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## **Dancing through COVID: An Ethnographic Exploration of Exotic Dancers' Experiences during a Pandemic**

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DANCING THROUGH COVID: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF EXOTIC  
DANCERS' EXPERIENCES DURING A PANDEMIC

By

Danyelle Sturdivant

A thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology, Sociology, and Social Work at the  
University of South Alabama in addition to the degree requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in  
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### **Abstract**

The novel coronavirus pandemic, quarantine, and social distancing measures affected working conditions for a variety of workers. Exotic dancers were distinctly impacted due to the stigma of their work which, prior to the pandemic, often involved the sale of close-proximity lap dances. This paper explores exotic dancers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide insight on the unique challenges they faced.

Data were gleaned using ethnographic methods with modifications informed by phenomenology. Existentially-engaged participant observation was performed in a small, Southern strip club, identified here as Flare. Two rounds of formal, recorded interviews were conducted with six exotic dancers, and unrecorded, informal conversations were carried out with several other dancers and club employees.

Despite the taxing emotional work dancers perform, they were excluded from pandemic financial assistance, prompting many of them to temporarily work in lower-paying jobs during the two-month quarantine period in which Flare was closed. Upon Flare's reopening, dancers faced a decrease in customers, an increase in new dancers, and the elimination of lap dances as an earning method, all compounding to cause increased competition among dancers to sell expensive VIP rooms. Dancers experienced a lack of benefits, reduced opportunities to earn money, and changes to their working environment that made it more difficult for them to predict their earnings. This is representative of the precarity in the exotic dance industry that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Keywords: exotic dance, strip clubs, precarious work, COVID-19 pandemic*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Workers across a variety of industries were affected by the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 and the resulting quarantine and social distancing measures. Exotic dance, a stigmatized and precarious occupation within the adult entertainment industry, was acutely impacted. In order to provide insight into a community of marginalized workers' unique predicament during the pandemic, this paper explores the experiences of a group of exotic dancers from a strip club, referred to as Flare, following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus.

I ask the following questions: What do exotic dancers experience? How did the COVID-19 quarantine affect exotic dancers? How is the pandemic affecting exotic dancing? What has been the overall impact of the pandemic and quarantine on exotic dancers? In investigating these questions, this work illuminates the first-hand experiences of dancers following the COVID-19 pandemic by means of an ethnographically- and phenomenologically-informed methodology that extends reflexivity and interdisciplinarity to understanding exotic dance.

I aim to relay an insider point of view on dancing to challenge stigmatizing conceptions of exotic dancers. I ground this work firmly in the ethnographic principles of naturalism, understanding, and induction by using a phenomenologically-informed approach to the traditional ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015; Honer and Hitzler 2015; Bevan 2014). In order to foster ethical, balanced power relations between the dancers as participants and myself as an academic, I abide by ethical guidelines including informed consent, confidentiality, and feedback from participants (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015).

My participation in the field as a dancer was pivotal to the development of the following chapters. This work should be viewed as an account developed in collaboration with dancers

rather than as a project about them. I engage with interdisciplinary literature on exotic dance, and I give extensive detail on my positionality and methodology in order to contextualize the understandings developed herein.

This chapter is intended to serve as an introduction to the purpose and contributions of this work. The following chapter (Chapter Two) is an extensive review of literature related to exotic dance that 1) situates a definition of exotic dance within a sex industry context, 2) summarizes relevant trends in research on female dancers, 3) describes the emotional labor involved in exotic dance and its associated profit structure, as well as the types of strip clubs and customers, 4) elaborates on the sex wars that frame and polarize conceptions of power within research, 5) frames the concept of power within a strip club in the context of increasing precarity in the exotic dance industry, and 6) highlights the marginalized position of sex workers during the pandemic.

Chapter Three is an intensive and reflexive examination of 1) my methodology describing the original purpose of the study, 2) my experience accessing and entering the field, 3) the context and setting of the current research, 4) the development of my research questions following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 5) the ethical guidelines by which the research abides, 6) the ethnographic principles forming the theoretical foundation for my methodology, 7) the phenomenologically-informed modifications made to traditional ethnographic methods, 8) the interviewing process, 9) the formal participants of the study, 10) my positionality and role as a researcher, and 11) the data analysis process.

Chapter Four presents the findings of this research through quotations from dancers that indicate the following: 1) exploitation is complex and may stem from emotional labor, 2) dancers use drinking to facilitate their emotional labor, 3) dancers did not receive pandemic financial

assistance and earned less working in other jobs, 4) lap dances were eliminated as an earning method, and VIP rooms were more difficult to sell, 5) the decrease in customers led to a reliance on regulars, 6) the influx of new dancers increased competition within the club, 7) and dancers' inconsistent earnings illuminate the precarity of the exotic dance industry, exacerbated by the pandemic.

Chapter Five is a discussion of the findings in relation to my research questions, situating them within previous literature on the topic. Appendix A contains relevant details about the formal participants.



## **Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature**

This chapter presents an exploration of relevant literature on exotic dance to contextualize exotic dancers' experiences of power and precarity following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. I first aim to situate a definition of exotic dance within a sex industry context, while distinguishing stripping from prostitution. I then present a summary of relevant trends in research on female dancers, a description of the emotional labor involved in exotic dance and of the profit structure associated with that labor, and an overview of types of strip clubs and customers. I elaborate further on the sex wars that frame and polarize conceptions of power within research. Finally, I frame power within the industry in the context of increasing precarity and highlight the position of sex workers during the pandemic.

### **Situating a Definition of Exotic Dance within a Sex Industry Context**

Exotic dance, commonly called stripping, is an occupation that involves the removal of one's clothing. Despite this, anthropologist and former exotic dancer, Katherine Frank (2007:502), notably avoids defining exotic dance explicitly as sex work:

I conceive exotic dance (including stripping, lap dancing, table dancing) as a form of adult entertainment involving varying states of nudity, physical contact, and constellations of erotic and personal services such as talk, fantasy, and companionship. Strippers may perform on stages or sell individualized dances to customers.

She further distinguishes this “form of adult entertainment” from prostitution. Similarly, Rambo and Pruitt (2011) state that while exotic dance does stimulate the imagination with sexual fantasy, it does not inherently fulfill the desire it encourages.

Contrastingly, Deshotels and Forsyth (2006:224) begin the body of their article on exotic dancers’ perceptions of power at the micro-level, in interactions with customers, by emphatically stating that “[e]xotic dancers are sex workers,” citing a 1993 World Health Organization definition of sex work. They argue that “[s]tudying exotic dancing as a form of sex work is important,” based on stripping’s prevalence within the industry (Deshotels and Forsyth 2006: 224). However, it’s important to note that this definition and claim are not based on any concurrence with the lived experiences of dancers but are instead based on the academic fruitfulness of framing exotic dance this way. Erickson and Tewksbury (2000:272) similarly state that “[o]ne of the most studied components of the sex industry is the professional stripper.” This characterization of exotic dance as a piece of the larger commercial sex industry is interwoven into much research on the topic.

The commercial sex industry “refers to all commercial goods and services of an erotic and sexual kind” (Agustin 2005:1). Accordingly, sex work or erotic labor includes but is not limited to “street-level prostitution, exotic dancing, massage, pornography, phone sex, and internet sex” (Wahab et al. 2011:57). Within these and many other definitions and descriptions, exotic dance is considered sex work. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether this categorization should or does apply to all dancers. There is a considerable stigma associated with sex work. What Hannen and Bruckert (2012:57) refer to as the “whore’s stigma” is a form of taint that draws negative attention to and evaluation of sex workers. Because of the “whore’s stigma” and

because not all dancers perform explicitly sexual labor, some dancers, specifically those in this study, have rejected the label of sex worker.

Barton (2002:587) comments that researchers “have rarely questioned whether their own preferred terms seem useful categories to the sex workers themselves.” Researchers have a tendency to apply their concepts to participants without regard for the participants’ perceptions. I was told early on by a fellow dancer that she didn’t like being thought of as a sex worker, preferring the term “adult entertainer,” and others agreed. Thus, while the sex industry provides a context for trends in the exotic dance industry, I will bracket “sex work” as an academic category that may interest exotic dance researchers more than actual dancers, and I will rely on the aforementioned definition of exotic dance as a form of adult entertainment (Frank 2007:502) that relates more fully to the lived experiences of the dancers in this study.

### Previous Research on Exotic Dance

According to Wahab et al.’s review of the literature on exotic dance (2011:57), exotic dance has become increasingly visible in popular culture through the economic impact of strip clubs and Hollywood depictions of clubs and dancers. The popularity of exotic dance is coupled with an abundance of academic interest in the topic, and in recent decades, stripping has been studied by many disciplines from a variety of perspectives (Wahab et al. 2011; Frank 2007:501-3).

Tracing the development of research since 1970, Wahab et al. (2011:65) state that early exotic dance research largely characterizes the work as deviant, owing to researchers’ assumptions “that stripping is a problematic . . . occupational category.” They state that researchers in the 1970s and 1980s focused on how dancers hide deviance, dancers’ motivations,

and the inauthenticity of the intimate behavior they perform (65). This focus eventually expanded to include meso-level analysis of clubs in the 1990s (Wahab et al. 2011:67). Additionally, the 1990s saw the rise to prevalence of the dancer-researcher, a principal investigator with current or previous experience as a dancer (Wahab et al. 2011:69). Recent research since 2000 has had a further tendency to move away from singular, pathologizing explanations toward nuanced, contextual conceptualizations of exotic dance and dancers (Wahab et al. 2011:56). The recent literature situates dancers within “organizational and cultural frameworks” (Wahab et al. 2011:69). This nuance and contextualization may be the result of the influence of a growing number of dancer-researchers (Wahab et al. 2011:71).

#### The Legal Requirements, Emotional Demands, and Precarious Economy of Dancing

By law, to dance in the state where this research was conducted, every newly-hired dancer must go to the police department to complete an application for an entertainer’s license, pay the associated \$100 fee, and register as an entertainer (municicode.com). The license may be suspended, revoked, or denied approval if the entertainer is in violation of any local laws, especially those regarding prostitution. It is illegal for any employee, regardless of their position, to work in an adult entertainment facility without a valid entertainer’s license. The license must be physically in the employee’s possession and produced for any law enforcement officer on request, and anyone caught dancing without a license is subject to fines or jail time.

While exotic dancers may perform in a variety of locations (Rambo and Pruitt 2011:397), this paper focuses on those performing, at least part time, in strip clubs. Clubs often differ in specific policies, and thus I aim to describe the occupation as it occurs in general and, more specifically, in my field site. Exotic dance is called commonly stripping because of the act of

disrobing that typically occurs in a stage performance (Rambo and Pruitt 2011:399). In a strip club, each entertainer is called to the stage individually to “dance” or seductively move her body in various states of undress, the level of which is often determined by local laws (Rambo and Pruitt 2011:399). While she performs, it is customary for the audience to throw one dollar bills on the stage that she will collect at the end of her performance. This stage performance serves as an advertisement for potential customers; when she leaves the stage, she is available for private dances as well as for personal interactions such as drinking and conversing (Rambo and Pruitt 2011:399), and this socialization is a large part of her job.

