develop a regular clientele). I communicated with my participants mostly through email and private Facebook messages using a stock recruitment message. This method introduces bias into my sample in that I cannot generalize it to the entire population of female American exotic dancers.

My sample was focused in Portland (n=7), with a small set of comparison cases (n=2) of women living in Los Angeles and Ormond Beach, Florida, both of whom have been mobile in their careers, and therefore drew from experiences working in multiple cities in their interviews. All of my participants identified as white. Five had college degrees (one had also obtained a graduate degree) and four had completed some college. Their ages ranged from 21 to 35 years (most were in their mid 20s) and their amount of experience dancing in strip clubs ranged from five months to six years. All but one were currently employed as dancers in strip clubs.

Instrument

The interview schedule was designed to build rapport and let my participants feel at ease. I began by asking open-ended, though topic-specific, questions before probing for details or clarification, making the interview seem more like a conversation than an interrogation. This also allowed my participants to guide the conversation and reduced my influence on their responses and articulations of their experiences with and perspectives on regular customers. I made sure that we discussed all the topics on my interview schedule, but in most cases the participant guided much of the conversation and covered the topics I had listed on the schedule without my prompting. Interviews lasted about an hour on average.

The interview schedule was organized into several categories, each one beginning with an open-ended question (such as ‘How do you maintain relationships with regulars?’) followed by a few probing questions I wanted every participant to answer (such as ‘Do you communicate or socialize with customers outside of the club?’). I began each interview by asking the participant, ‘What is your favorite part of your work?’ and sometimes following up by asking if and in what ways exotic dancing has unique demands that set it apart from other kinds of work. All questions were worded to present myself as a non-judgmental, informed outsider who approaches stripping from a positive standpoint, thus avoiding perpetuating the common stigmatization of sex work. Furthermore, the questions were placed so as to allow participants to discuss first what they thought was important to know about their work. Although they knew I was specifically interested in their relationships with regulars, this allowed them to demonstrate the importance and value of those relationships in their day-to-day working lives without being prompted by me. Most questions were designed to explore dancers’ relationships with regular customers, and a final question asked what made someone a successful dancer, in the eyes of the interviewee.

The first questions asked how they would define and characterize a ‘regular’, which allowed me to orient my usage of that term to the way the participant operationalized it and allowed the interviewee to speak freely about her experiences. Other groups of questions were designed to gain an understanding of the importance of regulars for my participants’ work (both in terms of livelihood and enjoyment); how dancers understand both their emotions toward regular customers as well as customers’ feelings about them; how they strategically navigate and maintain these relationships, including how they choose which customers to pursue a ‘regular’ relationship with and on what grounds they had ended such a relationship; how they feel when interacting with regular versus random customers; and the structure and environment of the club(s) where they worked, including policies about interactions with customers, the kinds of patrons their club attracted, and dynamics between fellow dancers.

I eventually hoped to clarify why dancers felt the way they did about customers (and acted accordingly). In order to gain empirical evidence that spoke to this question, I addressed it on the level of structure and tradition within strip clubs by asking questions about how participants learned to navigate regulars and whether they rejected any bureaucratically or traditionally established rules or norms. In order to achieve my primary research objective of developing a complex picture of how dancers expressed their feelings about regulars and how they chose to interact with them, I strove in each of these sub-groupings of questions pertaining to regulars to determine if participants distinguished between individual customers in their responses or if there were exceptions

to any generalized responses they gave. For example, I wanted to find out if participants chose to interact with certain customers outside of their workplaces and why they chose some customers over others.

Data Analysis

Employing a primarily inductive approach to data analysis, I developed a conceptual map as themes emerged in my interviews with participants and proceeded to create a coding scheme based on those emergent themes. I analyzed my data by performing axial coding, wherein I applied my coding scheme to the transcribed interviews and coded for topics and themes (rather than individual words or phrases). My codes were organized into categories that partially mirrored the arrangement of my interview schedule. I coded for: whether a participant expressed feeling generally negatively or positively about maintaining relationships with regulars, the social contexts and spaces in which they chose to interact with regulars, how they came to frame their emotions about regulars (how they characterized a 'successful' dancer and what influences they saw as affecting their behavior with and understanding of regulars), the kinds of emotions they mentioned in reference to regulars (jealousy, annoyance, enjoyment, flattery, stress, indifference, etc.), and how they strategically managed their own emotions and those of their regulars.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Most exotic dancers in the United States find it helpful and often necessary to maintain relationships with multiple regular customers in order to earn a reliable income in a relatively unstable industry. These relationships fall outside of normative scripts used for dating or romantic relationships or for interactions between service workers and customers in a non-sexualized environment. The regular-dancer relationship incorporates both simultaneously, with limited pre-existing rules or codes for how to behave or feel. This is especially true for the dancers, who, unlike their clients, typically do not get lost in the fantasy of the relationship, and thus take on the responsibility of facilitating it. Although such non-normative relationships are somewhat ambiguous in terms of both definition and conduct, erotic dancers who engage in them regularly reduce their sense of ambiguity by developing personalized codes centered on three primary aspects of their work as it pertains to regulars: finding the right regular, dealing with the wrong regulars, and setting boundaries around interactions. In what follows, I explore how exotic dancers in these situations create ad hoc codes of conduct pertaining to their emotional experiences with their regulars as a part of their individualized business models.

