

CHROME, CONVERSATIONS, AND INTERTEXTUALITY: THE COUNTER
NARRATIVE OF POLE DANCERS ON INSTAGRAM

by

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, this thesis is dedicated to strippers and all sex workers. I owe my passion for pole dance to the strippers who invented the art form of pole dance long before it received the mainstream recognition it has today. Before I had the courage to take a pole class, I used to frequent the strip club and watch many of you perform incredible routines full of strength, grace and confidence — this eventually inspired me to try to embody these characteristics in the studio. Though I haven't always gotten it right, my goal is to open up conversations that center sex work in order to progress toward a more inclusive society that is safer and more just for *all* sex workers.

This is also my love letter for the pole community. May we continue to collectively grow into a community that is inclusive for all. May we continue to recognize, question, and unlearn ingrained whorephobia and other unconscious biases.

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I. INTRODUCTION: A WHOLE NEW WORLD, OR A REFLECTION OF THE OLD ONE?

I first immersed myself in the Instagram pole community by following the instructors and students of the studio that I attended. My feed became flooded with images of bodies and gender expressions with thought-provoking captions, many of which expressed agency and body autonomy through written rhetoric in ways that were shockingly different from the patriarchal and heteronormative culture that I knew. Growing up, I was taught that there were only two gender expressions, and that the female body existed merely for the pleasure of the male gaze, so I was surprised, but also delighted, to see so many diverse individuals post about their pride in pole dance. I perceived this online community as a paradox of both a public space and safe place to explore identities, sexuality, and the relationship between body and mind. It is an online subculture that I am now currently active in as both creator and observer.

The Instagram platform is a unique space where users can share intimate experiences, if they choose, with a larger audience than just immediate communities and social circles. In addition to images and videos, the platform allows its users to add up to 2,200 characters of text within captions. Even more discourse opportunities exist within the comments sections of the images and videos (for better or for worse). My personal experience on the social networking site is that it has provided me with an opportunity to learn about different sub-cultures, particularly strippers and other forms of sex workers within the greater pole community, through a combination of both visual and written rhetoric posted on the platform.

Nearly a decade after my first foray into Instagram, my personal Instagram community has grown beyond just pole instructors and out-of-the-pole-closet hobbyists and now includes career strippers and advocates for sex worker rights. In particular, this network expansion has helped me recognize my own subconscious whorephobia (i.e. a hatred, disgust or fear of sex workers). Thus, my Instagram network expansion forced me to confront my own misunderstandings of sex workers that are ingrained so deeply into American society that many individuals subconsciously participate in them by perpetrating a narrative that de-humanizes sex workers, claiming they are objects undeserving of rights and dignity. Interrogating this master narrative will be the focus of Chapter Two.

Regardless of the seemingly societal progressiveness, the pole community on Instagram is not a utopia immune to the whorephobia of the dominant narrative. Even among individuals whom you would presume know better are people who insist that sex work is not real work and that sex workers are not deserving of rights or dignity. Consequently, much of the rhetoric of the pole dance Instagram community privileges studio pole dancers over strippers, despite the fact that what is taught in pole studios often mimics a dance form that was created by strippers. The past prevalence of the #notastripper hashtag in my own pole dance Instagram newsfeed implied that the pole community reflected larger society's negative views of sex work, despite the community's insistence on body autonomy.

Once I confronted my own internalized whorephobia, I began to critically challenge it in myself and in my community by becoming curious about the narratives of

sex work told by everyone within the larger pole dance community on Instagram. It is apparent that recreational pole dance is becoming more mainstream; new pole studios are opening up across the world, and Jennifer Lopez performed a pole dance routine on prime-time television during the 2019 Super Bowl halftime show. Thus, it is more important than ever to examine if the growing popularity of recreational pole dance subverts or enforces the societal whorephobia that perpetuates sex work stigma.

I realize that I must take off my rose-colored glasses in order to honestly and critically examine the pole community's Instagram rhetoric. This has made my original thesis intention shift from examining the storytelling of the pole community as a whole to a new focus on elevating the lived experiences and counter narratives of sex working pole dancers.

For the sake of this project, I will use the term "counter narrative" loosely to name and contextualize the storytelling that pole dancers share on the Instagram platform regarding their own lived experiences with sex work. The decreasing popularity of the #notastripper hashtag and increasing acceptance of the #yesastripper hashtag on Instagram suggests that the storytelling of lived experiences shared by sex-workers on the platform have had a similar impact on others as they have had on me.

Research Questions

- What does Instagram discourse analysis of recreational non-sex working pole dancers say about these pole hobbyists' perspectives of career strippers?
- Which parts of the master narrative that demands the policing of the bodies and finances of individuals outside the hegemony (which consists of affluent, white,

CIS-het people) are subverted by the pole community's overall rhetoric on Instagram? Which parts of this master narrative, if any, are further enforced by pole hobbyists?

- How are strippers affected by recreational studio pole dance becoming more socially acceptable?
- How are career strippers responding to the aforementioned master narrative that privileges recreational pole dancers?

Research Design and Methods

I selected six different Instagram posts and used James Paul Gee's discourse analysis framework to piece together the narrative regarding sex work of the pole dance community on Instagram. Gee provides my research seven discourse analysis building tasks (defined in detail in Chapter Three): significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge (17). Gee furthermore provides me with six tools of inquiry for analyzing how the workings of the above seven building tasks enact in the world to create cultures and institutions. These tools are 1) situated meanings; 2) social languages; 3) figured worlds; 4) Discourses; 5) Conversations; and 6) intertextuality. These tools will also be defined in detail in Chapter Three. I embrace Gee's notion that language is always political (10) and acknowledge that all seven of Gee's building blocks are at play when it comes to the rhetoric of the pole dancers on Instagram.

For my analysis I utilize a highly contextual analytical framework that includes the visual rhetoric of images in context with the written components that surround them

— this includes image captions, user names (handles), and account bio information. Therefore, I focus and queer the specific building blocks of significance, identities, politics and connections by primarily using the tools of Discourses, Conversations, figured worlds and intertextuality. Since my analysis is highly contextual, I pay special attention to Gee’s building block of intertextuality.

I am committed to being inclusive and diverse in my research, so for my analysis I selected Instagram posts from accounts that include individuals of different proximities to pole dance and sex work: strippers, pole instructors, and pole hobbyists. Furthermore, I acknowledge that I cannot speak for career strippers despite the fact that I am attempting to piece together a narrative through the incorporation of several strippers’ own stories on the Instagram platform. Therefore, in Chapter Four, I also discuss my Instagram analysis results with a sex work industry labor organizer to ensure that I do not completely project my own biases onto my findings.

Further Ethical Considerations

As a member of the pole community, I know the harmful stigmas and stereotypes that surround it firsthand. It is my priority to be respectful of the individuals that I represent within my own research because I sincerely respect the personal boundaries of all of my community’s members. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to me to only include posts from accounts that are public in order to eliminate violating the privacy of private Instagram users. I have confirmed that all posts and Instagram handles mentioned, researched and analyzed in my work belong to users with public profiles to ensure that I

do not out anyone with a private profile. This project was also approved by the IRB (#7999).

Review of Existing Literature

Considering the unconventional nature of my area of inquiry, it comes as no surprise that there isn't much scholarship regarding the Instagram pole community within the field of rhetoric and composition. However, many parallel studies have been published on Instagram rhetoric analysis, online counter narratives, and the theory of whorephobia.

Pole Dancing

In "The Future of Pole Dance" Joshua Paul Dale uses queer theory and his own experiences as a white male pole dancer in Japan in order to argue that pole, as a recreational sport, was invented for women by women to escape what Laura Mulvey coined as the heteronormative male gaze. Mulvey originally detailed her male gaze theory in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," writing, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female... In their traditionalist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (837). Dale suggests that this active and passiveness sexual imbalance still exists within the pole community, but argues that it transcends the traditional role of male as active and female as passive and that the performative aspect of pole dance is *not only* for the heteronormative male gaze, but for the gaze of an impersonal, "unincarnated other" (387). This unincarnated other, as theorized by Dale, is

a different kind of spectator with a more balanced and less objectifying vantage point since it is not inherently performed by women for men. This is an interesting theory for me to build upon when considering the Instagram audience in my research. Much like Mulvey's assertion of the male gaze in cinema, the observation of pole dance Instagram posts are also uni-dimensional between performer and observer, because the Instagram platform is a type of stage. While online pole dance communities are discussed as blogs and websites in Dale's work, social media has evolved since Dale's article was published nearly a decade ago. Instagram is not mentioned.

Much of the feminist scholarship that I was able to find sought to separate pole fitness from stripping, or used a feminist lens to assert that pole dance and sex-work are problematic due to sexual exploitation. Sine Nørholm Just and Sara Louise Muhr are self-proclaimed feminists who did just that in their work "Holding on to Both Ends of a Pole: Empowering Feminine Sexuality and Reclaiming Feminist Emancipation." Just and Muhr examine the relationship between sexual ambiguities and female empowerment within the pole realm, and ultimately claim that pole may be empowering for some, but that it is also inherently exploitative because it is "interrupted by an objectification beyond [the pole dancer's] control" (20). In other words, this feminist work that explores pole dance perpetrates the stigmas that surround the body autonomy of sex workers. The authors conclude by saying, "the limits of the discourse of sexual empowerment may be clear, but it also becomes possible to reclaim this discourse for a project of broader and more radical feminist emancipation" (20). My work will embody that broader and more radical

feminist emancipation, adding a less whorephobic perspective to the conversation by being inclusive of sex worker narratives.

Whorephobia

The history of othering women for their sexual practices has a history as extensive as sex work itself, so it is not surprise that the whorephobic mentality of slut-shaming existed long before the Internet. In “Dirty Talk: A History of ‘Slut,’” Nancy Wilson explains that the meaning of the word “slut” has since been used to describe unclean and improper sexuality amongst women (48) and concludes that the word ‘slut’ functions as a way for men to “cast women as the Other” (58). Wilson cites the example of a 1717 medical book entitled *Syphilis* to prove this point and explains how two men went to a brothel and contracted syphilis after hiring a sex worker: “The ‘Slut’ is a product these young men purchased, but the problem lies in her being a faulty product” (49).

According to Sarah Ahmed, this notion of a perceived other is a prerequisite for shame to occur. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed states, “Shame as an emotion requires a witness: even if a subject feels shame when she or he is alone it is the imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to herself or himself” (105). Therefore, the traditional usage of “slut” is a vehicle to create shame and perpetrate whorephobia in society. This definition of shame and history of slut shaming are important to contextualize in my own analysis of Instagram rhetoric when looking for themes that echo the master narrative.

In “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” Theodor Adorno theorizes that the cultural phenomena of slut shaming a more vulnerable group will inherently exist because those who “feel pressure attempt to transfer it onto other, weaker groups, and either rationally or irrationally perpetuate the odium” (79). Adorno exemplifies this by stating that prostitutes were more or less left alone during the days marked as more sexually oppressive in Germany, yet more harshly policed after the sexual revolution that led to less shaming of women who has sex before marriage (77). Thus, more sexual freedom for *most* of society resulted in even more scrutiny and policing of the individuals who fell outside the new societal acceptances around sex.

Many of the essays within *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival* exemplify the phenomena of Adorno’s theory, as the book is a collection of essays written by sex workers who assert that they were left out of the #MeToo movement. While most women were being uplifted to come forward with their stories regarding sexual assaults, sex workers were left to suffer in silence due to the societal stigmas that surround their professions. In *We Too*’s introduction, Natalie West says about sex workers, “We too live in a world marked indelibly by sexual harassment and abuse” and that the collection of essays within the book “seek to change those conversations in which sex workers are the objects, not the subjects, of their own stories” (14). My work also seeks to change those conversations in order to center the voices of strippers.

Instagram

Although there is a lack of scholarship on pole dance rhetoric, I found significant academic discourse focused on how Instagram has been used by sub-communities as a

platform to share counter-narratives. In *Instagram*, Tama Leaver, et al., define how these sub-communities function: “Some of these groups may be organized around the public repository of hashtags...or interest groups that are not otherwise so easily accessed by visible affordances on the platform’s interface but require a level of in-group knowledge” (149). The pole dance sub-community of Instagram is organized through a combination of both hashtag repository and in-group knowledge. Leaver, et al., also provide my research with a critical rhetorical analysis framework by explaining how the texts that surround images contextualize rhetorical meaning: “What visual content we choose to share — whether on Instagram or elsewhere — has meaning because of its form, its context, and our communicative intentions, and these vary between individuals. This is aided by surrounding contextual information, be it captions, hashtags, profile information, comments or other annotations” (44). I incorporate this theory into the rhetorical analysis of my own research by contextualizing images beyond just a visual analytical frame to a frame that considers the visuals’ surrounding texts (e.g. captions, hashtags, profile information, and event comments left by followers).

