

5-1-2022

Consumers of Sex, Romance and the Spectacle: An Ethnographic Study of Female Tourists in Bangkok's Adult Entertainment Zones

Jason H. Scott

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/31813366>

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CONSUMERS OF SEX, ROMANCE AND THE SPECTACLE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC
STUDY OF FEMALE TOURISTS IN BANGKOK'S ADULT
ENTERTAINMENT ZONES

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
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Doctor of Philosophy – Sociology

Department of Sociology
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University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2022

May 6, 2022

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Consumers of Sex, Romance and the Spectacle: An Ethnographic Study of Female
Tourists in Bangkok's Adult Entertainment Zones

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Abstract

This research is an ethnographic study of female sex tourism in Bangkok, Thailand and explores how women, as consumers, participate in activities and spaces that were historically reserved for male tourists. Much of the existing scholarly literature investigates the way men from the global North participate in sex tourism practices. Very little attention, however, has been given to the way female tourists engage as consumers in the global sex tourism industry. Studies conducted in the Caribbean suggest that sexual consumption practices among female tourists are dichotomously different from men because of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts. To guide this research, I asked three questions. First, how do female tourists participate in Bangkok's sex tourism industry? Second, what common characteristics do female sex tourists display? Finally, how is the sex tourism industry organized? I answered these questions by creating a typology of sex tourists that shows the different ways in which women visitors consume sex, romance and the public spectacle. In developing this typology, I spent nearly two years in the field making observations, participating in touristic activities, engaging in guided conversations and conducting interviews. My findings indicate female tourists are realizing that many establishments and service providers are facilitating a welcoming environment to a variety of sexual orientations by actively and passively soliciting their presence. Recognizing that female is a socially constructed category, I draw attention to the way consumers engage these spaces as well as contest traditional notions of gender roles and sexual scripts. I conclude by providing a more nuanced explanation of the participants and services provided.

Acknowledgments

I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to the many people who helped me get to the final stage of this project. I would first like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Barb Brents, for your patience and support throughout this journey. Your encouragement and feedback were vital to the completion of this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Simon Gottschalk for your guidance and assistance in helping me find workable solutions when I grappled with methodological issues. I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Witchayanee Ocha for sponsoring me as a visiting scholar and overseeing my project while I was conducting fieldwork in Thailand. I am appreciative of your insight, generosity and the professional networks you introduced me to. I am also thankful to Dr. Jiemin Bao and Dr. Kate Korgan for your willingness to see this project through to the end. Dr. Renee' Watson, I will forever be indebted to you for your mentorship and letting me know that my voice does matter.

This research would not have been possible without the cooperation of my study informants and gatekeepers. Because you opened up your social world to me, I can now see and understand things that I never knew existed. I appreciate your insider knowledge and am extremely grateful for all that you shared with me. Without your assistance and feedback, the typology I am introducing in this dissertation would not have been possible.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my spouse and family for your unwavering support. You remained patient and endured many sacrifices throughout this process. Your encouragement and belief in me is what kept me going whenever I questioned my presence going down this scholarly path. You made me realize this is just the beginning of a greater journey.

Preface

According to Ranjan Bandyopadhyay (2013: 1), “Scholars have paid little attention to sex tourism – it has not been seen as one for serious intellectual investigation.” Despite the great magnitude of the international sex tourism industry, engaging in sex research is considered “taboo” (Berdychevsky, Gibson and Poria, 2013: 65) and investigating the organization and social worlds of those involved is “deemed socially inappropriate” and opens the researcher for a line of query to determine if they have some sort of “twisted sexual perversion” (Carr, 2016: 189). Despite being somewhat commonplace, I find this type of rationale a hapless academic form of moral panic given that Kibicho (2009: 18) posits “sex tourism today is a mega-industry.”

For those who choose not to adhere to cautionary warnings and decide to proceed forward with research pertaining to sexual acts and associated forms of consumption, it is not unusual to receive advising to wait until tenure status is attained. Because of the stigma associated with openly speaking about sex, let alone researching how it is practiced, job placement and promotion remain real concerns among graduate students and newly minted PhDs. It is unfortunate this Puritanical trajectory still exists nearly seventy years after the groundbreaking research on observed human sexuality conducted by Masters and Johnson in the late 1950s. In fact, Tom Reichert (2003: 11) expounds this point by stating “Even William Masters and Virginia Johnson, two pioneers in the area of sex research, were advised not to pursue sex research until they were fully tenured.” It must be noted, however, there appears to be one broad caveat to this line of reasoning – sex tourism research lacks “social righteousness” unless the underlying purpose of the study is to posture the industry and those who participate in it as deviant and morally reprehensible (Carr, 2016: 189-190). This Victorian-esque view of

human sexuality demonstrates the need to advance new ways of understanding contemporary forms of sexual consumption in touristic studies.

These positions reinforced from the earliest stages of my project that I have to be extremely careful not to impose my voice by speaking on behalf of women or sex workers and to recognize that my gender, racial and sexual identities do indeed impact the findings I unearth. I also learned quickly that I must grow thicker skin because my scholarly contributions will be heavily scrutinized as a result of my personal background and social forces that perpetuate individual and institutional biases. Neil Carr (2016:197) asserts “Within the field of sex and tourism arguably no areas have yet been saturated; for anyone *brave enough* to step into the field there are almost limitless research opportunities.” Since the time Carr declared this, scholars of sexual commerce have made tremendous progress and their findings are now regularly presented at professional conferences and published in an array of academic journals. Despite these advances, Carr remains correct because inquiries of female sex tourism continue to be limited. Based on my rebel spirit and belief that good data can be generated by studying the organization of the female sex tourism industry and the meaning participants give to their social interactions, I step up to Carr’s challenge and will let the chips fall where they may.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

While conducting medical tourism fieldwork in Thailand for my master's thesis, I encountered several informants who, in varying capacities, previously worked in the sex industry. Initially, this appeared strange to me because most people I interviewed were formally trained and licensed to work in the medical tourism sector heavily promoted by the Thai government. At that time, Thailand was in the midst of marketing a large scale international campaign, *Amazing Thailand*, to showcase its exotic culture, pristine landscapes, and maintain its place as the world's top medical tourism destination. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) used a three pronged approach to medical care and the services they were ready to furnish in order to attract foreign tourists. The first prong consisted of advertising the medical industry's ability to provide both inexpensive routine medical treatment and complex invasive procedures administered by internationally trained and accredited physicians in newly erected state of the art facilities. The second prong emphasized alternative and longstanding practices in traditional Ayurvedic and Eastern medicine that nurtured mind-body function through means such as acupuncture, herbal and naturopathic remedies, as well as mindfulness. The third prong, and the largest of the three in terms of utilization by tourists, advanced traditional Thai massage as a way to stimulate good health and wellbeing. It was in the last category where I met several former sex workers who explained how they transitioned their work from engaging in illegal activities in the informal economy to the regulated formal economy.

When massage workers discussed their involvement with customers prior to receiving licensure, I was mostly told about stories of the usual suspects – wealthy older White men from the West – but also heard several times about the escapades of Western women who utilized

sexual services from underground massage parlors and sex workers. These stories intrigued me, but tourists and their sexual engagements were not the focus of my research at that time. Further into my graduate studies I began to investigate what I learned about female tourists through the interview data I collected from massage workers. I was surprised to find out the role Western women play in the sex tourism industry was missing from the scholarly literature when it came to the case of Thailand. Despite visiting several red-light districts with both male and female students who were conducting fieldwork of their own in Thailand, it was frustrating to see the scholarly void in terms of female participation since women were actively present in these spaces. What I did discover, however, was voluminous studies focusing on harmful aspects of predatory tourism and belaboring atrocious acts consisting of men exploiting local women and children of color. But, what about the female tourists I saw in every entertainment zone that I visited and the multiple accounts detailed by my informants? This piqued my curiosity even more and ultimately led to exposing my scholarly ignorance when it came to the suppression of researching sex, in general, and, specifically, the several ways in which women contest essentialist notions of gender and sexual scripts in activities and spaces traditionally reserved for men.

According to Nhatthien Nguyen (2010: 40), “Prostitution is vital to Thailand’s enormous tourist industry.” Despite this, sexual consumption by female tourists remains relatively unexplored even though an increasing number of women engage as consumers in the sex tourism industry (Sanders, 2010b; Sikes, 2006). Male sex tourism in Thailand has been studied extensively and the research findings have been instrumental in formulating frameworks to understanding why Western men have sex with Thai sex workers (Brown, 2001; Enloe 1989; Manderson, 1997; Seabrook, 2001); how they negotiate illegal aspects of entertainment zones

and red-light districts (Andrews, 2004; Montgomery, 2001); and facilitate an international political economy that perpetuates inequalities (Cohen, 1982, 1988; Law, 2000; Leheny, 1995; Omandi, 2003; Phillips and Dann, 1998; Wonders and Michalowski, 2001). Although these frameworks allow us to better comprehend practices of male tourists, such explanations remain relatively few as to the case of women. This disparity has created a knowledge gap in the understanding of the organization of sex tourism.

Besides sustaining the focus on male tourists, many findings are framed from a perspective that it is only gender dynamics that matter, situating sex tourism as an example of patriarchy – male exploitation and domination of female sexuality (Enloe, 2000, 1989; Farley, 2003; Jeffreys, 2009, 2003). Other studies look at issues of race in understanding sex tourism, but many of these continue to focus solely on questions of racial difference and how race is used as an inequality that favors the tourist over the service provider (Kempadoo, 2001, 1999; O’Connell Davidson, 2011, 1999; Sanchez Taylor, 2006, 2001). In addition, assumptions of illegal prostitution remain a common theme.

Alongside these understandings of how men participate in commodified sex is an emerging body of scholarship that shows females are not only consumers of sex as tourists, but a rapidly growing component of the market for a variety of sexual services (Comella, 2008; Kingston, Hammond and Redman, 2021, 2020; Wosick-Correa and Joseph, 2008). Other research on sexual commerce explores how intimacy is consumed and marketed in various sectors through the boyfriend experience (Tewksbury and Lapsey, 2017) and girlfriend experience (Bernstein 2007a, 2007b; Carbonero and Gomez Garrido, 2018; Milrod and Monto, 2010; Milrod and Weitzer, 2011; Weitzer, 2021). This perspective is rarely discussed in the female sex tourism literature. Therefore, a pressing question exists: How can we understand

female sex tourism, and what does it suggest about sex tourism generally? This research is an ethnographic study of female sex tourism in Thailand. It will specifically examine: How do female tourists participate in the Thai sex tourism industry? What common characteristics do female sex tourists display? And, how is the female sex tourism industry organized?

As I answer these questions, I am proceeding with an understanding that gender is a socially constructed concept that varies in meaning over time and place and is culturally defined to fit the norms and values of society (Connell, 2002, 2000, 1998, 1987; Ryle 2018; Valentine, 2020; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is culturally situated and remains in a state of flux, it is constantly negotiated, contested and reimagined. While gender is a social construction, the label of woman has tremendous sociocultural meaning and power implications. Gender is a complex set of roles and processes that interact with race, ethnicity, class, nation, and sexuality. Individual interactions are also important because they impact gender structures through contestation but also reproduce them through culturally normative performances. It is from this standpoint that I am interested in the consumption patterns in female sex tourism. Because I did not know how potential informants or observed persons would self-identify their gender, I am disclosing from the beginning of this dissertation that initial interactions and observations were based on my presumption of common Westernized characteristics associated with female presenting tourists. Upon recruiting a research subject for an interview, I sought confirmation by asking the tourist to disclose their gender status. Accordingly, I realize that gender attribution is flawed because gender is something that cannot be seen. However, I had to begin somewhere so I relied on cues of femininity when I decided to engage or observe people. This was employed as a starting point to delve deeper rather than an endpoint.

The dearth of studies examining women tourists is problematic for two major reasons: First, more female tourists are vacationing in the Kingdom of Thailand than ever before; in fact, some source countries have more females leaving for Bangkok than men (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2013). Second, not only are female tourists welcome at most of the infamous entertainment zones situated throughout the country (Sanders, 2010b; Sanders-McDonagh, 2017), but they also have the option of visiting sexualized areas and establishments that specifically cater to Asian (Vorakitphokatorn et al., 1998, 1994) and Western women (Sanders, 2010b). These increases in female tourist arrivals suggest that not only are women consuming sexualized activity, but a segment of the sex tourism industry is specifically organized around their presence and participation. Closely examining this group will help to better understand the intersections of race, ethnicity, class and gender as mutually constitutive dynamics that impact sex tourism.

In this dissertation I will show how female presenting tourists, as consumers, are contesting traditional notions of gender roles and sexual scripts by participating in the Thai sex tourism industry. The multiplicity of their consumption is better seen as a continuum instead of a binary analysis. Much of the early sex tourism scholarship focuses on exploitation and inequality in commoditized relationships. Newer research in sexual commerce is beginning to examine the intersections of race, class and gender for a deeper understanding of these inequalities and relationships. Little research on sex tourism, however, has drawn on these newer frames. In this dissertation, I expand on existing sex tourism research by showing how sex tourism involves a variety of gendered, raced and classed arrangements that blur the lines around intimacy and sexual gratification, includes various kinds of payment which reflects local economic contexts, encompasses a wide range of sexual commerce where both local and foreign

people buy and sell, and where multiple sexualities and partnerships become part of the sex tourism phenomenon.

Chapter 2 discusses the existing research on sex tourism. Much scholarship primarily views social identities associated with commodified sexuality from a gender binary perspective of man and woman that reproduces cultural gender roles and sexual scripts. This line of scholarship also tends to frame inequalities as additive standpoints rather than considering them as mutually constitutive. I then examine more intersectional scholarship that can be drawn on in understanding sex tourism. This will be used to show how the intersections of social structure create room to reinterpret the complexities of marginalities in sex tourism destinations.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodologies I employed over the course of this research. I paint a picture of my field sites and describe the various phases of this project and how each evolved into a better understanding of the sex tourism industry, its consumers, and those who sell adult entertainment. I also discuss how the interpretive paradigm helped frame this project and the collection of data.

The next five chapters discuss my research findings. Chapter 4 introduces the first of five classifications that move beyond the narrow romance/sex tourism dichotomy. I describe the intentional sex tourist who deliberately consumes Bangkok's sexualized spaces by knowingly and willingly providing financial support to erotic businesses and the people employed in these spaces.

Chapter 5 discusses the unintentional sex tourist who participates in many of the same activities as the intentional sex tourist, but does so in a way that is neither planned nor intended. Although similar, key distinctions help delineate the differences in how consumption takes place.

Chapter 6 examines the romance tourist, but deconstructs it from traditional interpretations by showing how this form of consumption is predicated by first participating in one of the other classifications outlined in this typology.

Chapter 7 introduces the benevolent tourist who consumes the sex tourism industry in a novel way. Rather than engaging in emotional intimacy, physical sex, or voyeurism, this consumer attempts to reduce perceived harms they associate generally with sex tourism and specifically with sex work. Instead of paying for eroticized services, benevolent tourists compensate entertainers not to engage in sexualized performances.

Chapter 8 is the final classification of the typology wherein I highlight the role of the spectacle seeker. This tourist attempts to consume the spectacle through passive engagement but often fails to recognize that they are indeed an integral part of the main attraction.

I conclude this dissertation in Chapter 9 by summarizing the typology and then I explain my scholarly contributions that expand the sex tourism literature. Additionally, using examples of my informants, I discuss how intersecting dynamics of class, race, sexuality and citizenship inform the behaviors of consumers and service providers. I end this dissertation by presenting the limitations of this study and propose future directions for research consideration.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The current body of scholarly literature sex tourism represents an array of vantage points, but maintains more similarities than differences. Much of the contemporary research incorporates an interdisciplinary approach to identify and explain who the players are (Frohlick, 2013; Hoang, 2011; O'Connell Davidson, 2011; Opperman, 1999; Ryan and Hall, 2001), what they do (Dahles and Bras, 1999; Harold, Garcia and DeMoya, 2001; Pruitt and Lafont, 1995; Tornqvist, 2012), and why they do it (Jacobs, 2009; Jeffreys, 2003; Sanchez Taylor, 2006). The questions of *who*, *what* and *why* are instrumental in defining sex tourism as an industry and practice, categories of participants, motivations for, and the implications of engaging in this type of leisure activity. By delving into the questions of who, what and why in a temporal fashion, a radical transformation of how sex tourism can be explained takes place.

Beginning with the identification of *who* sex tourists are, both the public and scholars alike perpetuate stereotypes about tourists and their associated behavior. Generally, White men are viewed as the customary suspects and developing countries are considered their playgrounds (Bandyapadhyay, 2013; Cohen, 1982; Enloe, 1989, 2000; Jeffreys, 2003; Montgomery, 2008; Opperman, 1998). These studies also include analyses as to *what* sex tourists do and the harms made against local residents (Farley, 2003; Jeffreys, 2003, 2009; Montgomery, 2008). In order to delineate sex tourism from other types of tourism, older investigations looked primarily at sexual consumption patterns; specifically, in the form of physical acts instead of a wider spectrum of sexualized activities, performances and emotional intimacy. These scholars conclude that sex for remuneration, or what they call prostitution, was what sex tourists sought to consume (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Jeffreys, 2003, 2000). None of this research examined

sexual commerce beyond men procuring acts such as intercourse and oral sex from people of less-privileged backgrounds. Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor (2006) suggests that while gender and prostitution are extremely important components of the discussion, other principal factors must be taken into consideration. Sanchez Taylor (2006, 2001a) and Phillips (2008, 1999) argue that the race of the local populace is central to any discussion on sex tourism. Sanchez Taylor (2001b) continues by saying racial and economic inequalities usually exist between the buyer and sellers so these differences must also be a point of consideration.

When asking *why* men engage in sex tourism, some findings suggest males are searching for types of sexual pleasure that are unavailable or stigmatized at home (Enloe, 2000), while others explain the activity as a form of patriarchy (Farley, 2003). Jeffreys (2009) considers sex tourism as a form of misogynistic activity. Other research found that many men exploit male privilege as well as economic and racial inequalities that exist between them and their service providers (Cohen, 1986, 1982). A major limitation to these studies is that they miss many complexities, including the ways some aspects both benefit and exploit different groups of sex workers, communities, and the economy of the tourism destination. They also do not explore the intersectional nature of inequalities associated with other forms of marginalized identities.

Because of the frameworks used to guide these studies, the initial wave of research defined sex tourism based on essentialist notions of gender. Gender essentialism rests on assumptions that there is a binary categorization of people – men and women – and they are fundamentally different. Gender essentialism works from the premise that there is an underlying and identifiable essence that makes a person either a man or woman and that these categories are immutable, universal and remain fixed across time and place (Ryle, 2018; Valentine, 2020).

From this perspective behaviors of men and women are dichotomized and based on an intrinsic belief that masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive.

The early sex tourism literature reproduces these essentialist depictions of gender roles and sexual scripts by making the assumption that males are sexually active and females are passive. The findings consistently advance narratives that it is only males, usually Caucasian and from wealthier countries, who travel internationally to pay for sexual services from local women and children (Montgomery, 2008, 2001). The research focuses on the ways women and children are seen by these men as racialized Others and of a lower socioeconomic status. These studies also focus on the complicity of the local government's desire for an influx of foreign investment which stimulates the (in)formal economy. Enloe (2000:36) echoes the structural gender inequality that results from this when she states:

“Sex tourism requires Third World women to be economically desperate enough to enter into prostitution; having done so it is made difficult to leave. The other side of the equation requires men from affluent societies to imagine certain women, usually women of colour, to be more available and submissive than women in their own countries. Finally, the industry depends on an alliance between local governments in search of foreign currency and local foreign business willing to invest in sexualised travel.”