The Making of a Good Regular: The Importance of Authenticity

While Frank (1998) overlooks the genuine emotions dancers may have for their regulars, my participants (unprompted by me) over and over again emphasized how important it is to have genuine care for their regulars in order for them to enjoy their work. Of course, this 'genuine care' is an act of emotion work that could be deconstructed further. Suffice to say that although we operate from the understanding that there are ultimately no 'real' or 'fake' emotions, speaking to the perspectives of dancers, these findings debunk the assumption that sex workers relegate their workplace emotional performances to the 'feigned' category and demonstrate that they actually believe in the sincerity of their emotional display with regulars (which is distinct from random customers).

When cultivating regular relationships, my participants placed a high value on genuinely enjoying the person's company. For Heather Ayers², who has been dancing for six years in Portland, it is absolutely necessary that she has fun interacting with her regulars: "I don't want to sit with somebody night after night that I can't converse with about day-to-day activities. That's not fun for me, and it's not fair [to me]...I'd just rather have someone who I can have fun with." Gabby Bartlett, a dancer of three years currently living in Florida but who danced for more than two years at an upscale club in Seattle, described why it was important emotionally for her to like her regulars:

I'd say that it helps so much when you have a really good friendship, or at least decently like to hang out with the person. It makes things so much easier, it doesn't make it so that you want to go get high before you see them... It makes, like, a big difference, but it only makes—compared to the money, it only makes a little bit of a difference, because you're probably still gonna go...but just what it does to your own personal self, makes a huge difference.

Although she ultimately valued the money she could make from a regular over her genuine feelings about him, Gabby appreciated the relative emotional respite that came from having a "good friendship" with regulars because it reduced the amount of emotion work she had to do to prepare for interactions with them (such as getting high).

Other dancers stressed the sincerity of their emotional investment in their regulars. Holly Taylor described the emotions she experiences when interacting with regulars as distinct from when she interacts with new customers:

When I see them, it's just genuine joy. When I see them, it's just a huge happy smile on my face, kisses on their cheeks, little hugs, fingers in their hair. I genuinely miss them, I do genuinely care and adore my regulars. There has been one where I did actually fall in love with a regular. And so I do have genuine emotions for these people. I care about them, they care about me. I worry about them, I want to know what's going on in their lives.

Rather than associating their emotional performances with regulars with their 'stripper' rather than 'real' selves, these dancers stressed the sincerity of their emotional performances with regulars.

Furthermore, dancers preferred to reach this state of genuine care by experiencing a 'real connection' with regulars, rather than feeling like they had to work on their emotions in order to care for their regulars (a theme to be revisited later). Heather Ayers firmly believed that this was the secret to her success in maintaining long-term, lucrative regular relationships based on "intellectual similarities": "I genuinely care about my regulars...I've chosen these people as my regulars because there's some connection...and that's what ultimately makes them come back." While not all dancers were as selective as Heather in choosing their regulars, they all agreed that having a real connection was desirable if not necessary for a relationship to last. Bethany Summers, who has been dancing for four years in Portland, explained that the most common reason a relationship with a regular ends is a lack of common interests. "If we just don't have anything in common. It kind of just happens, you know...It's just like, both parties just kind of realize that there's not that much to talk about anymore...things just fizzle out I guess is the right word." According to Bethany, if a real connection did not exist from the start, it

² All names are pseudonyms.

could not be constructed artificially through an insincere presentation of self or emotional performance on her part in order to maintain the relationship.