Counter Narratives in Online Spaces

Although the parallel studies listed in this literature review analyze other sub-communities of Instagram, they exemplify how other researchers have analyzed if and how these communities use rhetoric to tell stories that either challenge or perpetrate dominant societal narratives. Many also provide rhetorical analysis frameworks, theories, and research questions for me to draw from. For example, in “Visibly Ageing Femininities: Women’s Visual Discourses of Being Over-40 and Over-50 On Instagram,”

Katrin Tiinderberg researches whether heteronormative notions of female body images are disrupted by Instagram users, particularly in the over-40 demographic. Tiinderberg also discusses the exhibition factor of Instagram posting and whether it is subject to a “controlling male gaze” (62). Building on Tiinderberg’s research, as well as Dale’s theory of an unincarnated other, I ascertained the exhibition factor of Instagram in my analysis of the performative factor of pole dance in the digital realm that both subverts and perpetrates the master narrative. Furthermore, Tiinderberg’s study is one of the few that I found that analyzes Instagram data contextually and intertextually in that visual material and corresponding contextual written material are evaluated. I have used a similar rhetorical analysis framework.

Hailey Nicole Otis’ rhetorical analysis in “Tess Holliday’s Queering of Body-Positive Activism: Disrupting Fatphobic Logics of Health and Resignifying Fat As Fit” also uses a queer theoretical framework to analyze how Tess Holliday’s Instagram account disrupts the heteronormative culture that surround bodies. Otis asserts that Holliday “disrupts the normative and normalizing authorities that govern both fashion and social media, effectively challenging...the dominant order” (158). Otis draws upon queer critic scholar Isaac West to provide a rhetorical analysis caveat that is a cornerstone within my own rhetorical analysis: “we cannot ‘excuse moments where norms and normativities are reinforced more than they are challenged’” (175).

Copp lie Cocq and Karin Ljuslinder also look for disruptions or subversion of the master narrative in “Self-Representations on Social Media. Reproducing and Challenging Discourses on Disability” when analyzing if the self-representation of people with

disability challenges and/or perpetuates normative discourse or stigma. Furthermore, in “Achieving Visibility: Midlife and Older Women’s Literate Practices on Instagram and Blogs,” Laura McGrath evaluates the “experimental identity work” (101) that the Instagram platform enables its older users to explore and engage in. This study examines how a dominant narrative is being re-written by older Instagram users; I evaluate if similar parallels exist within the pole dancer rhetoric on Instagram by asking similar questions: does the rhetoric subvert the patriarchal side of the master narrative regarding sex work, or is it still enforcing other parts of the classist narrative by pushing strippers deeper into stigmatization?

In “The Intimate Screen: Revisualizing Understandings of Down Syndrome Through Digital Activism on Instagram,” Kara Poe Alexander and Leslie A. Hahner examine how Instagram is used as a platform for digital activism. Unlike traditional public protests of the past, counternarratives are now communicated on small, individualized screens, as has been the case with a counter-narrative to the stigmas of Down Syndrome. Similarly, I discuss how Instagram is used to re-claim narratives around labels that are often associated with stigmas, and I incorporate the notion of small screen intimacy into the analysis, as well.

There is more literature that describes how other online spaces have served as a means for marginalized groups to self advocate. In *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy*, Lisa Blankenship focuses on Joyce Fernandes, a labor and women’s rights activist whose Facebook posts about “the humiliation she endured in domestic work, as well as growing up black, or *preta*, in Brazilian society” went viral in 2014 (62).

Blankenship asserts an important point that I include in my own research: “The fact is that without Facebook, the stories of these women would in all likelihood, not be told, at least not on the level afforded by social media” (75). She ultimately states that women of color have gained access to “cultural capital through traditional and digital literacy” by “advocating themselves for change in attitudes, practices and public policy” (82). This is an informed and relevant assumption that I apply to my own study regarding sex-workers within the pole dance Instagram community.

Conclusion

It is enlightening to read the academic work that has been published on both acknowledging and deconstructing whorephobia, as well as work on how online spaces have served as a platform to share counter narratives. There is much scholarship on how Instagram can be used as a powerful tool for marginalized people to share their perspectives; however, Instagram’s sub-community of pole dance seems to be nearly nonexistent in the field of rhetoric and composition. I originally struggled to pick between feminism and queer theory as critical guiding lenses, but as I dug deeper into the literature, I realized much of the feminist rhetoric that is relevant to my research excludes the voices of sex workers and expresses whorephobic views. Thus, it is exciting to situate my work where the gaps in the research exist, so that I can begin bridging them. Specifically, I attempt to bridge the gap between recreational pole dance hobbyists and career strippers, as well as the gap between feminist rhetoric and sex-worker agency.

I believe that my viewpoints regarding body autonomy, sexuality and sex work would be much narrower if I had not read the diverse narratives of individuals in the pole

dance community through the Instagram platform. Now as an advocate for sex worker rights, I acknowledge the intersections (and exclusions) that currently exist within pole studio culture and mainstream feminist education regarding body autonomy and sex work. As a pole instructor who is active within the pole dance Instagram community, I am proud to teach many students who are also career strippers, and I seek room to continue bridging the misunderstandings that have long existed between feminist studies, pole dancers in the studio, and career sex workers who pole dance in strip clubs.

The aim of my research is to ultimately help me continue advocating for the rights of sex workers across different spectrums and lifestyles by grasping an understanding of what the narratives are. My biggest motivating factor is that I believe there needs to be more scholarship that doesn't exclude sex workers from mainstream conversations. Fortunately, I have found that Instagram serves as that place. I hope that my work will at least inspire more conversations around sex work inclusive academic research.

II. WHAT YOU ARE IS CLASSIST: DEFINING TERMS AND THE MASTER NARRATIVE



  jacqthestripper

Fig. 1: “What You are is Classist” by @jacqthestripper

In 2017 I started taking pole dance classes at a pole studio near my home in Colorado. Although it was taboo in some of my social circles to even step foot in a pole studio, let alone a strip club, I was proud of the strength and confidence I felt after those first few pole classes. The individualist part of myself also gained satisfaction from

dabbling into something that felt socially rebellious. But what would my friends and family think of me if I posted a photo of myself embodying my newfound strength and confidence on the vertical chrome bar? There was only one way to find out. My hands were shaking when I decided to post a picture of myself using all of my thigh strength to sit on a ten-foot pole while wearing short shorts and a tank top. I captioned it “Room for improvement, but I felt strong today. #NotAStripper.”

I didn't see any harm in this at the time. After-all, it was true...I wasn't working in a strip club. Other students and instructors from that pole studio were also using and liking posts with that hashtag. I continued to sprinkle that hashtag into the captions of my Instagram posts for months until the day that I actually clicked on it with the intention of connecting with other #NotAStripper pole dancers on the platform. I did find somewhat of an “echo chamber” at first, but was surprised to also find photos and videos of individuals (mostly women) dancing on poles in what appeared to be actual strip clubs, not just another pole studio. Were these images posted ironically? My curiosity has never allowed me to simply keep scrolling past posts that make me feel confused or slightly uncomfortable, so I went down a rabbit hole and clicked on several posts that looked like they captured actual strip club footage. When doing so, I noticed a trend of long captions underneath. Many of these captions flirted the edge of the 2,200-character-limit constraints of the platform and contained terms that I had never heard of before, such as “whorephobia,” as well as terms I had heard but didn't quite understand in this context such as “classist.” Was I being called out? Was my use the of the hashtag actually classist and sexist? What did my new hobby choice, my social media posting habits, and my

overall attitude toward strippers reflect when I was forced to look in the mirror through this exposure to a profession that I didn't yet understand? I don't remember there being as much education and discourse on sex work within the greater pole community back in 2017. It's possible that I was just too naive to see beyond my own lived experiences at the time. I wish I would have known then what I know now.

Although my intention of scrolling through the #notastripper hashtag archive was to connect with other like-minded "pole fitness" hobbyists, I ended up discovering a much more thought-provoking sub-community. Through this Instagram archive, I found strip club industry thought leaders such as Elle Stranger (@stripperwriter), AM Davies (@thequeenofsexy), Selena the Stripper (@prettyboygirl), Jacqueline Francis (@jacquethestripper), and many more who use the Instagram platform as a place for activism and unionization for sex worker rights. In this hashtag archive, strippers and stripper allies (predominantly more-informed pole hobbyists) educated me on how harmful the rhetoric of the #NotAStripper hashtag truly is, their counter narratives reversing not only the male gaze, but also my whorephobic gaze, as well.

For example, unless I (or other users) comment on any particular Instagram posts, the original posters have no idea of our presence. The observation of pole dance Instagram posts are thus uni-dimensional between performer (pole dance poster) and observer (other user). As Laura Mulvey observes in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female... In their traditionalist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual

and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (837). On Instagram these sex-workers *are* being gazed upon, but they are *also* speaking back through the affordances of the social media platform, which is so important after constantly being left out of mainstream media conversations. On the platform sex-workers tell their own lived experiences by directly addressing the misconceptions of the sex work profession. I was thus forced to take a good hard look at my own internalized sexism and whorephobia, which I had unconsciously adopted.

The focus of this chapter is to define and operationalize key terms, including the master narrative’s classist and whorephobic views on sex work in order to accurately communicate and ultimately answer my guiding research questions:

- What does Instagram discourse analysis of recreational non-sex working pole dancers say about these pole hobbyists’ perspectives of career strippers?
- Which parts of the master narrative that demands the policing of the bodies and finances of individuals outside the hegemony (which consists of affluent, white, CIS-het people) are subverted by the pole community’s overall rhetoric on Instagram? Which parts of this master narrative, if any, are further enforced by pole hobbyists?
- How are strippers affected by recreational pole dance becoming more socially acceptable?
- How are career strippers responding to the aforementioned master narrative that privileges recreational pole dancers?

Defining Sex Work

What do you think of when you hear the term “sex work”? What do you think of when you hear the term “slut-shame”? It’s likely you think of a street-working prostitute when you hear the former, and a woman berated for her choice of sexual activity and expression when you hear the latter. These misconceptions are common and long-standing, as is the pejoration of terms used to describe women benefiting, especially but not exclusively economically, from their sexuality.

Indeed, because women have traditionally been economically oppressed in a society ruled by white CIS-males and therefore expected to be sexually submissive in exchange for financial security, women have traditionally been slut shamed/punished for their sexual desire/expression/acts, whether their intentions are money-motivated or not. In “Dirty Talk: A History of ‘Slut,’” Nancy Wilson traces this cultural phenomena back to the 1400’s and explains that “slut” was originally used to categorize an “unclean woman,” but the meaning eventually shifted to describe unclean and improper sexuality amongst women (48). Wilson explains that the word “slut” functions as a way for men to “cast women as the Other” (58). Thus, the word itself is a rhetorical device that has been used since the 1400’s to other women in patriarchal societies.

This practice of othering is where the notion of shame is created. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sarah Ahmed states, “Shame as an emotion requires a witness: even if a subject feels shame when she or he is alone it is the imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to herself or himself” (105). Therefore, the traditional usage of “slut” functions as a vehicle to shame women in patriarchal societies where women are sexually and economically oppressed.

However, it is more than just street-walking CIS-women who engage in sex work and who experience slut shaming. “Sex work” is a term that was coined by Carol Leigh (AKA: Scarlot Harlot) in the 1980’s. In her essay “Inventing Sex Work,” Leigh explains that she was inspired to coin the term as a response to it being phrased as “sex use industry” when as a prostitute ambassador in San Francisco she attended a conference organized by Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media. Leigh, a sex worker herself, preferred calling it the “sex work industry” over “sex use industry”, because it “prioritised the work of the provider rather than the customer” (Global Network). Thus, sex work was a term created by a sex worker to reclaim agency.

The term “sex work” itself has evolved since Leigh’s inception of it in the 1980’s. In her dissertation “Perceptions of Sex Trafficking Legislation by Sex Workers,” Victoria McMahan explains how Leigh’s term has evolved as new forms of sexual entertainment have been added under the umbrella of sex work as they have been created. According to McMahan, “Strippers, webcam models, phone sex operators – all these can be considered sex work, albeit with various levels of sexual contact or behavior” (1). Today the term “sex work” is widely used by advocacy organizations and health agencies, and it encompasses more than prostitution.

For the sake of my own research, I also want to acknowledge that women are not the *only* oppressed group in our classist society. The pre-determined order of a classist society is undeniably intersectional. Gender, sex, race, ethnicity, and sexuality are all major factors as to how economically (and sexually) oppressed an individual will be in a classist society. When I use the term “hegemony” I mean the dominant class of our

society, which is white CIS-het men. I don't think I'm reaching too far when I say that a Black, gay, trans-woman born into poverty is more likely to have a harder time finding the opportunities that lead to financial freedom than that of a white, straight, CIS-het man born into generational wealth. In fact, we live in a world that is historically set up to keep these two types of people as removed from each other as possible. However, sex work is one of the oldest ways for individuals born to lower classes (based on their intersections of gender, sex, race, ethnicity and sexuality) to mingle, negotiate and do businesses with the hegemony.

Given this definition of sex-work as an umbrella term that encompasses all sexual entertainment, the understanding that the oppression of a classist society is intersectional, and the acknowledgement that sex work is a way for the lower class to negotiate businesses with the hegemony, it is safe to say that sex work is more than only full-service sex worker (FSSW) CIS women. Thus, my research seeks to be more inclusive of all sex working folx, not *just* females FSSWers, by acknowledging that it is possible for other groups of people outside of the hegemony to also experience slut shaming and whorephobia. This includes CIS and trans women, non-binary folx, as well as CIS and trans men. I did not wish to alienate the gender identity from my research due to societal assumptions.

For the intent of this thesis, I primarily mean *strippers* of all gender identities whenever I use the term "sex work" because that is where the intersection with my pole dance passion, knowledge, and experience lies. I have seen firsthand that sex workers are so often left out of the conversation, even when the conversation is about them. While I

am interested in my own experiences within the Instagram pole community, the goal of my work is to amplify the voices of “out” sex workers who work as strippers.