However, more recently, much of this research has been critiqued by a number of scholars for its exclusive emphasis on male consumers, and its singular focus on patriarchal power and misogyny. Empirically, studies that focus solely on male consumers have been

shown to provide an incomplete accounting of the broader group of participants and the ways in which they, as well as women, engage sexualized activity (O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 2005; Omandi, 2003; Sanchez Taylor, 2006; Sanders-McDonagh, 2017). During the last decade or so, a different school of researchers have begun to focus on areas that expand beyond patriarchal and misogynistic underpinnings. Instead of making gender status the sole center of attention, investigations are incorporating additional variables such as race and class. Studies that provide careful analysis of class demonstrate how people from a wide variety of age and socioeconomic statuses (Jacobs, 2009; Kingston et al, 2021, 2020; O'Connell Davidson, 2011; Sanders, 2010b) participate in this activity, while scholars of race and geography (Kempadoo, 1999; Mings and Chulikpongse, 1994; Phillips, 2008) have shown that the makeup of sex tourists is more inclusive than just White men (Bandyopadhyay, 2013; Bauer, 2014; Frohlick 2013; Harold et al., 2001; Leheny, 1995; Sanders-McDonagh, 2017). This expansion has created room to investigate how a wide range of women might be participating in sex tourism independently, together, or perhaps, even alongside their male counterparts. Despite these studies, however, a variety of anti sex tourism activists and especially US government agencies continue to view sex tourism as a masculine activity and a form of victimization.

Research on advertising campaigns tends to show that global sex tourism destinations usually market to men by selling the exotic (Otherness) as erotic and a form of neocolonialism (Bandyopadhyay, 2011; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Ocha, 2012). In addition, new ad campaigns have expanded to attract female tourists as well. In recent years, some exotic locations in the Caribbean and Africa have been promoted as centers of female sex tourism. In fact, journalistic accounts report the female market is growing and an estimated 600,000 women travel internationally each year for the purpose of partaking in a sex filled holiday (Bindel, 2013). In

the Caribbean, places like Barbados (Phillips, 1998), Cuba (Cabezas, 2004) the Dominican Republic (Brennan, 2004a), and Jamaica (Kempadoo, 1999; O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 2005, 1999), attract women from the West. In Africa, countries such as Egypt (Jacobs, 2009), Kenya (Kibichio, 2009), the Gambia (Opperman, 1998) and South Africa (Omandi, 2003) frequently see European women courting local male escorts while enjoying their vacation getaways. Destinations on both American continents like Argentina (Tornqvist, 2012), Belize (van Wijk, 2006) , Costa Rica (Frohlick, 2013) and Ecuador (Meisch, 1995) are seeing an expanding number of Western women engage in sexual relationships with local men that have a noticeable, but often veiled, commodified element. Even places that are notorious for male sex tourism throughout Southeast Asia are steadily attracting both Asian and Western women who seek sun, sand, and sex (Dahles and Bras, 1999; Sanders-McDonagh, 2017; Vorakiphokatorn et al, 1998, 1994).

Pushing past traditional conceptions of this phenomenon, Jackson, Sahl and Brents (2018) argue that in the United States some women are participating in lesser researched forms of sex tourism by engaging in adult entertainment activities at strip joints, swingers clubs and pornography expositions. While most of these studies are ethnographic and shed considerable insight into various aspects of female desire during the course of their holiday experience, precise calculations linking women to the sex tourism industry are extremely difficult to quantify. This is because current conceptualizations of what sex tourism entails often diverge along ideological and political lines. This void needs to be filled because academics are currently “caught in a circular argument” and future research must begin to address this glaring limitation and lack of quantification (Carr, 2016: 188). I suspect the answer, however, will not come without considerable debate because knowing the sheer magnitude of the industry will

expose positional shortcomings, massive interconnectedness to other tourism sectors and the insider role played by various governments, elected officials, and organizations of all sizes.

Romance Tourism

Prior to commencing fieldwork for this study, I was captivated by the idea of romance tourism and the implications it had on gender roles and sexual scripts. I viewed the romance tourism concept popularized by Pruitt and LaFont (1995) with critical suspicion since it is used almost without exception to depict what women engage in with local men even when money is exchanged for erotic services in return. Interestingly, this same concept is rarely applied to similar behavior by men who have amorous, albeit commodified, relationships with women in developing countries (Harold, et al, 2001; Jeffrey, 2003; Pruitt and LaFont 1995). Although I understood the arguments made by scholars such as Dahles and Bras (1999), Frohlick (2013), Jacobs (2009), Jeffrey (2003), Meisch (1995), Phillips (2009) and Tornqvist (2012) prior to embarking on this path of research, I could not help, however, but wonder if it really was something different than sex tourism? When looking at sex tourism and women as consumers, Jeffrey (2003) asked the question in her self-titled article – do women do it too? Although she answered negatively and asserted women seek intimacy with their male companions, I remained confused as to how to understand the scores of women visiting venues such as brothels, massage parlors, and live sex shows. Is there really such a gendered dichotomy between romantic fantasies and salacious economic exchanges in what sex tourists do?

Although appearing similar at first glance, much of the research on female tourists suggests there are key differences based on love vs. sex and gender dynamics which distinguish what men and women actually do when they sexually engage with the local population in far

away destinations. Pruitt and LaFont (1995: 423) allege mere sexual exchange is not the intent of the vacation experience for women; instead, what ends up being produced is “a discourse of romance and long-term relationship.” As such, based on their research of emotive and sexual interaction between local Jamaican men and Western female tourists, they coin the conceptual framework from which they work “romance tourism” (Pruitt and LaFont, 1995: 423). In romance tourism, sexual exchange becomes an incidental byproduct of the newly kindled relationship because motivations are much the same as those developed within traditional Western courtships.

During their study investigating female tourists in Jamaica, Pruitt and LaFont (1995) noticed that women usually enter into “relationships” with only one or two partners and the behavior is strikingly different from men who typically have several partners during their stay on the island. Romance tourism, according to them, displays very different behavior patterns and motivations compared to the masculine phenomenon of sex tourism. With romance tourism traditional gender roles still exist, but are absent of the ever present hierarchal “power relations of male dominance and female subordination” that are characteristic to sex tourism (Pruitt and LaFont, 1995: 423). Affective and fulfilling encounters form the basis of romance tourism and provide an opportunity for the couple to “explore new avenues for negotiating femaleness and maleness” (Pruitt and LaFont, 1995: 423).

Dahles and Bras (1999) also report similar findings after studying the interaction between Balinese beach boys and international female tourists. Much like Pruitt and LaFont, they observed noticeable differences in what local men publicly displayed during their interactions with Western women compared to what male sex tourists demonstrated with female sex workers in various places around the globe. While the primary scope of their study was to examine how

Balinese men used their role as tour guides to network various relationships with local businesses and tourists, it became apparent to them the men were more of a “romantic entrepreneur” instead of male “prostitutes” despite being notoriously labeled as “bad boys,” “Kuta cowboys” and “gigolos” by locals and tourists alike (Dhales and Bras, 1999: 281). Just like their Jamaican counterparts, Balinese tour guides capitalized on hegemonic forms of masculine aesthetics to make themselves more attractive to women seeking a holiday romance, but also allowed for gender role manipulation by appearing subservient to the needs, wants and desires of tourist women. This difference has dominated the scholarly discourse for the past two decades and, in turn, has set the stage for creating a feminine classification specifically for women – romance tourists – while men are perceived along hardened and masculine lines; hence, labeled as sex tourists.

Conceptual Contestations

There are several critiques of the distinction between romance and sex tourism. These critiques focus on the gendered distinctions between romance and sex, and what kinds of purchases actually constitute sex tourism. In his study of female tourists in the Caribbean, de Albuquerque (1998b) claims the romance moniker is merely a smokescreen to disguise what he perceives women are actually doing: paying to play sexually with local men of color. To think otherwise is simply “deluding themselves by imagining their relationships to be romantic rather than sexual” (Harold et al., 2001: 980). Klaus de Albuquerque takes this position based on several factors, but namely including elements such as: (1) Female tourists often find their partner(s) in venues well-known for prostitution and sometimes with priapic inspired names along the likes of the “Stiff Banana” or “Big Bamboo;” (2) women pay for all expenses incurred

by the “couple” during their time together; (3) cash and gifts are almost always given to the male service providers prior to the tourists’ return departure to their homelands. Critiquing Pruitt and LaFont, these scholars put forth the idea that men and women alike have the potential to be romance tourists, even if one or the other rarely happens based on a person’s expected gender performance (Brennan, 2004a, 2004b; O’Connell Davidson, 1999; Sanchez Taylor, 2006, 2001). Julia O’Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor (2005: 83) critique the romance moniker and assert many of the characteristics are indistinguishable from sex tourism:

“...the phenomenon by which local and migrant women, men, and children enter into fairly open-ended relationships with tourists in the hope of securing some material benefits (including gifts, meals, clothing, cash, and opportunities to migrate to affluent countries) to be as much part of sex tourism as the phenomenon of brothel or street prostitution in tourist areas.”

In an attempt to find common ground between the romance and sex tourism camps, a smaller group of scholars are proposing the term “companionship tourism” to describe the most common exchange between foreign tourists and local men and women since “neither love nor sex may enter the picture” (Harold et al., 2001: 994). Aside from the introduction by Harold et al, the term companionship tourism is not readily used in the sex tourism literature.

Research on sex work among male sexual consumers further critiques what most scholars see as separate spheres between an intimate emotional connection and the purchase of sexual services. Examining the role intimacy plays in the commission of economic-emotional

exchanges of the girlfriend experience (GFE) challenges the binary notion that says it is either emotional romance or exploitative sex for payment (Bernstein, 2007a, 2007b; Carbonero and Garrido, 2018; Hoang, 2015, 2014, 2011, 2010; Milrod and Monto, 2010; Milrod and Weitzer, 2011; Omandi and Ryan, 2020, 2017; Weitzer, 2021). Bernstein (2007a, 2007b: 103) conceptualized the affective and intimate relationships she saw in her research on sexual commerce as a form of “bounded authenticity” that is common between female service providers and male customers. This is where the consumer perceives they are in a genuine reciprocal emotive connection but the provider compartmentalizes her performance and maintains it solely within the specified timeframe of the transactional exchange. While the intent is to appear real for the customer, the *authenticity* – perhaps better described as bounded intimacy – is manufactured and turned on and off based on the terms of the remunerative arrangement. Milrod and Weitzer (2011: 447), examining survey data of male clients, suggest economic-intimate relationships between providers and their customers vary from “counterfeit intimacy to an authentic emotional bond between the two parties.” In their study, counterfeit intimacy was recognized by the parties as a fictional experience whereas an authentic emotional bond was not economically or temporally constrained. Furthermore, Milrod and Monto (2012: 792) contend that the intimacy associated with the girlfriend experience (GFE) is becoming more preferred by men over impersonal physical sex because the GFE tends to “replicate some aspects of conventional, non-remunerative romantic relationship.” The question of *what*, therefore, needs to be probed deeper beyond gendered assumptions about tourists’ motivations and intent. This is an important question because physical acts are only one segment of the broader sex tourism industry (Jackson et al., 2018; Kibichio, 2009, Sanders, 2010b; Spencer and Bean, 2017).

The prostitution-based framework remains divisive because of the strong emphasis on physical intimacy as the qualifying measure of sex tourism (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Opperman, 1998, 1999). From this perspective, sexual commerce is isolated to intercourse and oral sex acts. Other scholars, though, are beginning to suggest that we must look beyond prostitution and acknowledge how the bigger picture of commercial sex intersects with economic, global, labor, and tourism sectors (Brents, Jackson and Hausbeck, 2010; Cabezas, 2004; Hoang, 2014, 2015; Sanders, 2010b; Spencer and Bean, 2017). They contend sexual commerce encompasses much more than just the physical exchange of sex acts. This school believes sexual commerce must include a wide variety of adult oriented entertainment including attending strip clubs, swingers clubs, dungeons, sex shops, sex toys, online pornography, and sensual massage to name just a few activities (Comella, 2008; Kingston, Hammond and Redman, 2021, 2020; Wosick-Correa and Joseph, 2008). When looking from a broader perspective more nuanced views will emerge and this will result in greater explanations that generate new ideas about the complex intricacies of intimate authenticity and sexual commodification.

Broader views also allow for newer analyses of long-standing interpretations of concepts like objectification. For example, the male “gaze” is traditionally situated as a way of demeaning women and Others. Sanders (2010a, 2010b) examines the gaze in her ethnographic research on female tourists attending sex shows in Thailand and finds that women employ a gaze similar to that of men. She concludes that when broadly examining concepts such as the gaze, women are just as likely as men to “Other” Thai sex workers. This is a significant finding because when sex tourism is no longer isolated to physical acts associated with prostitution, sexual consumption then becomes much broader and moves beyond the limited realm of bodily contact. Accordingly, by extending sexual consumption to visual and voyeuristic arenas, the

meaning of sex tourism expands exponentially. Even though this mode of thought is not unique (Opperman, 1999) and it is gaining more support with interdisciplinary approaches, little has been applied to the case of Thailand. Despite opening possibilities for new understandings, Bishop and Robinson (1998) predicted that an expansion of what constitutes sex tourism will only muddy the difference between “normal” tourism and “sex” tourism. By incorporating non-traditional elements like visual and voyeuristic accounts into research, rather than “muddying” sex tourism, perhaps we can better explore how society does construct the lines separating acceptable and deviant behavior.

Not only is the recent research on *who* and *what* constitutes sex tourism becoming more contentious, but the question as to *why* also lacks consensus. A small number of current studies investigating sexual commerce implement an intersectional framework which looks at the junction(s) between forms and systems of inequalities; particularly, those of race, class, and gender. Because an intersectional approach is now being utilized with greater frequency, more analytical depth is beginning to occur across the literature.

Race

Early attempts to deal with racial issues in sex tourism drew on neocolonial theories of race (e.g. Said, 1978; Aitchison, 2004; Ayoob, 2002) which focus on differentiating *us*, White men [and women] from the industrialized North/West, from *them*, the Other, the South, or (semi)periphery nations sometimes referred to as the subaltern or developing world. For some scholars (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Dahles and Bras, 1999; Enloe, 2000; Manderson, 1992) ‘Others’ are *characteristically* different from those of the North and sex tourism is uniformly and unequivocally a form of racial exploitation.

Other studies (Brennan, 2004a, 2004b; 2010; O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 2005; Sanchez Taylor, 2006) provide more nuance by showing how race is mobilized as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Brennan 2004a, 2004b) to attain a desired outcome like citizenship, love, or wealth, in addition to being a source of inequality and stigma, Hence, contextual application and analysis is critical in research. For example, extensive ethnographic research by Hoang (2015) shows how race and gender are arranged to socially construct a pan-Asian masculinity and finds that wealthy Asian businessmen in Vietnam’s multilayered sex industry counter notions of the hegemony of the Western male. Her research also finds that Vietnamese female sex workers do benefit greatly from exchanges with Western male sex tourists and documents many who have used proceeds from them to start businesses like bars and restaurants (Hoang, 2014, 2011).

Gender

Gender is another variable used to describe the unequal status of interaction within the sex tourism literature (Jeffreys, 2009, 2003; Manderson, 1997, 1992). Typically, gender is presented in two ways. First, the focus is on patriarchy as a structure that creates gender inequality. Men are predominantly sex tourists and women are sex workers in ways that reproduce that structure. Male sexuality is hegemonic, and the prostitution that is part of sex tourism is a tool of patriarchal expression. Second, the focus is on gender roles whereby men are largely reproducing masculine sex roles with the purchase of quick, impersonal, sex acts and women reproduce feminine sex roles through the pursuit of romance. Although these aspects of gender have already been discussed in some detail, it is worth revisiting momentarily as an instance of inequality and a variable that is only partially examined.

As an inequality, much is known about how men use their privileged status to procure sex from disadvantaged minority women. Those who label women as sex tourists surmise that women are just as capable of objectifying men who are of color and lower socioeconomic status. Sanchez Taylor (2006: 43-44) suggests that focusing on gender differences in this way may be more harmful than good:

“female tourists’ sexual-economic relationships with local men are predicated upon the same global economic and social inequalities that underpin the phenomenon of male sex tourism. The fact that parallels between male and female sex tourism are widely overlooked reflects and reproduces weaknesses in existing theoretical and commonsense understandings of gendered power, sexual exploitation, prostitution and sex tourism.”

Another major weakness in gender analysis within sex tourism studies is that gender is primarily applied as a binary, an essential role, rather than as a socially constructed dynamic. Gender scholars such as R.W. Connell have long critiqued gender role theory and argue that gender is socially constructed. They further posit that gender and its associated inequalities vary across time and place, as well as race and social class (Connell, 1998, 2000, 2002). West and Zimmerman (1987) also take a social constructionist approach by arguing that gender is something that is done in social interactions and does not exist as an essential trait. They assert that “doing gender” is a performance and that people are held socially accountable for their acts. This sheds light on how gender inequalities manifest in society and can be seen through the concept of allocation (West and Fenstermaker, 1993). Allocation explains how decisions get

made, who makes the decisions, who gives orders, and who has to take them (Ryle, 2018: 41). From this perspective, femininities and masculinities are culturally assigned attributes of power and subordination that are associated with gender and are taught through the process of socialization (Ryle 2018). Indeed, in Thailand, the sexual economy embodies much more than just males and females as it also includes venues for gay, lesbian, and transgender tourists (Ocha, 2012; Ocha and Earth, 2013). However, extremely little is known about these places, their customers, or their service providers. As a result, these “sex tourists” are left out of the equation despite being active participants within the industry.

Class

Situating sex tourism in class-based inequality places sexual commerce in the socio-political realm at the local, national, and global levels. Research on the political economy of sex tourism can range from understanding sexual exchange between two people, to examining how multinational companies and organizations invest in the development of local infrastructure. Enloe (2000: 36) finds Western male sex tourists use class based privilege to gain advantage when engaging in sexual exchanges. This inequality between tourists and locals is perpetuated by both wealthy jet setters and by budget tourists. O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor (2005: 85) explain why this is so:

“North American and European tourists’ very presence in the Caribbean is predicated upon a particular, and vastly unequal, world political and economic order, and the individual tourist necessarily enters into relationships with the poor...as the politically and economically privileged party. Even the working-class, budget tourist from Europe,

Canada, or the U.S. is in a position to spend about as much on a package vacation as many locals make in a year. This not only makes commercial sex more affordable for the tourist, it also means that tourists are in a position to freely dispense gifts and sums of money that, though negligible to them, represents significant benefit to the average local person.”

Class based economic inequalities manifest at the macro level as well. For example, entire seaside resorts are constructed to create sexualized transnational spaces known as sexscapes (Brennan, 2004a, 2004b; 2010). Sexscapes create an avenue of exchange to a greater global market for both local businesses and residents. In these transnational spaces, as in many tourist spaces the poor suffer from economic inequality as a result of lacking financial and social capital. One example of how poor locals suffer economically from an influx of tourists is through the gentrification process. In newly constructed resort towns, local residents are pushed out to the periphery due to housing costs outpacing their rate of pay. In turn, tourists and expatriates use their economic status to lay claim to real estate that is beyond many locals’ economic reach. This type of activity is well established in destinations that attempt to pull male tourists, but consumption patterns and consequences for areas catering to female sex tourists are largely ignored.