While previous studies have shown that regulars often need reassurance that dancers are being authentic in their presentations of self and especially emotional performances, I found that an authentic performance on the part of regulars was perhaps equally important for dancers (Wood 2000). Holly Taylor said she “feeds off” the “genuine energy” customers show her during private dances, creating “a very safe, loving, kind of a rosy aura between us of trust and love and sensuality.” Importantly, this “aura” is created by both parties and is dependent upon the customer opening up and being authentic. Bethany Summers showed that she does not take customers’ performances for granted when she described a regular she had only known for a few months: “The newest one is just probably one of the nicest people I’ve ever known in my life. And so I don’t really feel that uncomfortable with him. I don’t think he could be faking how nice he is, because he’s just so ridiculously nice.” Apparently for Bethany, a customer acting nice over multiple interactions was potentially suspect, but because he hadn’t yet slipped in his performance, she trusted his sincerity.

Authenticity on the part of regulars was especially important in terms of accepting the dancer for who she really was. Kelsey Young, a dancer of two years from Portland, described those few customers as “true regulars.” Heather Ayers said that it was simply easier and less tiring in the long run to “be authentic” and “just find somebody who accepts you...it’s so much less work.” Heidi Robinson, an ex-dancer with three years of experience working in Portland, described the “comfort” she felt in being sincere with regulars:

Just with a random customer that comes in, there’s a lot of like how much bullshit do you put on, as opposed to like with a regular client I could get more into what my day was really like for me, and I feel like sharing those interpersonal, or those details about my personal life really helped to deepen the relationship with the regular, they felt privileged that they had a view into that portion of my life. There was a comfort for *me* because I got to be more sincere, more myself around them. Heidi alluded to the financial motivation for sharing details about herself as she cultivated regular relationships. At the same time, she experienced a significant emotional respite from being sincere with certain regulars. Thus her positive emotional experiences at work aligned well with the emotional consumption of her regulars. Notably, the sincerity of a regular’s interest in her manifested itself in an interest in her life outside of the strip club.

Even the exchange of payment for time and services was ideally characterized by total sincerity. Dancers found that when their regulars appeared to be genuine in their desire to compensate them financially, it had a profound impact on reducing their stress levels. Gabby Bartlett described the emotional benefit of finding a generous regular:

He *wants* to give me his money...I know it sounds crazy, but I feel like he genuinely cares...I think that makes a huge difference in the way that they treat you and the way that you feel about them, cause if you’re feeling like they care and they want you to be happy and they want to give you the money, you’re not gonna feel guilty about taking it...You enjoy yourself a little bit more, because you know that they are more at ease about giving you the money, so it’s not as much of an issue.

Thus the act of payment, which, given the way our society understands commodification and true intimacy as mutually exclusive, has the potential to be the largest threat to the authenticity of the interactions between dancers and regulars. However, if the regular appears to be genuine in his generosity, this can actually strengthen the authenticity of the relationship from the dancer's perspective. In addition, it also tends to reduce the stress associated with hustling dances (approaching new customers to try to sell them a private dance then and there) and of negotiating payment with regulars. I revisit these themes shortly when discussing what happens when regulars do not fit the ideal model.

Regulars Gone Wrong

Scholars understand emotional labor to have negative psycho-social consequences, a claim I do not attempt to contradict here. Previous studies have demonstrated that dancers perform considerable emotional labor on the job, especially when working with regular customers. My participants understood emotional labor as an intrinsic part of their job, describing it as their duty to make their customers—especially their regulars—feel special. At times, this involved a certain amount of surface acting (such as feigning sexual attraction), even with the best possible regular with whom the dancer felt an authentic connection. I found, not surprisingly, that when regulars are less than perfect, my participants employed emotion management techniques to work up the emotional display required. In cases where they lacked an authentically enjoyable relationship, this emotional labor became much more tiring. In order to reduce or at least make sense of their emotive dissonance, or a disconnect from their emotional performances that would result in a cynical performance, dancers worked on their own emotions to reframe how they felt about their regulars.

It is rare that a customer fits all of a dancer's ideals for a perfect regular. While my participants varied somewhat in terms of the specific traits they valued in a regular as well as how many negative traits they were willing to tolerate, everyone I interviewed had tried at some point to maintain relationships with difficult regulars. When relationships with regulars did not fit the desired real connection model, dancers instead highlighted the positive aspects they saw in these regulars. Although she first stated, "If I'm gonna socialize with the customers, it's going to be more based on like an authentic interest," Brooke Anderson, who had been dancing for only five months at the time of our interview, conceded that she does not, in fact, experience "authentic interest" with her three regulars. She justified the fact that she maintains relationships with them by saying, "I mean, I guess like, they're all really nice. The other two are really nice people and have been really respectful and, you know, seem like genuine human beings." Although she wouldn't describe her relationship with these regulars as 'real' enough to be called a friendship, she emphasized positive aspects of her customers' personalities, particularly that they seemed to be "genuine" with her.