Furthermore, when I speak of the intermingling of classes, all you need to do is look around to see this exemplified in a strip club. The micro version of the redistribution of wealth via monetary exchange is present through the negotiation of lap dances and the literal throwing of money onto a stage. I have watched the financial situation of some of my friends over the years completely change after beginning to work in strip clubs. For example, one woman of color whom I knew went from living out for her car as an 18-year-old, to being able to comfortably afford her own apartment in Austin before she reached her 20’s. Working as a stripper literally allowed her to work her way into more secure lifestyle at a quicker rate than some other avenues would have allowed for.

Another one of my pole dancing peers was able to get a loan for her creative endeavor and start her own business thanks to the funding of one of her strip club regulars.

Establishing the Master Narrative

The existence of a counter narrative implies that an inaccurate master narrative came first. The master narrative I will explore in this chapter is that the bodies and finances of individuals outside of the hegemony (meaning people who are non-CIS male, non-white, non-heteronormative) are to be policed, controlled, and stripped of autonomy, a narrative that is inescapable today in the United States. This classist master narrative tries to predetermine an individual’s worth based on their different intersections and tells us that the lives of sex workers are not valuable or worthy of agency through constant

policing and ridicule. We are both explicitly and subliminally reminded that sex work is illegitimate and degrading, which strips these workers of their humanity.

The classist master narrative that results in the hegemony's ridiculing of sex worker's bodies and financial gain is ubiquitous in pop culture—the offhanded “harmless” stripper jokes, the exhausted trope that the “slut” deserves death first in movies, and the casual use of “slut” to denote a greedy person (e.g. “Cheese Slut”). In fact, entire comedic plot-lines center around the death of a stripper. In the 1998 *Very Bad Things* a group of men go to Las Vegas for a bachelor party where they “accidentally” murder a hired female stripper. Conversely, in the 2017 Netflix comedy *Rough Night*, a group of women “accidentally” kill a male stripper at a bachelorette party. In “Boobies, Booty Shorts, and Bar Trash: How to Spot a Feminist,” April Faith Thomas recounts a graduate school experience in which a room full of academics laugh and discuss how the “slut” in *Halloween* deserved to die at the hands of her own brother because she had sex. Thomas explains how she realized that “academic feminism and popular feminism were not yet on the same page” when the room full of her peers smirked while making comments justifying the character's death, such as “[she] should have had more respect for herself” (34). Thomas' anecdote exemplifies how the messaging of pop culture subliminally influences educated critical thinkers to accept the master narrative, which is where the ideal that the lives of “sluts” are not valuable stems from. In our society where there is not much sex worker visibility, the subliminal messaging of these movies that reduces the lives of sex workers to nothing more than a disposable joke or a scapegoat

continues to uphold the classist master narrative that demands the policing of an individual's sexual morals in exchange for financial gain.

The subliminal Hollywood messaging that sex worker lives are not valuable intersects with an equally problematic notion that all sex workers are sex-trafficking victims, as displayed by a recent encounter I had with a PhD student in a graduate English course. When I introduced my academic work as the “counter narrative of sex workers” to the class, this kind-intentioned PhD student zealously interrupted me to let me know that she had a contact at a non-profit for trafficking victims that she was happy to put me in touch with. I was too stunned to immediately respond, so I just stared at her, red-faced, before taking a moment to laugh at the irony. I used the awkwardness of this misunderstanding as a teachable moment. I explained to the entire class that a goal of my academic work is to explore the counter narrative to the “all sex workers *must* be victims” trope of our society's master narrative. I also explained that there are many individuals who claim agency over both their bodies and financial situations through sex work. That PhD student pulled me aside after class to apologize, but I told her I didn't fault her. How could I when I am aware of the rhetoric that surrounds sex workers? As Selena the Stripper notes in the Foreword to *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival*, sex work is much more complex than society's forced binary created through an “essentialized sex worker narrative of ‘happy hooker’ or ‘trafficked victim’” (xiv).

Unfortunately, current legislation reveals the real-life hazard of allowing this binary to go unchallenged. For example, in 2018 President Donald Trump signed bipartisan legislation known as Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and the

Senate's Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) into law after both passed the US House and US Senate. In "Perceptions of Sex Trafficking Legislation by Sex Workers," McMahan explains that both pieces of legislation fail to clearly define the difference between voluntary sex work and sex trafficking (5). Thus, much of the overall conversations that surround sex workers' rights also conflate the two different populations of sex workers and sex trafficking victims. This results in the common misconception that all sex workers are victims who need protection and saving from their situations. The "happy slut deserve to die" trope is as detrimental to the sex worker community as the "all sex workers are trafficked victims" rhetoric. Both master narrative ideals rob sex workers of rights and agency, while also serving as a way to police the intermingling between classes via the exchange of sexual acts for money.

Given this classist master narrative that constantly enforces the ideals that "greedy hookers deserve to die" or "poor trafficked victims have no agency," it is not a surprise that recreational pole dancers want to distance themselves from these stigmas. However, these essentialist stereotypes are problematic because vilifying a group of people who started the art of pole dance as a form of sex work for survival/livelihood is elitist. On the one hand, we see a culture of people (primarily women) who essentially fight the patriarchal part of the classist master narrative by prioritizing the removal of shame/empowerment of the female body, sensuality and sexual expression. This is great for what it's worth. However, what we see on the other hand is not so great; this same culture fighting patriarchal standards echoes greater society's shaming towards people who use that agency in the realm of sex work for monetary gain. Thus, pole dancers who strip for

money are not only othered by the hegemony, but they are also othered by more “mainstream” recreational pole dancers (like me in the past, unfortunately). It’s ironic to see these mainstream recreational pole dancers’ constant efforts to separate themselves from sex-workers while they mimic a stripper’s erotic dance style in bikinis and 8-inch “exotic heels.” Thus, as recreational pole dance becomes more mainstream and socially accepted as a hobby, career stripper pole dancing as a means for survival becomes further alienated from mainstream culture as a whole.

This phenomenon of one set of sexual taboos becoming less stigmatized and more acceptable while pushing another further into the fringes of society is not new. In “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” Theodor Adorno theorizes that “sexual liberation in contemporary society is mere illusion” (72). He goes on to exemplify this by stating that prostitutes were more or less left alone during the days marked as more sexually oppressive in Germany, yet more harshly policed “after the success of women emancipation” (77). Although the act of sex before marriage become less taboo, the idea of sex for money became even more taboo. Adorno asserts that more sexual freedom for *most* of society resulted in even more scrutiny and policing of the individuals who fell outside the new societal acceptances around sex. Adorno explains, “Part of the hopeless dynamic of what sociology likes to call interpersonal relations is also the fact that those who feel pressure attempt to transfer it onto other, weaker groups, and either rationally or irrationally perpetuate the odium” (79). Although career strippers are by no means “weaker” than recreational pole hobbyists, they are more typically vulnerable.

In sum, the classist master narrative is that the value of an individual's life is predetermined based on different intersections of identity, and that the bodies and finances of individuals outside of the predetermined hegemony need to be stripped of agency through constant policing and ridicule. I also hypothesize that intersectionally-privileged pole dancers transfer the pressure of being policed, ridiculed, and slut-shamed onto career strippers who do many of the same things (just in exchange for financial gain/stability). Thus I hypothesize that as it becomes more "acceptable" for individuals in closer proximity to the hegemony to claim bodily autonomy through recreational pole dance, I hypothesize that it becomes further stigmatized for individuals further removed from the hegemony to claim agency through pole dancing as a form of sex work.

Admittedly, I have been guilty of enforcing the classist and whorephobic master narrative by trying to separate myself from strippers in hopes of transferring the pressure of being slut shamed for my hobby onto sex workers. I can liken my past action of posting myself in mini shorts on a chrome pole with the caption of #NotAStripper to a memory I have of my childhood bully. She was one of the most popular girls in middle school who was known for having big green eyes and the cutest outfits in school. One day I realized that she showed up to school wearing the exact same black and glittery Tinker-bell shirt as me, but her shirt was brand new and mine was well worn in. My excitement for unintentionally matching with the most popular girl in school was quickly squashed by her running up to me and yelling at me for wearing the same shirt as her. She took the humiliation one step further by telling everyone in school that day that we were definitely not friends and that I must be stalking her because I copied her style. The irony

is that I owned the shirt first — in fact it was a shirt that I had been sharing with an actual friend of mine for months.

In the case of #NotAStripper, I was the bully. Knowing what I know now, I have gone back and removed the #NotAStripper hashtag from all of my original posts; this means that those posts are no longer searchable in that specific hashtag's archive. I am embarrassed by my own past inconsiderate use of #NotAStripper, but I think it is worth sharing my experience for the sake of transparency and to further contextualize my interest and understanding of the hashtag. This has also led to my curiosity as to how the hashtag and its sentiments function on Instagram today.

III. #YESASTRIPPER #NOTASTRIPPER SCHISM: AN INSTAGRAM ANALYSIS



Fig 2: "Better Than This" by @jacqthestripper

The classist mater narrative that values individual lives differently based on intersections of identity results in the policing and shaming of individuals who fall outside of the predetermined hegemony. This policing of bodies and finances is often enforced beyond members of the hegemony to include individuals who have fallen victim to similar policing. A common trope that derives from the master narrative is that sex workers exist in the binary of either being “poor trafficked victims” or “greedy hookers

who deserve to die.” This trope is undoubtedly enforced beyond just the ruling class when legislation, pop culture, and common misconceptions are evaluated. Adorno’s assertion of sexual taboos throughout history theorizes that as one group of sexually oppressed individuals gains wider acceptance amongst the hegemony, a more vulnerable group will inherently suffer further stigmatization from the general population. I hypothesize that there is a similar phenomena demonstrated amongst the pole community on Instagram with intersectionally privileged pole dancers transferring the pressure of being policed, ridiculed, and slut-shamed onto career strippers who perform many of the same attributes (just in exchange for financial gain).

Introduction

Despite the backlash it has received from the wider pole community over the past few years, the #NotAStripper hashtag and rhetoric continues to be used to separate studio pole dancers from sex workers. This schism between recreational pole dancers and sex working pole dancers occurs in the studio, but it arguably becomes much more apparent in virtual spaces where individuals have a screen barrier to further protect themselves from “the other.” I will analyze Instagram to determine how the pole community’s rhetoric impacts the master narrative regarding sex work (i.e. that sex workers are “greedy hookers who deserve to die” *or* “poor trafficked victims” who have no agency). The popularity of intertextual hashtags #NotAStripper and #YesAStripper, which are predominantly used by the pole community on Instagram, are a relevant and timely example of such bifurcation. We gain insight not only through the intertextuality of these controversial hashtags, but through much of the discourse that occurs on Instagram posts

made by pole community public figures. Because Instagram rhetoric is archived by hashtags and dated posts, I am able to study the overall rhetoric of the larger community.

In this chapter I am analyzing the discourse within the #NotAStripper, #YesAStripper hashtags, and other discourse regarding the schism on Instagram to answer the following questions:

- What does Instagram discourse analysis of recreational non-sex working pole dancers say about these pole hobbyists' perspectives of career strippers?
- Which parts of the master narrative that demands the policing of the bodies and finances of individuals outside the hegemony (which consists of affluent, white, CIS-het people) are subverted by the pole community's overall rhetoric on Instagram? Which parts of this master narrative, if any, are further enforced by pole hobbyists?
- How are strippers affected by recreational studio pole dance becoming more socially acceptable?
- How are career strippers responding to the aforementioned master narrative that privileges recreational pole dancers?

Thus, I will analyze the pole community's Instagram rhetoric for two different things: to determine if the rhetoric of intersectionally-privileged pole dancers exemplifies a transfer of body politics pressure onto career strippers and to examine what the narrative of sex-working pole dancers reveals about sex-worker identity and body politics.

Methods

In the process of answering these niche community questions, I am adapting James Paul Gee's discourse analysis framework. According to Gee there are seven areas of "reality" created within all spoken and written discourse that are always at work: significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge (17). Furthermore, according to Gee's methodology theory, all discourse analysis should be critical because "language is always political" due to the fact that language is "part of the way we build and sustain our world, cultures and institutions" (10). Gee provides six tools of inquiry for analyzing how the workings of the above seven building tasks enact in the world to create cultures and institutions. These tools are 1) situated meanings; 2) social languages; 3) figured worlds; 4) Discourses; 5) Conversations; and 6) intertextuality. I embrace the notion that language is always political and acknowledge that all seven of Gee's building blocks are at play when it comes to the rhetoric of the pole dancers on Instagram. However, I will focus and queer the specific building blocks of significance, identities, politics and connections by primarily using the tools of Discourses, Conversations, figured worlds and intertextuality for the sake of my analysis:

- **Significance:** How do pole dancing Instagrammers use intertextuality, figured worlds, Discourses, and Conversations to build visibility for the pole community as a whole? How does visibility for one group of pole dancers bolster or diminish the significance of the other, if at all?
- **Identities:** How do Instagrammers use intertextuality, figured worlds, discourses and conversations to identify themselves as pole dancers on the Instagram

platform? Is there an apparent bifurcation and hierarchy between the ways recreational pole dancers identify themselves and how sex-working pole dancers identify themselves? If there is a hierarchy in the way pole dancing Instagrammers identify themselves, is it a subversion from, or reflection of, the master narrative? In other words, do pole dancers on Instagram counter negative stereotypes for all pole dancers or just pole dancers who are in closer proximity to the hegemony? *It is important to note here that there will undoubtedly be overlap between the two building blocks of identities and politics, because the act of policing an individual's bodily autonomy is inherently political.*

- **Politics:** How, if at all, do pole dancers on Instagram use intertextuality, figured worlds, Discourses and Conversations to create, distribute, and/or withhold social goods from people who pole dance for survival rather than as a hobby? Do recreational pole dancers use these tools to construe strippers as “acceptable” and deserving of the same social goods that they fight for?
- **Connections:** How do Instagrammers use intertextuality, figured worlds, Discourses, and Conversations within posts and hashtags to connect or disconnect the pole community? Does this connection or disconnection make one group more relevant than the other?
- **Sign Systems & Knowledge:** How do Instagrammers use intertextuality to privilege or disprivilege the specific sign systems of #NotAStripper and #YesAStripper, or the figured worlds that surround these hashtags' sentiments?