As she circulates the room, her goal is to sell a private dance, sold by the song, or a private room, sold by the hour. This is a process of presenting herself as desirable and negotiating with the customer (Rambo and Pruitt 2011:399). Once a customer has agreed to pay for a dance, he follows the dancer to a sectioned-off area of the club designated for this purpose and sits on a couch while the dancer straddles his legs, grinding into his lap (Rambo and Pruitt 2011:399-400). When offstage, dancers are also available for extended dances in more private areas called VIP or champagne rooms, which are similar to what Rambo and Pruitt (2011:400) describe as couch dances that occur in gentlemen’s clubs. This is typically a harder sell than a standard lap dance, as the VIP room is more expensive for customers.

As dancers perform and interact with customers, they must execute a common activity of service workers in which they manipulate their own feelings to present themselves in a way that will influence customers. According to Barton (2002:593), this is a form of Hochschild’s (1983) emotional labor. Deshotels and Forsyth (2006:226) state that “the exotic dancer’s chief work product is, indeed, emotional labor,” as she performs it to incite the sexual desires of male customers in what the authors term “strategic flirting” (224). Strategic flirting, like all emotional

work, entails a “constant preparation, presentation and management of self”; for a dancer, this often includes “deep acting,” attempting to shift her own emotional state, as opposed to mere “surface acting,” by manipulating her body language (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:54). This labor places a psychological strain on dancers that can estrange them from themselves and their emotions (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:54).

The occupational milieu in which exotic dancers perform their emotional labor is unique, in part because it is a “drug space,” with normalized drug and alcohol use requiring dancers to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable drug behavior rather than to classify all use as negative (Lavin 2017:302). Lavin (2017:294) describes dancers’ perceptions of drinking and drug use as well as the “othering” and normalizing narratives that dancers construct to distance themselves from stigmatizing stereotypes. Dancers view drinking and drug use as appropriate when used for instrumental or recreational purposes (Lavin 2017:299). Instrumental drug use is that which is not done for the enjoyment of its effects but rather for the more effective achievement of socially acceptable goals (Lavin 2017:299-300). In a strip club “instrumental, task-oriented drug use is widespread and socially normative (like taking an aspirin for a headache)” and is deemed legitimate when “in [the] service of their work performance” (Lavin 2017:300).

Dancers rely on a variety of strategies to amplify their work performance. As most aren’t salaried employees but independent contractors, they actually pay a floor fee or a house fee to work each shift (Mount 2018; Lewis 2006:298). Dancers earn money primarily through tips and sales percentages, meaning they have little control over their income (Mount 2018:64). They attempt to remedy this by employing a variety of tactics, often resembling busy restaurant servers, in order to profit from as many customers as possible (Mount 2018:64). This creates

immense competition for tips among dancers, and thus this working arrangement is inherently precarious (Mount 2018:64), reflecting “larger historical labor trends” toward unstable working conditions (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:52).

Working conditions for exotic dancers include the distribution of power within strip clubs. Lewis (2006:301) draws attention to the gendered division of power within a strip club, noting that on the surface, power relations tend to follow the structure of a patriarchy, with men occupying the roles providing essential services and those with the most managerial authority. Operating more covertly than the gendered surface division are other forms of power including economic power, which encompasses one’s earning opportunities and ultimate income, and autonomous power, which stems from a worker’s autonomy in the workplace and functions as an inverse reflection of one’s workplace commitment (Lewis 2006:301-2).

Moreover, Lewis (2006) describes the differential positions of different types of strip club employees as they are scattered against this matrix of power forms. Seeking to maximize their autonomy so they can freely create opportunities to increase their income, employees of the club often engage in cooperative and mutually beneficial exchanges and interactions with other employees (Lewis 2006:306). These cooperative strategies that workers use to promote their autonomy result in the operation of a self-interested “informal economy of favors” (Lewis 2006:310). This is an unwritten code of reciprocity that workers use to create additional opportunities for income, to circumvent the unpleasant or unprofitable aspects of the work, and to foster amiable relations with coworkers (Lewis 2006:310).

Social Clubs and Sugar Daddies: Typologies of Strip Clubs and Patrons

A key contextual feature of exotic dance is the meso-organizational level of individual strip clubs. Sociologist and former dancer Mindy Bradley-Engen and fellow sociologist Jeffrey Ulmer (2009:29) developed a typology of strip clubs that classifies them as hustle, show, or social clubs according to general characteristics. They argue that variations in the structural context of exotic dance and in how sex is sold can create differential perceptions of exploitation for dancers. According to Bradley-Engen and Ulmer's (2009:45) typology, Flare is a social club.

Distinct from pageant-like show clubs and sex-oriented hustle clubs, Flare seems more akin to a "friendly 'local neighborhood bar,'" (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009:45). Like a typical social type of club, this smaller establishment generates large profits through bar sales, which minimizes the club's need to profit from competition among dancers and thus promotes cooperation (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009:47). Accordingly, the experience of dancers at social clubs is characterized by "cooperative sociability" including friendships with fellow dancers, positive or sympathetic attitudes towards the job and customers, symmetrical power relations with customers and management, and a sense of belonging that leads to personal commitment to the workplace (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009:48-9).

Dancers at social clubs typically hold positive views of their customers. Erickson and Tewksbury (2000:272) cite a lack of academic research on strip club patrons and aim to categorize them based on their behavior and spatial position in the club. Their typology identifies six types of men patronizing strip clubs: the Lonely who seek dancers' conversation and companionship (281); the Socially Impotent who also seek conversation and companionship but "lack the basic social skills to procure or maintain" them (282); the Bold Lookers who come for a "voyeuristic/pornographic experience" (284); the Detached Lookers who are also motivated by voyeurism but with a more casual, dispassionate attitude (285); the Players who aim to capture a



dancer's interest through charm and courting (286); and the Sugar Daddies who pursue conversation and companionship, like all patrons, but receive a higher level of intimacy from dancers (287). The relationships that Sugar Daddies form with dancers are distinct in their depth, their duration, and their extension outside of the club setting (Erickson and Tewksbury 2000:288).

### Sex Wars: Polarized Conceptions of Precarious Power

Research on exotic dance has been plagued by questions of whether strippers are empowered or exploited in their interactions, liberated or oppressed in their occupations (Frank 2007:504; Bradley 2008:513). In general, there is considerable debate around the topic of gendered power within the sex industry, including stripping, that stems back to the 1980s "sex wars" between radical or anti-porn feminists and sex-radical feminists (Barton 2002:585-6; Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009:29; Bruckert 2002:8-9; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006:224-6; Frank 2007:504-5).

Anti-porn feminists claimed that pornography, and even sexuality, was intrinsically exploitative to women as it reproduced patriarchal patterns of gendered power relations and domination (Barton 2002:586). Sex-radical feminists countered the anti-porn argument with the claim that exercising agency through one's sexuality was in fact liberating and subversive of heteronormative gender relations (Barton 2002:586). These polarized conceptions of sexuality and sex work took root early in the history of research on exotic dance, but fortunately, contemporary conceptions of stripping offer more complexity, framing "exotic dance as a form of strategic and emotional labor with both positive and negative consequences" (Wahab et al. 2011:61).

The strategic and emotional labor of dancers is encompassed by the term “strategic flirting” coined by Deshotels and Forsyth (2006:224) in their exploration of dancers’ perceptions of micro-interactional level power with customers. They state that women’s emotional labor is consistently seen as reproductive of the gendered division of power in which they are subservient to men, while men’s emotional labor leaves them in a position of authority (226). Becoming what the customer wants is seen as degrading for women but empowering for men because of how we culturally define femininity and masculinity (Deshotels and Forsyth 2006:238), but this does not necessarily reflect female workers’ perceptions of their own power.

Deshotels and Forsyth (2006:230-1) conclude that dancers view themselves as empowered in their interactions with customers, indicating support for the sex-radical feminist view of dancing as liberation (233). However, they also note the negative consequences of dancers’ emotional labor, specifically its adverse effects on their sense of fun and on “their ability to create an authentic self,” especially in the realm of sexuality (234-5). These alienating impacts suggest that dancers are required to perform a level of emotion management that is beyond their comfort zone (Deshotels and Forsyth 2006:236). Accordingly, although dancers may perceive themselves in a position of power, Deshotels and Forsyth (2006:236) conclude that dancers experience both liberation and oppression when they engage in strategic flirting.

Rather than attempting to define exotic dance as either empowering or exploitative, Barton (2002:886) argues that both of these views “ignore the multilayered nature of human experience” with their singular understandings of sexuality. It is possible for individuals at the micro-level of interactions to experience exotic dance as liberating while, at the same time, the experience reproduces macro-level, institutionalized patterns of gender inequality (Barton 2002:586). She further explores related nuances in experiences of power by presenting a two-

fold temporal understanding of exotic dancers' power as it relates to their emotional satisfaction (Barton 2002). Although dancers initially enjoy the moments of power afforded by their job, their emotions oscillate over the course of a single shift, while their self-esteem and satisfaction decline throughout the course of their careers (Barton 2002:587).

Faced with occasional abuse and frequent rejection from customers, dancers become intimately acquainted with the knowledge that women's value in society is correlative of their attractiveness (Barton 2002:591-595). The impact of disrespect such as this is a gradual erosion of a dancer's self-esteem the longer she dances (Barton 2002:595). Barton (2002) thus presents a satisfaction-based understanding of power that is precarious, uncertain, and subject to diminishment over time. Similarly pointing to the uncertainty of dancers' power, Bradley (2008:515) also indicates that experiences of liberation versus oppression may change over time, but instead of hinging on the oscillation of emotions throughout an evening or the decline in self-esteem throughout a career, this shift in experience is reflective of wider trends in the industry.

### Precarity in Exotic Dance

In describing the rise of feminized, precarious working arrangements in North America, Fogel and Quinlan (2011:52) reiterate the characteristics of precarious, temporary work: instability in income and/or hours; minimal or lacking benefits; undefined, unregulated employer-employee relationships; a competitive, individualistic environment; and, commonly, a high physical and/or psychological demand on workers (2011:53). Additionally, they describe how contemporary exotic dance displays all of these characteristics.

Since dancers largely work for tips, their income is inherently unpredictable. Additionally, clubs can close without warning, leaving dancers unemployed. As independent

contractors, dancers receive no benefits such as maternity leave or worker's compensation. The relationship between a dancer and the owners and management of the club where she works is very complex, and although dancers are independent contractors and pay a set fee to work, they are often micromanaged and exploited. In addition, competition among dancers for jobs and tips contributes to a declining comradery, despite the informal economy of favors (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:54). Finally, both the physical performances dancers give and the emotional labor they perform can take a toll on dancers' well-being.