Similarly, Bethany Summers described the one regular who she would drop if she could afford to lose his business: "He's kind of clingy, you know. I mean I like him, he's a really interesting person, he's super smart and super...yeah, but then one thing that I wish that he like...he *tells* me that he understands my job...and that I have to dance for other people, but like sometimes he doesn't always show it." Bethany framed her complaint about this regular in terms of his lack of authenticity with her; although he claimed to respect her definition of the relationship as a job, his actions demonstrated otherwise. However, immediately after she started to complain about this regular,

Bethany highlighted his positive attributes, reminding both herself and me that she did indeed like him. Here Bethany seemed to be articulating the emotional work of aligning her feelings with what she thought she *should* feel about her regulars (even if it was difficult at times).

Holly Taylor demonstrated a different emotion work technique by sympathizing with her “unworthy” regulars. She said, “Those are the people that do not usually get female love and attention on a daily basis. They don’t get hit on at the bar, they don’t get winked at, they don’t get the [phone] numbers that they ask for.” By being mindful of and empathizing with the rejection these individuals presumably faced elsewhere, she was able to elicit sympathy for them and more readily give them the same sincere emotional performance she would give a customer for whom she genuinely cared from the start.

In order to overcome the lack of deep acting or of a sincere emotional performance in interactions with customers with whom they didn’t feel an initial authentic connection, dancers reframed not only the personalities of customers but also their roles as dancers to incorporate insincere emotional performances. They recognized that in order to earn more money, they had to engage on occasion with less-than-perfect customers. “Because in the end, it’s about the money”, Holly Taylor explained, “so of course I’ve made exceptions for disgusting people because...It’s definitely a part of my job to make unsavory men feel like king of the world.” Sam Rogers justified the fact that she masks her negative emotions at work, saying, “I am an entertainer, that’s what my job is...I want to keep people amused and laughing and tell them jokes, but I’m not going to talk about my shitty day.” Others referred to their work as “therapy”, “sensual healing”, or of providing a “girlfriend experience,” suggesting that working with non-ideal regulars was not merely a matter of sucking up and dealing with it, but that it was their professional duty to be as democratic as possible in the emotional and sexual services they provided.

Rather than accepting that with certain regulars, an insincere performance would be necessary or focusing, for example, on the money they earned from these customers even by mere surface acting, my participants tried whenever possible to forge a genuine emotional attachment in order to fit their model of an authentic dancer-regular relationship. In this way, they seem to have become somewhat fused with their workplace role, as Hochschild (1983) predicts. However, I found that they defined their roles as custodians of their customers’ emotions in their own terms rather than in the terms set out by the owners of the clubs where they worked or in terms of a stigmatized stripper role. In creating an ad hoc code of behaviors and emotions based on a fusion of their ‘real’ and ‘stripper’ identities with regulars, they called upon images of girlfriends, therapists, and entertainers along with whatever values they associated with these roles so as to be able to continue to feel a sense of authenticity and be true to themselves even as they enacted surface-level emotional performances with certain non-ideal regulars.

“A Difficult Dance”: Cultivating Regulars and Setting Boundaries

Terminating a relationship with a regular is often the last choice, even when he fails in one or many of the desired client trait categories, because of the loss of income that termination would entail. For Heidi Robinson, this was a stressful aspect of the job that contributed to her decision to stop after more than three years of dancing: “I had ran into a few stressful situations with regular clients and with their demands for whatever I was providing for them became too much for me, I kind of would have to pull back and

that made me nervous about my regular income...it's a difficult dance!" In these cases, Heidi redrew boundaries with customers at the risk of losing their business. The task of constructing boundaries between customers in a way that will ensure their continued business is a highly individualized and dynamic process. Experienced dancers typically do not offer advice to new dancers and there are no real guidelines related to how to build and maintain a regular clientele. Thus dancers they learn as they go, creating ad hoc codes for these interactions and relationships that in large part determine the fate of their income and shape their emotional experiences at work.