How do recreational pole dancers and sex-working pole dancers interact with each other through using different hashtag archives?

Results

Analysis 1 - Fig. 3

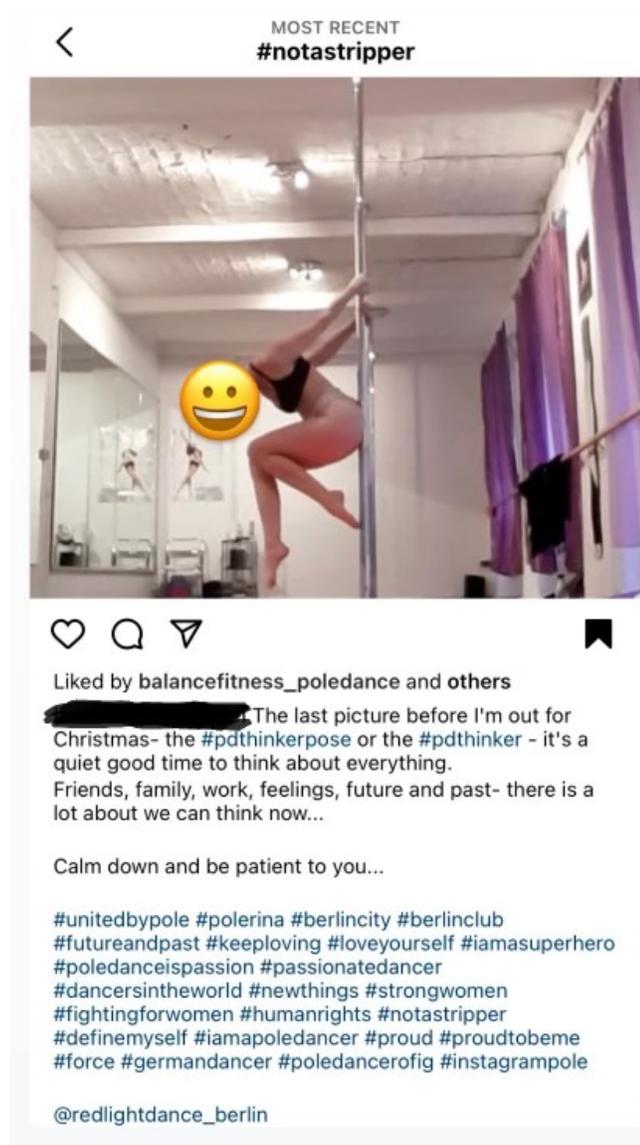


Fig 3: “#FightingForWomen #HumanRights #NotAStripper”

Fig. 3 was posted in 2020 by an Instagrammer with a public profile. This Instagrammer is not what I would consider a “public figure”, because she only has 277 followers, which is why I have blurred out her face and username. Her Instagram profile simply states “Pole is life” in the bio section with nothing else. The visual rhetoric of fig.1 contains a photo of the Instagrammer lifting herself in the air on a pole while wearing an outfit that resembles a bikini. This outfit choice provides a similar amount of coverage that most strip club outfits do. Fig 1. is archived under #NotAStripper and 26 other hashtags. The full caption states:

The last picture before I’m out for Christmas - the #pdthinkerpose or the #pdthinker - it’s a quiet good time to think about everything. Friends, family, work, feelings, future and past - there is a lot about we can think now...calm down and be patient to you... #unitedbypole #polerina #berlincity #berlinclub #futureandpast #keeploving #loveyourself #iamasuperhero #poledanceispassion #passionatedancer #dancers #intheworld #newthings #strongwomen #fightingforwomen #humanrights #notastripper #definemyself #iamapoledancer #proud #proudtobeme #force #germandancer #poledancerofig #instagrampole @redlightdance_berlin

For my analysis of fig. 3, I will look at sign systems and knowledge in conjunction with Gee’s building blocks of significance, identities, and politics to answer my two leading research questions.

The original poster of fig. 3 distinguishes her recreational pole dancer identity from the identity of a stripper with the intertextuality of hashtags. It is ironic that the first hashtag used is #Unitedbypole because this post doesn't *just* fail to mention strippers when discussing the Instagrammer's identity as a pole dancer, it also purposefully uses the #notastripper hashtag to separate her from strippers. This post seeks to include only recreational pole dancers in its attempt to counter negative stereotypes for the pole community. Thus, in this post, recreational pole dancers who are in closer proximity to the hegemony are privileged over strippers in a manner that enforces the master narrative.

This post also uses the intertextuality of many hashtags to build visibility for the pole community while excluding strippers from that visibility. What I find most striking about this post is that #notastripper comes right after #fightingforwomen and #humanrights. The Instagrammer's use of hashtags #humanrights and #fightingforwomen attempts to add the concept of female body autonomy found in recreational pole dance to Instagram conversations regarding human and female rights. However, the use of #notastripper implies an exclusion of strippers from those specific archived conversations. This rhetoric also implies that strippers do not deserve a seat at the table where human rights and female equality are discussed. Thus, this post uses sign systems to diminish the significance of sex-working pole dancers while attempting to bolster the significance of recreational pole dancers as deserving of human rights.

This post's tool of intertextuality applied to identities and significance builds into politics. The visual rhetoric and list of hashtags are worked by the poster to construe recreational pole dance as "acceptable" in archived Instagram conversations regarding human rights and feminist issues, while construing strippers as "unacceptable" and "invaluable" through the incorporation of #notastripper. Intertextuality of sign systems is used to withhold the social good of human rights from strippers by separating their identity and significance from recreational pole dancers.

Analysis 2 - Fig. 4



Fig 4: "Stripper Culture Appropriation"

Fig. 4 was posted by a pole studio named @lionessaerialfitness. The photo is of a woman wearing 8-inch heeled boots and the equivalent of a bikini and on what appears to be a type of stage. It's safe to assume that the woman pictured in this post is a pole student at the pole studio. This image is accompanied by a relatively short caption that includes eight different hashtags. The caption states:

Beautiful Sonya with her never-ending legs looking amazing @epfestival
@vivajerryfish #lionessaerialfitness #polersofig #pride #strongwomen
#wexfordfitfam #polefitness #notastripper #poledancing

For my analysis of this post, I will apply Gee's building blocks of connections, identities, and politics to answer my two primary research questions:

- 1) As it becomes more "acceptable" for individuals in closer proximity to the hegemony to claim bodily autonomy through recreational pole, does it become more stigmatized for individuals further removed from the hegemony to claim agency through pole dancing as a form of sex work?
- 2) If the pole community's overall rhetoric on Instagram subverts the patriarchal side of the master narrative, is it still enforcing other parts of the classist narrative by pushing sex working pole dancers further into the fringes of society?

Intertextuality is used to disconnect strippers from the overall pole community through the incorporation of #notastripper in this post. The woman photographed in fig. 4 is dressed in a way that mimics the style of a modern-day stripper in a strip club, but the post's caption makes sure to distinguish her

recreational pole identity from the identity of a stripper. The #notastripper hashtag contrasts the other pole community related hashtags (e.g. #polersofig, #strongwomen, #polefitness, and #poledancing) because all other hashtags are affirmations of identity while the #notastripper hashtag is the only denial of an identity. That is, it is the only hashtag out of eight that states that the person photographed in fig. 4 is *not* (a stripper). Thus, fig. 4 attempts to make non-sex working pole dancers more relevant than strippers in the post by countering negative stereotypes of recreational pole dancers who express sexuality, then separating strippers from that counter narrative.

As far as the building block of politics goes, fig. 4 uses intertextuality and figured worlds to withhold social goods from strippers in order to distribute those social goods to recreational pole dancers. These tools attempt to construe recreational pole dance as socially acceptable, something “strong women” do, when performed recreationally. Thus, fig. 4 sends the message that pole dancing is acceptable when done recreationally, even if performed in the exact same clothing that a stripper would wear; however, fig. 4 also conveys that it is unacceptable and invaluable to do the same thing in the same clothes in a strip club for money. In the sense, the post in fig. 4 enforces some parts of the master narrative regarding the unacceptability of sex work, while seeking to counter other parts.

Analysis 3 - Fig. 5

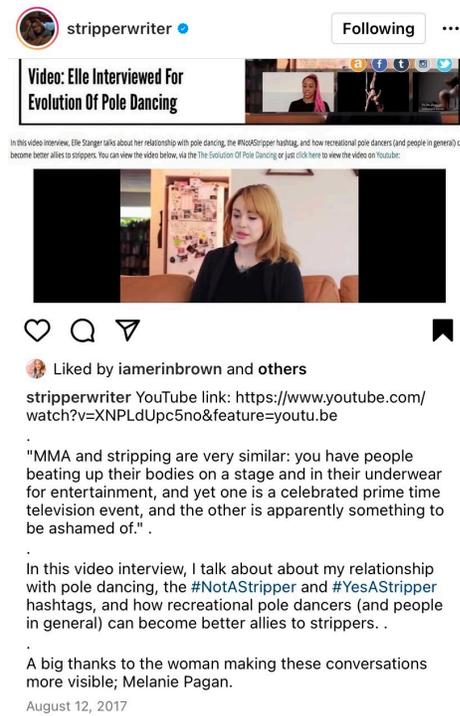


Fig 5: “#NotAStripper #YesAStripper” by @stripperwriter

The Instagram post that was pivotal to my realizing the error in my whorephobic ways was by Elle Stranger, @stripperwriter. Although it is not possible to know what @stripperwriter’s profile and follower count looked like when I stumbled across it nearly five years ago, I can analyze the 2017 artifact in context with her profile components today. Her profile currently boasts 161k followers and says, “Certified sex educator-writer-parent-entertainer-podcaster-she/they. I like being paid to talk.” Stranger is known today for her work as a stripper, writer, sex educator, and podcaster, as her username and profile both state. She is also known for her sex-worker activism and often speaks at her local city hall meetings on behalf of sex worker rights. It is also important to note that

although fig. 5 was posted on Instagram back in 2017, it is still one of the first posts that comes up when #NotAStripper is searched in the hashtag's archival (as of January 2022). Considering that @stripperwriter has over 100,000 followers and the fact that this post is still favored in the algorithm, we can infer that @stripperwriter's advocacy for sex workers is disrupting the master narrative.

Fig. 5 posted by @StripperWriter on August of 2017 is a screenshot of a blog article. The caption begins with a YouTube link, then quotes a snippet of her interview (which is featured in both the screenshot blog article and the linked *YouTube* video):

MMA and stripping are very similar: you have people beating up their bodies on stage and in their underwear for entertainment, and yet one is a celebrate prime time television event, and the other is apparently something to be ashamed of.' In this video interview, I talk about my relationship with pole dancing, the #NotAStripper and #YesAStripper hashtags, and how recreational pole dancers (and people in general) can become better allies to strippers. A big thanks to the woman making these conversations more visible;
Melanie Pagan.

I will use Gee's building blocks of significance, and then the building block of identities in conjunction with politics to analyze fig. 5.

The post in fig. 5 manages to disrupt the master narrative through several rhetorical strategies, but @stripperwriter's use of intertextuality is the most remarkable. The two bifurcated camps—#NotAStripper and #YesAStripper—are used within the

same sentence. Thus, this intertextuality is used to build visibility for strippers within the larger pole community. Through this strategy, @stripperwriter gets her original post to show up in the archive of both hashtags, which allows the post to reach a larger audience than just other sex workers. Thus, although the rhetoric of the #NotAStripper hashtag is undoubtedly harmful because it perpetrates stigma, @stripperwriter uses it as an invitation to educate individuals, like me seven years ago, who are unknowingly perpetrating the harmful sex worker stigmas that fuel the master narrative. She addresses the societal stigmas of shame that surround her line of work in fig. 5, but demonstrates that she does not succumb to this shame with her username and the #YesAStripper hashtag used intertextually with the #NotAStripper hashtag. Strategically, @stripperwriter often uses the #NotAStripper hashtag to get her messaging out to the public regarding their own narrative of sex worker agency and dignity. Although she uses the intertextuality to have Conversations and Discourses regarding the profession of sex work, she does not diminish recreational pole dancers in this post.