Another way of viewing how sex tourism perpetuates economic inequality at the macro level is to look at the significant role of international finance. Scholars suggest that grant dollars for international development from large donor nations and loans from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank are being used to subsidize the sex tourism industry (Leheny, 1995; O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 2005). These funds are generally earmarked

specifically for tourism development and advertising campaigns. By selectively funneling money, multinational corporations generate record profits while paying only the prevailing minimum wage (Safa, 1997). Much like the data suggests from racial and gender inequalities, power plays a vital role in economic disparity and political economy. In the case of sex tourism, local and foreign businesses tend to profit more than those who sell sexual services. However, this dynamic is not limited to sex tourism and is central to global capitalism. In addition, research is increasingly showing how complex the relationship between sexual services and local development is, with some sex workers benefitting differently depending on the context (Hoang, 2014, 2011).

In the case of Thailand, there is a well-established history of local, regional and national pressures to develop entertainment zones catering to foreigners who explicitly engage in sex tourism (Ryle, 2018: 178). The sex tourism industry became especially popular among American military personnel dating back to the Vietnam War era and remained noticeably visible despite air base closures following the end of the conflict (Ryle, 2018; Truong, 1990). In fact, in 1980, the Thai Deputy Prime Minister encouraged expansion when he declared:

“I ask all governors to consider the natural scenery in your provinces, together with some forms of entertainment that some of you might consider disgusting and shameful because they are forms of sexual entertainment that attract tourists...we must do this because we have to consider the jobs that will be created for the people (cited in Montgomery, 2008: 906).”

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) when she highlighted the inadequacy of single-issue analyses to explain the structural racism and sexism that Black women endure with their lived experience. Rather than viewing inequality solely as a gender issue or race issue, she suggests they are, in fact, intersecting and interdependent. Up to that point, gender was viewed separately from other structural categories of social identity such as race, ethnicity, class and sexuality (Ryle, 2018). Crenshaw (1991, 1989) argues that not only is it impossible to make a separation, but it is undesirable to isolate gender from race and race from gender. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) brought attention to the idea that when employing intersectional thought two problems must be addressed. The first is a belief in the dichotomous either/or of social positioning. She contends this assumption must be overcome by pivoting away from the mindset that a person is either a member of one category or the other; instead, framing from the standpoint of both/and is a more accurate accounting for the intersections that are present. The second is a tendency to rank social categories and forms of oppression. This means not all people will share the same experience despite having certain social commonalities and one category is not necessarily qualitatively more significant than another. All members of society are raced, classed and gendered but it is where they intersect with other structures that form unique identities and lived experiences. Gerry Veenstra (2011) reminds scholars that intersectionality “does not provide a set of propositions that together form an explanation; rather, intersectionality currently consists of a loose set of principles or assumptions that are being applied and tested by many researchers in a variety of contexts.”

While intersectional investigations are common in gender, race and feminist studies, they are relatively rare in the scholarly literature on sex tourism, especially when it comes to female

consumers. Hoang (2015, 2014, 2011), however, uniquely drew on intersectional frameworks to portray how the production of masculinity is established and performed through relations of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation. Her study focused on heterosexual male consumers who used sex bars in Ho Chi Minh City to display varying forms of status – both relationally and in the global finance sector. She observed that White Western men used these spaces “to project their status anxieties onto women’s bodies, affirming Western superiority in the men’s aspiration to preserve Western dominance” (Hoang, 2014: 526). She compared this with the way powerful Vietnamese businessmen and returning Viet Kieu express a transnational masculinity that “provide men with the stage to contest Western superiority through conspicuous displays of disposable cash that express taste and superiority in their aspirations to trump Western dominance” (Hoang, 2014: 526). Hoang shows how Western, Viet Kieu and local Vietnamese businessmen all utilize sex workers as a way to affirm or contest varying forms of masculinity. She concludes that Western sexual consumers were disadvantaged players in the more affluent venues compared to their Vietnamese counterparts. She also points out that many sex workers in certain sectors use their situational positioning to materially benefit from both Western and Asian men.

Ham (2020: 563) points out that “Intersectionality offers an opportunity to think about social differences and power in the sex industry beyond risk and vulnerability.” However, Ham laments that great emphasis remains placed on female sex workers in the West as the disadvantaged party in transactional arrangements. In similar fashion to Hoang (2015, 2014 2011), Ham (2020: 559) posits that studying the various sectors of the sex industry is key to a more nuanced understanding:

“Workers’ analyses of power across different sectors not only has practical implications for those working in the sex industry, but also has significant implications for the ongoing theoretical debate about whether sex work constitutes a form of exploitation (as in radical feminism) or as labour (as within a sex worker rights framework). Conceptualizing sex work as wholly exploitative erases the variations in power and agency between different sectors, workplaces and workers. This contrasts with workers’ precise, detailed explanations of the varying levels of autonomy, power, risk and profit across sectors.”

Conclusion

The sex tourism industry, therefore, should be seen as a multifaceted phenomenon that is best explained from a variety of perspectives, including an examination of the social construction of race and class as well as gender. Despite the large volume of inquiry regarding male consumers, female sex tourism has remained negligibly researched. Although more studies are emerging in the African and Caribbean regions, female sex tourism in Asia is rarely discussed. In the case of Thailand, little is known about how women engage and consume sexualized environments and activities.

In my research, I will adopt a more intersectional perspective that examines the lived experiences and social context of individuals as they participate in the industry. I will examine how cultural context impacts individual trajectories. Doing so will provide a more nuanced understanding of participation in the female sex tourism sector.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

This research is an ethnographic study of female sex tourism in Thailand. Although popular sex tourism destinations are located throughout the Kingdom of Thailand in locations such as Koh Samui, Pattaya and Phuket, fieldwork for this study took place in the capital city of Bangkok. Bangkok is an appropriate investigative site for this research because it is home to one of the world's largest sex tourism destinations (Omandi, 2003; Seabrook, 1997). In fact, I argue the size of the industry is much larger than current estimates because female participation is regularly omitted from the analyses of government agencies, non-governmental organizations and scholars. Geographically, Thailand is located in Southeast Asia and is often referred to as the epicenter of international sex tourism for men (O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 2005; Sanders, 2010b). Aside from its geographic location, Bangkok maintains a symbolic relevance in the sex tourism world (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995; Ryan and Hall, 2001). This can be partially attributed to the popularity, breadth of the red-light districts, as well as the number of sex workers employed both formally and informally. There are three locations officially designated as entertainment zones within Bangkok that provide access to adult orientated activities of a sexual nature. This research focuses on the two areas located in tourist zones - lower Sukhumvit Road and Patpong. Although Ratchadapisek Road is the third official entertainment zone, I omitted it from this study since it primarily caters to local residents and is in an area not regularly visited by tourists. Within these zones a variety of sexualized spaces can be found. Establishments that participate in sexual commerce range from host(ess) bars, gogo bars to sex shows. They also include venues such as traditional pubs,

nightclubs and massage parlors. In spite of prostitution being codified as an illegal activity in Thailand, tourists can easily find a plethora of sex workers willing to engage in an endless array of services. On any evening, there are countless venues populated by thousands of sex workers who routinely cater to every gender, sexual orientation and fantasy imaginable. Because of this, international tourists consider engaging in the Thai sex tourism industry to be a form of cultural authenticity (Sanders, 2010a).

In order to fill this massive demand for sexual entertainment and services, Thai sociologist Nitet Tinnakul estimated in 2004 that there are over 2 million Thais of all genders and sexual orientations working within the sex industry (Haskell, 2013). This number, however, is highly contested and thought to be an overestimation when looking at other enumerations. For example, a 2014 UNAIDS report calculated the number of Thai sex workers at 123,530 (Tanakasempipet, 2016) while the U.S. Department of State situates the number somewhere in between 200,000-300,000; hence, both of these accountings are only a fraction of the estimation given by Tinnakul. When considering the number of businesses involved, Krittinee Nuttavuthisit (2007: 24) of Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University reports that nearly 8,000 establishments throughout the Kingdom sell sexual services. Even though a precise quantification of sex workers is difficult to obtain due to the illegality of prostitution in Thailand, the breadth of the Thai sex tourism industry remains widely acknowledged among academics and tourists alike. In 2016, however, Thai Tourism Minister, Kobkarn Wattanavrangkul, defiantly rebuked such assertions and claimed "Tourists don't come to Thailand for such a thing" (Tanakasempipet, 2016). Outside of official government channels, it is clear that the denial of Minister Wattanavrangkul is out of touch when it comes to the population of sex workers and sheer number of sexualized spaces within the Thai sex tourism industry. Ironically, given the

government's position refuting Thailand as a sex tourism destination, entertainment zones are marketed in tour guidebooks as must see attractions and viewed by many tourists as authentically Thai as the local cuisine and floating markets.

Besides the official entertainment zones, unofficial areas exist as well. Escorts and other sexual service providers can be found in virtual spaces that are not regulated by the same governing agencies that police the official entertainment zones. In these virtual spaces, not only do Thais advertise their availability of services, but a plethora of online platforms are populated with a substantial number of foreigners willing to provide the same offerings. In addition to the two official entertainment zones found in the touristy area and online spaces, I discovered the Ratchadapisek venues which are off the beaten path and cater primarily to Thai and Asian expatriate women. These establishments are of particular interest because their lineups of male service providers were much larger than most of those found in the official entertainment zones populated with tourists. Unlike clubs in the tourist zones, those located near the outskirts of the city provide a greater sense of anonymity for both patrons and providers. In part, this is because the exteriors are rather inconspicuous and are hidden from heavy foot traffic. Since these venues are not typically listed in popular travel guides or websites associated with Bangkok's nightlife, they tend to be frequented substantially more by local residents and those who specifically plan their holiday experience with the intention of engaging in traditional sex tourism practices. This is especially the case for establishments that solely target female customers since traditional Thai cultural norms and values frown upon women from engaging in promiscuous and overt sexual behavior. While prostitution remains a criminalized activity under two separate statutes, *Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act, B.E. 2539 (1996)* and *Act of Entertainment Places, B.E. 2509 (1966)*, gender-based double standards are common and carnal behavior is

socially controlled in ways that attempt to deliberately suppress sexual agency among Thai women (Sukanya, 1988). Additionally, as Ronald Weitzer (2021: 623-624) astutely points out, entertainment venues governed by the *Act of Entertainment Places* statute are required to ensure performances are not “obscene or indecent” but the terms are left undefined and remain open for interpretation.

When defining words relating to commodified sex and service providers, I elect to use the terms sex work and sex worker instead of prostitute and prostitution. I opt to legitimize the performative labor and mutual consent of the parties associated with transactional sex. Bernstein (1999) and Hoang (2010) situate sex work as an agentic choice whereas prostitution is a form of survival and sexual violence. Because my Thai informants told me they were neither coerced nor forced into their roles, I am identifying them in this research as sex workers. Coercion and force are legitimate concerns, but I did not hear any accounts of its presence from Thai sex workers or knowingly observe it in the regulated and heavily policed tourist zones. Most government officials use prostitute and prostitution to denote the illegality of transactional sex. Some Western scholars share this prohibition-based viewpoint because they do not consider sex work legitimate labor – instead, they see it as forms of patriarchal power, degradation and criminal activity. Most of my informants, however, whether they were industry employees, stakeholders or tourists, used the vernacular prostitute and prostitution. I found it interesting that several of the female sex workers I conversed with throughout this study did not make a distinction between the terms and often self-identified as a prostitute engaging in prostitution rather than a sex worker performing sex work. Because sex work and sex worker are not commonly used terms in the Thai sexualized landscape, this distinction was pointed out to me as a Westernized construct that is not universally accepted. Accordingly, unless I am giving a

situational depiction framed by an informant or providing a quote from a source that uses other terminology, the words sex work and sex worker will be employed in this study.

Another term that needs to be operationalized is woman. Because I situate gender as a social construction I work from the premise that the meaning of woman is sociocultural, dynamic, fluid, and varies over time and place (Connell, 2002, 2000, 1998, 1987; Ryle 2018; Valentine, 2020). Gender is culturally conditioned, produced, reproduced, and contested through social interaction. Gender goes beyond the binary of man and woman. In fact, Thai culture does recognize a third gender, kathoey who are seen as neither men nor women (Ryle, 2018: 10). This category can include a diverse array of individuals presenting outside of Western gender binaries. I am interested female tourists and how the sex tourism industry is organized to facilitate their participation. Accordingly, the category of woman relates to those who have been socialized to identify with characteristics and traits associated with femininity and/or those who self-identify as such.

In Bangkok, there are a variety of venues that cater to men, women and transgender consumers. Although these categorizations exist locally, the Thai sex tourism market is designed to allow people of all genders to express their sexuality in a way that is not isolated to heteronormative activity. Women are welcome to attend sexualized spaces and engage in activities that cater to the consumption of femininity, masculinity and the non-binary. Therefore, I am defining female sex tourist as a person who displays cultural forms of femininity and self-identifies as a woman. In addition, I will interview and observe individuals presenting as a variety of genders in order to understand how the female industry is organized.

Adult Entertainment Zones

Bangkok is home to arguably the most adult entertainment venues in the world and is notorious as a destination for sex tourism. When discussing destinations that appeal to romance/sex tourists, Pruitt and LaFont (1995: 425) suggested “the men go to Thailand and the women go to Jamaica.” While that may have been the case in 1995, my findings will show that times have changed, and women do indeed go to Bangkok to indulge their romantic and sexual fantasies. Coincidentally, Caribbean men, particularly from the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, as well as African male sex workers now have a strong presence in Bangkok’s informal sexualized economy – traditional bars and pubs, nightclubs, online websites and streetside. While visibly absent in the 1990s and before, these men are part of the international community of sex workers who cater to both Asian and Western women in the spaces where I conducted fieldwork.

The spaces where I conducted research are relatively privileged sites within the Thai sexualized geography because Bangkok’s adult entertainment zones are heavily policed due to the large presence of international tourists. In fact, at the entrance to these sites a banner is often displayed signifying the area as a safety zone. In these spaces English is the designated lingua franca for commerce and conversation. As a result, this restricts who works in the entertainment zones so industry employees are not reflective of other sexualized venues outside of the tourist areas. This is also a significant limitation to the results I will present in forthcoming chapters as there are other sectors that I did not examine. The following field sites and venues are where I spent over 1000 hours gathering ethnographic data during my time in Bangkok from October 2014 – August 2015, June 2016 – August 2016, and June 2017 – August 2017.

Lower Sukhumvit

The entertainment venues located in this area are nestled along one of Thailand's largest thoroughfares and densely populated areas. This is a major tourist destination due to widespread availability of accommodation, epicurean delights, nightlife, public transportation, shopping outlets and world-class medical facilities. This area is also known as the *farang* (Thai for foreigner) ghetto because of the concentration of international tourists and expatriates who reside, visit and work in the area. Throughout the day sidewalks along the bustling eight lane road are lined with wares from shopkeepers and during the evening they transform to makeshift bars, restaurants and a provisional market that extends for nearly one mile.

After normal business hours and when the sun begins to set, the appearance of the area is dramatically transformed, enhancing the sensorial perceptions of sight, smell, sound and touch. During the day, what appears to be the center of any major international city slowly evolves into a colorful and more intimate environment. The sidewalks become difficult to navigate because street vendors create narrow paths to make room for their goods. This results in creating barely enough space for people to walk in opposing directions without making some sort of physical contact. Most nights, especially when inclement weather is forecasted, canopies of umbrellas normally seen at seaside settings or outdoor cafés are erected to divert torrential downpours away from the heavily occupied walkway. This substantially impacts the senses because what is seen and experienced during the daytime – enormous skyscrapers, countless office workers and Thailand's largest multilane road – disappears into the night. Instead of seeing headquarters of multinational corporations and facilities of global hotel giants, street side onlookers now become cordoned off with vendors selling clothing, food, illicit goods, knockoff medications, trinkets and a vast array of sex toys. The nighttime sky disappears in the sea of clear polyethylene plastic

sheeting, ground tarps, and large industrial umbrellas branded with corporate labels such as Chang, Coca Cola, Heineken, Pepsi, and Singha. When navigating this environment, tourists are commonly accosted by vendors hawking their products and solicited by sex workers, regardless of whether they are walking alone, coupled or in a group. This backdrop creates a setting that amplifies the senses and results in an intimately steamy environment of sweaty tourists unlike anything most outsiders have ever encountered.

There are two infamous red-light districts along Sukhumvit Road: Nana Entertainment Plaza (NEP) and Soi Cowboy. Each location is at opposite ends of lower Sukhumvit Road where the evening sidewalk spectacle takes place. Most tourists who elect to see both venues in one outing make the trek by foot going through the labyrinth of manufactured chaos created by entrepreneurial street hustlers and an array of vendors. In between the two destinations are a series of side streets that house hostess bars and traditional pubs, condominiums, discotheques, hotels, massage parlors, restaurants of all calibers, and a variety of businesses that cater to every tourist need. Anything a person can find in a major international city will be found here, but with the unique flair of adult entertainment and services mixed in, both openly and discretely.

Nana Entertainment Plaza (NEP)

NEP is proclaimed to be the “world’s largest adult playground” for sex tourists and documented as such in several guidebooks and virtual sites dedicated to Bangkok’s nightlife and red-light districts. In fact, erected at the entrance is an extremely large neon lit banner making the same proclamation. Arched between two buildings, it is strategically placed with silhouetted images of dancing women above the wide walkway entrance into the eroticized compound consisting of scores of gogo bars. There is only a single entrance/exit point into the venue so all

visitors know upfront about the highly sexual nature of the environment they are about to encounter. Below the left and right sides of the banner are two smaller illuminated signs designed to make visitors feel comfortable and safe. On the right hand side the sign displays two lines appealing to a fun and relaxed atmosphere: “Land of Smiles” and “Your Second Home.” The sign on the left promotes the protection, safety and well-being of visitors: “Nana Safety Zone” and “Lumpini Police Station.” Once inside the perimeter of NEP a separate banner reading “Nana Safety Zone” occasionally appears. NEP is a three storey complex that is U-shaped and occupied by gogo bars that cater to people of all genders and sexualities. On the ground floor there are a series of outdoor bars that employ hostesses and kathoey – transgender women – to sell food, drinks and “take-out” companionship services.

Inside of the gogos an elevated catwalk-like platform is always staged in the center of the room so that patrons have a clear view of the dancers and performances regardless of where they are seated. The lighting along the floor-side tables and stadium style seating is usually very dark except for black lights highlighting hues of blue, pink, purple and white. The center stage is sharply lit so that the performers are the focal point and attention is deflected away from those sitting in the audience. Depending on the particular establishment, rotations varying from as little as five dancers to as many as twenty-five or more populate the catwalk often lined with chrome poles. Some of the gogos have multiple stages with see-through booths and Plexiglas ceilings for side acts such as lesbian sex, shower shows and upskirt peeping of panty-less dancers.

Although the majority of gogos at NEP are staffed with cisgender Thai women providing erotic performances and intimate services to hetero and bisexual men, they also provide explicit services to bisexual women and lesbians. A growing number of transgender women sex workers

(commonly referred to as ladyboys in Thailand by tourists and entertainment zone employees) exist in this space as well. The entertainers at transgender gogo bars consist primarily of transgender women who receive hormonal treatment or have undergone some sort of body modification ranging from breast implants to complete sex reassignment surgery. Despite the prevalence of gogo bars at NEP employing exclusively cisgender women, a few consist of both cisgender and transgender staff and two gogo bars specifically showcase an entire staff of transgender staff. It is important to note that with the exception bars that employ transwomen, cisgender male performers are absent at the NEP complex. Some gogo bars have a blanket policy of refusing employment to transgender entertainers. The purpose is twofold: first, some customers specifically avoid establishments who hire sex workers that do not neatly fit within the gender binary framework; second, it eliminates the possibility of physical altercations that might occur as a result of heterosexual men feeling deceived by unknowingly engaging in intimate contact with a person outside of their sexual preference.