Dancers construct certain boundaries both to protect themselves (from bodily harm and also from intrusion into their personal lives and identities) and to maximize earnings. They usually have a uniform set of boundaries for every new customer they meet in terms of sharing personal information or making contact outside of the club, whether virtual or face-to-face. However, as customers prove themselves as fitting their ideal regular model through consistent interactions and transition to a dancer-regular relationship, these boundaries shift. One of the ways dancers manage their sense of emotional and physical security with non-ideal customers is by maintaining stricter boundaries between their 'real' lives and/or personalities and the strip club interactions. In these cases, the club and their 'stripper identities', in these cases, serve as a barrier from allowing the customer complete access to the dancer's identity and life. Although they adjusted their boundaries strategically to entice customers or maintain regular relationships, my participants described several instances where allowing customers greater access to their personal lives was not financially driven.

"Make sure they think that they know you"

Several participants avoided sharing information that would make them easily identifiable in 'real life' out of concern both for personal safety but also potential embarrassment (such as discovering that a customer was a friend of their father's). They employed various strategies to maintain the authenticity both they and their customers desired without violating this part of their code of conduct.

Gabby Bartlett recommended that a dancer should "do everything that [she] can to make sure that they [the customers] *think* that they know [her]" (emphasis mine). Setting boundaries around the sharing of personal information while remaining as authentic as possible involved intensive emotional labor on the part of dancers. A common strategy was to tell partial truths. Lydia Green said:

I won't tell them exactly what I'm going to school for. I'll tell them a similar field, but I won't tell them exactly, because it narrows it down too much, it's too easy to track. So stuff like that, but generally speaking, I really don't like being inauthentic, so I try to not, you know, without being unsafe, I try to not be dishonest.

Similarly, in order to avoid being identified down the road by someone in her 'real' life, Holly Taylor was careful never to share specific details about the family she nannied for to regulars:

I used to talk about my nannying a lot, because it's a turn on to them, you know, it's my whole, Superman Clark Kent identity that they got off on. But of course I never showed pictures, I never told their names, I relucted [sic] to even tell the ages. I tried to keep that as separate as possible while still including it in my story line.

Because nannying was a significant feature of her 'real' life and identity that also served as a strategic presentation of her backstage role, Holly Taylor felt obliged to share it with her regulars in order to keep the interaction authentic and her "story line" complete, even though it meant she had to take pains to conceal certain details.

Brooke Anderson shared real personal information with customers based on her sense that she could trust them, which was rooted both in "the consistency of the relationship" as well as the customer demonstrating an openness or vulnerability towards her. "I find that when you're honest with a person about something, they're more honest with you, and it kind of rolls in that kind of way." She went on to describe the first time she met one of her regulars when he bought a private dance from her at the strip club:

He said, 'I really am really extremely uncomfortable having other men watch me in a state like that...I was abused as a kid by my uncle, and I just have a lot of problems with me in intimate spaces and I just don't want them watching that.' And I was like, whoa, he just kind of laid it all out there...I think in his willingness to be like who he is and what he needed, is like really impressive to me, especially in that kind of environment, where I feel like it takes a lot for a guy to be that kind of vulnerable in a strip club. So I don't know, I think that's what kind of made me realize that he's someone I could talk to about a lot of different things.

Because this customer demonstrated a willingness to be vulnerable first, she followed his lead and formed what she described as the most authentic and most enjoyable out of her three regular relationships because there was mutual sharing of personal information and vulnerability, both characteristics of the so-called 'pure relationship,' or the contemporary ideal form of intimate relationships as theorized by Giddens (1992). This customer distinguished himself in Brooke's eyes by offering a new spin on the usual heteronormative power imbalance in terms of vulnerability between customers and dancers.

Other dancers had hard and fast rules about specific details they avoided talking honestly about with regulars. Lydia Green, for example, never shared her real name. For others, the motivation was not so much related to personal safety as their own sense of the appropriate parameters of the relationship. Holly Taylor never discussed her childhood; Heidi Robinson drew the line at her family: "I would keep like personal details, especially about my family private. I think that would make it like too real, to bring like family kind of stuff into that." For Heidi and other dancers, there were ultimate limitations to how authentic they wanted the relationship to be. Although they required a certain amount of authenticity with their regulars in terms of genuinely caring about them and being themselves, dancers controlled regulars' access to their authentic selves (and thus the authenticity of the relationships itself) by withholding certain details.