Beyond just the incorporation of the sign system #YesAStripper and its intertextuality to #NotAStripper, @stripperwriter is also re-claiming her sex-worker identity and shedding the narrative of shame that surrounds it through her rhetorical choice of username. She displays “stripper” in her username, so the word “stripper” appears before everything she posts. Thus, @stripperwriter uses intertextuality to build visibility for strippers amongst the greater Instagram community, which is comprised of other sex workers, recreational pole dancers, and even people who are completely unaffiliated with both sex work and pole dance. With her username alone, she is claiming

agency over her profession, which is usually stigmatized by the master narrative.

Furthermore, she includes “writer” after “stripper” in the username to show that she is multifaceted. The master narrative reduces sex workers as objects through the male gaze, but with this choice in username, @stripperwriter seeks to destigmatize sex work and stress that stripping is only one part of her identity. She also signals to other sex workers that their identities are valid and multifaceted, crafting a counter-narrative.

Through the post in fig. 5, @stripperwriter also acknowledges that there exists a hierarchy within the binary between strippers and recreational pole dancers, and therefore she also acknowledges that the way recreational pole dancers identify themselves as separate from strippers reflects the master narrative. She blurs this binary by questioning the established hierarchy attached to it by bringing in another group of athletes; MMA fighters. In the post’s caption @stripperwriter writes that MMA athletes are “celebrated” on television for “beating up their bodies on a stage in their underwear” while strippers are perceived as doing “something to be ashamed of.” Thus, she draws attention to the fact that the social good of being celebrated is denied to strippers by mainstream society, but given to MMA fighters whose sport parallels stripping. This MMA example mimics the bifurcation and hierarchy between recreational pole dancers and strippers while also widening the scope of visibility and relatability to Instagrammers outside of the pole community. Thus, by pointing out the political contradictions within the binary’s hierarchy of what is “acceptable” and what is “shameful,” @stripperwriter demonstrates that stripping is a profession that is acceptable and as deserving of social goods as recreational pole dancers and professional MMA fighters.

Analysis 4 - Fig. 6



Fig 6: “Admitting Wrongdoings” by @arlenecaffrey

Fig. 6 contains a photo of a woman in a bikini who is squatting down in stripper heels. This photo is accompanied by a very long caption that includes four hashtags. The full caption states:

It’s ok to admit that you are wrong. Here’s a excerpt of a short story about my early days of pole dancing and how I learned over time what a tool I was with my internalized misogyny. My legs were whiter than my privilege; constantly concealed beneath flowing skirts and flared jeans, they had not publicly seen the light of day since about 4th class when body-consciousness first creeped in. Minutes before heading out the door, I had

cut a lesser-worn pair of combat-style pants above the knee and semi-neatly hemmed them on my sewing machine. Teamed with my converse runners, my milky pins and I were ready to go forth and learn how to not be a stripper. Several weeks previous to hacking my pants, my yoga instructor coolly announced at the end of another torturous session that she was bringing to the Republic an existing new workout called pole fitness; she was curious as to who would like to join her as she led her train into previously uncharted fitness territory, right here in our little cosmopolitan town of Drogheda. The idea of being one of the first to partake in something so totally non-conformist and unlike a normal boring workout immediately appealed to my pretentiousness. I envisioned myself in black and white, hair wild and free being blown about in a sexy fashion by wind from an indefinable source, with a svelte body that moved like melting chocolate as I danced around a pole, a majestic hybrid of Jessica Alba in 'Sin City' and Kate Moss in a White Stripes music video. So I decided there and then to forsake my oafish yoga practice and subscribe to pole fitness... Although we would be learning how to execute movement on a shiny smooth metal pole like what you would find in a strip club, this was NOT stripping. What we would learn was purely for fitness; we'd wear our workout shorts and runners and exercise using the pole as an apparatus. No high heels, no lap dancing, no hot pants, because we weren't like "those dirty girls"... more to follow! But a spoiler; how did I unlearn the bullshit?

By listening to the lived experience of others and getting over my own ego.

#notastripper #intersectionalfeminism #poledancerofig #poledance

I will use Gee's discourse analysis building blocks of identities, connections, and politics to analyze fig. 6.

Fig. 6 uses the tools of intertextuality, figured worlds, and discourses to identify the distinction that is often made by recreational pole dancers to separate themselves from strippers. @arlenecaffrey uses the hashtag #notastripper after telling her own story of how she used to judge strippers as unacceptable when she first began recreational pole dance. She admits that she used to perpetrate the stigmas of the master narrative that both dominant culture and some ignorant recreational pole dancers project on strippers. However, @arlenecaffrey goes on to counter the negative stereotypes that she identifies as previously enforcing by calling out her own "bullshit" and stating that she unlearned said bullshit by "listening to the lived experiences of others." Thus, the intertextual and ironic use of #notastripper juxtaposed by @arlenecaffrey's own change-of-heart story connects members of the larger pole community (including both recreational hobbyists and career strippers) to a counter narrative that includes sex workers. This strategy does not necessarily make either group more or less relevant than the other, but it does call out the elitism that is often found in recreational pole dance studio culture.

The intertextuality of #intersectionalfeminism after the strategically ironic use of #notastripper is worth noting in terms of politics. This intentional hashtag usage implies that @arlenecaffrey believes that intersectional feminism is beyond just fighting for her own individual experiences as a white, non-sex working pole dancer. Thus, fig. 6 reveals

Gee's tools to distribute the social good of feminism to strippers, not just other recreational pole dancers such as herself. The ironic use of #notastripper, in addition to an honest change-of-heart story, is being used to construe recreational pole dancers and strippers as equally acceptable. The only thing this post deems as unacceptable is elitist recreational pole dancers who do not practice intersectional feminism by looking down on sex-working pole dancers. Thus, the rhetoric of fig. 6 recognizes the pervasiveness of whorephobia in subcultures outside of the hegemony and then attempts to unite everyone beyond that through intersectional feminist beliefs.



Fig 7: "Better Than That" by @janis_therapy

Analysis 5 - Fig. 7

Fig. 7 is another post that I found under the #notastripper archive where the hashtag was used ironically by @janis_therapy. A non-binary person is pictured sitting on the beach in a swimsuit. The caption only contains one hashtag (which is #notastripper)

and it is used within the text of a paragraph, rather than just listed at the end. The full caption states:

I may be in retirement but sometimes the universe reminds you that ~not a str!pper~ bitches want everything str!ppers have except the money lmfao I could never set foot on stage again and ill always be better than that shit. Anyway this isn't even about ~not a str!pper~ women. The insistence on distancing oneself from stigmatized work is protective, if weak, ignorant, lacking in any moral fortitude, and boring. I'm thinking tonight about the dynamics of my last two relationships, a clearer understanding of which clicked into place after learning about the types of women my exes dated after me: one, a flight attendant; the other, a pole hobbieist who felt invested in distancing herself from str!pping - insisting, I'm not one of THOSE women, but someone who instead is worthy of protection, love, gentle treatment. This makes perfect sense, given the context and emotional dynamics of both relationships, both with white men who liked to fetishize my latino identity and were drawn to, and threatened by, my identity as a SWer. Both chose to date white women, both of whom were engaged in either more respectable, but still feminized and exploitable emotional labor; or who engaged in the sexy aspects of s*x work, but not for other men, and not for money. A friend asked, do these men just not know what they want, or do they want polar opposite women? I am not a woman, but I've learned a lot about what patriarchy teaches men to want,

based on stripping, the stories of my swing clients have told me about their relationships, and what I've experienced in my own. What they want is ownership over women's sexuality. A woman's sexual appeal and emotional availability/servitude needs to belong to them only - a feat that honestly neither flight attendants nor #notastripper jackasses can actually accomplish because no one can self-abnegate to that extreme, it's not sustainable and even it were, straight white men are a bottomless pit of selfish pathology - if not, they need to abuse her into Stockholm syndrome or discard her brutally, something which respectability, at the end of the day, will not protect any woman, s*x worker or not, from.

I will use Gee's discourse analysis building blocks of identities, politics, and connections to analyze fig. 7.

In fig. 7, @janis_therapy acknowledges the political hierarchy that exists within the binary between recreational pole dancers and strippers, then they immediately flip this binary. They begin this post by first identifying as a retired stripper and asserting that they are still more acceptable than elitist pole dancers, despite the negative stereotypes that dominant society attaches to sex workers. They argue that even if they "never set foot on stage again" that they will "always be better than that shit." By "that shit" @janis_therapy explains that they mean pole hobbyists who feel "invested in distancing [themselves] from stripping." Thus, they acknowledge that the master narrative has been adopted by pole hobbyists and projected onto strippers. They furthermore recognize that the

enforcement of the master narrative results in the withholding of social goods from sex workers, such as “protection, love and gentle treatment,” which is consequently also enforced by women who “other” strippers in order to conform to societal expectations. Thus, fig. 7 asserts that as a retired stripper, @janis_therapy does not (and will not) subscribe to the master narrative’s hierarchy that values none-sex workers over sex workers, and thus, recreational pole dancers over strippers.

Fig. 7 also acknowledges the nuance of whorephobia by explaining that the problem doesn’t exclusively exist within elitist women and recreational pole dancers circles, but as a by-product of the straight white male’s desire to own a woman’s sexuality. @janis_therapy criticizes both white men and whorephobic recreational pole dancers by saying that “#notastripper jackasses” cannot accomplish the impossible task of providing the entirety of their emotional availability and sexuality to a man any better than a sex worker can.

It is interesting to note that #notastripper is the only hashtag used in the entire post, and therefore, incredibly strategic of @janis_therapy. The singular #notastripper hashtag is used intertextually to create visibility amongst the group of people who @janis_therapy asserts have a false sense of superiority over strippers; this is done by archiving the post with all other posts archived under #notastripper. Thus, someone like me seven years ago could easily stumble upon fig. 7 when looking to connect with other likeminded hobbyists under #notastripper. This use of intertextuality and Conversation is @janis_therapy’s

response to whorephobia in both the dominant part of society and the sub-culture of recreational pole dancers.

Analysis 6 - Fig. 8



Fig 8: "Why I Strip" by @prettyboygirl

Fig. 8 is a picture of a person wearing a baggy t-shirt and a fluffy blanket — this person is standing in front of another person's bare legs, and those bare legs are accented by stiletto heels. It was posted by @prettyboygirl, who is best known as Selena the Stripper, and also as Christianna Clark. Clark, who uses fae faer pronouns is the president of Strippers United and known for faer work as both a sex worker and sex worker activist. I did not find this post through hashtags because it does not contain any hashtags. However, the sentiments and

figured worlds of #yesstripper are contained within the caption, and a counter narrative with a unique perspective is constructed. The full caption discusses the financial empowerment of stripping and states:

When people ask if I strip because its empowering, they tend to mean hexually. Being overtly hexual, publicly, while femme or performing femininity is a radically transgressive act. sure. But that's not why people pick it up as a career. What's empowering is the money. Its the financial liberation, if you're lucky enough to get there. Some dancers instead waste away in some quasi indentures servitude to the club — strapped with fees, unmet dance quotes from nights before, tip-outs that take hall of their earnings. That is disempowering: the take on the risk and stigma this job entails and to leave with less than nothing. The reality is that many dancers end up in the latter scenarios because clubs aren't regulated in ways that protect us from wage theft. They're only regulated in way that punish us for performing hexual services and make sure we pay our taxes. Taxes that mostly go to policing us, incarcerating us, and funding wars that trigger the kinds of economic migration that lead people to take up dancing and other sanctuary occupations. I think for a while I didn't know how to place the sense of liberation I felt. It didn't come from dancing

with customers. Sometimes it came from dancing on stage, but that was no guarantee. There were plenty of times I felt taken advantage of dancing on stage: like when costumers would push my boundaries without tipping me. A dry stage feels disrespectful, especially when you can see everyone watching, enjoying a few show. So its not the dancing that's liberating either. Which leave the money. Being middle class; affording to live comfortably; being able to travel; having the freedom to financially support my friends, family and community; having the free time and stability to take on volunteer work: all of this is liberating. The work itself is not liberating, for me anyway.

I will use Gee's discourse analysis building blocks of sign systems, identities and politics to analyze fig. 8.

@prettyboygirl's use of figured worlds through the building blocks of sign systems and knowledge is strikingly apparent with the use of terms like "hex worker" "hexually" and "hexual" in the caption. These terms *may* be foreign for individuals far removed from the Instagram sex worker/stripper community; however, they are terms that sex workers commonly use on Instagram in order to get around the platform's censorship algorithm. It is not hard to infer that "hex worker" means sex worker, that "hexually" means sexually, and that "hexual" means sexual, but this play-on-language is a crucial strategy for sex workers such as @prettyboygirl to get their own counter narratives published on the platform

with a lower threat of censorship (and consequences such as account deletion). The persistent use of these hashtags show that sex workers will not be silenced from sharing their own counter narrative, even when threatened by censorship. The sentiments of the #yesastripperhashtag hashtag found in fig. 6 demonstrate that @prettyboygirl does not conform to the hierarchy of the master because fae believe that sex workers deserve the same social goods as the rest of society, which in this particular case is the right to self-advocacy through counter narrative on the Instagram platform.