#### Financial Assistance and Sex Work During the Pandemic

\_\_\_\_\_ There were widespread economic impacts to nearly all industries and occupations during and following the initial quarantine period of curfews and business closures sparked by the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020. In response to the brewing economic crisis, the federal government passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act at the end of March "to provide emergency assistance and health care response for individuals, families, and businesses affected by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic" (congress.gov). The CARES Act included provisions to grant loans to small businesses and to extend unemployment benefits to workers traditionally excluded from them.

Through the Payment Protection Program, eligibility for Small Business Interruption Loans from the Small Business Administration (SBA) was extended to all independently owned and operated businesses with under 500 employees, including independent contractors (congress.gov). There are six factors that can disqualify a business from eligibility: engagement in illegal activity, owing back child support, deriving revenue from gambling, lobbying, being a government entity, and presenting live performances that are prurient or sexual in nature or

deriving revenue from selling or presenting products, services, depictions, or displays of a prurient nature ([covid19relief.sba.gov](https://www.covid19relief.sba.gov)). This last disqualifier, being prurient, particularly affects exotic dancers and sex workers and is illustrative of their marginalization. The “whore’s stigma” draws negative evaluations of sex workers (Hannen and Bruckert 2012), and it becomes tangible in their overt exclusion from SBA loans and the notion that they don’t deserve assistance during this economic crisis.

Unemployment benefits were also expanded by the CARES Act, and through the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, eligibility was extended to groups who are not typically allowed benefits including the self-employed and independent contractors ([dol.gov](https://www.dol.gov)). Eligibility requirements are overseen by states, and the state where this research was conducted did not publish additional restrictions to eligibility. While there is no formal documentation excluding dancers and sex workers from unemployment benefits, the likelihood of dancers’ receiving these benefits under a system that marginalizes them so heavily is unclear.

Provisions extending eligibility for SBA loans and unemployment benefits were vital to workers, for in response to the quarantine period of lockdowns, many nonessential businesses were forced to temporarily or permanently close; some, however, were able to move their products and services to online platforms. During this time, sex work experienced a similar transition to the virtual world (Nelson, Yu, and McBride 2020). Sex workers from all branches of the industry shifted to virtual sexual services like camming and selling nude photos and videos, services that are thriving amid increased desires for intimate connection sparked by isolation (Nelson, Yu, and McBride 2020).

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has entered a time of social distancing, maintaining six to ten feet from others to prevent the airborne spread of the virus.

Social distancing is antithetical to exotic dancing, which often involves close-proximity stage performances and lap dances. In fact, lap dances were legally forbidden in many areas such as Miami, where the mayor prohibited them in June (Hanks 2020). Social distancing is thus proving to be a challenge for exotic dance and the wider sex-work industry.

#### Future Research: Culture, Context, Collaboration, Engagement, and Reflexivity

Agustin (2005:619) prescribes the study of commercial sex from an interdisciplinary, cultural studies perspective in order to look at the industry in a broad way, paying attention to sex work's various intersections with other aspects of culture. She argues that the sex industry encompasses a wide variety of activities, each occurring in its own "complex socio-cultural context in which the meaning of buying and selling sex is not always the same" (Agustin 2005:619). Former dancer Katherine Frank (2007:510) echoes her call to view sex work "as culture, rooted in everyday practices." Although some dancers may reject the label of "sex work" as a description of their experience, the culture of the sex work industry is still valuable for this academic inquiry due to stripping's position in that context.

Former dancer Mindey Bradley (2008:515), noting changes in the exotic dance industry, calls for investigations into the varied structural conditions producing and contextualizing differential experiences of exploitation and empowerment. Bradley also urges researchers to look into the impacts of the changing social-organizational context of the industry.

Noting the tendency for sex workers to experience "'othering' by those who claim to want to help and 'know' them," Stephanie Wahab (2003:626) discusses a qualitative, feminist, and participatory epistemology and methodology that prioritizes creating knowledge in collaboration with participants through mutuality and reciprocity to ensure their realities are

accurately reflected. Accordingly, she recommends “regarding sex workers as the experts on their own lives” (Wahab 2003:640).

In a joint book review, former dancers Danielle Egan and Katherine Frank (2005:298-9) identify a lack of engagement between feminist and deviance studies literature on exotic dance caused by structural and individual constraints (309); consequently, they call for more interdisciplinary engagement in future research.

Owing to a tradition of researchers’ failing to engage with work on exotic dance outside of the researcher’s own discipline, Egan and Frank (2005:300-1) join feminist researchers in calling for researchers to reflexively interrogate their own positionalities. They state that “[t]o be reflexive is to analyze what one knows, as well as how one knows it” (Egan and Frank 2005:301). Similarly, Wahab et al.’s (2011) comprehensive exotic dance literature review notes a lack of reflexivity numerous times, both in researcher positionality and in methods. Accordingly, the primary aim of the following chapter on methodology and context is to foster reflexivity.

### **Chapter 3: Context and Methodology**

#### **Purpose of the Chapter and the Study**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an intensive and reflexive examination of my positionality and methods. Operating under the assumption that there is no such thing as value-free and objective social science, my aim here is to “construct knowledge rather than discover truth” (Wahab et al. 2011:72). At the very least, what is discovered in research is highly contingent on a researchers’ motivations and methodological choices. Taken to a fuller extent, a researcher’s motivations and choices are necessarily affected by who the researcher is, her subjectivity or individual views, and her positionality or social and political contexts. Wahab et al. (2011:72) joins Egan and Frank (2005) in calling for researchers to “articulate and interrogate their multiple subjectivities and positionalities” as well as to elaborate on their methods. This chapter attempts to heed their call, thereby adding context and meaning to the paper (Wahab et al. 2011:72).

My original intention was to study the experience of exotic dancers. I began thinking of such an investigation a couple years prior to writing this when I was rather broke and in search of a summer job. I remember reading about dancers who made exorbitant amounts of money and thinking I could do that, but I also wondered: what is it like to do that? I googled the experience of strippers and found quite a few articles to skim, but they merely piqued my curiosity. I gathered that the experience of stripping was attractive financially to those who did it and also academically by some who had done it and many more who hadn’t. The question persisted: *what is it like?* For the first time I wanted to do something not just for the satisfaction of experience but also for the sake of knowledge. I wanted to do it, understand it, and explain it all at once. My decision to become a dancer and my decision to research dancing were one and the same.



The Field: Accessing Club Flare

When I decided to become a dancer at a middle-class club called Flare, I wanted to be the best possible dancer to ensure that I would actually be hired, and so I took pole classes to learn a few moves and practice them in six-inch platforms. Although this is not a common pre-audition step taken by dancers in my area of the country, it proved to be very valuable, as my pole dancing instructor gave me helpful advice on the types of clubs where I could be successful. To determine whether I wanted to audition at Flare, I paid the club a visit and asked the manager some questions. He was very polite and charismatic, encouraging me to audition that very night. Feeling unprepared, I declined but returned the following week with my dance shoes and a duffle bag packed full of clothes and items that I might need in case I was hired and asked to work the night. Fortunately, I was.

I auditioned at Flare in July of 2019, roughly eight months before the pandemic began to wreak havoc in the area. The club is surprisingly small, reminiscent of a typical bar with the addition of a small, six-foot circular stage with a metal pole in the middle. Opposite the stage is the bar area, complete with stools and a full menu of drinks. The center floor area is scattered with tables, and a few rows of chairs sit near the stage. On the edges of the room are the door to the managers' office and a few small, sectioned-off corners, one of which is the community space for personal lap dances. The other areas are VIP or champagne "rooms" for extended private dances. Though the environment is small in space, there is a base of customers who attend the club regularly. Additionally, the club can draw in a sizable crowd on weekend nights, sometimes filling to standing-room only.

The customers, staff, and other dancers were all surprisingly nice. For example, the other dancers were quick to teach me the ropes, including how to move well on stage and who and

how much to tip out at the end of the night. I learned that the spirit of cooperation was largely unique to this social type of club (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009). Indeed, there appeared to be very tight social bonds among dancers and even between dancers and their regular customers. This atmosphere of sociability made it quite easy to build rapport with my future research participants.

### COVID-19: A Research Problem

After months of working at Flare, I finally got approval and funding for the research project that I had been planning since I originally asked myself what it was like to work as a dancer. Although this turned out to be my proposed research question, I realized as I prepared to investigate that I didn't have a clear sense of direction. As I noted in chapter two, there is an abundance of research on exotic dance, including that focusing on dancers' experiences, and so I sought to make my research innovative or at least not entirely reiterative of what's been written on the topic for decades. As I was preparing to conduct my interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. It was about mid-March when I got a text from a fellow dancer informing me that the club had closed indefinitely. Initially, I was shocked because the closure happened so suddenly and without warning or direct notification; once the shock wore off, I was dismayed because my main source of income was no longer viable; but, finally, I was thrilled because I had an unexplored research question: how would COVID-19 impact the experience of exotic dancers?

### Ethical Guidelines and Methodological Principles

In designing this study, I was aware that academics have historically disempowered female sex workers (Wahab et al. 2010:59), and they do this primarily by placing their own

theoretical concepts above the experience of the women under study. To avoid this ethical mistake, I have chosen to make use of ethnographic research principles that prioritize the native or participant's point of view (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Ethnographic research involves developing, sometimes close, relationships with participants and protecting them from exploitation through informed consent, the option to use pseudonyms, and collaborative feedback (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:153-4).

To begin, this study received approval from the University of South Alabama's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Then participants were asked to read an information sheet describing the project and its associated risks before verbally agreeing to participate in interviews. The requirement to document this consent in writing was waived, in accordance with IRB requirements, to protect their identities. All participants were required to use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the research site and other participants, although some dancers gave permission to use their real or stage names. Most were given the opportunity to read an early draft and provide feedback.

As previously stated, my priority was privileging the emic perspective, giving priority to my participants' points of view (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:150). The methodological principles of ethnography include naturalism, grounded in realism, understanding, and induction, both of which are grounded in social construction (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:152). Naturalism prescribes objective descriptions of human behavior as it occurs in a natural environment, produced through intensive, first-hand contact (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008:152). Understanding involves explaining human behavior through an understanding of the cultural context in which it occurs (Eriksson Kovalainen 2008:153), thus this principle values participant observation and conversations. Induction uses discovery-based methods to refine a

general topic and develop theories with a focus on “local interpretations” (Eriksson Kovalainen 2008:153).