Soi Cowboy

Similar to Nana Entertainment Plaza, this zone features primarily gogo bars staffed by Thai women. Also like NEP, Soi Cowboy is home to a dedicated transgender bar and lively outdoor sidewalk scene at each of the two points of entry. On any given night, a minimum of several hundred sex workers can be found providing an array of visual performances, acting as touts ushering tourists into their bar, and availing themselves to men, women, or both, for an evening of erotic entertainment and intimate services. Soi Cowboy is a pedestrian only walking street nearly 400 meters long and lined on each side with adult entertainment clubs and hostess bars numbering in the dozens. At the main entrance is a large display configuring a neon stripper

wearing a ten-gallon hat and holding a lasso and below is a colorfully illuminated sign that reads Soi Cowboy Entertainment. Hung across the interior of the street is a large orange and black banner that reads “Safety Zone” on the first line and the second line displays “Thonglor Police Station.” The atmosphere is designed to shock the senses with vibrant lights, loud noises, scantily clad sex workers and unfamiliar exotic smells emanating from food carts hawking regional cuisine from Thailand’s northeast Isaan region – home to a large number of people working on this street.

There are, however, key differences that distinguish Soi Cowboy from other entertainment areas. First of all, it is located near one of Bangkok’s busiest intersections and public transportation cross points. Second, it is nestled between skyscrapers that house luxurious condominiums, offices of multinational corporations, and the Thai headquarters of one of the world’s largest banking institutions. Around the corner sits one of Bangkok’s premier shopping centers that lures a large number of local residents and tourists from all walks of life. The large mix of expatriates, office workers and tourists in the area, creates an environment considered more socially acceptable to visit than the raunchiness of NEP or the notorious Patpong. Accordingly, business professionals are often seen here socializing with tourists and entertainment staff after working a late shift in the nearby area.

Patpong

Of all the entertainment zones studied in this research project, Patpong is the oldest and most famous in Bangkok. It is listed in every guide book that covers adult activity and nightlife and has been the backdrop for numerous studies on the Thai sex industry (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Manderson, 1992; Odzer, 1994; Sikes 2006). The nightlife of Patpong takes place

primarily on two side streets, Patpong 1 and Patpong 2, which are located between the heavily traveled Silom and Surawongse roads. Patpong 1 is the center attraction and draws the largest number of tourists ranging from single travelers wanting to attend a ping pong sex show to families with small children seeking to purchase counterfeit items at extremely inexpensive prices. Despite being a sexualized space, Patpong is unique in the sense that anything from apples to zebra print clothing is available for tourists to purchase. During the evening hours, when sex shops are in full swing, a night market occupies the roadway between adult entertainment outlets on each side of the street. Touts make a concerted effort to usher visitors from the market into one of the many gogo bars on the ground level and clubs situated upstairs that host live sex shows. Bright neon signs that pulsate rhythmically to the loud sound of heavy bass beats bare the names of infamous gogo bars such as Super Pussy and Kings Castle. These ground floor establishments blast cold air that filters past the beaded and velvet curtains separating the two very different spectacles. The comfortable breeze and assurances of cheap alcohol are often persuasive enough to entice people inside to temporarily escape the hot and sticky tropical humidity.

As such, it is a common sight to see night market patrons enter sex shows drenched in sweat and carrying multiple bags of fake designer goods purchased just a few meters away. Even though gogo bars are a common sight throughout Bangkok's red-light districts, live sex shows are rare outside of the Patpong area. Sex shows are almost always performed upstairs and away from the bustling crowds of shoppers. While gogo bars are tolerated, and perhaps even normalized in such close proximity to the bargain hunting market-goers, the performances that take place in sex shows are on a different level of being sexually explicit. After hiking up a long, dark, narrow and steamy staircase, doormen await to collect an entrance fee. The quoted price

almost always starts at least double of what the doormen are willing to accept. Foreigners who did their research or were advised in advance about the multi-pricing scheme usually successfully haggle down the cost of admission. Inflated fees are used to pay the touts' commission and the remainder is split among staff members. Once pricing is settled, tourists are escorted to their seats and ready themselves to watch the infamous ping pong live sex show. A few bars, however, have devised a way to deceive unsuspecting tourists into believing they found a great deal and can attend the shows without paying an entry fee. Touts will convince tourists who decline to pay for entry that another show exists with an assurance it is free. The maneuver is used to gain trust and ultimately trick the naïve show seeker. Upon arrival at the "free" club, tourists are immediately seated by a friendly staff member and quickly served with a drink. When the final tab is served for settlement, the bill is outrageously inflated beyond the pricing listed on the menu. A drink list will then be provided to justify the costly charges. This list is a different menu that looks similar, but at the bottom includes fine print stating there is a mandatory service charge for each customer. Once the final bill comes it is increased to more than make up for the lack of entrance fee. If the bill is contested, then the barmen get aggressive in an effort to intimidate the stunned customers. If that fails, they have uniformed police contacts quickly arrive to negotiate a settlement in lieu of being arrested for failure to pay services rendered. Unfortunately, this scam has been running for decades despite Thai authorities knowing about it and the practice being publicized in a multitude of guidebooks and online forums.

Soi Twilight

Until May 2019, this alley was home to several male gogo bars, massage parlors and gay clubs. Due to urban revitalization efforts, the venues in this area recently became displaced which resulted in several of them going out of business. Some, however, relocated to Soi Patpong 2 and continue to operate business as usual. Despite the change, Soi Twilight played an integral field site in this research because unlike the entertainment zones previously described, the main attraction here is male sex workers. Because Soi Twilight is within a few hundred meters of Patpong, it attracts hordes of female tourists who visit the night market as well as a large number of gay men. Nana Entertainment Complex, Patpong and Soi Cowboy mainly cater to those seeking femininity, whereas this area highlights masculine features and eroticizes the male body. Some clubs employ as little as a dozen men while the largest establishments have over one hundred working on the busiest nights. As with the gogo bars staffed with female dancers, the men in this area provide a variety of acts and routines that range from individualized pole dancing to choreographed performances involving several showmen. The larger clubs also provide live sex shows at set times each evening where artistically composed routines, fellatio and mock intercourse are performed for the visual consumption of audience members.

Interestingly, there are a considerable number of male sex workers in these clubs. Approximately one-third, based on the interviews and guided conversations I had with employees, identify as heterosexual despite working in well-known gay establishments. For these men, their preference is catering to female tourists and couples seeking male services, but most will also privately entertain men for the right price. In these situations, sex workers make a key distinction between work performance and personal sexual identity. Thus, just like female sex tourists, they challenge conventional notions of gender roles and sexual scripts given their

deviation from heteronormative expectations. Even though intimate sex acts are often part of their routine with male clients, assumptive labels of being bisexual or gay are strongly refuted and sometimes a source of heated disagreement.

Types of venues within Entertainment Zones

Gogo bars and live sex shows are part of the formal economy because they are regulated and heavily policed. During my time in the field, on a few occasions the police and military – Thailand was under martial law during part of this research – conducted inspections at NEP and Soi Cowboy establishments. While there, they checked the identification cards of all employees to ensure they were of legal age and Thai nationals. Also during these inspections, urine tests were administered to see if illegal narcotics were being consumed by the performers. On one occasion at NEP, a few patrons were required to show identification and take drug tests alongside the long line of Thai sex workers. Those working in the informal – unregulated underground – economy operate unofficially out of freelance bars, massage parlors, nightclubs, online websites, traditional pubs, and on the street. These service providers work illegally and represent diverse ethnic, racial and national origins. The following establishments consist of the largest number of venues attended by tourists.

GoGo Bars

These establishments provide various forms of erotic entertainment to consumers of all genders and sexual orientations. They are places where tourists can passively gaze at sexual performances or actively engage in conversation, physical contact and, upon mutual agreement, arrange for intimate encounters with sex workers outside of these spaces. The entertainers in

these establishments typically perform on stage, provide private dances to individuals or small groups, and often avail themselves for sexual services. In many of the gogo bars, some entertainers also perform choreographed routines during hourly showcases. When not on stage or providing private dances, gogo entertainers solicit audience members to purchase drinks which they receive a commission for each that they sell. Most entertainers have a drink quota to meet or else their salary is penalized. Some bars have a nightly quota while others track weekly. During the process of soliciting drinks, sex workers engage tourists in conversation as a way to determine if they are open to private entertainment or a sexual liaison. Despite most tourists rejecting these sorts of advances, they are often approached by other entertainers making the same solicitation throughout their presence at the bar. Besides performers, gogo bars also employ a host of other staff members consisting of servers, management and security personnel.

There are several similarities that exist regardless of entertainment zones when it comes to gogo bars. First, gogo bars are usually located near high traffic tourist areas within close proximity of public transportation points. Second, they are open to customers regardless of gender or sexual orientation. While some cater to various populations, all are generally welcome unless specifically noted otherwise. Third, once inside a gogo bar, consumers will generally see entertainers wear small round numbers adorned to outfit tops or bottoms as a way of differentiating each performer. If a customer is interested in a specific entertainer, they simply tell one of the employees the number and then the desired person will come over for conversation and drinks. Next, if the customer and sex worker are interested in leaving the bar, then a bar fine must be paid to the establishment. A bar fine serves the purpose of compensating that bar for the loss their employee for the evening. Since the entertainer is no longer able to solicit drinks for the bar once they leave, there is a potential for lost revenue. Even though gogo

bars provide adult entertainment as its main attraction, it is the sale of alcohol and other drinks that generates the most revenue for these establishments (Wilson, 2004; Sanders-McDonough, 2017). As such, all gogo bars institute a bar fine regardless of the entertainment zone they fall within.

Live Sex Shows

Live sex shows are found in a limited number of gogo bars and offer an additional form of adult entertainment that goes beyond the typical pole and choreographed dance routines. These showcases are also known as ping pong shows and pussy shows and leave little to the imagination. These types of shows in Bangkok's entertainment zones are isolated to alleyways near the Patpong night market. Unlike gogo bars that merely have a curtain veiling the inside spectacle from passing tourists, live sex shows take place upstairs away from ground level traffic and behind tinted doors closely guarded by security staff due to the explicit nature of the acts. Even though live sex is usually inferred by tourists as heterosexual or gay performances because of promotional placards providing images of two entertainers – usually a heterosexual couple, but sometimes lesbians or gay men – most live sex acts in Bangkok are presented by a sole performer. Those that do include traditional notions of sexual exchange between two people include lesbian acts, fellatio and simulated intercourse.

Sex shows in boy bars are less common and very different from those found in venues with female performers. Male entertainers go through rehearsed dance and strip routines, but also incorporate mocked acts of sodomy behind an illuminated sheet and open displays of autofellatio. Women, however, carry out a repertoire of approximately twenty different acts and they tend to be the same shows regardless of where tourists view them. Many of the

performances are not considered erotic, but instead are displays of degradation and disgust (Sanders, 2010; Sanders-McDonagh, 2017; Sikes, 2006). These performances typically show women pulling yards of neon ribbon, long strings of razor blades, and needles from their vaginas. Other acts include performing a dance routine that ends with expelling a small animal that is concealed within the vaginal canal.

There are also interactive routines that involve direct participation from the audience. In these situations, those selected become active members and leave their role as passive gazers because without their firsthand assistance, the performance cannot be completed. An example of active participation is when a tourist holds a balloon and the performer shoots a dart from the vagina resulting in it being popped. Another common routine involves a tourist clutching a paddle and hitting a ping pong ball that is ejected with tremendous pelvic force from the entertainer's nether region. Other examples include the birthday, bottle, smoking and writing shows. The birthday and smoking shows incorporate audience participation by lighting a candle and cigarette so that the female performer can extinguish the flame by passing wind on it and blowing tobacco smoke, sometimes with perfect circular rings, from the vagina toward the spellbound onlookers. The bottle show requires tourists to inspect the sealed cap and ensure it is not loosened; afterwards, the cap is removed by the sex worker who squats over it and simultaneously untwists the bottle cap demonstrating the immense strength of her vaginal muscles. The writing show consists of composing a customized note with an ink pen that is placed within the performer's vagina. Similar to unscrewing the bottle cap, the entertainer squats near the floor and carefully moves her hips until the script is finished. Once completed, the note is shown to the audience so they can see the skilled penmanship including a salutation that is personalized with the name of the chosen patron.

Freelance Bars

In these establishments, sex workers offer companionship to people of all genders as well as couples. At first glance, these bars look no different than a traditional pub. However, they are notorious spots leading to commodified sexual encounters because these are popular locations where sex workers, generally women, ply their trade when not affiliated with a gogo bar or massage parlor. These bars do not employ sex workers or provide eroticized shows, but the management and staff are aware of their presence and tolerate them as long as they are not disruptive to the paying customers. Establishments will sometimes provide a financial incentive in the form of a finder's fee to those who bring their customers to the bar. Some places provide the incentive once the customer spends a certain amount, others provide a flat fee, and the remaining who offer this kickback will give sex workers a set percentage of the sale for that visit.

Research Methods

The interpretive paradigm emphasizes the relevance of meanings and motivations of individuals and groups, particularly to gain an empathetic understanding, or *verstehen* (Weber, 1947). In addition to providing an empathetic understanding, the goal of *verstehen*, is to give a descriptively accurate portrait of the social world that is being investigated. Weber (1947) implies that studying social worlds from the lens of the group itself generates better understanding than external impositions made by an outsider. Thus, *verstehende* sociology is premised on the idea that relationships must be forged between the researcher and the researched to ensure correct representations of social worlds and interactions are made. In fact, by utilizing this approach, "Verstehende sociology not only teaches social researchers how to avoid indulging any subjective tendencies they may have but also assures them that their data are

objective; this is, what they report is what they and their informants know to be grounded in informants' actual experiences" (Gold, 1997: 389). Unfortunately, many sociological studies often fail to take Weber's perspective into account and researchers generate meaning not by observation or firsthand accounts, but instead entirely through their interpretation of secondary data collected for reasons other than the specific task at hand. Herbert Blumer (1969: 32) expounds this point when alerting that:

“[Such] research gives no assurance that premises, problems, data, relations, concepts, and interpretations are empirically valid. Very simply put, the only way to get this assurance is to go directly to the empirical social world—to see through meticulous examination of it whether one's premises or root images of it, one's questions and problems posed for it, the data one chooses out of it, the concepts through which one sees and analyzes it, and the interpretations one applies to it are actually borne out.”

Through field observations and, in particular, employing sociological and ethnographic typologies, good, dependable and well-grounded qualitative data can be acquired “through the development of close and continuing contact with those being studied” (Gold, 1997: 388-389). One way in which to achieve this is through adhering to the methodological roles introduced by Buford Junker (1952) and popularized by Raymond Gold (1958) based on the Chicago school tradition of qualitative inquiry. By doing so the researcher becomes better equipped to situate oneself in the field and effectively understand the intricate nuances of social interaction. Gold

(1958) delineates four research roles for the naturalistic practitioner in field settings – the complete observer, observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer, and complete participant. These roles are not exhaustive and contemporary classifications for naturalistic research also exist such as the complete-member-researcher, active-member-researcher, and peripheral-member-researcher; however, they are often built upon the framework introduced by Gold's ideation of researcher field roles (Adler and Adler, 1994: 379). Since the overarching goal of fieldwork is to empirically generate data that allows for the interpretation of group members' meanings and motivations, both classical and contemporary modes of ethnographic field roles are appropriate and specific frameworks should be used based on suitability to the study at hand.

Unlike many traditional ethnographic studies aiming to gain knowledge about a particular culture and its indigenous population, the social world I chose to investigate is highly mobile and transient. Additionally, it is without a clear hierarchy or universal basis for membership so gatekeepers are separated from various realms of the organizational structure and not known to all who participate. Despite engaging in observable sex tourism practices, most of the subjects I interviewed, whether in brief exchanges of informal guided conversation or lengthier types of formal interviews, failed to self-identify as being a group member– female sex tourist. This is not uncommon in spite of women participating in economic-sexual exchanges (Sanchez Taylor, 2001:36).

Even though a majority of the women I approached in adult entertainment zones refused to accept the label of sex tourist, my job as an ethnographer was to study female tourists in specific environments that were highly sexualized. My goal in doing so was to develop an understanding of the female tourist experience, decipher how women navigate these spaces and ultimately attribute meaning to them and their interactions while there. I also paid careful

attention stakeholders and how they viewed female tourists, attracted active and passive participation in various forms of adult activity, and how they successfully marketed these places to make them increasingly more accessible to women. Additionally, including local stakeholders was key to providing cultural context and their specific understandings of complex social relationships within the sex tourism industry – this is what Geertz (1973) calls “thick description.” Because Gold’s conceptualization of researcher positioning allows for role fluidity and constant adjustment based on the specifics of each interaction, I elected to use his framework of naturalistic observation over more contemporary versions that keep the researcher fixated in a singular role.

Table 1: Methodological Map

PHASE	ACTIVITIES	PURPOSE
Phase I 3 Months	Complete Observer: Non-Participatory Observations	- <i>Identify</i> : (virtual) spaces, activities, players, symbols - <i>Observe</i> : activities, patterns, businesses, demographics, players, stakeholders
Phase II 3 Months	Observer-as-Participant	- <i>Formal/Informal interviews and guided conversations</i> : short-stay tourists, sex workers, business owners, governmental officials - <i>Transition</i> : passive to active membership role
Phase III 1 Year	Participant-as-Observers Complete Participant	- <i>Continuation of interviews and guided conversations</i> : longer-stay tourists, sex workers and other stakeholders - <i>Establish Rapport</i> - <i>Empathetic Understanding</i> - <i>Thick Description</i> - <i>Validate findings</i> - <i>Reflexivity</i>

Complete Observer

As a complete observer, for the first three months of this study, I made a concerted effort to avoid social interaction with potential informants. Initially, I deliberately positioned myself distantly so that I could observe natural interactions without tourists knowing I was watching them. During this phase I spent roughly 20 hours per week strictly observing red-light districts and the social interaction that took place within them. Although the role of complete observer is not one of a major interactional influence, it does, however, allow for critical “reconnaissance” to take place as a form of “preparation for more intensive study in another field role” later in the project (Gold, 1958: 222). Adler and Adler (1994: 379) suggest the complete observer is “fundamentally removed from their settings” and the observer is “neither seen nor noticed.” In each of the field sites, I found several vantage points where I could simply watch how people entered entertainment zones, how female tourists interacted with the people and spaces within them, and how these tourists exited the scene. I also paid close attention to the physical landscape noting how it was arranged, the objects that were present and where various stakeholders positioned themselves to recruit tourists for engagement. Specifically, as a complete observer my aim was to identify activities, key players, spaces and symbols relevant to the sex tourism industry. Once I identified relevant aspects of the scene from my remote position, I closely observed them and was able to gather more data about interaction patterns that occurred both occasionally and regularly.

I collected these initial observations from peripheral stations that included sitting at outdoor cafes, patios and open-air bars in adjacent non-sexual establishments near the entrance to each entertainment zone. As I moved closer to the scene where interaction between tourists and sex workers took place, I sat on a sidewalk curb and other available public space where both

locals and tourists stopped to take a brief break from the hustle and bustle of the nearby area. I continually worked my way closer in subsequent periods of observation until I reached the heart of the entertainment zones.