In fig. 8 @prettyboygirl also asserts that strippers are as deserving of the social goods of labor rights and fair wages as the rest of society. In the caption @prettyboygirl immediately identifies as a stripper who is empowered by the financial stability that stripping has provided. Fae state that stripping has allowed faem to be middle class and afford “to live comfortably.” This is a subversion from the master narrative that categorizes sex-workers into the two limiting binaries of either the “greedy hooker” or the “poor trafficked victim.” The subversion lies in @prettyboygirl’s claims that living a comfortable middle class lifestyle is faer ultimate goal through sex work labor, which is different than either of the extreme binaries that the master narrative forces strippers into. Fae also assert that many strippers end up in an unfair “servitude” at strip clubs, because there are no labor law protections. Thus, @prettyboygirl seeks to remind sex workers that they are just as deserving of social goods as anyone else and that

there is no shame in choosing sex-work as a profession that affords one a comfortable lifestyle.

Discussion

Through my application of Gee's discourse analysis methodology, I found much nuance in the answers to my research questions:

- What does Instagram discourse analysis of recreational non-sex working pole dancers say about these pole hobbyists' perspectives of career strippers?
- Which parts of the master narrative that demands the policing of the bodies and finances of individuals outside the hegemony (which consists of affluent, white, CIS-het people) are subverted by the pole community's overall rhetoric on Instagram? Which parts of this master narrative, if any, are further enforced by pole hobbyists?
- How are strippers affected by recreational pole dance becoming more socially acceptable?
- How are career strippers responding to the aforementioned master narrative that privileges pole dancers?

I found that there isn't only a schism between recreational pole dancers and strippers, but also between different groups of recreational pole dancers regarding pole hobbyists' perspectives of strippers. One group of recreational pole dancers enforces the master narrative by transferring the pressure of being slut shamed onto strippers, while the other group uses language that indicates subversion through allying with strippers.

Thus, I did find that there is still, undoubtedly, an ongoing hierarchy that exists between

recreational pole dancers and strippers. This is evident when the sign system #notastripper is used as an attempt to differentiate studio pole dancers from strippers because it enables pole hobbyists to reinforce the part of the master narrative that individuals who profit off of their bodies are not deserving of social goods, such as human rights and respect.

While the #notastripper sign system is often thought of as a privilege to use due to a false sense of superiority studio pole dancers feel toward strippers, it also serves as a way for less whorephobic pole hobbyists and strippers with lived experiences to educate Instagrammers on a more inclusive counter narrative. Instagrammers who identify as sex workers, such as @stripperwriter, @prettyboygirl, and @janis_therapy (and even those who don't identify as sex workers, such as @arlenecaffrey) are leveling the hierarchy through the way the hashtag #notastripper functions within Instagram captions. Thus, my analysis also shows that there are other individuals within that same hobbyist community who actively use their own Instagram platforms to educate on how harmful #notastripper rhetoric is through intertextuality in the same way that sex workers do. Furthermore, @arlenecaffrey's change-of-heart story in fig. 6 echoes my own experience of unlearning whorephobia from "listening to the lived experiences of others," and is further evidence that the counter narrative of strippers on Instagram can lead to mitigation of long-lived whorephobic prejudice.

The Rise of #YesAStripper

Through my preliminary research for this chapter, I was surprised to find that the use of the #notastripper hashtag (at least amongst public accounts) has started declining

while the use of the #yesstripper hashtag has risen. As of February of 2022, the #notastripper hashtag only has 6.6k public posts archived under it, which is significantly fewer than the 107k public posts under the #yesstripper hashtag. Furthermore, many of the public posts under the hashtag #notastripper are in fact strippers using the hashtag intertextually and ironically. Thus, intertextuality seems to be deprivileging the #notastripper hashtag as it is often used simultaneously with #yesstripper to introduce and privilege the #yesstripper hashtag, as we saw one example of in fig. 3. The sign system #yesstripper is used to reclaim the discourse and diminish the shame that surrounds sex work. The incorporation of this hashtag functions as a way for career strippers to connect with each other on the platform and signifies to the larger pole community on Instagram that strippers are not ashamed of their profession.

Beyond Instagram

An entire movement has been birthed from the #yesstripper hashtag that sex working pole dancers started as a direct response to the whorephobia in the recreational pole dance community, which ultimately reflects the master narrative. Today, the “Yes a Stripper” trope is noticeable amongst the pole community beyond just the Instagram platform. There is now a podcast entitled “Yes A Stripper” that is hosted by AM Davies, who is a former stripper and sex worker rights activist. It is intended not just for other sex workers and members of the larger pole community, but also as a means for sex workers to get their stories out to the masses in a world where sex worker voices are often filtered out of mainstream media. The podcast is available on all major streaming sites, such as Spotify and Apple Podcasts. The podcast’s description on Apple Podcasts reads,

“Strippers are real people that are capable of amazing things, in and outside of the strip club... [It] discusses what strippers are up to, what the climate in and outside of the clubs is like and how social classifications can be harmful to marginalized groups. Strippers, sex workers, pole dancers and civilians can learn from stripper and sex worker community members and their allies” (Network). Thus, sex workers have created their own space through a mix of different platforms to share their counter narratives as inspired by the intertextual #yesastripper response to #notastripper.

IV. WE'RE ALL A WHORE TO SOMETHING: AN INTERVIEW WITH AM DAVIES OF STRIPPERS UNITED

“Classifying each other as people and workers is dangerous to society and marginalized people” -

AM Davies

“Physically I am quite visible, but I am voiceless” -

Charm on Yes a Stripper Podcast ‘Putting on the

Charm’ - Episode posted 1/26/22

It is evident that the classism of the master narrative continues to plague the pole community on Instagram through part of the bifurcated community’s continued elitist use of the #notastripper hashtag. Thus, the #yesastripper hashtag and greater movement around the hashtag was a response to the whorephobia of #notastripper amongst the pole dance Instagram community. The movements and sentiments around #yesastripper have gained visibility and traction within the last few years and serve as a way for strippers to share their counter narratives with the larger Instagram community and beyond. The hashtag has evolved into a greater movement which includes different media, such as the “Yes a Stripper” podcast, for continuing to share a counter narrative that includes the sex worker perspective.

Introduction

AM Davies (she/they) is the founder and a host of “Yes A Stripper” podcast, a powerhouse activist for the sex worker industry, and a former stripper. What I appreciate most about AM’s activism work is the acknowledgement of how important it is for the

sex worker movement to center the individuals who are most impacted by criminalization, violence, racism, migration laws, gender, and economic discrimination. I have long admired from afar AM's work in both sex worker advocacy and in pole dance artistry. Her ethos in the pole community speak volumes over the past twenty years, from winning the title of Spearmint Rhino's Entertainer of the year to organizing Pole Star Invitational, the first pole dancing competition outside of strip clubs in the United States. They also founded "United Pole Artists" with the goal of uniting the larger pole dancing community. Today, AM focuses most of her efforts working toward the unionization of strippers and serving as secretary for Strippers United. According to the organization's website, Strippers United is an "inclusive community of empowered strippers" where the "ultimate vision is to dismantle whorephobia and decriminalize sex work" (Who We Are). Thus, AM is constantly asking, "how can we support the most marginalized in our industry" within the "Yes A Stripper" podcast episodes.

I began regularly note-taking while listening to AM's "Yes A Stripper" podcast as an integral part of my research for this thesis, but the thought of reaching out to her for an interview didn't originally cross my mind. I know that her activism work is beyond the scope of a full-time job, and I did not want to add more to her to-do list. However, when I offhandedly mentioned using the podcast as a research source at work one day, the owner of one of the pole studios that I work at (Crimson Minx of Minx+Muse) asked me if I had considered interviewing AM. When I voiced my apprehension, Crimson insisted that AM is a designated thought-leader in the community and that Crimson would be happy to

introduce me to AM via email. I was thrilled and shocked when AM agreed to chat with me.

I had to immediately put my nerves and imposter syndrome aside when AM arrived in my Zoom room promptly at 1pm CST. Although I have plenty of interviewer experience from when I worked as a music journalist (in what feels like a a past life), no interview with a rockstar in a music venue greenroom made me quite as nervous as interviewing AM over Zoom did. Maybe the nerves showed up because I know how meaningful her life's work is, or maybe it was because I've seen things in her that I wish I could be myself. Or, perhaps, the nerves struck because I had such high hopes for what I would learn from this conversation.

Method

My hope for this interview was to get a true insider perspective into what my Instagram discourse analysis revealed. I acknowledge that despite how objective I tried to remain in my analysis, I inevitably have my own internal biases and limitations due to the fact that I have never worked as a stripper. I wanted to make sure my conclusions weren't merely me projecting my understandings onto the community, but were coming from a place that fairly considered the sex worker perspective into the counter narrative that I pieced together from Instagram posts and podcasts. Thus, my ultimate goal of the conversation was to shed more light on my guiding research questions with the perspective of a sex worker:

- What does Instagram discourse analysis of recreational non-sex working pole dancers say about these pole hobbyists' perspectives of career strippers?

- Which parts of the master narrative that demands the policing of the bodies and finances of individuals outside the hegemony (which consists of affluent, white, CIS-het people) are subverted by the pole community's overall rhetoric on Instagram? Which parts of this master narrative, if any, are further enforced by pole hobbyists?
- How are strippers affected by recreational studio pole dance becoming more socially acceptable?
- How are career strippers responding to the aforementioned master narrative that privileges recreational pole dancers?

Additionally, I was curious about the threat of censorship that strippers face on Instagram after analyzing @prettyboygirl's caption in fig. 6. Therefore, I included many questions around censorship in hopes of furthering my understanding of the necessity of language when sharing a sex worker inclusive narrative on Instagram.

I asked AM a list of many questions to clarify my own understandings of my research questions over a Zoom conversation. In order to amplify the sex worker perspective, I am including a minimally edited transcript of my interview with AM Davies in the results section of this chapter. This is to ensure that my own biases and perspectives do not get in the way of what AM had to say. I believe that editorializing her answers to my questions would not be as impactful as letting their words first speak for themselves. Therefore, I save my interpretations of said interview for this chapter's discussion portion.

Results - Interview Transcript

JMH: I'm familiar with your work, but I'd love to hear you give me a brief overview [of your work] for the sake of having it in your own words. What are your current projects and other things you are working on?

AMD: I started "Yes a Stripper" podcast in the end of 2019. In 2021 we added three new hosts to the show. Now it is a four-person-hosted podcast. Those three new hosts are all women of color. It was my response to sharing platforms, my platforms, with people of color and sharing the mic. I am also the secretary of Strippers United. I helped build Strippers United, which is formerly known as Soldiers of Pole. We are now officially a 501(c)(3) non-profit in the eyes of the government. That is work that I did directly to get that status. That was a huge project. I continue to work with Strippers United in coordinating mutual aid initiatives, coordinating events for the purpose of community, connection, fundraising, and for educating strippers and sex workers about their legal rights and their worker rights. I'm also working on building Sex Work News Network with two other people of color. I am just the admin [and] website person, but they are the ones that are the driving force behind it. So, that is brand-new and not too many people know about it yet. We haven't done a huge launch. It will be a news network for sex workers. I think that's it right now.

JMH: Oh so just that, just those few things (sarcasm). I love it. I know that one of the goals of Strippers United is dismantling whorephobia. I talk about that a lot in my own academic work and am often asked for a definition of it. What is your personal definition of whorephobia?

AMD: My personal definition of whorephobia is fear of, or hate towards, or disdain for

people who are sexually expressive and free, and who do what they want with their own body despite what anybody thinks about them. You can be whorephobic towards a woman who is sexually promiscuous [by saying] ‘oh she’s a slut’; that’s a form of whorephobia. It can also be in the form of [believing] ‘all strippers are trash.’ That’s also whorephobia. Or, ‘she’s just a hooker...it doesn’t matter anyway.’ That’s all whorephobia. It’s hate, disdain, or fear toward any person of any gender that is open and free sexually with their body and their behaviors.

JMH: I like that you included all genders. I feel that a lot of context around slut-shaming and whorephobia is gendered, but I think that any gender expression can experience [whorephobia].

AMD: I think that whorephobia is pushed upon mostly women and transgender folx and the gay community. I think that happens within the gay community amongst each other. But you don’t really see that with CIS gender males. It’s just not very common.

JMH: Earlier you mentioned [that] you brought three new hosts onto ‘Yes A Stripper’...I was listening to one recently, I think it was the one where you introduced everyone, and GiGi Holliday was saying how podcasts and even online spaces are a way for y’all to write sex worker history in a way that is accessible with your own words because so much of the history has been [erased]. I like that she framed it that way. Do you think that things like the podcast and speaking out online can help demystify sex work and maybe de-stigmatize it in the future?

AMD: I would like to think that it would do those things. I do know that I selectively converse with some white CIS gender males, who are not clients, and they’ve actually

become random friends around the country. They listen to my podcast and listening to the podcast has helped them understand and change their perspective on things over time.

This is like...three men in particular that I'm talking about. These are just the ones that I connect with. So, I don't know what kind of impact it has on people like that [white CIS gender males]. Quite frankly, white CIS gender males are the most dangerous humans on the planet, so they are the ones who I'd like for their perspective to change the most. Not only are they the most dangerous, but they are the most powerful. If they are educated and understand things, maybe we will be able to demystify and change behaviors over time. It's kind of like...I'd rather do this than do nothing. At times...I'm going to be honest...a lot of the issues that we deal with in general in the world just feel hopeless. I do hope it does that, though.

JMH: I definitely feel that. I will say that even sharing some of your work on my [Instagram] stories and such, I've had CIS gender, straight, white males message me in response to tell me they never thought of it like that. So, even [though] I am not directly speaking it and just sharing your content and sharing the podcast content, I hear back from people I would not expect to hear back from that 'wow! I never saw it that way, but thanks for informing me',

AMD: That feels really good. That's great. Thank you for that.