### Phenomenologically-Informed Ethnographic Methods

Participant observation is a fundamental research method in ethnography (Honer and Hitzler 2015:552). It involves participating in a field with the intention to collect observational data. Some researchers, however, recommend a modification of this method. Honer and Hitzler (2015:545) propose a phenomenologically-based research methodology that aims at an inside view by taking subjectivity as a starting point. They recommend that, like all reports, other people’s reports of a phenomenon be treated with skepticism, as they are not as accessible as data generated through the “researcher’s own *practical* co-participation in a social context” (Honer and Hitzler 2015:548). By engaging with and participating alongside those under study, researchers can compensate for the inaccessibility of others’ subjective knowledge in order to co-experience the local meanings and undergo a shift in perspective (Honer and Hitzler 2015:548-9). Through existential engagement, a researcher practically handles the topic and participates in subjects’ activities in hopes of becoming more similar to them (Honer and Hitzler 2015:550). Observant participation supplements traditional participant observation with “procedurally reflective . . . co-experiencing” by prioritizing participation over observation (Honer and Hitzler 2015:552).

I developed a semi-structured interview guide based loosely on phenomenological principles. Bevan (2014:137-9) recommends a three-interview process based on adaptations to the methods of previous researchers. According to his process, the first interview is for contextualizing, and it aims to explore through the use of descriptive and narrative questions the

backdrop surrounding the experience in question for context and significance (Bevan 2014:140). The second interview uses structural and descriptive questions for apprehending the phenomenon or elucidating details of the many ways of experiencing in question (Bevan 2014:141). The third interview, for clarifying the phenomenon through imaginatively varying the questions (Bevan 2014:141-2), was deemed inappropriate for the purposes of this study and was adapted to suit the goals of the research.

Although I was in the field for over a year, my data collection and formal interview processes lasted ten weeks during a research fellowship program in summer 2020. Adapting Bevan's (2014) method, I chose to conduct two formal interviews for contextualizing and apprehending, followed by an optional, informal feedback conversation. With consent from my participants, I recorded most of these interviews and conversations; however, there were a few impromptu sessions that I was unable to record. The interviews were all semi-structured, so while I had a long list of questions I wanted to ask, I followed it loosely, at times letting the flow of the conversation with the participant dictate the direction it took. Additionally, the questions were subject to minor adjustments based on my perception of their relevance, and thus they differed slightly between participants.

In the first interview, the contextualizing interview, I asked participants questions about 1) their personal backgrounds such as age, relationship status, and number of children, 2) their previous experience dancing such as the number of years they've danced, how they began dancing, and the number of strip clubs at which they've worked, and 3) their experience at Flare before the pandemic such as how they made the majority of their income and how they felt about customers and fellow dancers. In my second interview, the apprehending interview, I asked questions specifically about their experience dancing in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This included what they did during the two-month club closure, how their earning methods and income level differed from before the closure, and how they felt about the situation. My final conversation was very informal, involving the presentation of my initial findings and soliciting feedback from participants. Here, I only asked their opinions of the paper so far and what needed to be added. This conversation contributed to fostering collaboration between myself as researcher and the other dancers as participants.

### The Participants and My Role and Positionality

In total, there were twenty recorded interviews and conversations with nine dancers. Although many dancers and other club employees participated in this study informally through conversations as well as through my observations of them, there were six dancers with whom I completed both rounds of formal, recorded interviews. These women will be considered formal participants, and I provide a bit of detail about each of them in Appendix A.

I am a twenty-two year old black student, making me of a slightly younger age than most of my participants and of a different race from all but one. Additionally, I was dancing for a purpose that differed from most of the dancers in the study, for some of them were dancing their way through school, and all but one of them were dancing to support children. I do not, however, see a high degree of separation between myself and my participants, and I use the term “participants” the way one would use “coworkers,” “acquaintances,” or “friends” because that’s what these women are to me. I see myself not as the theoretical expert here to explain their behavior, but as one privileged enough to have a platform to amplify all of our voices.

### Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, my observational notes were mostly incorporated into interview questions in order to ensure participant concurrence with the inferences. I began transcribing the first round of interview recordings, noting any points that needed clarification, before conducting the second round. For some of the more universally murky points, I added questions to my interview guide to ask in remaining rounds; for others, I simply made a note to ask the dancer for clarification the next time I spoke with her. After conducting and transcribing both rounds of interviews, I read and re-read the transcripts, identifying any recurring or eye-catching quotes and themes. Stephanie Wahab (2003:636-7) notably describes a fear of exploiting her participants, which I felt deeply when thematizing these conversations with dancers. I subjected the resultant themes to further investigation by consulting additional literature and informally asking participants' additional questions to guide my interpretation. The findings of this investigation are presented in the following chapter.

#### **Chapter 4: Findings**

Chapter One of this work introduced and described the aims of this study and its potential contributions. Chapter Two relayed extensive background information on exotic dancing including its location in the context of the sex industry, the requirements and emotional demands of the work, and precarity in the industry. And Chapter Three depicted the field site, elaborated on my methodological orientation and my use of phenomenologically-informed modifications to the traditional ethnographic methods of participant observation and in-depth interviewing, and described my participants and my role in data analysis.

In this section, Chapter Four, I present an exploration of the following: dancers' experiences of power as well as their experiences facilitating emotional labor through alcohol before the COVID-19 pandemic; a precarious lack of benefits for exotic dancers demonstrated in their inability to receive government financial assistance offered during the pandemic, dancers' subsequent considerations of other employment during the COVID-19 quarantine period, and their acquaintance with reduced earnings in more legitimate jobs; the indirect communication of information about closure, reopening, and social distancing rules indicating the precariously undefined and unregulated relationship between dancers and their employers; the impact of the elimination of lap dances as an earning method and the subsequent reliance on VIP sales; the decrease in customers leading to a reliance on regulars; the influx of new dancers leading to an increasingly competitive environment that is the hallmark of precarious work; and dancers'



inconsistent earnings and associated financial struggle that illuminate the increased precarity of exotic dance.

### Before the Pandemic

#### *Differential Experiences of Exploitation*

While not a designated focus of this study, exploitation is one of the biggest topics in exotic dance research. And, thus, even though I didn't formally ask dancers about their experiences of power, the topic came up in conversation. When I told Cassius that researchers often question whether dancers are the exploiters or the exploited, she replied, "I think it's all up to you... It's your perspective and it's what you allow. Ya know, you can either use or be used. What's it gonna be? I know what it's gonna be for me. I can't make that decision for everyone... Maybe in the past I've let it be the opposite way around. But not anymore. It's very empowering."

She had apparently given some consideration to her own power as a dancer in a strip club, and she describes empowerment in this context as a perception and a choice. It's exceedingly simple the way she put it, as though all one needs to do to avoid exploitation is claim and occupy the singular position of empowerment. Cassius' explanation indicated only one empowered position, that of the "user," which is diametrically opposed to the unempowered position, that of the person being "used" or oppressed. Her view of exploitation in exotic dance sounds quaint, but the dichotomy between using and being used that she created while making the statement is quite limited and may not be wholly applicable to the lived experience of other dancers.

Maddy had a different response when I informed her of the prominence of the question: are dancers exploited? She thought about it for a moment and then hesitantly spelled out her feelings regarding being exploited as a dancer: “I halfway feel like we are . . . it’s just you really need the money, like if I swallow my pride just a little bit.” She indicated that a contributing factor to exploitation in this context is the fact that dancers “really need the money,” which puts them in a vulnerable position. Moreover, she described swallowing her pride as “halfway” exploitative. When asked what she meant, she clarified that sometimes she has to tolerate more than she feels she should to deal with difficult customers.

This is reminiscent of Barton’s (2002) description of the way dancers’ feelings of empowerment erode over the course of their career due to the alienation associated with the emotional labor they perform: for example, displaying desire for men they aren’t attracted to, smiling in the face of rejection, and swallowing their pride. This is all emotional work, manipulating one’s inner feelings to produce a desired effect in others (Barton 2002:593). It seems, similar to dancers in Barton’s (2002) study, that it is partially Maddy’s performance of emotional labor that degrades her sense of power in interactions with customers. This is also consistent with the findings of Forsyth and Deshotels (2006:238) when they conceptualize the emotional labor of exotic dancers as “strategic flirting.”

#### *Drinking to Facilitate Emotional Labor*

The emotional labor of dancers, even when it is not an act of swallowing pride, involves remaining amicable while dealing with all types of people. This can be difficult, as Taylor explained when we discussed her drinking habits at work:

“Those people can be kinda stressful sometimes. Ya know? Annoying to deal with... It be tough. I just remember customers telling me ‘you need to loosen up.’ They’ll be joking and stuff or laughing, and I’m just like ‘I want my money’... I ain’t got time for these jokes. I ain’t got time for this

corny stuff. I don't need all the lovey dovey stuff... I just got so tired of hearing 'you need to loosen up' because I have a resting bitch face. When I would drink then it'd be like 'oh I'm 'happy' --well quote unquote happy-- Let's have fun! I'm so much fun because I've been drinking.' ... it's just a little bit easier drinking... It's easier to seem like you care because when I'm sober it's like 'dang this girl isn't listening to me. This girl doesn't care about my problems at all' like I really don't!" She indicated drinking as a strategy for handling customers who are "annoying to deal with."

Dancers are freely allowed to drink at Flare within the limits of their alcohol tolerance, and while they can purchase the slightly-overpriced drinks themselves, they typically rely on customers to buy drinks for them. Drinking is a normal part of the environment. With her detailed explanation of her motivation to drink, Taylor managed to describe a fundamental aspect of the emotional labor of exotic dancers: seeming like you care. As she described it, this countenance of concern is difficult to sustain when your only real priority is making money. For her and others, drinking makes this work easier.

Taylor was not the only dancer who admitted to drinking in the service of her emotional labor. In a similar discussion of drinking at work, Charm quipped, "...you have that one asshole that you have to be drunk to be around." With her remark, she concisely illustrated Taylor's point that dealing with certain customers is easier after drinking, and by calling the difficult customer an "asshole" she pointed to Maddy's earlier description of swallowing her pride to tolerate more than she normally would. However, Charm did not suggest that drinking makes her feel "halfway" exploited but that it is an escape from annoyance.

Dancers' feeling the need to drink, even if it is in the service of their own earnings, seems very troublesome at first. Indeed, it's easy for one to scoff at the instrumental use of substances when sobriety is a required and normalized aspect of one's work environment. this is simply not

the case in a strip club. Being under the influence of alcohol, while not required at Flare, is so commonplace that it's expected. The thought that these women might be steering towards alcoholism due to the emotional demands of their jobs is a distressing one, and it would be easy to worry that some of them were headed that way., But then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and something intriguing happened: dancers quit drinking.

Noticing the high level of drinking that dancers did at Flare, I must admit that I had internally labeled most of them as moderate to heavy drinkers and assumed that they drank just as freely outside of work; however, most of them stated that they didn't drink at home or anywhere other than Flare. When I asked Cassius about her drinking habits before dancing, while dancing, and during quarantine, Cassius stated, "I do drink.... I didn't used to drink [before dancing], hardly ever I guess. Now I drink at work, of course. It's hard not to with people offering to buy you drinks... Oh yeah, I didn't drink at all during COVID."