The role of complete observer also allowed, at times, to minimize inherent positional influences – a non-participant heterosexual white male occupying a position of privilege – which I brought to the field. While I was keenly aware of many self-demands and personal political biases and believing they would always be relevant, it turned out, in fact, not to be the case in some situations. For example, being positioned at a distance led to inquiring about observations that I thought were important based on my own self-positioning as a scholar, but in actuality were only mere afterthoughts to those engaging in sexualized spaces. Gold (1958: 222) warns that the complete observer runs the risk of ethnocentrism when “the field worker cannot or will not interact meaningfully with an informant.” As such, the complete observer was my starting point of data collection and also where I made several oversights because I was not interacting with the people I was researching. I did, however, often inquire with informants in later phases of the research process before eliminating a lead or an angle I considered to be insignificant to the manufacturing of meaning and social interaction.

Observing from a distance and not discussing my observations with those being studied proved to be a detriment at some points because I completely overlooked situations and symbols that later became obvious when pointed out to me by key informants. This, I contend, is where Raymond Gold (1958) is indeed correct regarding the complete observer running into unintentional ethnocentric thoughts, practices and interpretations by misunderstanding what they are observing. In an effort to minimize the pitfalls associated with this scenario, I employed measures to ensure both the reliability and validity of my observations. I was generally on track

in most instances when taking note of what *I* observed and was able to use data derived from these observations to delve deeper once I had a more interactional research position. The observations I collected from this initial position yielded both recurring contradictions that later would be resolved as my position of distant outsider evolved into active and passive participation in group activities.

Although the position of complete observer implies distance, it does not always equate to physical proximity. At the beginning of fieldwork, I employed observational reconnaissance wherein I maintained an interactional distance by intentionally failing to engage in conversation with tourists and industry stakeholders. My intent was to keep the role of researcher covert; thus, unknown to those I was investigating. However, after analyzing my initial notes and coding for themes a few weeks at each field site, I adjusted, yet maintained, my research role as complete observer. Modifying my position to covertly engage in “systematic eavesdropping” allowed me to collect an additional layer of data (Gold, 1958: 222). Additionally, I used eavesdropping as a check to ensure I was minimizing potential threats of ethnocentric misunderstandings since I was relying entirely on my own interpretation of what was happening up to this point.

Once I entered the scene, I was able to take this role to a closer and more intimate level by sitting and walking near groups of tourists, but still not taking part in conversations with them. Instead, I was listening intently to what they were saying to each other and those who make a living by working in sexualized spaces. Many of my initial observations regarding social interaction were confirmed such as those who intended to engage in traditional sex tourism practices and those who were only interested in seeing the surrounding spectacle. In other instances, I was surprised by the content of conversations because on several occasions I heard disparaging and sexist comments describing other tourists and those working in sexualized

venues. Although eavesdropping was an excellent complement to observing at a distance, I could not always hear clearly, and this left me with another set of questions that I wanted answered. Despite being able to sit next to someone or walk closely behind them, I often missed a lot of details. With loud music thumping in the background, crowds of people coming and going with no indication of their next movement, as well as a conscious effort to not appear creepy to those I was covertly investigating, I realized these were only but some of the limitations associated with the complete observer. While this was my first role in the field, I found myself periodically returning to this position based on new discoveries and insider information revealed by key informants. It became obvious that I missed more than I thought by remotely and covertly observing those I was studying.

Observer-as-Participant

According to Gold (1958: 221), “The observer-as-participant role is used in studies involving one-visit interviews.” Because my target population consisting of female tourists was highly mobile and usually in Bangkok’s sexualized zones for only a short period of time, sometimes as little as one night, I often had an extremely limited opportunity to interview informants or have a quick guided conversation. Like the complete observer, the role of observer-as-participant requires extensive formal observations, but at the same time allows for swift social interaction. Because I was able to place myself side-by-side and be another member of the audience consuming the spectacle in the surrounding environment, I did not have the same restrictions that complicated the covert role. This role was Phase 2 of the study and initially lasted three months, but I occasionally found myself returning to the observer-as-participant in the final phase of fieldwork to clarify findings and to validate others. Just like Phase 1, I spent

approximately 20 hours per week at the field sites in this role. I was well-positioned to ask questions and even answer those posed to me about this project and my knowledge of Thailand's adult entertainment scene. Transitioning to this role allowed me to make better sense of the environment I was observing by interpreting it through the lens of those I was studying. Rather than making assumptions about their social world based on my epistemological positioning, hearing directly from them provided better perspectives and insights that I did not originally develop by observing at a distance without any sort of communicative contact.

Although I had better access to sex tourists as observer as participant, recruitment participation initially proved to be a major obstacle. There are several reasons for this, but I initially concluded that it resulted from tight restrictions placed by the UNLV Institutional Review Board (IRB) and being an unfamiliar heterosexual White male randomly approaching female tourists and inquiring about their social interactions in sexualized spaces and the meaning they give to it. As it turns out, I was indeed correct in my assumption, but only partially because other factors definitely impacted their willingness to discuss holiday activities. When learning about various methodological difficulties among tourism scholars, I reluctantly admit that I was actually relieved to find out my situation was not as unique as I had originally thought. Julia Harrison (2008: 41) explains the disinclination of tourists from wanting to participate in research projects when she lamented "My failed efforts to engage tourists in casual conversation as they left particular attractions demonstrated to me that few tourists were willing to be distracted from their holiday activities long enough for me to gather any meaningful ethnographic information." This suggests that tourists generally want to carry on with their holiday experience without facing intrusive questions from researchers.

Julia Harrison's (2008) experience, whose research was not of a sexual nature, shows that even casual conversation can be difficult to develop, let alone maintain, with tourists who are leaving the scene of local attractions. I had to learn to accept rejection from the earliest days of my role in this phase of research since it was commonplace most times I requested a formal in-depth interview. This experience was far from easy to embrace, but I was able to relate to the refusals because I also declined to be interviewed or surveyed on multiple occasions while holidaying abroad. However, I had a very different experience from Harrison when it came to casual conversations. I was often successful in establishing meaningful interactions when they were of a short and informal nature. This was especially the case when I initiated them while in the scene as a participant instead of after-the-fact when tourists were already leaving the site of inquiry.

Despite having good success in capturing tourists' attention for brief periods of time, whenever I broached the idea of a formal in-depth interview the tone of the conversation usually changed. Informants, especially women, would begin to hedge answers with guarded responses or abruptly end the conversation altogether as I dutifully began to read from the IRB informed consent documents. Even though I usually introduced myself at the beginning of most conversations as a graduate student conducting research pertaining to the sex tourism industry and how female tourists participate in it, when asking if they would be willing to discuss their opinions, that in and of itself, was not usually enough to generate a fleeing response; instead, it was the formality of being a research participant that caused rejection. On the other hand, when it appeared as if I had a willing member for an in-depth formal interview, I was usually left waiting empty handed since most tourists did not show up at the agreed upon time and place. Erin Sanders (2010) also ran into this problem when she conducted doctoral research on the

visual consumption of sexualized spaces among female tourists in Thailand's adult entertainment zones. In fact, as a middle-class heterosexual White woman, Sanders was often outright rejected when attempting to secure interviews and survey participation with Western women about their experiences and interpretations of the Thai sex industry. In other regions around the globe, female researchers regularly face similar levels of rejection despite their racial and ethnic status when asking female tourists to discuss sexual consumption and the meaning they give to their relationships with men from the local population (Gorry, 1999; Sanchez Taylor, 2001).

When only one opportunity exists to obtain meaningful data from a tourist, in their own words, the observer-as-participant is put at an extreme disadvantage in highly energetic, mobile and sexualized environments. Because sensorial stimulation created by the surrounding spectacle is disrupted and momentarily removes the informant as an active participant in the scene, the willingness to convey insider knowledge does not increase but drastically diminishes. This scenario is compounded when employing human research protection measures such as the process of obtaining written informed consent. While I had several potential informants initially agree to participate in a formal interview, most withdrew their willingness to participate after I proceeded to hand over a multipage informed consent document. The process of reading the entirety of the document and/or having it read to them is often beyond what tourists, especially sex tourists, are willing to agree to. Although this encumbered my ability to secure formal in-depth interviews with non-Thai speaking informants, I was, however, successful in regularly obtaining informal talks and having guided conversations in my role as observer-as-participant.

Besides having limited time with informants and dealing with hurdles that create barriers to participation, the observer-as-participant must also be extremely cautious with their interpretations. Because interaction is of a limited nature and of a very short duration, the

possibility of misunderstanding informants, and likewise, informants misunderstanding the researcher and investigational intent must be considered. Raymond Gold (1958: 221) alerts qualitative practitioners to this when he forewarns:

“However, because the observer-as-participant’s contact with an informant is so brief, and perhaps superficial, he is more likely than the other two [complete participant and participant-as-observer] to misunderstand the informant, and to be misunderstood by him.....Brief relationships with numerous informants expose an observer-as-participant to many inadequately understood universes of discourse that he cannot take time to master. These frustratingly brief encounters with informants also contribute to mistaken perceptions which set up communication barriers the field worker may not even be aware of until too late.”

Because I spent nearly two years in the field, I was able to compensate for the limited exposure with each informant that Gold (1958) warned could lead to potential misunderstandings. To this extent, I used interactions later in the field work process as a way to clarify and confirm earlier interpretations and understandings that I had and to make sure informants grasped the purpose of my role and research project. Even though this role was critical in the second phase, I kept returning to it throughout the remainder of the project whenever I wanted transient tourists to react to the findings I unearthed in the remaining roles and phases. Although this tactic proved useful in eliciting better comprehension of various

actions and meanings, I contend, overall, there was less misunderstanding in this role than when I positioned myself as a complete observer.

Participant-as-Observer

In this final phase, my role as researcher differed from observer-as-participant because I was able to develop better rapport with informants than I did with the typical one-off interactions I had in the previous role. As participant-as-observer, I continued to spend approximately 20 hours per week conducting research but was able to spend more time meeting with informants and, in some cases, even accompany them to various field sites and beyond. This position also created room for me to meet and conduct in-depth interviews with key players in the informal sex tourism sector as well as stakeholders outside of the main entertainment zones such as taxi and tuk tuk drivers. While most tourists were usually in and out of the red-light districts rather quickly, the people I met in this research role stayed for longer periods of time or were entrenched members who relied on sex tourists to make a living. What differentiated many of the sex tourists I interacted with as participant-as-observer is that most had planned their vacation with the express intent of actively engaging both the sex tourism industry and sexual relations with members of the local population as well as those who came to Bangkok from abroad to sell sex. As such, I had greater access to these consumers and the luxury of meeting with them on multiple occasions since the purpose of their vacation required them to be in areas for longer durations that provided specific spaces conducive to sexualized activity. Because stakeholders work and sometimes live near tourist zones, their presence is required despite the transient nature of foreign tourists who only visit for hours, days or weeks. Regardless of what brings one into this particular community, both residents and tourists alike socialize together and

share these sexualized spaces. This pattern of sociability aligns with Gold's (1958: 220) rendering of the participant-as-observer and their relationship to the greater community being studied. He notes:

“Probably the most frequent use of this role is in community studies, where an observer develops relationships with informants through time, and where he is apt to spend more time and energy participating than observing. At times he observes formally, as in scheduled interview situations; and at other times he observes informally—when attending parties, for example. During the early stages of his stay in the community, informants may be somewhat uneasy about him in both formal and informal situations, but their uneasiness is likely to disappear when they learn to trust him and he them.”

Raymond Gold's depiction is spot on because I was initially viewed by several female tourists and sex workers alike as someone looking to gain access to their social worlds for reasons that could be detrimental to their own self-interests. Distrust of foreign researchers who travel to developing countries is common in studies that seek to understand aspects of sex and romance tourism (Gorry, 1999; Sanchez Taylor, 2001). When I disclosed I was researching the sex tourism industry, many sex workers initially thought I worked for a non-governmental organization (NGO) seeking information about forced prostitution and sex trafficking. Other people thought I was going to solicit them with an opportunity to leave the sex industry by

offering occupational training in a different field or recruit them to join a religious group. As I quickly found out, this is a common practice of NGO workers and faith-based organizations in Thailand's red-light districts. Management staff and security personnel in sexualized venues do not take kindly to these benevolent offers and react swiftly by barring recruiters and announcing their presence to nearby establishments. To combat this perceived association with NGOs and religious organizations, I was quick to give a business card that showed details of my academic affiliations to both my home university in the United States and my Thai host institution. I also showed a photo-based credential issued by the National Research Council that disclosed my name, project title and contact information if they wanted to confirm my researcher status or lodge a complaint against me. Despite my hopes of mitigating them, these efforts were still met with skepticism in several establishments.

In spots that were more tolerant, several of the *mamasans* (female managers who oversee sex workers) warned me not to interrupt employees while they perform their duties. They also made it explicitly clear not to bother customers with my informed consent paperwork while on their premises. Since a customer interacting with another customer is quite normal in these establishments, managers usually did not object or prohibit me from having conversations with tourists who were seated in my general vicinity. To abide by these restrictions, I waited until people were leaving to ask if they were willing to have an in-depth interview. Just like with Julia Harrison (2008), this tactic of approaching tourists as they were departing the investigative scene was usually met with rejection. This was especially true in the former role of observer-as-participant. Nonetheless, in this role, rejection was still high, but I was more successful in attaining limited participation by remaining steadfast in my recruitment effort and realizing it

was simply a matter of numbers to find willing participants. Therefore, the more I solicited tourists I increased the likelihood of recruiting informants for this study.

Despite being regularly rejected, I attribute seeing the same tourists in these clubs on several occasions, and them seeing me, as an asset that allowed for better cooperation once we recognized each other multiple times. Accordingly, I had to ask a lot of people in various membership positions to get the information I was seeking about their social world. Despite being normally turned away, persistence through recurrent contact and subsequent conversations sometimes proved fruitful when reluctant informants later agreed to be formally interviewed.

Because a few establishments were more welcoming and staff recognized me from my visits when I was not interacting with them as a part of an earlier research role, they became chattier and curious about my intentions and purpose of study as time went on. In these clubs I was not automatically pegged as having deceptive motives like I was in other establishments. It is in these specific bars and clubs that were receptive to my presence where I was able to find informants more easily, particularly sex workers, who were willing to openly talk about the sex tourism industry and how female tourists utilize their services. Since my extended presence in the scene was viewed as non-threatening as time evolved, I was able to develop rapport with gatekeepers – mamasans and papasans – as well as key informants such as sex workers of all genders, industry touts, tuk tuk and taxi drivers as well as staff members from nearby hotels, restaurants, street stalls and convenience stores. In fact, I was even invited to attend a few parties and one establishment surprised me with a small birthday celebration of my own after nearly a year in the field. It was this type of trust that I built over an extended period that led to indispensable information that would have otherwise gone uncovered.

In the informal sex tourism sector, I developed a significant finding because of my lengthy presence in the field and regular social interaction with local residents. This led to meeting several men from Africa who specifically came to Thailand to sell sexual services to foreign female tourists and wealthy Thai women. Sex work was not their only source of generating income because they also had secondary hustles like selling illicit narcotics to tourists and providing physical protection and collection services to female sex workers associated with the same syndicate the men were affiliated with. I first observed these men when I was writing field notes at a bar that overlooked a nearby sidewalk lined with street prostitutes and food stalls catering to nearby nightly crowds. I usually came to this establishment a few times each week prior to departing the field whenever I visited Nana Entertainment Plaza and Soi Cowboy. Although the purpose of coming to this particular spot was to write an evening summary while observations were still fresh, I kept noticing the same guys and their public displays of intimate contact with travelers. I also noticed how they worked as a team to sell narcotics and warn each other when something appeared to be out of the ordinary. After a few weeks of coming to my usual spot and writing up field notes, it became obvious the men would quickly leave upon my arrival.

By this point, I began having short conversations with the service staff since I saw them a few times each week and they already knew what I was going to order since I rarely deviated from my preferences. I told them about my research and why I chose to regularly frequent their establishment. This is how I learned the African men were actually sex workers who became concerned about my presence. When I asked about them to the waitress who usually took my order, she told me that the men thought I was conducting reconnaissance on them. In fact, they questioned the waitresses about my presence when I was not around and pointedly asked if I was

a foreign law enforcement officer working with the Thai government. I found this quite strange, but as it turns out, this is not an uncommon situation when foreign researchers conduct field studies relating to illicit and marginalized activities. When it comes to the realm of romance and sex tourism, both April Marie Gorry (1999: 24) and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor (2001: 54) encountered similar situations when their informants expressed concerns about sexual opportunities with tourists getting destroyed as well as field workers being affiliated with the American FBI and other international alphabet agencies. In addition to concerns about foreigners asking sensitive questions regarding illicit and sexual activities, researchers who readily display a recording device only compound informant insecurities and preconceived notions of being setup for participating in criminal activity (Sanchez Taylor, 2001: 54). Once I learned about these anxieties I had to make some adjustments. Accordingly, audio notes, when I did use them, were recorded on my cellular phone so it appeared as if I was having a conversation. I also employed note taking as my primary tool for documenting conversations and informal interviews. This resulted in shorthand transcriptions or recollections after the fact instead of verbatim accounts. This was not ideal, but just like with Gorry (1999), Sanchez Taylor (2001), and Sanders (2010b), it became a necessary method for data collection. With some sex workers in the informal economy, it took me several months to ease their concerns and build enough rapport to alleviate their apprehension not just to interact around me, but also with me.

I was ultimately successful in befriending a few of these men and was able to collect data about their presence in the sex tourism industry and how their life histories impacted their involvement. As Gold (1958: 220) asserted, informants and gatekeepers are often skeptical of researchers, but in the role of participant-as-observer “their uneasiness is likely to disappear

when they learn to trust him and he them.” By way of a chance encounter during my private time away from the role of researcher, I was observed by one of these African sex workers during an outing with my spouse and child at a nearby shopping mall. This same gentleman approached me a few nights later at the bar where I was writing up field notes and appeared more relaxed with my presence. In the following weeks some of the other African men began to interact with me as well. This proved to be one of the most important segments of events during the fieldwork process because they opened up a line of inquiry for me that I completely missed and otherwise would not have had access to explore.

Complete Participant

The researcher plays the role of complete participant when s/he takes a covert position in the field, but unlike the complete observer who also often occupies a secretive position, the complete participant is involved in group activities, pretends to be a group member, and learns to protect the role when challenged with compromising events. In this position, only the researcher is aware of his/her actual role and strives to maintain a concealed self-identity. In fact, Gold (1958: 219) states:

“The complete participant realizes that he, and he alone, knows that he is in reality other than the person he pretends to be. He must pretend that his real self is represented by the role, or roles...he must bind the mask of pretense to himself or stand the risk of exposure and research failure.”

My original intent was never to position myself as a complete participant because I am a heterosexual male, not a female sex tourist. Secondly, being astutely aware of the stigma attributed to sex tourists, especially men, I did not want to have that hovering over my role as researcher in this project or attached to eventual findings. Even though I went into the field with an open mind, or so I thought I did, it would be disingenuous if I denied that the prevailing academic discourse and societal labels did not influence me.

Since most people view sex tourism as an activity that involves participation in prostitution, being a complete participant means that the researcher would have to engage in physical sex acts in order to be a group member. As it turns out, this approach is not an adequate description of what sex tourism or its constituency entail. Chapters 4-8 discuss how sex tourism and its base of membership are much broader than often portrayed. As such, merely taking in the spectacle put on display in red-light districts is enough to temporarily result in group membership. It is important to consider that being a member, especially at the periphery, is not a master status for the vast majority of participants. Visiting a sexualized zone or establishment is normalized in many of Thailand's tourist areas. Some consider it an authentically Thai experience (Sanders McDonagh, 2017) and others contend that "Bangkok sex shows have become institutionalized as a tourist attraction" (Wilson, 2010:65). Accordingly, visiting these areas does not usually result in a stigmatized identity for tourists who fall short of physically engaging in prostitution or participating in other forms of contact with sex workers. Therefore, using a broader lens that incorporates what actually takes place in sexualized zones, my view of what constitutes sex tourism and its associated tourists also changed. As my understanding in this space progressed, defining the aspects of who, what and why of sex tourism created room for another role that I ultimately occupied – the complete participant.