JMH: Of course. That kind of segues into my next question. I kind of found the whole "Yes a Stripper" movement, personally, after first finding "not a stripper," and seeing that hashtag go viral. [This was] nearly a decade ago in the pole community...I feel like that was such a whorephobic time. Am I wrong about this: Did that movement come as a

response to all of the whorephobia there was in the pole studio [community]? Or is it something entirely different?

AMD: I think what happened was at the beginning of the pole dance explosion, if you said ‘I’m a pole dancer and I take pole dancing classes.’ then people would go, ‘Oh! You’re a stripper!’ and that would be the general comeback to making a statement about pole dancing. Then the person saying ‘I’m a pole dancer’ immediately gets offended because they know what that means. They automatically feel classified and pushed down lower on the classification level of what’s ‘acceptable,’ and there’s this fear. [It becomes] ‘I’m not like that’. I think that happened enough times to enough people that they felt it necessary to very much divide pole dancing from stripping, but still maintain the aesthetics of stripping, which is the cultural appropriation that we see. Then they [mainstream pole dancers] tried to push us [strippers] out of the game. Strippers have been blacklisted from [mainstream pole] competitions....they’ve even had awards stripped from them when organizers realized they were a stripper in the past or present. I’ve been barred from working at certain events as media in the beginning of my United Pole Artist career. I was told that I could come as media and then told there was no room for me. I’m almost certain it was because of my background...I’ve always been very open that I was a stripper from the beginning...because I was. So, I think it was just people getting tired of the ‘lesser than’ quality.

JMH: Do you think that the “Yes A Stripper” hashtag was a response to that? I saw that start to go more viral. I know for a while people were really quiet, even in the studio, about working at clubs. Do you think that was a reclamation of language after the “Not a

Stripper” movement? [Similar to] how using queer used to be an insult, but now in my day I happily use the term ‘queer’ to describe myself. Do you think it is a similar type of reclaiming the language?

AMD: I think so. I think reclaiming the language and also starting the conversation. The actual hashtag was actually created by a singular person and then it went viral from there. A lot of people don’t know who created the hashtag. I do. I don’t like to talk about them because I found out much later that they are a big racist. I don’t really like to give them too much credit. One person started it who had a voice at the time. It just sort of blew up from there. When I chose the name for the podcast, I reached out to this person, unknowing of their background, and asked permission to use the hashtag as the name. I received permission. I even contemplated changing the name later, but it was such a good name. People are so aware of what it means and what it stands for. Then there was like a war about it...it was like strippers against pole dancers on social media. So, it was definitely not just to reclaim, but to also be unashamed and to show that you have nothing to be ashamed of. If you are a pole dancer, not a stripper, all you have to say is ‘I’m not a stripper, but aren’t they great?’ That’s all you have to say. You don’t have to defend yourself. Because who cares what some frat guy at a bar thinks about you?

JMH: Absolutely! You can just say ‘I don’t currently work at a club, but I love strippers. I can thank them for what they did for creating an art.’ Even when I teach beginner classes and have beginners come in and hear them say something [negative about strippers], I stop the class and say, ‘We love strippers here. We do not knock them. They started what you are learning.’ You have to squash that as soon as they come in.

AMD: That's awesome.

JMH: We talked earlier about using online platforms and the podcast to educate people. I also know you mentioned in one of your recent podcast episodes with Charm that through online spaces, you have also learned more about full-service sex workers, and that it's from being able to read the thoughts and experiences of other people. I know Instagram gets knocked sometimes, but I know it also serves a purpose. But, as far as censorship goes, I've read up on how it's gotten worse after FOSTA and SESTA. Have you noticed censorship becoming more of an issue since [those acts went into effect]?

AMD: Oh, definitely. I am permanently shadow banned. I can't get out of it. I've been lucky enough not to completely lose my account like other colleagues have. I started policing myself. I gave in. I deleted a lot of topless photos of myself, even though I was covered. I even took down photos where I had a small bikini on. We have also all had to change our language. We write 'skripper' instead of 'stripper.' We write 'sex work' with numbers for the vowels, like [spells out] 's-3-x w-0-r-k.' I don't even write the word 'link' in a real way. I write [spells out] 'l-!-n-k' and 'b-I-0', because I don't want bots to even see that I'm promoting links. There was this one time I was doing the Everybody Visible campaign. I don't know if you've heard of that.

JMH: I don't think I have.

AMD: Do you remember the time when pole dancers were all getting shadow banned and hashtags were getting deleted by Instagram? That was right around FOFSTA/SESTA. We started hearing from other [Instagram] communities that were hearing the same thing: it was fat [positive] communities, black and brown communities, mostly activists and

artists who were black and brown, and other sex-artists...people who do nude sculptures and such. So, we did this huge campaign called *everybodyvisible.com*. When we went to post the link to that website in a DM [direct message] on Instagram or a profile on Instagram, we were blocked. And this was a brand-new website, so it wasn't that bots had discovered content on there. It was just the URL that was barred from being posted anywhere on Facebook or Instagram.

JMH: I didn't even realize they monitored DMs like that. That is wild.

AMD: Oh yes they do. They have rules. They must have some sort of keyword block thing. The only word I can think of that would have triggered it was the word "body" [in the url]. But, I am able to post *yesastripperpodcast.com*. Why am I able to post that but not 'everybody visible?' Very strange. It was a brand-new website. It wasn't known...I just made it. It literally was immediate. It wasn't like they even had time to look at the website and decide [if it should be blocked].

JMH: Were you already shadow banned at the time?

AMD: No. I am shadow banned on @thequeenofsexy ... this was with my work on @unitedpoleartists. We were all just pole dancers communicating with each other within an Instagram messaging group. Nobody could post it, even on Facebook. We all tested it and tried.

JMH: That is wild. It makes sense that I hadn't heard of the campaign if it was already getting censored like that. Speaking of that too, censorship, you talked with Charm about how you were able to help her actually get her [Instagram] account back. And sometimes, you are actually able to help other people, but sometimes Instagram doesn't do that [grant

people their accounts back]. You mentioned it seems that there is a little bit of racism in that [decision of who gets their account back]. Can you elaborate a little bit more on that?

AMD: I think it's both arbitrary and racist with how they choose. I think they do take race into consideration. However, there is still plenty of white people who haven't gotten their accounts back either. That is why I believe it is sometimes arbitrary. I don't know how they get chosen. Maybe it's the timing and the right person sitting behind the computer that sees all the reports. I really don't know how they decide who gets what back. Charm's account was smaller...that could be another reason...that they didn't see it as threatening. I think the larger accounts that have more power and visibility could be more threatening. I'm just guessing here based on my experience.

JMH: Right, I don't think anybody really knows.

AMD: ...and they won't talk to us. They promised to talk to us. Again, through the work of 'Every Body Visible' we did get the eyes and ears of executives for Facebook. They said they would talk to us, but that they never came to the table.

JMH: How long ago was that?

AMD: This was back in 2019. We were doing it in the beginning of the year, I think it was [the] Fall of 2019 when we were doing this work. Anyway, in some cases it works, and in some cases it doesn't.

JMH: Do you think it has something to do with the laws and the way they are worded in a way that conflates language between victims of sex trafficking and actual sex workers?

AMD: I think it has to do with the way that the law has tightened the noose around social media tech giants. So, section 230 was weakened...are you aware of what section 230 is?

JMH: No, can you....

AMD: So, section 230 was one of the things that was weakened during FOSTA/SESTA. Section 230 states that for social media platforms, let's say... I, as an individual, uploaded child sex abuse materials...before FOSTA/SESTA, I, the individual, would have gotten in trouble. After FOSTA/SESTA, now Facebook, Twitter, Instagram would be held liable because of that weakened section. That's why they cut off all of these hashtags, because they were combing through them to make sure that there was nothing in there that could get them in trouble. Right after the signing of FOSTA/SESTA, the hashtag #woman was blocked and you couldn't see anything [under the archive]. They did the same thing to #womensfitness. #Mensfitness was fine. But, they were combing through to make sure there was no content on there that they would be liable for. That is when policies became stricter for users. They didn't want to get in more trouble with the government...the government is already mad at them for a ton of shit in general.

JMH: So, it might not necessarily be that the execs at the company have a problem with it, but it's...the way the law is written. Are they liable as an accomplice? Is that it?

AMD: I'm not exactly sure the degree of liability, but they will get in trouble and shut down...similar to what happened to Backpage... they were just decimated. Granted, there were things on there [Backpage] that shouldn't have been. In instances of Pornhub and Backpage, professional adult sex workers were telling the creators of these platforms that there were child sex abuse materials there, but [the platforms] weren't really doing anything about it. Finally other people caught onto it. We were trying to help. We always do. We don't want children involved in this either. That's [the fact that sex worker

complaints about child abuse content was ignored] because the majority of these platforms are built by white CIS-gender males, and they just see the sex workers as money. They don't consider what we have to say. I hope I'm not getting too off-track here.

JMH: No, this is great. This is right on track.

AMD: So, the blurred lines between sex work and sex trafficking are really convoluted when you talk about street workers. Because there are a lot of street workers who are sex trafficked. They also don't consider sex work, as work. They consider it survival. There are also all these little nuances within our own community. What is sex work and what is sex trafficking, what is survivalist sex acts? The thing is, the people creating all these laws and policies are not really talking to sex workers who are knowledgeable and understanding of our community. They don't even really know the difference themselves. ...If you wore a bikini on Instagram, you could be targeted as someone to be shadow banned because you look like a sex worker.

JMH: It's interesting you brought up the differences between sex work, sex trafficking, and survival sex work and how nuanced the lines are between [them]. I read *We Too* and a lot of the essays there really opened my eyes... I didn't realize how blurred the lines can get. But that's the most important piece, listening to sex workers and their wants and needs. Not to get too Marxist, but isn't all labor exploitive anyway? *laughs*

AMD: *laughs* Right..ya!

JMH: In some way or degree, we are all being exploited.

AMD: We're all a whore to something.

JMH: We are! My advisor recommended John Oliver's piece on sex work to me...have you seen it yet?

AMD: I haven't seen it yet, but it's been sent to me a few times...I just haven't had the time to watch it yet, but it's on my list of things to do. I saw part of it, and I'm really grateful to him for doing that. Someone in that position really needed to do that.

JMH: I was prepared to not agree with a lot of it, but his ultimate argument was that before we start making up laws for a group of people that we need to ask them. And he talked a lot about the pros and cons of legalization and decriminalization, etc. Getting back on track here... You've talked a lot on the podcast about how as pole dance become more mainstream, like JLO at the Super Bowl and FKA Twigs, that some people consider it a 'win,' but you've talked about how it actually seems to stigmatize people who pole dance as a form of sex work more...

AMD: Yea, I don't think it was a win; I think it was a huge loss for strippers and for sex workers. I think it was a huge win for 'pole dancers,' but that seems to be all they really care about. I disagreed, and I made a huge post on United Pole Artists' Instagram page, the Monday after the Super Bowl, which I had written on Saturday...not even realizing that on Sunday she was going to be on a pole on the [Super Bowl halftime show] stage. It was almost like I had predicted it or something. I had written about it...because I was writing about the *Hustlers* movie, which is why I ended up already having that prepared. That movie, in general... is pretty terrible, because they portray all of these ideas of how strippers are...and because they say it's 'based on a true story.' There's a lot of things that are inaccurate about that 'true story' as well. It's infuriating to see a high-powered

celebrity to be able to do what we do...horribly by the way, she's not very good at it... on an International stage. Let's be real, the world watches the Super Bowl. When we do it in the privacy of a club we're 'dirty skanks,' but when *she* [JLO] does it glamorously on a million dollar stage, it's a 'win.' But it's not a win. In fact, the *Hustlers* movie came out in a time when we were all getting shadow banned and deleted [from Instagram]. But her and her pole dancing friends in the movie were everywhere. They were on billboards, bus stop signs, Facebook, Instagram...and everywhere else that you would see advertisements, she was plastered everywhere pole dancing. Meanwhile, we were getting deleted [on Instagram]. I don't see how that is a win. Furthermore, she didn't use her visibility and voice and platform to even talk about the issues we [strippers] deal with. Yes, she did say things like 'pole dancing is so hard, I have so much respect for it.' But, everything new is fucking hard; I don't care. Can you talk about our issues? We're screaming to be paid attention to. You have the power and you have been adjacent to these people now, but you are doing nothing to help. That was our problem with FKA Twigs also. She did the same thing.

JMH: I know she [FKA Twigs] was supposed to talk to Charm, but I haven't heard an update on that. Did she ever get back to her?

AMD: I don't know if she ever did talk to Charm, but she did talk to strippers. She did end up lending her Instagram platform to an activist stripper group over in the UK for several day. She also donated a bunch of money to a couple of sex worker activist groups. She did as much as she could to step up and lend her platform, which is what we really need and wanted. She has, since then, changed the way she approaches the aesthetic of

being a stripper. It's not as flippant as it was before. Now she's more like 'here's me *playing* a stripper and here's these activist type groups that are doing work around this.' So, she does do that type of stuff now.