Even some of the heaviest drinkers at Flare claimed to only drink at work. When I asked Rose, who often appeared intoxicated before the pandemic, about her drinking habits, she gave a surprising response: "To be honest with you, I only drank when I was at Flare, so when COVID hit and the club closed, uh, I didn't drink." After the club reopened, she transitioned into working as a cocktail waitress, and I haven't seen her have a single drink since reopening.

### During Quarantine

#### *A Lack of Benefits*

Dancers need to be successful in their efforts in order to earn a living, since they are not salaried workers and do not receive paychecks for the hours they work, only tips and a percentage of their sales. Additionally, dancers are typically ineligible for social welfare benefits

and government assistance since they are independent contractors. One aspect of precarious work is a lack of benefits such as health care, worker's compensation, and unemployment (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:53). This lack became particularly relevant during the state-mandated quarantine period while Flare was closed from around mid-March to mid-May.

In the economic crisis provoked by the pandemic and quarantine, workers from many industries relied on amped-up unemployment benefits and increased loan eligibility for small businesses through the CARES Act ([congress.gov](http://congress.gov)). This aid was even extended to independent contractors and the self-employed, but among the few groups specifically excluded from the provisions for Small Business Association loans were those in prurient, or sexual, businesses ([covid19relief.sba.gov](http://covid19relief.sba.gov)).

When I asked Rose how she decided to become a cocktail waitress, she explained that dancers were left out of the provisions for aid: "When I couldn't receive unemployment for being a dancer, even though they were giving self-employed people unemployment. When I realized dancers were not included, I decided it was time to get a W-2 job." In expressing her desire for a W-2 job, what she really wanted was the benefits that come along with a form of income that's seen as more legitimate.

Dancers have long been excluded from government social services, but when nearly all independent contractors were given access to Small Business Association (SBA) loans ([covid19relief.sba.gov](http://covid19relief.sba.gov)), dancers were not included. Our state didn't explicate the eligibility requirements for unemployment benefits under the CARES act, and thus it couldn't be confirmed or denied that dancers were formally excluded. However, it is important to note that it was a widespread belief among dancers that, in addition to SBA loans, they were also ineligible for

unemployment at this time. Few were surprised or disappointed, as they've come to expect this type of marginalization.

Since our state did not clarify eligibility requirements, the existence of formal mechanisms for excluding “prurient” professionals from benefits cannot be confirmed, but Maddy had some anecdotal insight: “A lot of girls were talking about how they applied for food stamps, but because of the pandemic, the food stamps workers were doing, well they always do background checks, but they were doing it more... they were looking at it more closely and if anyone had a license for dancing, they weren't gonna get it [food stamps]. If you have a license, that shows up on your background check... it really is a badge of shame.”

As local law dictates, to work at Flare, each dancer must apply for an entertainer's license, pay a \$100 fee, and keep the card in her possession at all times while working in case a law enforcement officer requests to see it. Licenses are subject to suspension, revocation, or denial if an entertainer is found in violation of the requirement to carry a valid license or of any local laws. According to Maddy, the stigma of exotic dance physically manifests itself in the license we are obligated by law to obtain and hold. This legally required “badge of shame” signals to government agencies that we are “prurient” and thus, in their opinion, not deserving of the same benefits as other self-employed business owners.

### *Marketable Skills*

Since dancers certainly weren't eligible for Small Business Loans and were rumored to be ineligible for unemployment, they had to seek out ways to support themselves financially while the club was closed. Their searches for a means of financial support often involved considerations of what else they could feasibly do for work and what marketable skills they

possessed. It can be hard to translate the complex emotional labor that dancers perform into skills befitting a resume, and accordingly, exotic dancing is stigmatized as low-skilled work.

In a conversation about what dancers are doing in response to the pandemic, Taylor illustrated the concern for dancers' skill sets that non-dancers sometimes have when she said, "People are looking at girls who dance like 'what are y'all gonna do now that the clubs are closed? Do y'all have any other skills'... There's a lot that some of them are actually doing." She went on to list hobbies and jobs that other dancers have such as working on cars, monogramming cups, and nursing, but the fact that many dancers do things other than dance isn't widely known by people with no involvement in the industry. Consequently, people see dancers as lacking skills, and there is an assumption that they can't do anything other than dance for income. This stigma and assumption can even sink into their own self-perceptions, disguising their actual abilities.

When asked if she had considered other employment, Cassius questioned her own marketable skills, saying, "I'm getting up there in stripper years... I'm not 21 anymore. I definitely think about it all the time. At this point I kinda feel like I don't know what I could do or what I'd wanna do because I don't have any real skills. I don't have a good fucking resume... hard to put [my skills] into a normal working scenario." Later in the conversation, she hinted at her remarkable leadership skills in mentoring other dancers and her time management skills in structuring her shifts, and thus by stating that she doesn't "have any *real* skills," she was not wholly talking about a lack of useful abilities. Instead, she was largely indicating a lack of ability to put the skills she did have into a resume and to market them to someone outside of the exotic dance industry. Based on her demonstrated capacities, the contention that she doesn't have real skills appears to be an internalization of the stigma of being an "unskilled" exotic dancer.

*Considering and Pursuing Other Employment*

Despite the faulty belief that dancers are unskilled and some dancers' internalization of this belief, the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine forced dancers to consider how they could support themselves without dancing as an option. Taylor, who is in a nursing program, described contemplating making moves toward her nursing career:

“During the pandemic I was considering... I was trying to look at some CNA jobs... I figured if we ain't making no money at the club, maybe I can work towards my whole nursing thing and get a little experience under my belt... But I wasn't really able to do so because I had issues with childcare. The daycare wasn't open... If I take the job where is my son gonna go? I couldn't do it... I want my career, because nurses are essential, like you definitely need nurses... If something like this was to happen again ya know, it wouldn't affect me too much... like 'bitch we need you to come to work' (laughs) 'we don't need strippers!'”

Unfortunately, Taylor's considerations were halted by a lack of available childcare. She describes wanting to be an essential worker for a level of job security that's desperately lacking in exotic dance since it is not defined as crucial to meeting society's needs (Nelson, Yu, and McBride 2020).

When I asked Cassius if she had thought about doing something else for money during quarantine, she responded, “At this point I should've saved up the money to do what I wanna do which is open a business. I think it would probably be something in the bar/entertainment business just because that's something I know... I haven't saved enough money for that.” She indicated that she had been mentally planning for her business more while the club was closed, but that she was financially unable to pursue her entrepreneurial dreams. She did, however, begin another type of small business: she began selling intimate pictures to her customers on snapchat. A similar move to virtual platforms was seen in all forms of sex work during the pandemic amid



the increased demand for intimacy amid the anxiety of the pandemic and quarantine (Nelson, Yu, and McBride 2020). While virtual sex work may seem unskilled in the way that exotic dance does, it requires considerable time, knowledge, and consistency to support oneself in the way Cassius did (Nelson, Yu, and McBride 2020).

Some dancers already had plans for a career change before COVID-19 hit. When I asked Charm if she had considered other employment she stated, “Yes, but I was doing it before the pandemic ever happened, so I don’t blame it on it. I blame it for not being able to go to class. I was gonna do real estate...” Her pre-pandemic plans to take courses for her real estate license had to be deferred due to the quarantine closures. To support herself, she began working the front desk at an auto shop.

While Charm had her plans deferred due to the pandemic, Rose’s career change was sparked by it. As noted earlier, she made the decision during quarantine to become a cocktail waitress when the club reopened. Quarantine and the lack of government assistance for dancers highlighted her need for a W-2 job with benefits, and, accordingly, she made a switch. She largely relied on her savings for financial support while the club was closed.

Other dancers found employment through family. “I helped my father. He has his own personal business,” Maddy explained when I asked what she did during quarantine.

Bubbles got a job working at a liquor store, as she described when I asked her what she did during quarantine: “Probably like a month in I started working at a liquor store which was fun. Kinda fun... I haven’t had a, like, normal job other than dancing in a long time... but it was fun getting out of the house because I was going crazy being locked up in the house.” She referred to work other than dancing as a “normal job,” partially illustrating the internalized stigma of dancing as not legitimate, skilled work.

*More Work for Less Pay*

Despite the lower level of skill attributed to dancing than to other forms of work that are deemed more legitimate, dancers at Flare earned an average of \$300 to \$600 on a weekend night, and it can be difficult to make that level of income per week in other occupations. Accordingly, dancers who worked in other industries during and after quarantine found that they earned a lot less in their new jobs than they had while dancing. When I asked Rose how cocktail waitressing compares to dancing, she simply exclaimed, “NOPE! (laughs) It don’t compare!” Apparently, the income of a cocktail waitress doesn’t remotely measure up to that of a dancer.

Whether or not dancers’ quarantine jobs required more skill than dancing is up for debate, but some of them certainly involved more effort. When I asked Bubbles the same question about working at the liquor store, she emphatically stated, “It was a lot more work for a lot less pay. Like we ain’t gotta mop here [at Flare]... so it was kinda an eye opener. And then once I got my paycheck I was like ‘I can make this in an hour. If that. Just off of stage [tips]. What’s going on’... I was thinking it’d be like two days a week... we were working like five, six days.” She described the increased responsibilities involved in her new job and the decreased income associated with it in comparison to dancing. In addition to being harder and less lucrative, she noted her new job’s expectation that she temporarily work full-time hours; this is in contrast to the “come and go as you please” policy at Flare, which allows dancers to arrive and exit at any time during the night as long as they pay the floor fee and tip out 20 percent of their earnings.

*Indirect Communication*

The club reopened in May, and few dancers received the news directly from management. Charm, the oldest and most experienced of the dancers in this study, was the only

one to respond when asked who told her the club was reopening. Our manager, Hal, had apparently texted her the week that the club was reopening to let her know the news. The fact that she was one of few dancers told directly by management about the club reopening seems directly related to her status as a veteran dancer.

Most other dancers did not receive a text from management. Instead, Taylor anxiously checked the FaceBook page: “When we first closed, I looked on the page it had said ‘we’ll be back open in two weeks, and then two weeks later it said ‘we’ll let you know when we reopen,’ and then about two months later it was like ‘we back open.’ We were all just sitting there looking stupid checking the page like ‘when are they gonna reopen?’” She described an experience of near-constant anticipation and “looking stupid” that came from a lack of direct communication from her employers. She later noted how she made sure to pass updates along to those who weren’t as diligently checking the page, including me, and I found that this indirect transmission was how most dancers received information about the club’s closure and reopening.