During my complete participant role as a sex tourist, I had a few goals to accomplish. First, I used this role as a validity tool to test if information relayed to me by key players was observable or not. Second, it allowed me to visit venues and interact with people who did not know my role as a researcher. Originally, I did not anticipate utilizing this role or concealing my identity as a researcher. As a result of my initial strategy, many venues knew me from my self-disclosure when I was attempting to recruit informants during the second phase of fieldwork. This proved to be problematic when I became a complete participant. Because I wanted to observe natural interaction between tourists and sex workers, I was unable to return to specific spots where employees recognized me. Therefore, I went to other venues where I was unknown and viewed as just another tourist.

This is how I was able to observe how women interacted with staff and vice versa without either knowing that I was watching them more than the spectacle they thought attracted me to the scene. I neither initiated conversations while in this role nor did I ever ask for a formal interview since the point was to validate data via observations while keeping my identity covert when alongside other tourists. Whenever a conversation did arise, I had to balance ethical considerations imposed by IRB restrictions pertaining to informed consent when conducting interviews. Because this restriction mandates role disclosure when utilizing certain methodological tools, I only participated in small talk when others engaged me. The rationale for exercising this strategy was to ethically maintain my covert status. In doing so, I did not guide the conversation to deceptively gain information that benefited me at the expense of an unsuspecting sex worker or tourist. Instead, situational irony occurred because it was tourists and sex workers who dictated the content and direction of conversations. This usually resulted in a scenario where I was often answering questions instead of asking them. As a result, I had to be

introspective and keenly aware of both my pretended status and self-identity without the former blending into the latter.

The complete participant creates challenging demands for the researcher, especially in connection to the portrayal of character and those relating to self-identity. In order to be a sex tourist, one has to visit the scene, engage those at the scene and become part of the scene by taking in the surrounding spectacle that is on display. When covertly interacting in pretend mode, it is important to keep to the script, but at the same time be aware that it is only a script and not a master status of self-identity. Gold (1958: 220) suggests:

“...a pretended role fosters a heightened sense of self-awareness, an introspective attitude, because of the sheer necessity of indicating continually to himself that certain experiences are merely part of playing a pretended role. These indications serve as self-assurance that customers are not really treating *him* as they seem to do, since *he* is actually someone else, namely, a field worker.”

Pretending to be a sex tourist was vital to gathering some types of data, but it is important to note that the role was one of an observational position even though I interacted with various forms of the spectacle. Despite allowing for greater exchange, any blurring of role position with self-expression or identity would have resulted in methodological failure by “going native” (Gold, 1958:220). Accordingly, when self-identity and expression become part of role performance, it is problematic because the complete participant “can no longer function as an

observer” (Gold, 1958:220). When this happens, role detachment becomes absent and the self is no longer sociologically distinct from those being researched. As a result, findings are tainted while others are overlooked.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a method that utilizes inductive analysis. Despite employing a bottom-up approach to conceptual and theoretical formation, grounded theory practitioners often incorporate the use of sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2006). Blumer (1954: 7) distinguished these from definitive concepts by pointing out the former provide “suggestions” rather than “prescriptions” when examining phenomena. This study adopted sensitizing concepts as a form of what Bowen (2006: 2-3) calls “interpretive devices” and a “starting point.”

The most recent trend in sex tourism studies utilizes frameworks that place special emphasis on the roles of race, class and gender. However, most of these studies focus on relationships between advantaged tourists and marginalized sex workers. While I also used race, class and gender, I did so with the aim of using the variables as dynamics and starting points instead of a definitive grounding. Many studies frame these variables as fixed categories. I saw them as social constructions and sensitizing concepts. By using inductive analysis, I was able to discover patterns within the data I collected. These emerged during the course of data collection and analysis rather than prior to commencement or after the completion of fieldwork. Because I wanted to interpret the significance of interaction with sexualized spaces and the meaning female participants and sex workers gave to them, sensitizing concepts aided in the discovery and elaboration of key themes, but without having to test hypotheses. Charmaz (2003: 259) echoes this by calling sensitizing concepts “background ideas” and expands the thought by stating:

“Sensitizing concepts offers ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience; they are embedded in our disciplinary emphases and perspectival proclivities. Although sensitizing concepts may deepen perception, they provide starting points for building analysis, not ending points for evading it. We may use sensitizing concepts *only* as points of departure from which to study the data.”

I used elements of grounded theory as an interpretive strategy by constantly evaluating and reexamining data while it remained fresh instead of waiting until I returned from the field to conduct data analysis. I regularly created memos and codes while still in the field to compare emerging themes and patterns which allowed for a way of validating whether data were consistent or one-off findings. Regularly reevaluating data also helped to ensure that I did not become bound to the sensitizing concepts that I took into the field. In fact, these evaluative practices were designed as a means to help move beyond existing notions by nudging toward the goal of discovering new concepts and frameworks of understanding. Since I dealt with a large and varying group of people including key informants, stakeholders and tourists across a spectrum of genders, I was able to unearth a variety of perspectives that provided additional layers of understanding which I would not have attained had I only narrowly focused on female tourists.

Sociological Sampling

This study relied heavily on a variety of informants and group members to disclose an assortment of directions for inquiry in order to understand the sex tourism industry and how women, as consumers, participate and create social meaning. Raymond Gold (1999: 391) refers to this as “sociological sampling.”

“It is designed for research that aims to discover how people in the study area classify or label each other, how they find meaning in activities they care about in life, and how they engage in processes in which they individually and collectively define (antecedents and consequences of) their situations. The process of sampling sociologically permits informants to participate in the actual sampling through telling the researcher how to locate and interview persons whose social roles, relationships, situations, desires, needs, and the like are representative instances of the particular human behavior that the researcher is interested in investigating. To achieve this kind of empirical grounding of the sampling process, sociological sampling must be used.”

The key principle of sociological sampling is that the field worker does not base findings entirely on personal observation or predefined theoretical parameters; instead, the researcher places heavy emphasis on the experiential knowledge of the informants who have an intimate understanding of the social world under investigation. Because of the wealth of information that

comes with insider knowledge, I found the snowball method of recruitment to be useful. This allowed group members, stakeholders and other informants who are better networked to refer me to additional sources of information. When key informants and gatekeepers vouch for the researcher by referring them to other knowledgeable individuals, a larger spectrum of ideas and understanding becomes possible. This growth is a direct and proximate result of the snowball method that is emphasized in sociological sampling.

Gold (1999) indicates there are two main sampling trajectories with the sociological approach. The first is to generate conceptual or theoretical understandings of the phenomenon by discovering themes and categories and how they can be placed into larger frameworks or viewed independently of those that already exist. This is often referred to as theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The second is more aligned to producing naturalistic accounts based on experiential observation, informants' descriptions, and personal reflection. This approach is called "substantive sampling" and is "verstehende sociological in principle and thrust" (Gold, 1999: 391). Although the two sampling types are not mutually exclusive and can indeed be used in tandem, ethnographers generally place more prominence on one over the other based on whether their goal is to derive a more substantive understanding of group interaction or to generate frameworks that can explain how to classify group membership.

Since I utilized an inductive approach in this study and was not limited by theoretical motivations isolating inquiry to a singular perspective, I was able to generate both a conceptual framework of group membership and develop a substantive understanding of social interaction among those who participate in Bangkok's sex tourism industry. Prior studies on prostitution and sex tourism generally employed theoretical constructions of moral panic (Weitzer, 2009; 2007; 2005) to highlight exploitive aspects of class, gender, race and sexuality. While human

and sexual trafficking should never be tolerated, it becomes a gross mischaracterization when myopic generalizations fail to consider a broader range of motivations, participants, and the perspectives of informants who do not fit the espoused narrative.

I used sociological sampling as a way to discover the meaning participants, regardless of their role as consumer, facilitator or provider, gave to their involvement in the female sex tourism sector. In fact, Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest informants supply significant help in empirically grounding conceptual and substantive findings. Since sociological sampling mandates the researcher to have close and continuous contact with a wide number of actors over an extended period of time, inductive outcomes often do not neatly fit into existing typologies. Gold (1999: 389) proposes that considerable research, especially sociological in nature, has a “major defect” since it fails to incorporate the “social reality” of “informants’ actual experiences.” This follows Blumer’s (1969: 32) rationale when he warned:

“[Such] research gives no assurance that premises, problems, data, relations, concepts, and interpretations are empirically valid. Very simply put, the only way to get this assurance is to go directly to the empirical social world—to see through meticulous examination of it whether one’s premises or root images of it, one’s questions and problems posed for it, the data one chooses out of it, the concepts through which one sees and analyzes it, and the interpretations one applies to it are actually borne out.”

Interviews

Phase 2 started when I began to conduct interviews. The lingua franca in the entertainment zones is English and I elected to use it as the sole language to conduct interviews with my informants. This, however, is a major limitation to this study because it positions the entertainment zones as privileged spaces compared to other landscapes that do not see Western female tourists. Deciphering who was a sex tourist and why they were classified as such became a complicated task. Since there are conflicting accounts as to what sex tourism entails, it would have been easy to dismiss some people while spending too much time focusing on others solely because of their gender or overt interactions in sexualized spaces. Because I constantly coded data and recognized emerging themes, I was able to reduce some of these methodological pitfalls. Even before I entered the field, I decided to initially operationalize sex tourist as any person present in a red-light district or at a venue which allows, facilitates, or provides adult entertainment or sexual services through audio, physical or visual means.

I conducted interviews via convenience and snowball sampling. I utilized both semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Interviews were extremely important in finding information not readily apparent in visual observations. Interviews also served the purpose of clarification of ambiguities and contradictions. Furthermore, I used interviews in two very distinct ways: As a standalone data gathering tool, and as a catalyst with other qualitative research methods to produce a form of methodological pluralism (Borer, 2008). As a standalone method, interviews are useful to gain a descriptive understanding of the insider's perspective. As a complementary tool, I used interviews to derive a more in-depth knowledge of a person, place, or activity. The intent for using a pluralistic approach is to engage respondents in conversation rather than having the appearance of merely data mining or interrogating. This proved useful

because the pluralistic approach, along with informal and unstructured interviews, yielded richer data than formal methodological tools like structured interviews.

One way I incorporated pluralism into the interview process was through a visual sociological approach (Pink, 2001; Schwartz, 1989). I regularly introduced digital photographs stored on my cellular phone to informants. These photographs captured images of entertainment zones and some of their activities. I also showed images published in an array of print media, such as advertisements and tour books. Photographs and advertisements proved to be of tremendous value because they assisted in the recall process and in some instances generated new data. Although photographs, in and of themselves, are not ethnographic per se, they can be helpful in reinforcing ethnographic knowledge among “those in the know” (Pink, 2001: 77). Because photographs are subjectively interpretive, they can be helpful in informing, confirming, or contesting specific accounts. Dona Schwartz (1989: 119) warns that photographs are often interpreted based on personal feelings, perceptions, and roles. Because of the highly subjective nature of still image interpretation, I practiced caution when using visual aids. The purpose of using pictures was not to generate specific narratives but to provide an additional layer of interaction during the interviews. Since images are reflexive and elicit the senses, they contribute to the collaborative process of sharing and producing mutual understanding (Pink, 2009: 50). Because my subjects were extremely transient and only remained at the scene for a short period of time, I often had only one opportunity to interview them before their departure. Knowing this from the earliest stages of this research, I regularly employed a pluralistic approach in an effort to gain as much knowledge as possible when only limited time was available.

Because this study examines a socially marginalized population, it was important to demonstrate sensitivity during the interview process in order to avoid alienating the respondents (Lofland et al., 2006). One example of sensitivity I used was to present myself as non-judgmental. I realized that in order to receive any sort of cooperation, appearing to be impartial, at a minimum, was mandatory. A way I portrayed impartiality was to be non-confrontational even if disliking or disagreeing with what was said. Another technique I used was to avoid being corrective when I knew a response was unlikely or inaccurate. Instead of contesting misleading or incorrect information through debate, I simply asked for clarification. I also utilized methods to validate responses with additional questions and through triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018) – one way I incorporated triangulation was through employing go-alongs by accompanying informants to various types of venues in the entertainment zones.

The target sample for interviews was primarily female tourists. Because I did not know how potential informants would self-identify their gender, I made an initial presumption based on common characteristics associated with female presenting tourists. This included looking for things such as wearing feminine attire, carrying a handbag, and physical features like smaller stature, wider hips, longer hair, noticeable breasts and as well as using my instinct of gendered attributes. This method was not ideal and I realize that I most likely missed some tourists who identified as women. However, once I solicited a potential informant asking for their participation in an interview, I sought confirmation by asking the tourist to identify their gender status. If I misgendered a person based on physical appearance, I would not exclude them from the study. Because I was also collecting data for the possibility of a future comparative analysis, failure to self-identify as a female would not eliminate a person from participating. It is important to note that regardless of gender, the informants' sexual orientation varied

considerably. As a result, it was crucial to be alert for leads suggesting something other than hetero-normative behavior. This is important to recognize because leads often shed special insight as to how women, whether active or passive consumers, participate in a given environment and how they construct and give meaning to their activities.

Female sex tourists were not the sole group of interviewees in this study. In addition to women, I also interviewed tourists of other genders for a comparative analysis. Whenever I interviewed a tourist who was accompanied by another person, I would ask the companion if they were interested in participating as well. If they agreed, I asked these participants the same questions that I posed to female tourists. Most non-female companions elected not to participate in this study. I also had interviews and guided conversations with stakeholders of all genders in the sex tourism industry such as business owners, tour guides, sex workers, public health workers, and law enforcement officers. Sex workers and tour guides were especially insightful as to seasonal patterns and common routines once female tourists are in-country. They also provided fruitful information regarding activities that take place outside of the popular red-light districts and official entertainment zones. Other stakeholders, such as governmental officials were helpful in discussing tourism statistics and the various participants within the greater tourism industry. Information from police contacts regarding criminal conduct associated with the sex industry proved useful in analyzing behaviors and motivations among some tourists and foreign sex workers. This is important to take into consideration because prostitution remains illegal throughout Thailand despite its reputation as a highly charged sexual environment for visitors. Even though the potential for criminal apprehension is a real concern when engaging in illicit activities, sex tourists readily violate local and international statutes by actively participating in illegal prostitution.

Table 2: Breakdown of Informants and Types of Interviews

Informant Type	Number of Informants	Methodological Tool
Female Tourists	116	Guided Conversation and Informal Interviews
	13	Formal Interview
Male Tourists	22	Guided Conversation and Informal Interviews
Transgender Female Tourists	11	Guided Conversation and Informal Interviews
Transgender Male Tourists	3	Guided Conversation and Informal Interviews
Female Sex Workers	44	Guided Conversation and Informal Interviews
	10	Formal Interview
Male Sex Workers	28	Guided Conversation and Informal Interviews
	8	Formal Interview
Transgender Sex Workers	11 Female	Guided Conversation and Informal Interviews
	1 Male	
Stakeholders (tourism industry personnel)	21	Guided Conversation and Informal Interviews
	5	Formal Interview

Table 3: Demographic Information of Tourists – Formal and Informal Interviews Only

ID Number	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Country	Age
001-F	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Singapore	20s
002-F	Woman	Heterosexual	White	USA	40s
003-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Sweden	30s
004-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Sweden	30s
005-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Italy	20s
006-I	Woman	Bisexual	White	Italy	20s
007-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Singapore	40s
008-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Canada	30s
009-F	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Japan	20s
010-F	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Japan	20s
011-F	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Japan	20s
012-I	Woman	Bisexual	White	USA	50s
013-F	Woman	Heterosexual	Multiracial	USA	20s
014-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Germany	40s
015-I	Woman	Bisexual	White	USA	30s
016-I	Man	Heterosexual	White	USA	30s
017-F	Woman	Lesbian	White	England	30s
018-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Netherlands	20s
019-I	Man	Heterosexual	White	Netherlands	20s
020-F	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Japan	20s
021-I	Transwoman	Heterosexual	Asian	Thailand	20s
022-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	USA	50s
023-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Multiracial	USA	30s
024-I	Woman	Bisexual	White	Austria	30s
025-I	Woman	Lesbian	White	Austria	30s
026-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	England	50s
027-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	England	50s
028-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	England	50s
029-F	Woman	Lesbian	White	Canada	20s
030-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Thailand	20s
031-I	Transwoman	Bisexual	Asian	Thailand	20s
032-F	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Australia	40s
033-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	France	40s
034-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Black	USA	30s
035-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Black	USA	30s
036-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Australia	50s
037-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Australia	50s
038-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Multiracial	Chile	20s
039-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	South Korea	40s
040-I	Woman	Lesbian	White	Germany	20s
041-I	Woman	Lesbian	White	Germany	20s
042-I	Woman	Bisexual	Multiracial	Brazil	30s
043-I	Woman	Bisexual	Multiracial	Brazil	30s

Table 3: Demographic Information of Tourists – Formal and Informal Interviews Only

ID Number	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Country	Age
044-F	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Norway	20s
045-I	Transwoman	Pansexual	Asian	Thailand	30s
046-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	USA	60s
047-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	USA	70s
048-I	Man	Heterosexual	White	USA	60s
049-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Multiracial	Netherlands	20s
051-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	France	20s
052-I	Woman	Bisexual	Asian	Japan	30s
053-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Japan	30s
054-I	Woman	Lesbian	White	England	40s
055-I	Man	Heterosexual	White	USA	50s
056-F	Woman	Bisexual	White	USA	50s
057-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Black	France	20s
058-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	France	20s
059-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Multiracial	France	20s
060-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Japan	30s
061-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	Japan	30s
062-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Multiracial	Canada	20s
063-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	China	20s
064-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	China	20s
065-I	Woman	Bisexual	White	Denmark	40s
066-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	USA	30s
067-I	Man	Heterosexual	White	USA	30s
068-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	China	20s
069-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	China	20s
070-F	Woman	Heterosexual	White	South Africa	30s
071-I	Woman	Bisexual	White	Belgium	20s
072-I	Woman	Bisexual	White	Belgium	20s
073-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Norway	40s
074-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Black	USA	20s
075-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Multiracial	Spain	30s
076-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	Denmark	30s
077-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Multiracial	USA	30s
078-I	Transwoman	Heterosexual	Asian	Thailand	20s
079-I	Woman	Lesbian	White	Germany	50s
081-I	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian	South Korea	20s
082-I	Man	Heterosexual	White	USA	60s
083-I	Woman	Heterosexual	White	USA	60s

Reflexivity

My status as a Western, white, middle-class, cismale researcher examining female sex tourists cannot be ignored because some scholars consider the practice of men researching women controversial. Although likely to remain contentious, certain measures can be implemented to reduce bias and privilege. One way is to declare my epistemological standpoint (Collins, 1990) when discussing methodology and presenting conclusions. Another way is to make clear that the purpose of this study is not to speak on behalf of women, but rather to understand how women participate in the Thai sex tourism industry. As with any scholar, careful attention to methodologies and reflexivity must be exercised. Interestingly, most contemporary studies of sex tourism, regardless of gender, are conducted by female scholars. With the recognition of the importance of race and class, as well as female consumers, male sex workers, and with the increasing attention to transgender issues, there is indeed a place for reflexive scholarship among male researchers. As a male, I bring different life experiences to the field from that of female and transgender scholars. The goal of interpretive sociology is to understand a social phenomenon from the point of view of the subject. Knowing this, I also realize that there may be things that I do not entirely grasp based on observation and interviews. Rather than dismissing why certain actions take place or the meaning that is attributed to particular symbols, it is important that I be mindful of these issues because reflexivity may contain key insight as to why I either missed or cannot understand something.