Perhaps the most common boundary in terms of disclosure about their real lives and regulars was the existence of romantic partners. Most participants cited it as one of the very few aspects of their real life they did not share with regulars. Heidi Robinson said:

I think that if there was something I withheld [from my regular clients], it was generally problems in my relationship. I would deliberately try to avoid telling them about whatever romantic relationship I had going on in my personal life at

the time. We'd definitely avoid talking about boyfriends or new partners, things like that, those were things that you didn't want to tell them. Telling a regular that she was not single had serious emotional and thus financial consequences, so dancers were deliberate and cautious about when and with whom to share their relationship status. Heather Ayers, who was unique in that she was almost always honest with her regulars about the fact that she had a boyfriend, made exceptions for "the younger guys that come in...tend to be more romantic...Cause I can tell they're looking for something magical to happen." She avoided telling these customers that she was romantically unavailable in order to sustain their sense of fantasy.

Thus dancers reconciled the discrepancy between maintaining an 'authentic' relationship with their regulars and withholding some important parts of their everyday lives (such as identifiable information or being romantically unavailable) in terms of maintaining their personal safety and upholding the fantasy of the relationship for their customers, which they saw as their role as erotic performers and in particular as caretakers of their regulars' emotions.

"Bleeds into your daytime life": Maintaining a clientele over the phone

One of the primary advantages of communicating electronically with customers (via phone or the internet) outside of the hours working at the club is logistical: it allows dancers to invite certain customers to come into the club to see her during a shift, thus helping ensure she will get their business that night and allowing her to work an irregular schedule because she can alert choice customers when she does work. A potential disadvantage of this type of communication is that it also allows customers to contact the dancer whenever he chooses; for three of my participants, this intrusion into their personal lives was not worth the potential benefits, so they either restricted customer communication to inside the club or via email or an XoticSpot profile (an exotic dancer social media site).

The other major advantage of communicating via phone (namely texting) is that it allows dancers to escalate and regulate the level of emotional intimacy with customers outside of the club while still maintaining physical distance. The existing research on emotional exchanges between exotic dancers and regular customers has focused on face-to-face interactions within strip clubs. However, I found that engaging in varying degrees of emotional texting was typically the first barrier between work and real life that dancers breached as they cultivated a regular relationship. Gabby Bartlett explained:

It takes a lot of work to build clientele, and it takes a lot of work for them to want to give you money, and it's not, like, you just go to a club and you get their money, it's a constant, you're texting them all day, like it is a full time job to have even just three [regular] customers.

The work of communicating regularly with "just" three customers over the phone was high in emotional labor, as Gabby explained. Heidi Robinson had a similar understanding of the value and even necessity of communicating with regulars via telephone in addition to interacting at the strip club.

I feel that a lot in maintaining that kind of regular relationship, it's very difficult to do that within the confines of the club. So you build a more interpersonal relationship with a regular client, and that usually bleeds over into your daytime life. I would do phone calls or text messaging frequently with regular customers.

Most participants decided to exchange phone numbers with a new customer only if they had experienced a mutual authentic interest with him:

If they get three or more dances from me, and if I've liked their energy and I've liked their vibe and I want them to come back for me and I know that they probably will, I give them my phone number.

Customers demonstrated attraction and interest in dancers by spending time conversing and by purchasing multiple private dances. Dancers in turn chose to make the first step in cultivating a more emotionally involved relationship with a potential regular if they felt there was an authentic connection visible from the start.

"Bleeds into your daytime life": Private dates

One of the contradictions dancers face in creating codes for maintaining regular relationships is that it is both strategic financially and often stigmatized to break down the physical barrier of seeing customers outside of the club. Those who were paid cash for dates were able to sidestep the club and keep all of their earnings (rather than tipping out to the house) as well as to define the monetary value of their services, rather than relying on the prices set by the establishment. Gabby Bartlett described her experience with this mixed message:

Every club I've ever worked at, you're never supposed to see them [regulars]. And they never want to hear about you seeing them outside of the club...because there's a legal stance behind it, because they have an obligation with the city to not allow prostitution...But they turn their head to it because they know that that's how they [dancers] keep customers coming in.