For instance, Cassius also received the information indirectly: “I was actually told from another girl, and then I kinda confronted them [management] about it... No one told me... I think Bubbles said that Hal actually came and told her. I wasn’t just came to and told; I put myself in that. I was like ‘hey I heard this. Is that true?’” The sense of having to pursue the information rather than receiving the information directly from management is epitomized in her statement that she “wasn’t just came to and told,” but instead had to put herself into the circulation of information.

The indirect communication of such vital information points to the relationship that dancers have with their employers. In more standard employment arrangements, employers have a responsibility to ensure that workers know necessary information about the workplace,

including when it will be open. In those arrangements, the spread of information often occurs through formal channels of communication such as a company app. Flare lacks those channels, and this is partially demonstrative of the undefined and unregulated relationship between employer and employee, a characteristic of the precarity that exists in exotic dance (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:53).

### After Reopening

#### *Lap Dances Discontinued*

When asked how they earned the majority of their income dancing prior to the pandemic, many dancers responded that their primary earnings came from selling \$40 lap dances.

According to Taylor, her primary method of earning “[a]t that time [. . .] was usually lap dances.” Cassius stated that she made most of her money by “[s]elling \$40 dances and three for \$100.”

State guidelines didn’t provide any specific guidance on social distancing measures for adult entertainment venues. Rather, like restaurants and bars, they were simply to enforce a six-foot social distance between customers who were not together. Accordingly, Flare and many other strip clubs across the nation made the decision to stop offering lap dances in order to limit contact between customers and dancers. While this seems like a wise move, it must be noted that the club eliminated \$40 single lap dances but continued to offer VIP rooms, more expensive private rooms with dancers sold by time for the purpose of extended lap dances. These rooms have a general minimum of \$200 for 15 minutes with a dancer, and only half of the money from these sales goes to dancers while the other half belongs to the club. This is in contrast to the lap dances wherein a dancer was only required to tip out \$7 per \$40 dance, or \$10 per three for \$100.

In essence, dancers were still allowed to strip and dance in a customer's lap, but the way this occurred shifted from dancers earning the majority of their lap dance sales to dancers keeping only a fraction of their VIP sales after tipping out 20 percent of their overall earnings.

The disappearance of lap dances, a once prominent strip club feature, is noticeable. When I asked Bubbles what the biggest difference she had noticed since we reopened is, she immediately replied that it's "[u]s not doing lap dances." The disappearance of such a fundamental feature of the club and such a major stream of income for dancers is noticeable to nearly everyone. When asked about her first night at work after quarantine, Rose stated, "We couldn't do anything and I didn't know that until I got there... We couldn't do lap dances." There were a few other rules in the first weeks of reopening, such as not touching the stage while dancing, but most lasting was "no lap dances."

When discussing recent changes, Cassius described them thus: "As I know... we aren't allowed to do any dances *except* champagne [rooms]" (emphasis original). "I'm wondering if we're gonna resume [\$40 lap dances]... that's my fear." She lamented being limited to champagne room sales, expressing fears that this limitation won't end.

When describing changes to the job, Taylor tellingly stated, "Well of course now we can't sell lap dances, so you have to push for VIP." She described selling VIP rooms differently from selling lap dances, using the word "push" to indicate a higher degree of effort involved in the sale.

### *Pressure to Push VIP*

Most dancers preferred being able to sell lap dances to only being able to sell VIP rooms. When discussing her experience of dancing since the pandemic, Bubbles solemnly admitted that "...it's harder here now because there's not lap dances. Now we're just doing VIPs... I'd rather

just be doing lap dances.” She indicated not only her preference for selling individual lap dances but also an increased feeling of difficulty associated with their disappearance. On the same topic, Cassius commented, “It’s harder to push... it’s harder for me to sell the champagne rooms... I don’t know if it’s in my head... but I’ve always had a hard time selling the champagne rooms at Flare, and it definitely hasn’t gotten any easier since the COVID.” She began by describing the sale of champagne rooms as a “push,” which reinforced her sentiment that selling them is harder than selling lap dances.

When asked how her job has changed since reopening, Taylor noted that “[y]ou really gotta hustle to sell a VIP because ain’t nothing else going on... You know you got some out there but I mean come on. How many guys are gonna pay \$200 for a 15 minute dance.” She referenced the elimination of lap dances as an earning method with her statement that “ain’t nothing else going on.” Taylor described the sale of VIP rooms as a “hustle,” which is similar to Cassius’s and her own previous description of this sale as a “push.” She also pointed to the difficulty of finding customers who are willing to pay the more expensive rate.

Maddy concurred with this difficulty of finding customers. When discussing competition in the club, she explained why it has increased in response to the elimination of lap dances: “When we could do lap dances it was only \$40 for one. Where the guy, if he did one lap dance, he might do 2 or 3 with other girls. Now that we do just VIPs, they cost more. Our lowest is what? \$200? So most guys only feel comfortable doing one. So you’re competing for the whole customer instead of just for \$40.” She noted that the higher price of VIP rooms results in fewer dancers being able to make money from each customer, as customers with a limited budget can now only afford one dancer’s services.

*Fewer Customers*

In addition to the increased difficulty of making money, there are fewer customers in the club on a nightly basis. When I asked Charm how the nightly number of customers has changed since reopening, she exclaimed, “Oh dramatically! A lot less customers.” According to her, the number of customers has drastically declined since reopening. To the same question, Bubbles responded, “It’s a little less. Less people, don’t you think? Less random people just for you to walk up to.” By “random people” she meant customers who are available, and she noted fewer of them in the club. She notably referred to customers simply as “people,” and this perception of customers as normal people appears to be a typical attitude within a social club, whereas in other types of clubs, dancers usually hold more negative opinions of the patrons (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009).

#### *Reliance on Regulars*

The decrease in customers is disturbing but not equally so for all dancers. During quarantine when the club was closed, some began relying on their regular customers, club patrons with whom they’ve interacted before, and this reliance continued after reopening. Discussing how quarantine impacted her personally, Cassius stated, “I’m lucky I have really great customers who helped me out and sent me money.” Largely through her sale of intimate pictures on Snapchat, Cassius’s customers became a system of financial support while the club was closed. Other dancers experienced similar support from customers without the formal exchange of content or services. For example, Bubbles commented, “I would have people send me money, like customers, and it helped.” She noted that her customers’ financial support helped her make ends meet during quarantine.

When I discussed the biggest impact of the pandemic with our manager, Hal, he condescendingly remarked that “COVID has made more girls get sugar daddies and outside

acquaintances.” By Sugar Daddies and outside acquaintances, he is referring to customers’ giving dancers money in some fashion outside of the club. Customers’ lending financial support to dancers outside of the strip club is reminiscent of the special relationship that Erickson and Tewksbury (2000:287) identify between dancers and Sugar Daddies, a distinct type of strip-club patron.

When discussing the proportion of her income that comes from regular customers with whom she’s interacted before as compared to that coming from new customers, Bubbles stated, “I have regulars. And they’ve kinda been loyal. You know they’ve come back... them two Tuesdays [best nights since reopening] I did, it was all customers that I got to come in... That’s what I’m saying, if you have people come in, it’s really good. That’s the only way. Kinda.” She described her regulars as loyal, and the end of her statement indicated that she has been finding it more difficult to make money from new customers than from the regular customers she personally invites to see her at the club.

#### *Influx of New Dancers and Competition*

In addition to a decrease in customers, there has been an increase in dancers. Closures in nearby states prompted an influx of new dancers, leading to increased competition, epitomizing the uniquely individualistic work environment caused by precarious work (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:53). Charm and I were discussing how the number of dancers has changed when she said that “[i]t’s changed a lot. We getting all kinds of new girls from Florida and from Louisiana. Anytime something like that happens, they always wanna flood our way.” She indicated an increase in dancers, particularly in new dancers coming from states facing strip-club closures.

Because of the large number of new dancers, the environment became more competitive. When I asked how her relationship with other dancers has changed, Charm noted, “I think



COVID had a bit to do with it. And greed... Of course there's more competition when it comes to the new people that's coming in town... They wanna make money. We all wanna make money." The increase in dancers has thus led to more competition between dancers in the club. I asked Maddy the same question, and she was unsure. When prompted with sample descriptions of relationships--friendly, competitive, hostile--she responded, "I feel like it is more of a competition now." She went on to explain that this was partially due to the increased stakes associated with selling VIP rooms and "competing for the whole customer."

When asked whether it has been easier or harder to find available customers to approach, Bubbles declared, "If they didn't [come for someone], another girl got him. Which, we had a lot of girls tonight." She suggested that there are fewer customers who aren't already "taken" by another dancer simply because there are noticeably more dancers. The influx of new dancers has thus led to there being fewer customers per dancer, in an environment that was already more sparse with customers than usual. This increased competition, and the individualism sparked by it, is one of the characteristics associated with precarity in exotic dance (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:53)

### Going Forward

#### *Inconsistent Earnings*

Since Flare reopened following the mandated quarantine shutdown, lap dance sales, which previously comprised a significant portion of dancers' earnings, were discontinued; the number of customers entering the club has declined, leading to a continued reliance on regulars and Sugar Daddies; and new dancers have contributed to increased competition. Rather than

simply lowering dancers' earnings, these factors have combined to produce an impact on income that varies greatly.

Discussing changes to her nightly income, Taylor explained that “[i]n the beginning it was kinda iffy... recently it’s been more beneficial.” She described the initial uncertainty she had in returning to work with the changes implemented following the shutdown. This uncertainty subsided due to success she’s had in selling VIP rooms, largely to her regular customers. Taylor indicated that on average her income has increased by about \$100-\$200 per shift due to the more expensive sales, but there are still good nights and bad nights.

When asked about her recent earnings, Bubbles gave a similar account of fluctuation, saying, “It’s been good... Well, it depends... The first 2 weeks were horrible and then the next weeks were fairly good, and then the next week was really good. And then it kinda went down. But I think, because the whole COVID spiked back up and everybody got scared.” She illustrated how her income has lacked predictability by describing the ups and downs from week to week.

For some dancers, however, there have been no notable ups to match the unavoidable downs. Charm and I also discussed her income since the pandemic, and she stated, “To me, it’s been horrible.” As someone who’s been in the exotic dance industry for over 20 years, Charm has danced through some difficult economic times including the 2008 financial crisis, and thus she’s intimately familiar with the typical ups and downs of dancing. Her description of her income in this situation as “horrible” suggests that even she was surprised by the drastic change.

It is easy to understand why dancers' earnings might be reduced following the pandemic: they have fewer avenues of making money and are keeping a lower proportion of the sales they do make; there are fewer customers to go around; and there are more dancers to compete over

them. It is less easy to grasp why dancers are actually reporting destabilization and fluctuations in their incomes rather than merely a drop. Cassius pointed to a plausible explanation for the inconsistency. When I asked her how her income has changed, she said, “Gosh... I don’t know, but it’s changed. I feel like timing is not the way it used to be... I can usually figure out some type of pattern that I can work to help me make money, and I can’t seem to pinpoint one now... I can’t figure out a structure... It’s all weird after the COVID.”