Also of importance are potential issues relating to criminal, exploitive, and non-conventional behavior. Going into this research, I anticipated that I would most likely encounter some people and situations that I found demeaning, offensive, or vulgar. Despite any ambivalence I may have felt, I realized that it was imperative that I attempt to cage, as best I

could, any behavior that may alter the actions or demeanor of those I was studying. Not examining contentious or unlikely aspects of social worlds is a pitfall encountered by some ethnographers of sex tourism. Sanders (2010b) demonstrates this when she discussed her reluctance to observe a live sex show. Even though several of her informants told her that the show was a must see for any visitor to Bangkok and were providing valuable information about the female gaze, she nearly missed it because of her own preconceived notion that the show was objectifying and reprehensible. I tried to avoid missing aspects of this social world by following leads provided by my informants even when I thought there would be no additional insight to gain. Had I not done this, I would have missed a key finding in the way intimacy can manifest between gay male sex workers and heterosexual female tourists. I initially doubted an informant who disclosed this unconventional type of encounter, further investigation proved it to be accurate and I had to rethink my own understanding of what intimacy entails. Although these types of relationships do not take part in traditional sex acts, intimacy indeed takes place by engaging in conversations that expose vulnerabilities akin to those in traditional courtships. Once I realized this, other displays of affection were observably present such as hand holding and gentle caresses. Being reflexive challenged my own thoughts and allowed me to realize some gay men provide a boyfriend experience to female tourists. This is similar in ways to the girlfriend experience offered by some women who enter into economic-intimate exchanges with men – some of which fall short of engaging in sexual acts (Carbonero and Gomez Garrido, 2018).

Ryan and Hall (2001) reflexively discuss their roles as male researchers in the same environment, but from a perspective that is more tolerant of sex work. They contend that positioning creates a unique situation for the male ethnographer because on one hand, a critical

critique creates distance, whereas on the other hand acceptance may come across as endorsing. Sheila Jeffreys (2003: 233) points out the latter in her criticism of Ryan and Hall by indicating a pro-sex work stance instead makes them voyeurs rather than researchers and “this kind of ‘voyeurism’ is not a problem that women researchers have to face.” Knowing this, I realize my methodological and analytical choices present a series of dilemmas. According to Opperman (1999), the key to settling those dilemmas is to critically acknowledge them before they surface in the results. Therefore, acknowledging dilemmas and subjectivities should be encouraged because doing so allows the audience to have a better understanding of the researcher’s positioning (Adler and Adler 1987; Irwin 1987).

Chapter 4

Intentional Sex Tourists

I define the intentional sex tourist as the consumer who knowingly and willingly engages in paid sexual activity. Many of these consumers make a conscious decision to do so prior to arriving in Thailand. While intentional sex tourists create vacation itineraries that involve participating in the commodified sex industry, the stereotype portraying them as aging heterosexual White women afflicted with troubled romantic histories or those who solely seek to have sex with hypersexual male Others is not what I observed. Intentional sex tourists also include those who planned to visit these spaces before they arrived in the red-light districts but engaged in voyeuristic activities instead of participating in physical sex. Key informants who work as sex workers and other industry insiders explained to me the intentional sex tourist accounts for roughly twenty percent of their clientele. This group of consumers is the third largest segment of sex tourists in this research.

In comparison to academic and journalistic portraits of sex tourist typecasts, female involvement in Bangkok's red-light districts defied what one would expect to encounter. As I will discuss in great detail, the Thai sex industry, both formally and informally, actively solicits women as welcomed participants and fulfills desires and fantasies only limited by one's imagination. Several sex workers explained to me that they also sell authenticity and intimacy (Bernstein, 2007a, 2007b; Carbonerri and Garrido, 2018; Hoang, 2014, 2011, 2010) to tourists who seek their services. They provide forms of affection that are freely given in romantic relationships typically found in the non-commodified private sphere. I also encountered

intentional sex tourists who routinely placed strong emphasis on engaging with those of a preferred aesthetic or shared kink (Kingston et al, 2021, 2020).

The intentional sex tourists I observed ranged in age from recent high school graduates to retired grandmothers, women in their late teens to mid-seventies. This is slightly more diverse than Phillips' (1999: 189) typology of female sex tourists at seaside resorts in Barbados that included women between twenty-five and fifty years old. Jacobs (2009: 46), however, recruited nearly sixty Western female subjects in a matter of four months who slept with local men while vacationing in the Sinai region of Egypt. The women interviewed by Jacobs were between eighteen and sixty-seven years old and primarily from Europe and North America. Although my study lasted significantly longer than most existing examinations of women as sexual consumers, I observed adult women of all age groups paying in either cash or kind, sometimes both, for sexual services.

Regardless of age, forms of activity encompassed direct sexual services, erotic massage, striptease and voyeurism, just to name a few. The age of my informants was not an indicator of how they interacted with the sex industry. Those at the younger end of the spectrum took part in the same undertakings as their elders. During guided conversations and interviews with study subjects, this was confirmed by both consumers and providers alike. Whether paying for sexual touch, penetration, or watching a choreographed routine in a gogo bar located within the official entertainment zones, diversity of age was typically present in the vast majority of venues. The only significant deviation I saw was the relative absence of more senior women at discotheques compared to other sexualized spaces. Identifying displays of affection and voyeurism were easy to make in open spaces, but interviewing sex workers provided the most information about full-service activities that took place outside of the public eye. It was extremely rare for female

tourists to disclose the latter during our conversations, especially when my interactions were isolated to a single discussion. I had better success eliciting this information directly from the intentional sex tourist when I was introduced by sex workers and other industry gatekeepers. Repeat customers provided the most candid information, but again, this was predicated on being introduced from another group member – a fellow tourist or industry insider.

Female tourists, regardless of age group, told me they visited establishments and zones associated with sex tourism for similar reasons. All of the women I interviewed in this group came because they either had an interest in visiting at least one of the red-light districts prior to traveling to Thailand or made the decision upon arrival, but before finding their way to an adult entertainment zone. The following snippets from Aiko of Japan and Brenda and Cheryl of Australia are characteristic of the conversations I had with women of a wide variety of ages. The intentional sex tourist did not consider their involvement as a form of exploitation or victimization.

Me: How old are you?

Aiko: Twenty-two.

Me: Twenty-two? Why did you decide to visit a live sex show tonight instead of clubbing or doing something else?

Aiko: I've been to a lot of clubs and will probably go again tomorrow, but this is my first time here [red-light district]. I saw places like this in Phuket along the beach road but went to nightclubs with my friends instead.

Me: Okay, but what made you want to visit Patpong? Did you come for the night market or sex shows?

Aiko: Well...both! We heard a lot about the market and the sexy bars here are famous. People from all over the world come here so it's something we definitely wanted to see. After we watch the show we're going to buy souvenirs at the market.

Me: Are you enjoying what you saw so far? Is it what you expected to see?

Aiko: I didn't know what to expect other than the gogos and ping pong show. I knew the shows were crazy but I wasn't planning to play doctor with the ladyboys over there. It's hard to tell them apart from a real woman.

It is important to note that Aiko was not visiting the entertainment zone as a solo female traveler. She went with two of her friends who were of a similar age. They visited many of the famous beaches in the South, attended a full-moon party on the island of Koh Phangan, and went to see several Buddhist temples listed in popular tourist publications. Just as important, Aiko and her travel mates made concerted plans to visit the Patpong night market not just to purchase inexpensive counterfeit goods and gifts to take back home, but also for the allure of the sex scene. Patpong is possibly the most famous of all Thai entertainment zones in Bangkok and has been the field site of several academic studies including Bishop and Robinson (1998), Manderson (1997), Phillips and Dann (1998), Sanders (2010a, 2010b), Sanders-McDonagh (2017), and Wilson (2010).

While still in Japan and prior to departing for Thailand, Aiko decided she wanted to visit the sex bars of Bangkok despite never doing so in her own country even though they are readily available in Tokyo. As commonly practiced with sex tourists of most types, Aiko and her friends paid an entrance fee, purchased alcohol, tipped entertainers, and she even excitedly touched the

breasts of a transwoman soliciting intimate services. Aiko and her friends claimed to have never knowingly interacted with a transgender woman before this experience. They became extremely animated by describing how they tried to see if they could “spot differences” from those of a cisfemale. With the help of their new cisgender and transgender acquaintances, they had a small line up to compare anatomical features. I watched the group as they hawkishly inspected each of the servers by touching their breasts and after all was said and done, paid a tip to see, up close, the anatomy of a surgically constructed vagina of a transgender staff member who completed an extensive series of gender confirmation procedures.

As outlandish as this may sound, this sort of interaction is not uncommon in establishments that employ transgender entertainment staff. Staff told me on several occasions this is part of the allure in drawing curious tourists into sexualized venues that hire transgender employees – particularly sex workers. In addition to hearing about accounts like this, I witnessed similar events scores of times by customers of all genders. However, even though I met a number of transmen during the course of this study, I never witnessed any interrogation of their pelvic anatomy like I did with transwomen. Although the unit of analysis in this study was female sex tourists, I rarely saw male tourists exercise the same level of physical scrutiny with women and transgender sex workers as I did from female tourists. I also saw men and transgender customers scrutinize workers, but I saw many more females engage in this behavior than other groups.

This is not to imply that the behavior is absent from men and transgender customers, but I am asserting that women do take part in this type of behavior at much higher rates. Several employees, especially transgender women that I spoke with who worked in erotic venues told me the same thing. In fact, other scholarly accounts, such as Sanders (2010b), observed that in

several of the sexualized spaces she visited in Bangkok, often times a majority of the paying audience was gazing female tourists. She continues this thought by claiming female consumers are not isolated to Bangkok (2017: 2):

“In both Thailand and the Netherlands (and Amsterdam specifically), red-light zones and public sex performances are being explored and visually consumed by female tourists. In many venues female customers comprise not a small minority, but an equal proportion and in some cases a clear majority.”

Wilson (2010) implied she had a similar experience at Patpong when interacting as a female audience member while attending a sex show with her partner. What I saw substantiates Sanders (2010b: 9) finding that three elements are becoming increasingly more noticeable with female travelers. First, women seek out activities related to sex tourism beyond full-service sex. Second, women seek sexualized spaces as part of an authentic tourist experience. Third, many women are intrigued not just with sexualized spaces, but also with those who work in them. Even though the size of female audiences in several venues was quite substantial, other entertainment zones such as Nana Plaza and Soi Cowboy see more men and bisexual couples than solo female tourists and groups of women. But, that is not to say women, regardless of sexual orientation, are completely absent. In fact, it demonstrates that women have gained entry to spaces that were once reserved solely for men and heterosexual consumption.

Brenda and Cheryl shared a similar experience of wanting to visit the red-light districts of Bangkok. They were in their early to mid-fifties. I met them seated inside a male revue located

in an alley across from the Patpong night market. This particular area is home to several gogo bars entirely staffed by male entertainers. The audience for these establishments is quite diverse and is made up of single men, women, couples and groups of all sexual orientations. Inside the gogo where I met Brenda and Cheryl, over one hundred men dressed in thongs and a variety of risqué costumes meandered around the staggered seating to interact with customers who paid to enter the premises.

Unlike Aiko who went into an establishment overwhelmingly staffed with cisgender women and transgender personnel, Brenda and Cheryl told me they were more interested in a traditional girl's night out that entailed being entertained by cisgender men. During my observation of them, I noticed Brenda was a bit reserved but received intermittent lap and table dances while Cheryl was more aggressive and made it a point to seductively touch many of the entertainers who happened to walk by. Cheryl's spirit became more truculent as she became slightly inebriated. At one point, she became so enthralled that she stripped one performer of all garments down to his naked body. The irony between Brenda and Cheryl's demeanor is that despite being more reserved, Brenda was quick to generously tip entertainers while Cheryl, who was boisterous and very touchy-feely, was less inclined to part with her money so easily. This did not go unnoticed and Cheryl was quietly labeled by Thai speaking staff with derogatory names. I overheard the entertainers use Thai slang that implied she was stingy, perhaps even financially broke. As the night went on, Brenda received more attentiveness even though Cheryl appeared most interested in sexualized attention.

I situate both women as intentional sex tourists since they planned to visit this specific erotic zone that hosts a large number of male sex workers. Although neither one of them left that evening with one of the entertainers, they compensated the staff for their time, paid an entry fee,

and consumed the most profitable item on the menu – alcohol. Red-light businesses make most of their money from alcohol sales, not acts of prostitution (Wilson, 2004: 79-80). This scenario still remains a legitimate form of sexualized consumption and does not negate or diminish their role as sex tourists. The sale of direct sexual services is definitely one key component in sex tourism practices, but it is indeed only one of several forms related to sexual performance on offer in sex tourism destinations.

The intentional sex tourist contests traditional gender norms and sexual scripts in a bevy of ways beyond simply being present in sexualized spaces. When looking at Brenda and Cheryl as examples, Brenda was paying for erotic attention in ways similar to male consumers. This act defied traditional gender roles and sexual scripts (Ryle, 2018). Paying for male sexual attention was an affront to the performance and norms associated with Brenda's gender. Cheryl also contested traditional gender norms in her interactions. Despite Cheryl having an outward feminine appearance that unquestionably allows her to pass as a cisgender woman, she defied her expected sexual script as an object and instead became the subject when she asserted herself as the aggressor by making it known what she wanted and how she intended to get it.

The intentional sex tourist I encountered also shattered the stereotype of being financially secure. Several of the women who participated in this study were on shoestring budgets or employed in nonprofessional occupations making working-class to middle-income wages. Jacobs (2009), Sanchez Taylor (2001), and Sanders (2010b) noted this of their subjects when investigating women who engage in sexual escapades with locals while on holiday and Kingston et al (2021, 2020) also found it to be common for British women who purchase sex in the United Kingdom. One example of many informants who demonstrated this is Amber from Austria. She fits the archetype of the sex tourist who travels to faraway lands to engage in full-service sex

with local sex workers, Amber also broke the mold because she did not fit many of the antiquated descriptions associated with those who purchase sex. Amber is in her mid-30s and works in retail sales. She depicts the Western standard of being hegemonically attractive and athletic. She also has a worldly view influenced by extensive travels throughout Asia, Europe and Oceania as a backpacker and budget traveler.

Amber views sexual encounters as an important part of her travel experience. Although she has had plenty of one-night-stands with locals and has hooked up with fellow tourists during her travels, she also likes to have carnal interactions with professionals when visiting sexually charged environments. Whenever she passes through Bangkok, Amber makes it a point to visit red-light districts and sometimes purchases sex from men who she finds aesthetically arousing. In describing this to me, Amber did not veil her intent or her desires. While I met many women intent on seeking paid sexual encounters, Amber was only one of a few who directly informed me she saw herself as a sex tourist. Amber told me that she thought most women will not openly acknowledge the same label even though they are doing the exact same things they say sex tourists engage in. She suggested that stigma was the primary reason women shy away from the label. In a lengthy discussion with her, Amber painted a portrait of her experience as a sex tourist:

“It’s not like I woke up one day and said that I’m going to be a sex tourist. I like having sex with men, sometimes women, but mostly men. I’m not going to apologize for anything because there’s nothing wrong with what I’ve done. I never forced anyone to have sex with me...We all get something out of it whether it’s just

gratification or something else. I usually feel some kind of chemistry with the person whether it's a one night stand or I paid to be with them. Maybe there might be some romantic feelings with some people, but not usually. There's an attraction, of course, but usually it's just sexual and I leave it at that. I'm not looking for a husband or to take someone back to Austria. This doesn't make me a bad person, and there are more people like me than you think."

I met Amber through a key informant who is a transnational sex worker in Bangkok's unregulated informal economy. I developed a friendly relationship with a male sex worker from Africa over the course of many months and this parlayed into introductions with other members of the underground sex scene. This realm is associated with street prostitution and escort services. These men operate in spaces that are hidden in plain sight within Bangkok's adult entertainment zones. They often go unexamined because the focus of the entertainment industry is spotlighted on the feature attractions associated with select high profile spaces instead of small venues with less clientele. The informal sex workers that I interacted with operated independently out of discotheques, pubs, street corners and websites.

Interestingly, I met a variety of players in the informal sex scene, both consumers and sellers, from six of the seven continents. Some members were locals and expatriates, but a significant number were short-term tourists who exited the scene shortly after their arrival. Here, I found the largest number of women who paid for full-service sex. It is also where I found the most that were willing to talk about it. Being invited to interact with consumers by select

gatekeepers allowed me to meet a number of women, specifically intentional sex tourists like Amber, who are typically omitted from the scholarly literature. I discovered that tourist women in Bangkok engage in commoditized sex at higher rates with sex workers who ply their trade outside of formal venues like gogo bars and sex shows. Most single women in main attraction establishments were reluctant to participate in formal interviews that required a lengthy informed consent document, but were more inclined to engage in informal dialogue and guided conversations. When an intentional sex tourist was introduced to me by a service provider, I had greater success securing an interview but it usually remained informal and unstructured.

Conclusion

Much like the stereotype that Opperman (1999) highlights in relation to public perceptions and academic analyses of men who engage in sex tourism, popular media is now starting to make the same broad stroke with women. A growing discourse is scratching the surface covering the intersection of tourism and the way women are taking control of their sexuality while vacationing abroad (Berdychevsky and Gibson, 2015; Berdychevsky et al., 2013; Jacobs, 2009). Media outlets report with great interest the flings of Western women who plan their holiday experience romanticizing lustful desires while traveling in exotic locales with the purpose of engaging in sexual exchanges with local men of color (Hamid-Turksoy, van Zoonen and Kuipers, 2014). In most instances, these portrayals are conveyed in a way that one would view the interaction as a fantasy come true; in other words, a real life romance. Journalistic accounts are becoming especially more prevalent with British and European tabloid newspapers that follow a similar path likened to playful romantic cinematic depictions such as *Shirley Valentine* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Other narratives mirror films sensationalizing

female sex tourism in the age of globalization as illustrated in *Heading South* (Caribbean), *Paradise: Love* (Africa), and *Cowboys in Paradise* (Asia).

These media portrayals often associate female sex tourists as women in their middle-age to elderly years who are financially secure, endure body-image issues, and have difficulties forging meaningful intimate relationships in their homeland (Bauer, 2013; Bindel, 2013; Carr, 2016; Hamid-Turksoy et al, 2014). These sketches are eerily similar to conventional images of their male contemporaries, but deliberately omit one major frame – the absence of exploitive behavior. While these features might be common in some popular tourist destinations that attract licentious female revelers, in the case of Bangkok, they are neither an accurate nor complete depiction of the intentional female sex tourist. As demonstrated in this chapter, these stereotypes leave out several key characteristics displayed by women who participate in sexualized spaces in the Thai urban landscape.

I classified intentional sex tourists, based on the stated purpose of their vacation, desire to participate in commoditized sexual activity, and engagement in relationships that are predicated upon remuneration of cash or kind. Interactions are typically temporary and unrestricted rather than monogamous and long-term commitments. The women are not indicative of common journalistic depictions since they come from diverse backgrounds that are not restricted to a certain age, occupation, financial affluence, or social status despite the misplaced “sugar mama” persona often attributed to them. Most of the female tourists in these spaces are White women from the West who do not seem focused on romance but rather engage in activities similar to those who pay for sexual services outside the tourist context. Various stakeholders, however, told me that in recent years the number of Asian and non-White women visiting entertainment zones substantially increased and participate in the same activities as their Caucasian

counterparts. My observations confirmed a mix of racial groups, but White women appeared to have the largest presence.