Despite the discouragement, only two of my participants refrained entirely from seeing customers outside of the strip club because it violated their sense of what a dancer-regular relationship should be. As discussed above, one of the largest threats to the production of authentic intimacy, also highlighted in Frank's (1998) study, is the exchange of money. My participants thus took this into consideration when deciding when and who to see outside of the club. Some avoided the potential confusion such a commodified interaction presented for both parties altogether. As Lydia Green put it, "those are people that I kind of make money off of, and then if I'm gonna be personal [and socialize] with somebody I'd rather not, I don't know, I guess I like to keep a divide." Most, however, recognized the financial and emotional benefits of seeing customers outside of the club in cultivating an ideal regular relationship. Kelsey Young explained, "When you're going to dinner with them, they're paying for dinner, and you're talking with them, it develops a bond." In Kelsey's experience, it was harder to develop this bond within the strip club; thus going on dates outside of the club yielded long-term financial benefits and allowed her to develop the specific kind of regular bond she desired.

However, going out on private dates required perhaps the most individualized boundary setting for dancers to maintain their personal sense of right and wrong. For some, this meant that it didn't feel right to let their customers pay them for their time spent socializing outside of the club unless it was in the form of gifts (shopping dates were common). For others, it meant that they would only socialize with customers if they could be paid directly for their time without an awkward negotiation that could threaten the intimacy of the relationship. For example, Holly Taylor only sees clients who already "have the mindset of paying me for my time spent at lunch." She elaborated on this point:

Cause in the end, it's taking money out of my pocket...I would rather have our date time be in the club. You can buy me food at the club, you can buy me drinks at the club, we can sit at the club, and I'll perform for you at the club...In Vegas, I don't, that's my MO, to go out on these dates...So, it all depends on the city and the client. [It's] extremely personalized.

Thus Holly Taylor only does outside dates if she will be compensated better than she would be in the club *and* if the customer will already “have the mindset” to compensate her monetarily; otherwise, it is not worth the emotionally charged and awkward interaction to request that a customer pay her for her time.

While inside a strip club there is a limited variety of ambiance and entertainment, dancers and their regulars can expand from this by meeting outside of the club. Although she was not paid for dates, Bethany Summers described feeling more at ease with regulars outside of the highly sexualized strip club environment. Furthermore, outside dates increased the potential for services dancers could provide. For one regular, Gabby Bartlett performed sexual services that would not be permitted in a club (and that commanded a higher fee). Holly Taylor performed in hotel rooms for certain clients for whom “privacy is exceptional” because they have “such high profiles,” and therefore were not comfortable interacting within a public strip club with an erotic dancer.

Despite these advantages, several participants described the sense of safety the club environment offered them. Holly Taylor and Heidi Robinson both appreciated the pre-established codes associated with strip clubs. Holly Taylor said, “I do feel more relaxed in the club, I do. Because there's parameters already set, there's expectations that are already going to be met.” Heidi Robinson described the particular enjoyment of working in a strip club: “There was also sort of a rush in feeling very exposed or very vulnerable, while still very much in a very safe environment, in a sort of situation where I know that if anything sort of crossed a line, I would be protected by the staff at the club, or I could draw my boundaries where I needed to.” Outside of the club environment, this normative and physical protection disappears, presenting risk, both in terms of emotions and personal safety, to dancers. In its absence, they have to write, communicate to their customers, and enforce the codes. These outside interactions require complicated forms of emotion management as dancers uphold emotional performances consistent with those performed in the club while carefully setting and communicating the boundaries of the interaction.

Feeling physically safe with a customer was directly related to the sense of trust they had in the customer, and thus also related to the emotions elicited during face-to-face and virtual interactions. Heidi Robinson explained:

There was some regular clients that I think I felt, um, more safe or more comfortable with, so I could do things like go out on like dinner dates or shopping dates, and I didn't think they would threaten my security. There were other ones that I was a little more nervous about, that you would limit the outside of the club communication to like just strictly cell phone talk.

Based on how “comfortable” Heidi felt with customers during ‘safe’ interactions, she decided to loosen boundaries and extend interactions to riskier environments.

My participants usually determined whether they wanted to see a customer outside of the club by first getting to know them through continued interaction. Each had a specific model she followed. For example, Heidi Robinson described:

I kind of had I guess a process, in how I would escalate the outside contact, and it would begin a lot through conversations through text and if they were...well behaved or well mannered, [laughs] through several weeks of talking back and forth through text, we might extend that into voice conversations...And if that seemed to go smoothly, I think I would, um, go out to more like, meeting up for drinks or lunch or dinner, um and if those dates...went well, then you could kind of extend those sorts of things, like 'Hey, let's go on a shopping date.'

For Heidi and other participants, conversational texting served not only as a way for customers to feel as if dancers cared about them, but as a way for dancers to feel like they knew customers well enough to feel comfortable seeing them face-to-face outside of the club.