Cassius mentioned that she typically can find a “timing,” “pattern,” or “structure” to the way she moves through her nightly shifts. This notion of attempting to find a temporal pattern to facilitate earnings, allowing her to be in the right place at the right time, was not discussed by other dancers in interviews. However in later conversations, many confirmed that it resonated with them. Cassius went on to describe her notion of timing as a sense of pacing herself through the evening from when she is getting dressed to her first stage set to the amount of time she spends with a customer before moving on to talk to someone else. Through managing her time this way, she was able to gain some semblance of control over her earnings. With so many changes to the factors that contribute to “timing,” it is easy to see how such a fragile structure falls apart, leaving dancers with little means by which to control or predict their income.

### *Financial Uncertainty*

Dancers were impacted by the pandemic in a multitude of ways, some of which were positive: for example, being able to spend more time with their children, getting closer to friends, and having time to focus on school. There is not room for all of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on exotic dancers in this thesis; Due to the elimination of lap dances, the decrease in customers, the increased in new dancers, and the income uncertainty fueled by all the previous factors, one of the most negative and lasting effects has been financial worry and struggle.

When Charm and I talked about the reasons for her persistence in dancing, she said, “One, I like it. I’ve done it for so long it’s kinda natural. Two, money. The money is pretty good... Being able to pay for things I want in cash and not have to worry about it. I mean we’ve got to worry about it now because of the way everything is, but normally.” After dancing for over 20 years, worrying about money seems unprecedented to her, but “because of the way everything is” during the COVID-19 pandemic, that worry is now a reality.

When asked how the pandemic personally affected her, Cassius illuminated the dark side: “It affected me. Ooooh, it affected me badly. I had to go without. I was late on my phone bills, not just one month, two months. It was like ‘how will I be able to pay this when I gotta pay this?’” She described having to “go without,” making late payments, and prioritizing where to spend her extremely limited funds. Cassius’s struggle is not unique.

When asked the same question, Bubbles went into even further detail: “At first it was hard. Like uh, I got my car payment pushed off for a month. And then we got our rent pushed off for a month... we got, actually, both car payments... if I’m gonna do a whole family thing, we got both of em pushed off. It was so hard. It was a little hard. We got them pushed off, the bills. luckily, because we weren’t working... if you don’t work, you ain’t got no money. It was hard, and I can’t even imagine if it does that again.” She described deferring several bill payments. She had been used to the immediate, nightly income of dancing, and accordingly didn’t have much in the way of a contingency plan if something happened to her job. Bubbles ended her comments about the impact of the pandemic on the note of uncertainty about the future. This uncertainty demonstrates how increasingly precarious exotic dancing is during this time.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

In previous chapters, I introduced and described the aims this study (Chapter 1); relayed extensive background information on exotic dancing (Chapter 2); elaborated on my use of phenomenologically-informed modifications ethnographic methods (Chapter 3); and presented the findings of an investigation into the following questions: What do exotic dancers experience? How did the COVID-19 quarantine affect exotic dancers? How is the pandemic affecting exotic dancing? What has been the overall impact of the pandemic and quarantine on exotic dancers? (Chapter 4). This final chapter presents a discussion of the findings related to those questions.

Prior to the pandemic, the work of exotic dancers involved differential perceptions of power along with taxing emotional labor that they often used drinking to accomplish. During quarantine, when Flare closed for two months, dancers were denied forms of pandemic financial assistance, compelling many of them to temporarily work in other, less profitable jobs. After the club reopened, lap dances were eliminated as an earning method to foster social distancing, pressuring dancers to sell higher-priced VIP rooms. The elimination of lap dances, combined with a decrease in customers and an increase in new dancers, led to increased competition among

dancers and a reliance on regulars and Sugar Daddies. They experienced more prominent financial precarity as a result of the destabilizing effects of the pandemic on their working environment.

### What Do Exotic Dancers Experience?

There is an extensive history of literature on exotic dancers that discusses the power relations entailed by the work (Barton 2002:585-6; Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009:29; Bruckert 2002:8-9; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006:224-6; Frank 2007:504-5), and the topic was brought up in my interviews with dancers. Cassius's memorable statement, "It's up to you... You can either use or be used..." suggests that she views dancers' empowerment in a strip club as a matter of perception and choice.

Previous research has suggested that feelings of empowerment in exotic dance decline over the course of a dancer's career (Barton 2002), but Cassius's statements on the topic do not reflect this decline, as she commented that she may not have chosen using over being used earlier in her career. Empowerment in strip clubs may not be quite as clear cut as perceiving one's power and choosing to act to maintain it, but Cassius's comments beg for further investigation into the role of perception in experiences of power.

Barton (2002) defined experiences of exploitation and empowerment in exotic dance in relation to dancers' perceptions of themselves, finding that compounding effects of working in a strip club erode a dancer's self-esteem over time. Barton's (2002) conclusions are echoed in Maddy's concession that we are "halfway" exploited. Whereas Cassius emphasized her ability to choose an empowered position, Maddy's focus was on "swallowing her pride," suggesting a concern for her self-perception similar to the dancers in Barton's (2002) study. Their

dramatically different takes on exploitation confirm previous research findings that dancers can experience both oppression and liberation in a strip club (Barton 2002; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006). The differential views also point back to the role of perception in defining experiences as exploitative or empowering: it may simply depend on how the dancer in question perceives her own experience.

Dancers encourage customers to tip or purchase services by being friendly and fun. Maintaining this air of sociability while being internally focused on profit is a part of emotional labor that dancers enact. Emotional work involves altering one's "feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild 1983:7); research indicates this labor can come at a high cost (Barton 2002:593). As Taylor explained, "[I]t's just a little bit easier drinking..." pointing to the instrumental use of substances that Lavin (2017:299) identifies as normalized within a strip-club environment.

Taylor went on to explain her drinking further, stating, "It's easier to seem like you care...." Seeming like you care is part of the necessary emotional labor of dancers, and drinking simply makes performing that labor easier. This implies that dancers drink less out of a genuine desire to have fun and party and more out of a work-related responsibility to appear as though they are having fun and partying. Rather than drinking to enjoy its effects, dancers at Flare drink in the service of their socially acceptable goal to increase their earning potential, which Lavin identifies as the distinction between recreational and instrumental substance use (2017:299). In similar fashion to Deshotels and Forsyth's (2006) use of the term "strategic flirting" to refer to dancers' flirtatious enactment of emotional labor, drinking on the job may be viewed as strategic drinking.

While it is concerning that dancers feel the need to drink in order to put up with their customers, it is very encouraging that they don't feel this need to drink outside of work. Instead of being a destructive behavior that is damaging their lives, for these women, drinking is a normalized mechanism to facilitate their emotional labor, a standard workplace tool. Akin to many effective tools in more conventional jobs--hammers in construction, knives in cooking, needles in tailoring--instrumental drinking in exotic dance has the potential to be harmful. As with using conventional tools, the potential for harm from consuming alcohol must be managed through responsible use. While instrumental drinking is normalized, excessive intoxication is frowned upon, and dancers tend to drink moderately most of the time. As Lavin (2017:302) notes, substance use serves a useful function in a strip club and only occasionally turns to abuse. When used responsibly, drinking, like tools, becomes a largely safe way to make the worker's efforts more successful.

#### How Did Quarantine Affect Exotic Dancers?

In the two months that Flare was closed, dancers could not receive the same pandemic financial assistance afforded to other independent contractors. Rose stated that she decided to become a cocktail waitress when she couldn't "receive unemployment for being a dancer, even though they were giving self-employed people unemployment. When I realized dancers were not included, I decided it was time to get a W-2 job." Her statement that dancers were excluded from unemployment benefits has been echoed by other dancers, but it doesn't have an identifiable legal basis.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act established Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), extending unemployment benefits to the self-employed and



gig workers (congress.gov). According to the CARES Act, only those who are able to telework for pay and those who are on paid sick leave are federally excluded from PUA; however, eligibility is largely up to the states, and the state in which this research was conducted has issued no official guidance on unemployment eligibility, and thus it cannot be determined whether the state is intentionally excluding dancers from unemployment.

It is clear, though, that dancers and strip club owners were actively excluded from Small Business Administration (SBA) loans for which they might have otherwise been eligible. Among those ineligible for SBA loans are businesses that “[p]resent live performances of a prurient sexual nature; or derive directly or indirectly more than *de minimis* gross revenue through the sale of products or services, or the presentation of any depictions or displays, of a prurient sexual nature” (federalregister.gov). It is quite possible that this state is also intentionally excluding dancers from unemployment in the same way they are excluded from SBA loans. Regardless of what the case may be, the definitive exclusion of dancers from SBA loans and the lack of clear unemployment eligibility requirements combined to give dancers the impression that they were not welcome to pandemic assistance.

Discrimination such as this against dancers is not new. In the same fashion as women who engage in more explicitly sexual forms of sex work, exotic dancers are faced with the “whore’s stigma” that Hannen and Bruckert (2012:57) describe as a form of taint that draws negative attention to and evaluation of sex workers. Prurient business owners and dancers were given the sense that their work is not deserving of social benefits during a pandemic and a subsequent economic crisis. Dancers’ overt exclusion from SBA loans at this time epitomized the tangible consequences of the whore’s stigma. Notably, a lack of benefits is a key characteristic of precarious work (Fogel and Quinlan 2011).

Since dancers couldn't receive SBA loans and didn't think they should bother applying for unemployment, they temporarily turned to other employment. Many found that their new jobs were less profitable than dancing. According to Bubbles, her job working at a liquor store "was a lot more work for a lot less pay." This supports previous research indicating that dancing is increasingly a rational economic choice for most women and the occupation wherein they can profit the most. When discussing the reason women become strippers, Forsyth and Deshotels (1996:112) state that "[t]he choice of stripping as a livelihood was made with the knowledge that more could be made stripping than would be possible in a more legitimate occupation." The experience of working temporarily in more legitimate but less profitable jobs reinforced this well-documented knowledge about stripping.

#### How Is the Pandemic Affecting Exotic Dancing?

Due to social distancing guidelines, lap dances were no longer offered at Flare, resulting in the sale of higher-priced VIP rooms becoming the primary earning method for dancers. As Taylor stated, "Well of course now we can't sell lap dances, so you have to push for VIP." It is interesting that she uses the words "push for VIP" in contrast to "sell lap dances." She and other dancers often refer to selling VIP rooms as "pushing" or "hustling," indicating the increased difficulty, and possibly different interaction strategies, associated with selling the more luxury rooms. Dancers find it harder to sell these rooms--starting at \$200 for 15 minutes in the room--than to sell individual dances for \$40 each.