JMH: Way more than JLO

AMD: Way more than JLO. Quite honestly, that dude, Lil NasX...he did the same thing. He did the 'let me act like a stripper, but let me not talk about your issues.' Some people have issue with him, too. But, he's America's darling, so it's a little harder. He's black and he's gay, so having those strong minority [intersections] make it a little harder to sort of go hard with him. For FKA Twigs and JLO, we just went for it. With Lil NasX it was different.

JMH: I can see that. I think sometimes it's hard to find the line of when to call someone in and when to call someone out.

AMD: I think also because that video and song was about him coming out, which was a really big deal and really significant to a lot of people who are fearful of coming out...I think that coupled with everything, made us decide to back off.

JMH: I am glad that FKA Twigs at least...stepped up. I remember seeing the takeovers and thinking that was cool. [This all] reminds me of this theory I read about how when one group of sexual stigmas become more mainstream other things get pushed further in the corner...it talked about how in Germany there was the women's 'sexual revolution,' but then prostitution became a lot more stigmatized. So, for the first time brothels were being raided when they were left alone beforehand. It was women having sex before marriage that was originally the taboo, but as that became less taboo, prostitution became

more taboo. I have found so many parallels between the stuff we've been talking about with pole dancing going more mainstream, but stripping becoming more stigmatized.

AMD: Interesting...

JMH: Ya, so it seems like its ok for JLO and the celebrities to go do these things, but now it's like being a sex working pole dancer has become more stigmatized and pushed further out of the conversations as pole dancers want to separate themselves. So, that's a big part of my own research is making sure I'm a good ally and not...an asshole. All of that being said, one thing I really appreciate about you and your work is what you are constantly saying on your podcast.... that as mainstream sex work does become more a part of the conversation, that you don't want to leave anyone out. You always stress wanting to include the most marginalized, whether that's full-service sex workers, trans sex workers. Through your own activism, and your own research, how do we not leave anybody out of the conversation?

AMD: Inviting them to the table and having some table that is formulated for said conversation. There is [currently] no opportunity. If someone of power or in a position to make change said 'let's have a conversation with sex workers,' ideally they would go to sex worker organizations, and they would do the ground work for making sure the people of proper representation are present. I work with the Black Sex Worker Collective, and some of those folks on there are street sex workers. Some of them are survivors of sex trafficking. Even with Strippers United, I work with full-service sex workers that sometimes do street work. I work with trans sex workers, as well, who do all kinds of things from escorting, to stripping, to sugar babying. The unique thing about sex workers

is that you can do all different types of things. Daisy Ducati [co-host of “Yes A Stripper”] does porn, stripping, wrestle porn, cam modeling. My point is, you can dabble in all of these things as one person. Even by having one person of many skillsets and experiences is really helpful, because they can speak in one conversation about different parts of the community. Because the sex work community is divided in all of these little parts. I would just say that the first thing we have to do is find a table for those types of conversations. Literally, sex worker organizations are the people to go to and ask who to bring to that table.

JMH: ...making sure everybody is heard.

AMD: Yes, making sure everyone is represented because in every sex worker organization there is a huge diversity. In Strippers United, not everybody is a stripper. Some people don't identify as a stripper, but they do identify as sex workers.

JMH: I saw that when going through the website and everybody's bios. You were kind of talking about that earlier, too, how it is so nuanced. There have even been times where I have cammed and sugared. However, I don't currently identify as a sex worker. I think a lot of people within the sex work community can identify with the fact that the lines are pretty fluid.

AMD: Exactly.

JMH: I think those are a lot of the biggest points that I wanted to talk about. I'm so thankful for your insight. Is there anything else you would like to add? I want to make sure that I include things you think are important.

AMD: In conversations like this, I always like to make sure that the person writing or producing puts an emphasis on the most marginalized folks in the community, and that's Black Indigenous People of color and trans folks. If you take sex workers as a whole, we are already garbage, right? Regardless of your gender, age, or color...we're already considered the lowest of the class system, basically. As we live in this white supremacist racist society, in general, Black Indigenous people of color already have a hard time. Well, being a sex worker on top of that...just imagine. It's even worse for them. They are the ones that need the most representation and support and awareness around the issues that they experience.

JMH: Right, I think the issues are so unique based on...intersections. I do want to make sure that I include voices that are not just white sex workers in my thesis, as well.

AMD: We are very privileged, especially the ones who aren't doing street work. White sex workers who get to choose to try to be a stripper are in a very privileged position...you get the best shifts, you get the most shifts, and you can walk in and out of it as you please. There's a lot of other people who just can't do that. I think that's a common misconception as well...someone like me was very privileged in the work that I did for the eighteen years. I got afforded a lot of extra things, because of what I look like, specifically. I've seen my black co-workers not get shifts. I've seen them make less money. I've seen that with my own eyes. I think people need to understand that there is a lot of racism and discrimination, fat-phobia, ageism, homophobia. All of those things exist within our community and in our industry.

JMH: Absolutely. One of my good friends is only able to get hired at two clubs here in town [Austin] because she is dark-skinned Black with beautiful curves. She's told me stories that as soon as she walks in the door...she's gets a big no. It's a very real thing.

AMD: Absolutely. So, this is your thesis paper for grad school at Texas State?

JMH: Yes, I work for Crimson and Shelbi Aiona and Natasha, too. Everyone speaks so highly of you.

AMD: Oh Shelbi...she's a dear friend...she's my tattoo artist.

JMH: Everyone told me to tell you hi! I've listened to your podcast for a while, but especially when I solidified what I wanted to write about. I started listening to it more intently and taking notes, not just listening to it when I'm driving. When I mentioned that to Crimson, she's was like, 'well why don't you just talk to AM'...I was like 'well, I'm sure they're really busy.' So, I really appreciate it because I know you are busy.

AMD: No problem at all.

JMH: And making sure we aren't forgetting the most marginalized in the industry, I've been listening to podcasts by GIGI and the other new hosts. I also keep up with Selena and some of the things fae write and post. Are there any other industry thought leaders that I should make sure to look into for the sake of following their work?

AMD: Yes, Akinos is a great person to follow. I'll type her username in the chat. She runs the Black Sex Worker Collective. I'll put that username in the chat, too.

JMH: Thank you. That is something I want to be wary of in my own work. I want to make sure I'm not whitewashing the conversation.

AMD: That's great. Thank you for that.

Discussion

My hypothesis that strippers become further policed as recreational pole dance becomes more mainstream was confirmed when AM recounted when the movie *Hustlers* starring Jennifer Lopez (JLO) was released during September of 2019, and when JLO pole danced during the Super Bowl halftime show on February 2, 2020. She verified that while JLO's image on a pole was plastered all over social media and billboards, many strippers within her community started to get their Instagram accounts deleted. Thus, the famous actress JLO suffered no consequences of erasure when she did the exact same thing that was getting actual career strippers deleted from the Instagram platform. This platform erasure resulted in denying strippers the opportunity to share their counter narrative, amongst many other social goods. I will admit that at the time I saw JLO on stage at the Super Bowl, I thought it was a societal step away from slut-shaming. However, my opinion on that has drastically changed upon doing this research and learning that her performance actually resulted in more harm toward the sex worker community than what already existed (a phenomena similar to Adorno's theory).

This interview with AM also further solicited that the pole community's overall rhetoric on Instagram (and behavior in real life spaces) still enforces the elitism of the classist master narrative by transferring the pressure of being slut-shamed onto strippers. She explained that her perspective of the #notastripper hashtag was that too many recreational pole dancers were accused of being strippers and wanted to distinguish themselves from that classification since society (unfortunately and naively) views sex workers to be amongst the lowest class of society. Thus, she also confirmed that the

#yesstripper hashtag was created as a means for strippers to open a conversation and show that they refuse to be shamed.

I also learned that while there is a schism between the recreational pole community and strippers, and between different sects of pole hobbyists, there is also some bifurcation between the leaders of the “Yes a Stripper” movement, meaning that not all strippers, even those leading the #yesstripper movement, do not always see eye to eye (and, furthermore, just because a person is a thought leader creating change for one group of marginalized, does not mean that they are without flaw). AM explained that the sex work community is also divided into different little parts, but no one group of sex workers, whether they be full-service, street workers, strippers, or cam models, should be left out of the conversation and advocacy. Thus, while there are natural divisions between the lines of sex work, AM believes workers within these groups should rally together and not be at odds. Before my discussion with AM, I was unfamiliar with Black Sex Workers Collective, but I have since started following the group and their advocacy for the most marginalized within the sex worker community, by the most marginalized in the community.

My conversation with AM continued to add to my understanding of the nuance that exists in the answers to my research questions. I gained a wealth of knowledge on Instagram censorship, the importance of lending social media platforms to marginalized communities, as well as how privilege functions in both the pole community and the sex work industry. Regardless of my nerve-induced awkwardness over this Zoom

conversation, AM was gracious and insightful during our near hour-long Zoom conversation.

Before immediately diving into these research questions, I took a moment to introduce myself, my academic work and my work in the pole community. During this introductory time AM did let me know that she is often reached out to by journalists and other students, but she is incredibly selective with whom she speaks with these days. They explained that the introduction from Crimson was one of the main reasons that they agreed to take some time to talk to me. I am incredibly thankful for that introduction and believe that being an insider in the overall pole community (with some proximity to the sex worker community) created a level of trust and patience between AM and me prior to this interview. This is a conversation that I will remember and reference for the rest of my life in hopes of being the best ally possible to the sex worker community.

V. CONCLUSION: WHERE FROM HERE?

*“Destigmatizing sex work is necessary to uplifting
sex worker voices” - Hello Rooster*

*“I’m still here, in red glitter stilettos, still stripping
and still fighting, twenty years after we successfully
unionized the Lusty Lady...” -Antonia Crane*

My original intent for this thesis was to examine the counter narrative of the greater pole community on Instagram, but I began to realize that many parts of the classist master narrative are actually enforced by a rather large part of the recreational pole dance community. Despite all of the progressiveness that exists within the pole community’s rhetoric on the platform, there is a long way to go when it comes to examining and deconstructing the whorephobia that is still present within the Instagram community, as well as the greater pole community outside of the online realm, today. Therefore, my work eventually evolved into an attempt to amplify the voices of sex workers by piecing together a counter narrative that examined strippers’ responses to the community’s elitism that echoes the classism of the master narrative.

It is important to note that the lines between a sex-working and non-sex-working pole dancer are nuanced and not necessarily black and white. Identities, just like language, continue to evolve and change. So do careers. While I was dedicated to amplifying the voices of sex workers within this work, it is also important that I conclude by noting it would be impossible to include the diversity of thoughts and opinions of all sex working pole dancers within the confines of this thesis. Just as people within all

different populations are complex and unique, so are the individuals within the sex working part of the pole community. My hope, however, is that I was able to adequately portray the counter narrative of sex working pole dancers by actively examining the roots of my own past internalized whorephobia.

As my research results solidified, the issues that sex workers face are vastly unique due to intersectional classifications in conjunction with the classist master narrative's negative stereotypes of sex workers — this leaves a lot of opportunity for future research. Future research should aim to amplify the voices of the most marginalized in the community, particularly black trans women sex workers. Furthermore, future research should explore possible ways to avoid further perpetrating the cycle of forcing a more oppressed group into more sexual stigmatization. Thus, we can continue to examine how to fight against one of the unjust intersections of a classist society without putting another group down in that process. My interview with AM also confirmed that the censorship of Instagram disproportionately affects social goods and the livelihood of sex workers on the platform. This disproportionate censorship is something that should also be researched regarding damage mitigation for the most vulnerable within the community, such as black trans sex workers. Lastly, the responses to the counter narratives of sex workers are another great area for future research — it would be enlightening to examine the comments sections of sex worker Instagram posts for rhetorical empathy.

This thesis also serves as a counter narrative to a prominent idea that Instagram is, at most, frivolous. I currently work as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, and many of my

first-year English students constantly write about how much social media has destroyed society as a whole (despite many of them not knowing life before social media). This echoes the exhausted trope of moral panic that influences many of my own peers' perspectives regarding the value of Instagram.

I argue that social media has decentralized storytelling, which allows people to share their stories to a larger audience than would be possible with traditional media. Although the "new media" of Instagram is still subject to censorship, the gatekeeping of social media is far less than it is for more traditional media platforms, such as prime time cable news. Many amongst us are writers and artists, yet few of us are afforded the privilege of getting our work and thoughts published. I've learned about the world around me and the small part I play in it from reading other people's lived experiences on the Instagram platform, including many people whose lives are vastly different from my own. My research for this thesis also shows that other individuals have come to understand and work through their own whorephobia through learning counter narratives on social media as well. In *The Network Society* Jan Van Dijk asserts that "it is easy to speak on the Internet, but difficult to be heard" (40). While that assertion may hold some truth, I argue that Instagram makes it a hell of a lot easier for the most marginalized in our classist society to be heard than traditional media does.

After beginning my research for this thesis, I started to notice more sex worker advocacy in mainstream media and in political campaigns. John Oliver recently had a segment on the decriminalization of sex work during an episode on *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. Furthermore, out-and-proud former stripper Alexandra Hunt is a

Democrat running to represent Philadelphia in Congress; her viral campaign centers advocating for the most marginalized individuals of society, including sex workers. I am not sure if I am seeing more sex-worker-centered conversations because of all the tireless work that the folks at Strippers United, Black Sex Workers Collective, and other advocacy groups have put in, or if it's because my focus has been zeroed in on sex worker issues since I began my research process. I like to believe it is the former.

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