Often, feeling comfortable was related to the customer 'getting it,' or understanding how the dancer defined the relationship. Bethany Summers said, "I guess if he has a lot of money and he's a creep, like he can be my regular, but I would never go out to lunch with him or something." According to Kelsey Young, "you have to be really choosy on what regular that is [you go out to dinner with], because, you know, strings get attached, you get into relationships, as far as friendships, or whatever, and if the person is obviously wanting to have sex with you or date you or something, it's real sticky." The club environment served as a safe zone for dancers: either customers were less likely to make these advances within the club because it provided an explicitly commodified and fantastic backdrop, or dancers were better equipped to navigate the advances for the same reason.

Although it required greater effort in terms of maintaining boundaries to see regulars outside of the strip club, these interactions offered my participants greater opportunity in terms of increasing their earnings and expanding their services to better suit the needs or desires of specific clients as well as more autonomy in defining relationships with their regulars.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Cultivating relationships with regular customers is perhaps the biggest unwritten job descriptor of working as an exotic dancer. Dancers are surprised to learn the scope of these relationships as well as the role they play in securing a steady income; furthermore, it is difficult to get advice because of the guarded dynamics between experienced and new dancers. The literature has belabored the fact that seemingly authentic emotional performances on the part of dancers are of the utmost importance for customers in dancer-regular relationships. My findings indicate that sincere, authentic emotional performances from both parties are just as important to the dancers involved. My participants sought out and sometimes required a genuine emotional connection with a customer in order to allow a regular relationship to grow.

Maintaining these relationships can be particularly tiring if, as is sometimes the case, an authentic connection does not come easily. In these instances I have highlighted some of the emotion management techniques dancers employ to stimulate an authentic emotional connection to their regulars. Namely, dancers reframed how they saw their regulars' personalities to focus on their positive attributes or sympathized with non-ideal regulars. They also reframed their professional roles to include said regulars, drawing on relatively high-status roles such as 'therapist' or 'healer' to make sense of the significant amount of emotional labor they invested in their regulars.

Drawing from and in turn regulating their emotional experiences with regular customers, dancers enact complex boundary systems in order to take control of defining these ambiguous relationships. When their emotional experiences with regulars indicated that it was 'safe' to do so, dancers removed the boundaries limiting these relationships to face-to-face interaction within the strip club by engaging in emotional texting and even private dates (both paid and unpaid) outside the club. The way they redrew these boundaries served to keep these relationships commodified by tweaking normative dating scripts by, for example, placing severe limitations on the performance of their 'real' identity and sexuality with certain regulars, access to which is taken for granted in the normal or 'real' dating world.

My participants varied considerably in how exactly they defined an 'authentic' relationship with a regular, how far they deviated from this ideal, the amount of work they put into their emotions to bring them closer to a sincere performance, and how and why they drew boundaries with customers (specifically in terms of intimate, social, and virtual contact). This variety was related to the emotions regulars evoked in individual dancers (anger, frustration, pleasure, or a sense of ease). The results of this study prompts us to examine how people operate in contexts where there is no pre-existing code for how one should feel or act with regard to another's emotions, especially in situations with uneven or unstable power dynamics.

Furthermore, the way in which exotic dancers made sense of their own emotions by developing these ad hoc codes demonstrates a distinct form of emotion work that occurs in environments characterized by intense emotional labor where the structure of the workplace does not provide guidance for how workers should 'really' feel. Rather than drawing upon mainstream notions about the mutual exclusion of true intimacy (therefore true emotional investment) and commodified sexuality, erotic dancers who engage in relationships with regulars defined for themselves what was an appropriate way to feel about their regulars. Dancers carefully constructed these codes of feeling in the absence of structurally or normatively proscribed feeling rules. Rather than falling back on the codes of conduct for interactions between erotic dancers and customers set out by club owners within strip clubs, which typically includes restricting face-to-face interactions (especially paid dates) to inside the clubs, dancers branched out to define the possibilities of these interactions and of their emotional experiences on their own terms.

Although my participants demonstrated a spectrum of philosophies and practices from which they draw to develop these codes, they agreed on one thing: in this industry, dancers have to make their own way. Heather Ayers summed up this sentiment by saying that "you have to be willing to stick to your moral guns" in order to succeed as an exotic dancer. With few pre-established codes of conduct and feeling (and even fewer that are designed to benefit dancers over customers or club owners), dancers have created their own, while exposing some of the possibilities for both intimate and commodified relationships along the way.

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