While lap dances, and the closely related table dances, are the focus of many academic works on stripping, very little research touches on VIP rooms. In their 2009 typology of strip clubs, Bradley-Engen and Ulmer suggest that VIP rooms are most commonly found as a primary

earning method in certain, more hostile and sex-oriented clubs (40), but they do not describe differences between dancers' experiences selling VIP rooms and selling lap dances. It remains to be determined whether there are different interaction strategies involved in the sale of VIP rooms from that of lap dances and whether there is a marked difference between selling dances and "pushing" VIPs.

Selling VIP rooms is more difficult than selling lap dances in part because they are more expensive, and the price limits the number of available customers with a budget high enough to afford the rooms. In the words of Maddy, "Now that we do just VIPs, they cost more. Our lowest is what? \$200? So most guys only feel comfortable doing one. So you're competing for the whole customer instead of just for \$40." She describes selling the high-priced rooms as "competing for the whole customer," indicating the increased difficulty of and competition associated with selling VIP rooms to customers with limited budgets.

Previously with a budget of \$200, a customer could afford to buy \$40 lap dances with five dancers, whereas now he can only afford to buy a short VIP room with a single dancer; his entire budget and value as a customer will only benefit one dancer when it previously could have contributed to the earnings of multiple dancers. This reduced plurality of a customer's budget combines with the increased difficulty of selling the higher priced rooms to further limit dancers' ability to make money.

In addition, a customer's ability to afford only one VIP room with one dancer rather than several lap dances with several dancers further decreases the comradery amongst dancers, which was already declining in the industry before the pandemic (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:54). This is leading to more competition between dancers. Now that customers don't have the option to purchase less-expensive lap dances, dancers less frequently have the option to share a customer.

As Maddy indicates with her “competing for the whole customer” comment, selling VIP rooms is typically all or nothing, which adds to competition among dancers. Such competition and individualism are characteristic of the atmosphere produced by precarious work, which is becoming increasingly pervasive in the exotic-dance industry (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:53).

The new emphasis on VIP sales has brought to light the facts that it is harder to sell more expensive services to customers, and that when selling luxury services, fewer dancers can profit off a single customer with a limited budget. These facts, combined with a decrease in overall customers, has resulted in more girls relying on regular customers. As Bubbles explains, “I have regulars... if you have people come in, it’s really good. That’s the only way. Kinda.” She refers to inviting her regulars to see her as “the only way[,] [k]inda” to make really good money. At Flare, regular customers, those who have purchased a dancers’ services before, often have an ongoing yet cursory relationship with dancers wherein the dancer gives the customer her phone number for the sole purpose of inviting him to see her when she is working.

In some cases this relationship goes a bit further. The manager, Hal, stated that “COVID has made more girls get sugar daddies and outside acquaintances,” referring to instances wherein the customer-dancer relationship extends beyond the context of the club. Erickson and Tewksbury (2000:287) identify Sugar Daddies as a type of regular customer who has a deep, extended relationship with dancers that affords him a higher level of intimacy than that which is granted to other types of customers. This intimacy is the result of “trust based on the relationship that exists outside the strip club” (Erickson and Tewksbury 2000:288). Additionally, many girls reported receiving monetary benefits from regulars during the quarantine period when the club was closed. Their financial support outside of the context of the club, sometimes outside of the

exchange of services, qualifies these men as Sugar Daddies and suggests that these relationships can be a system of support that dancers can maintain in the absence of a profitable club.

### What Has Been the Overall Impact of the Pandemic and Quarantine on Exotic Dancers?

Dancers have turned to regulars and Sugar Daddies because their typical income based on selling relatively low-priced dances to multiple customers has been replaced with pushing more expensive VIP rooms to fewer available customers. Dancers' reliance on Sugar Daddies demonstrates that, outside of regular customers, exotic dancers' working environments, income, and lives have become more unpredictable. Cassius describes this, saying, "I feel like timing is not the way it used to be... I can usually figure out some type of pattern that I can work to help me make money, and I can't seem to pinpoint one now... I can't figure out a structure... It's all weird after the COVID."

In the past, it was possible to find and create patterns to organize a night at work in a strip club. For instance, a dancer could have a monetary goal for the night in mind and pinpoint the number of lap dances she would need to sell to reach that goal and how frequently she would need to sell a dance in order to meet her goal by the end of the shift. Additionally, she would know temporal and demographic factors such as what time the club is most crowded, what type of customers are present at what times, and when she would have the best opportunity to sell the most dances. Knowledge of these factors allows dancers to organize their time.

According to Cassius, this organization is more difficult now, and that's because those factors that go into planning it have fundamentally changed in ways that aren't easily quantified. Many dancers' primary earning method has been eliminated, and the number of available customers has decreased, leaving very little basis upon which a dancer can predict her nightly

income or structure her time towards achieving her monetary goals. This income uncertainty is a key defining characteristic of precarious work (Fogel and Quinlan 2011:53).

The disappearance of predictability from dancing at Flare has widespread consequences, but the largest is financial uncertainty. Charm described a fundamental change when recounting why she continues dancing: “The money is pretty good... Being able to pay for things I want in cash and not have to worry about it. I mean we’ve got to worry about it now because of the way everything is, but normally.” After over 20 years of dancing, her main reason to continue is that dancing allows her to not worry about money.

Previous research confirms that dancers usually enter the occupation because it is the most profitable choice (Forsyth and Deshotels 1996), often freeing the dancer from significant levels of financial stress. However, Charm qualifies her statement, adding that dancers have to worry about it now. By “now, because of the way everything is,” she is clearly referring to the ongoing viral pandemic causing all of these changes to her working environment. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing guidelines, exotic dancing has become more uncertain, unpredictable, and precarious, leading to Charm’s experiencing financial worry in a way she never had previously. The pandemic has altered previously existing patterns that structured dancers earnings and made them somewhat predictable, and this has resulted in financial worry.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that perception may play a larger role in experiences of empowerment than previous research has suggested, positing the role of subjective awareness, rather than agency and constraint, as a more productive focus for research on exploitation in

exotic dance. Challenging the stigma of dancers as drunks and party girls, it can be concluded that dancers at Flare drink instrumentally to facilitate the emotional demands of the job and that these women are workers meeting the demands of their workplace with the available, normalized resources. Additionally, the marginalization of dancers in provisions for pandemic financial assistance is illustrative of the stigma of sex work and led to many of them seeking temporary employment during the quarantine period. The fact that many dancers found their pandemic jobs to be less profitable than stripping reinforces the notion that dancing is a rational economic choice.

The elimination of lap dances as a social-distancing measure has had destabilizing effects on working conditions including increased pressure to “push” VIP rooms and increased competition “for the whole customer.” This destabilization has caused a reliance on regular customers and Sugar Daddies who may form a system of financial support in the absence of new customers in the club. Patterns that previously structured dancers’ earnings and made them somewhat predictable have disappeared, making dancing more unpredictable and uncertain and leading dancers to worry about money.

\_\_\_\_\_ This thesis presents the findings of an ethnographic case study of a single exotic dance club with quotations from only six participants. As such, the applicability of these results is limited. In addition, this work focuses on the perspectives of female exotic dancers who work at the club. Further research incorporating data gleaned from a larger amount and variety of employees would paint a more holistic picture of COVID-19’s impact on strip clubs. Future research could explore the idea that drinking makes it easier to meet the emotional demands of exotic dancing. Studies might also investigate Cassius’ notion of “use or be used” and the role of perception in conceptions of power. Additionally, future research might include multi-club

analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine, and social distancing guidelines to explore their effect on exotic dancers in different social and cultural contexts.

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**Appendix A: Participant Bios***Taylor*

Name: Taylor      Age: 27      Race: “Black and a lil white”      Number of Kids: 1

Relationship Status: In a relationship      Notes: “we’re just together.. all there is”

Education: Cosmetology certification; 1st year of nursing program

Employment: Just dancing currently

Started Dancing at Age: 20      Reason: waitressing grew old      Number of Clubs Worked: 3

Details: took a break and then returned to dancing after having a child

Fav Detail about Fav Club: “made a lot of money”

During COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine: did nothing mostly, cooked a lot

*Cassius*

Name: Cassius      Age: 28      Race: white      Number of Kids: 1

Relationship Status: In a relationship      Notes: Previously dated a former strip club owner

Education: 1 year of college      Employment: Just Dancing Currently

Started Dancing at Age: 21      Reason: industry connections      Number of Clubs Worked: 9

Details: cried at first audition

Fav Detail about Fav Club: party atmosphere

During COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine: sold pictures and videos via snapchat; after interviews, took temporary leave from Flare for drug addiction treatment

### *Charm*

Name: Charm                      Age: 44                      Race: white                      Number of Kids: 4

Relationship Status: Single at time of interview                      Notes: recently remarried

Education: Medical assistant and sociology                      Employment: runs office at auto glass shop

Started Dancing at Age: 17 (not legal)                      Reason: a job was offered                      Number of Clubs: 50+

Details: unknowingly pulled into a strip club parking lot to check pager, was invited in, and accepted the offer enthusiastically

Fav Detail about Fav Club: good money before 2008 economy crash, never was the same

During COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine: gardening/ yard work, began auto glass job

### *Rose*

Name: Rose                      Age: 29                      Race: Mixed                      Number of Kids: 2

Relationship Status: Single                      Notes: switched from dancing to cocktail waitressing while finishing school

Education: Last year of psychology degree                      Employment: Cocktail waitress currently

Started Dancing at Age: 22                      Reason: eviction notice                      Number of Clubs: 4

Details: was handed an eviction notice the day after finding out that an old friend had started dancing, successfully made \$900 in 4 days and avoided eviction

Fav Detail about Fav Club: family feel, lack of drama

During COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine: time with kids, school kept brain functioning, switch from dancing to cocktail waitressing to focus on studies.

### *Maddy*

Name: Maddy                      Age: 27                      Race: white                      Number of Kids: 2

Relationship Status: Single                      Notes: one of the newest dancers at time of study

Education: Graduated high school                      Employment: Just dancing currently

Started Dancing at Age: 26      Reason: Needed money      Number of Clubs: 1

Details: “I got out of long a relationship, needed money and my sister worked at club”

Fav Detail Club: schedule flexibility “we don’t have a set schedule”

During COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine: stayed home with children and helped with father’s business

*Bubbles*

Name: Bubbles      Age: 27      Race: white      Number of Kids: 0

Relationship Status: In a relationship      Notes: relationship is non-monogamous

Education: Graduated high school      Employment: worked at a liquor store during pandemic

Started Dancing at Age: 22      Reason: friends in the industry told her it was good money

Number of Clubs: 7      Details: travels to out of town clubs “it’s good to bounce around”

Fav Detail about Fav Club: large, fun time

During COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine: started working nearly full time at a liquor store 1 month into quarantine.