While some tourists I observed were of the same class, race, gender, sexuality as the providers, several intentional sex tourists also showed considerable social difference. Julie Ham (2020: 563), however, suggests that instead of looking for power differentials isolated to risk and vulnerability, differences may spread power in transactional arrangements in diverse ways. My findings show that in Bangkok's multilayered sex industry, providers who service tourists also possess considerable privileges that are not afforded to those who work outside of policed tourist areas where coercion, deception and force are serious concerns.

Western privilege, perhaps better stated as economic privilege from the global North, afforded consumers the possibility to seek an authentic Thai experience by entering into paid relationships with a local service providers. Thai sex workers are aware that some Western sex tourists racialize and eroticize the exotic so they use this to their advantage. Several female sex workers who solicit their services to White tourists deliberately darken their skin with cosmetics to enhance the perception of exoticism. Hoang (2015, 2011) discovered in Ho Chi Minh City that women who work in sex bars employ a similar tactic with Western men. I learned that in Bangkok male entertainers also employ a similar practice but through exposure to the sun. This allows men to enjoy outings to the pool and beach with their companions and they also get to publicly put their body on display for the consumer. This is a key distinction to make because Thai women will rarely expose their skin to the sun because of a deeply rooted cultural preference for whiter skin. White skin in many Southeast Asian cultures is a signifier of class and proof that one does not have to engage in unskilled outdoor physical labor. Despite this,

male entertainers do it for the economic reward they will receive by satisfying the dark and handsome desire that some clients are yearning for.

Thais also use their language skills to perform race in order to increase their desirability. This allows entertainers to economically capitalize on it through the role of cultural broker. In this scenario, the intersections of race, ethnicity and nation are used to leverage appeal with Westerners. Since English is not widely spoken outside of the tourist areas, and sex workers are well aware of this, Thais use it to their advantage and market the service to clients with the expectation that it will result in a multiday commission. However, I also encountered several instances where privileged Western women who benefited from this service labeled Asian men with emasculated stereotypes such as being controllable, gentle, obedient and sensitive. This gender role reversal results in Thai men navigating feminine roles in a patriarchal society while their Western female clientele exercise traditional masculine gender roles by taking on the part of decision maker and demonstrating assertiveness, financial independence and being emotionally strong.

In this privileged sector of the Bangkok adult entertainment zones, I did not find exploitation of the kind mentioned in the sex tourism studies I reviewed that focused on male tourists. However, what I did discover was female tourists were often able to use privilege that is not readily available to them outside of these liminal spaces to gain a sense of sexual gratification. For example, Aiko and her friends gendered and sexualized difference of transwomen by comparing them to their own feminine Asian bodies. They were animated and scrutinized what they considered to be real and fake female anatomy. They used their own experience as heterosexual cisgender women as the barometer for what other Asian women should look like and who should be sexually desired. I regularly observed similar behavior with

White women as well. This reproduced Westernized norms of what gender and femininity are socialized to be and tourists imposed them on transwomen by declaring what was womanly and what was not.

The Thai sex tourism industry is also organized in a way that allows female tourists to utilize a variety of privileges not available to local women outside of the tourist zones. As tourists, consumers are able to seek services in areas that are policed for their safety. This advantages sex tourists over the local population because the same consideration is not given to less privileged markets. Sex workers who cater to tourists also benefit from this upper tier placement because of their cultural and social capital and therefore can charge more money for their services.

Chapter 5

Unintentional Sex Tourists

Several studies conducted in other destination hotspots around the world have reported that the vast majority of visitors who participate in the adult entertainment industry do so without viewing themselves as sex tourists, even when tourists reveal the existence of a monetary exchange with erotic entrepreneurs (Dahles and Bras, 1999; Frohlick, 2013; Harold et al, 2001; Meisch, 1995; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995). Those whom I interviewed in the Thai adult entertainment districts were no different. There is a widespread belief among holidaymakers that sex tourism is premised solely on purchasing physical acts of sex (Opperman, 1999, 1998; Ryan and Hall, 2001). The bulk of sex tourism research conceptualizes participation from a similar position. This narrative, however, is beginning to change with more recent framings from Bandyopadhyay (2013), Bauer (2013); Carr (2016), Jackson et al., (2018); and Sanders-McDonagh (2017) who provide more nuanced definitions and understandings of sex tourism that better capture the larger breadth of the phenomenon. Bandyopadhyay (2013: 1-2) argues that a paradigm shift must take place because too much data is being left out of the scholarly discussion due to narrowly isolating the composition of consumers – tourists from the West who exploit marginalized Others from the East.

In this chapter I discuss the second largest group of tourists in this typology – women who do not plan their holiday experience to involve sexual activity but end up participating in the adult entertainment zones. This group represents approximately one-third of the tourists who visit red-light districts in Bangkok throughout the year. Their economic contribution is substantial even though they do not plan in advance to take part in erotized leisure practices. The

unintentional sex tourist becomes involved in a myriad of ways. Most unintentional sex tourists do not purchase full-service sex and those who do only account for a small portion of the revenue generated for the broader industry. Much of the money these tourists spend comes from venue entry fees, libations and tips for the performances that entertainers provide (Sanders McDonagh, 2017; Wilson, 2004: 79-80). Thus, the unintentional sex tourist makes up a large segment of the customer base that keeps the Thai sex industry afloat. Sometimes she purchases sex, other times she is a voyeur, but every time she is patron and financial contributor in at least one, but usually more ways.

I define the unintentional sex tourist as those who monetarily contribute to the sex industry and receive something in return; however, these consumers made clear in guided conversations and interviews that they were not planning to do so. The unintentional sex tourist of Bangkok differs from de Albuquerque's (1998a) categories of Caribbean tourists as "neophyte" and "situational tourist" as well as Phillips' (1999) "situationer." The Thai unintentional sex tourist instead exchanges cash expecting to receive something in return. When she does have sex, it is not solely with men or people from different ethnic or racial groups than her own. The women in Bangkok that I categorize as unintentional sex tourists were representative of various sexual orientations. While a majority of the women I interacted with identified as heterosexual, I regularly encountered bisexual and lesbian women. These women were frequent participants in all activities available within the adult entertainment scene. This is a key point because these consumers were not mentioned in the literature I reviewed. I also met several female sex workers who only agreed to leave their place of employment with other women. They told me they were not bisexual and refused to engage in erotic labor with men. The focus of their attention was isolated to bisexual women and lesbian tourists.

One of my gatekeepers to bisexual and lesbian tourists was Ploy. Ploy began her career in the sex industry working in a Thai massage parlor that covertly provided erotic massage services. Most of her customers were tourists who did not seek sexual services, but she did encounter women who had an interest in escalating the service beyond relaxation and therapeutic purposes to something that was more titillating in nature. Sometimes this happened by direct request from the tourist and other times Ploy initiated the escalation by acting on receptive cues of being open to a more sensual massage. The business where she worked received word of mouth referrals from members of a few web-based forums commonly known to intentional sex tourists. Some of these boards include platforms dedicated to women who are interested in taking part in paid sexual encounters. The unintentional sex tourist lacked prior intent to engage sexually, but Ploy was quick to change the trajectory from non-sexual to intimate when an opportunity presented itself. Ploy discussed with me multiple times how she would reel in unsuspecting tourists and shift traditional massage to something more sexual based on observing changes in breathing patterns, facial expressions and bodily positioning. I questioned Ploy about her motivation to provide extra services and she simply answered, “money!” When I inquired about additional details she told me she would earn an extra 500 – 1,000 Baht (\$17 - \$34 USD) if the massage turned sexual. Most customers would ask her how much they owed once finished while some would proactively offer an additional payment over the standard massage cost without being prompted. When she felt as though a customer was not going to pay extra, a request of 1,000 Baht was made but she said she would be willing to accept half. Ploy rarely had an issue with non-payment and when she did she would let the customer leave if they began to make a scene. Because the parlor where she worked did not give tea money – bribes – to the

local police department, the owner did not want law enforcement to know what was being secretly offered.

Realizing that she could earn significantly more by providing sex to women, Ploy moved from the massage parlor to one of the world's largest red-light districts. In the gogo bar that she moved to, Ploy was one of only a few women who solely entertained other women with dances, massage and full-on sex. Although plenty of her coworkers were bisexual, Ploy often received the first opportunity to entertain single women who frequented her bar. During my conversations with Ploy and observing her interactions with female tourists, it became apparent she retained a brisk schedule due to the regular presence of women looking to see what is on offer, especially in the physical and voyeuristic realms. Most of the relationships Ploy had were isolated to a single visit and resulted in tips and commissions from alcohol sales, but she explained that it was not out of the ordinary to be bar fined a couple of times most weeks. Two of her customers transitioned from sexual to romantic relationships. I will discuss this in more detail in the romance tourism classification because I had the opportunity to interview her besotted holiday partner.

Another way to understand sex tourism introduced by Ryan and Hall (2001) is the concept of liminality. They argue that liminality is a way to comprehend how people who otherwise would not visit service providers or sexualized establishments choose to do so while on vacation. This is precisely how some unintentional sex tourists rationalized their behavior to me. Because red-light districts are viewed as liminal spaces where societal values do not apply and traditional forms of deviance are not stigmatized, consumers engage in activities that in different circumstances would be off-limits in their day-to-day life. Ryan and Martin (2001: 143) explain:

“...tourists may be said to possess a temporal liminality by reason of being outside of their normal occupation and place. Their possession of space between and betwixt their own homes and those of the host community within which dream fulfillment is pursued locates tourists in a specifically socially condoned marginality, even if they engage in commercial or noncommercial sex with other than normal partners or engage in too much alcohol consumption.”

Ryan and Martin (2000: 140) examined liminality from their position as participant-observers while studying the social world of strip clubs. They concluded that the “striptease is a forgotten section of sex tourism that within its rituals both challenges and exemplifies generally understood notions of male-female relationships.” Therefore, as is validated in this study, gender roles and sexual scripts become fluid when human bodies are the focus of the gaze. Perhaps this might also explain the role liminality plays in sexualized spaces where women not only demonstrate fluidity, but outright contest constraining social control mechanisms designed to ensure their compliance with cultural expectations of gender performance.

In the social world of female sex tourism, women visitors to Bangkok actively engage liminal spaces by visiting gogo bars, attending live sex shows, and through interactions with other patrons and sex workers in adult entertainment venues. As a result, consumption manifests in ways beyond paying to engage in commercial sex acts; the unintentional sex tourist purchases beverages, food and libations from establishments that also facilitate the selling of sex. Since this, in and of itself, is a direct contribution to the economic earning potential of industry staff,

female tourists, without question, are supporting the spectacle in ways they may not have imagined until pointed out to them.

This scenario is exemplified in a conversation that I had with Olivia from Denmark. Olivia is in her mid-30s and was traveling with her sister who is in her twenties. After developing the classifications of this typology, I asked female tourists in red-light districts what they thought. I met Olivia when she and her sister were seated next to me at a gogo bar staffed with male entertainers. I knew the server, Eck, from previous visits and he was aware of my research project and was helpful in answering several questions I had about his interactions with female tourists, his place of employment and the broader sex tourism industry. Olivia overheard the conversation I was having with Eck and she began to engage us. I welcomed the exchange and started to discuss the intentional sex tourist, unintentional sex tourist and the spectacle seeker classifications with her. I told her the various categories were representations of sexual consumption by female visitors and they were created based on my observations, interactions with tourist and sex workers, and their responses to my preliminary findings. Olivia responded to my presentation with the following:

“I don’t view myself as a sex tourist because I don’t do the things I think they do, but now you have me questioning myself. I never paid to have sex, here or anywhere else. I never even thought that I would visit one of these red-light bars, it just wasn’t in our plans. We knew Thailand was famous for prostitution, everyone knows, but we had no idea they have bars for women too. We’re here because we were at the market and kept getting approached to go

watch the sex shows. We just weren't interested, but they were relentless and wouldn't give up. We told them we didn't want to see any ping pong shows or watch the girls, so he showed us this place. He said it was popular with women. It was free to enter, so we decided to check the guys out while cooling off and having a few drinks. Now, I suppose I'm a sex tourist too."

Olivia and her sister laughed it off at first, but rapidly realized they were just two of the many women that evening who were watching men perform on stage and giving stripteases and table dances to audience members. After discussing it with Eck who served their drinks, it dawned on them that they were, in fact, sex tourists. Even though they never would have identified as such until I suggested it to them, they were amazed the impact their short presence had on sustaining the sex tourism industry. This response was not uncommon and while some other women remained dismissive of their role in the typology, most entertainers were not.

Ryan and Martin (2000: 144) explain the active role strip club attendees play in the sex tourism market in Australia. But, their analysis remains focused on men as subjects—the consumer—while women are the objects—sellers of the fantasy. I argue that this narrow way of conceptualizing gendered sexuality misses seeing the ways women join the spectacle as active economic participants. I witnessed this scenario thousands of times during the course of this study just as Sanders (2010b), Sanders-McDonagh (2017) and Wilson (2010, 2004) did during their field observations in Bangkok's red-light districts. While Ryan and Martin make a powerful case for seeing sex tourism as including voyeuristic consumption, they view sexual

consumption in strip clubs through a stereotypically gendered lens. Specifically, Ryan and Martin (2000: 144) state:

“In the strip club the tourist is the flaneur. *He* observes, lives through the interactions with the women, idles time with them, talks to them, buys them drinks, provides a living for them, is in the place, of it, but it is liminality: an experience outside the norm...voyeurism is perceived as *male*. Voyeurism has arguably two components: the scopophilic instinct, that is the pleasure involved in looking at another person as an erotic object, and ego libido instincts within which self-identifications and relationships are played out. Thus, one possible interpretation of the striptease or exotic dance is that it exists to gratify the whim of the *male* while commoditizing the sexuality of the *female* (emphasis added).”

Sanders-McDonagh (2017) asserts that women are key players in voyeurism and utilize the gaze in sexualized spaces such as Amsterdam’s red-light districts and Thailand’s adult entertainment zones. Even though the gaze is sometimes employed at a distance, it is not merely passive participation. Although I cover this aspect with the *spectacle seeker* classification within this typology, Goffman (1967: 268-269) states it best when he claims the striptease absolutely has an active role for the attendee because “the customer can be the star performer...it is the final mingling of fantasy and action.” Despite Ryan and Martin’s (2000: 155) findings being isolated

to male tourists, I suggest they also apply to the female tourists I observed and spoke with in Bangkok. They put forth the idea:

“Being at the striptease is, for the man, the act of possession in the sense of being able to gaze upon the naked female form, but without the risk of performance that is involved in visiting a prostitute. It is a mimetic jeopardy: it mimes desire but without its final fulfillment. The voyeur at the striptease is not solely passive, but also a participant. Indeed, therefore, he is the flaneur—for by the act of standing up, going to the podium, inserting the dollar bills into the woman’s garter, the unseen face in the crowd now becomes part of the spectacle...the client pays to become part of the spectacle.”

Accordingly, the unintentional sex tourist manifests in many different capacities in Bangkok’s adult entertainment industry. Although members of this classification share a commonality of having no prior intent to partake in the offerings of red-light districts or full-service sex, they still find their way in it at some point during their vacation. Women take part as solo travelers, in groups with friends, and even as couples in romantic relationships. While most unintentional sex tourists see their participation limited to a single night, some find their way back on subsequent visits when they happen to be nearby. Other consumers transition from this classification to the intentional sex tourist if they become particularly attracted to the spectacle and those within it. Just like the intentional sex tourist, some women from this

classification also progress to the realm of romance tourist when they become smitten with their paid entertainer.

Chapter 6

Romance Tourists

This is a small population of women compared to the intentional sex tourist, unintentional sex tourist and the spectacle seeker. However, in recent years, this segment has increased in presence as the sex tourism industry continues to organize in a way that attracts more female consumers. I find that even though consumption patterns may differ at times, romance tourists generally begin their journey as (un)intentional sex tourists and migrate to the romantic realm as their experience with a particular entertainer evolves from sexually charged to emotional entanglement. Other consumers, however, take a different path by entirely skipping physical interactions and instead base consumption on emotive aspects routinely associated with traditional courtship. I will show that this population desires many of the same services that their male counterparts seek with the relational aspects of the girlfriend experience. I contend that acknowledging the varying types of intimacy sought out by female consumers helps provide more nuance and conceptual breadth in understanding sex tourism.

During my time in the field I learned that some tourists become enamored with sex workers and keep the relationship alive well beyond a single or short-term visit. I also learned through a variety of informants that perceptions of authenticity, emotional intimacy, and dating relationships, not just physical sex, are being sold in Thai entertainment zones. In fact, some of the relationships are never sexual, at least in a traditional understanding, despite being produced in highly eroticized spaces. What I am not convinced of, even after multiple trips into the field, is that female romance tourism practices significantly differ than what some men do – develop affective ties with sex workers (Carbonero and Garrido, 2018; Hoang, 2015, 2014, 2011, 2010; Omandi and Ryan, 2020, 2017; Weitzer, 2021). What I am certain of, however, is that romance

tourism is absolutely part of the larger sex tourism industry that has a strong foothold in Southeast Asia.

Most studies situate romance tourism geographically in Africa (Jacobs, 2009; Kibicho, 2009; Omandi, 2003; Omandi and Ryan, 2020, 2017; Opperman, 1998), Bali (Dahles and Bras, 1999), Caribbean countries (Cabezas, 2004; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995), and Latin America (Frohlick, 2013; Meisch, 1995; van Wijk, 2006), but extremely little is known about female romance tourism in Thailand and especially in the capital city of Bangkok. Thailand shares many of the same environmental and cultural allures as other destination countries – pristine beaches, mountainous jungles and tropical islands. This is only part of the reason why Thailand is a tourist destination. Another part is that Thailand also attracts record numbers of tourists for its Buddhist culture, culinary exquisiteness and friendly people; after all, the Kingdom’s nickname is the Land of Smiles.

I found that the tourists’ I interviewed articulated the reasons for their attraction to local romantic entrepreneurs as a connection to the host culture. Pruitt and LaFont (1995: 425-426), in their study of romance tourism in Jamaica, found that relationships were typically “cross-racial” and women were “seeking an ‘enriching’ travel experience” based on their perceptions of authentic culture. Intimate encounters with local men satisfy this inclination of authenticity. From this specific premise is where Pruitt and LaFont (1995: 426) differentiate the paid sexual encounters women receive from local men of color to what their read of the literature says male sex tourists engage in:

“The desire for the ‘cultural’ experience which the tourist women seeks, coupled with prolonged exposure to local society

demonstrates a readiness to embrace, however, superficially, the local culture. This contrasts with the sexual liaisons of sex tourists. The local man is not merely a sexual object, but rather the woman's personal culture broker. He serves to ease her experience in the society and provide her with increased access to the local culture."

Pruitt and LaFont (1995) imply that touring women are not just acting out hypersexual tropes of the uncivilized savage but are instead genuinely interested in affection. Women are wooed by local men and receive an encounter that is filled with passion and likened to a boyfriend experience (BFE). Since the beach boys of Africa and the Caribbean court their female companions for periods ranging from an evening out to weeks on the beach, perhaps even longer with Phillips' (1999: 190) "repeat situationer," the assumed intent is different than that of the White male, who is stereotypically pegged as being more interested in quick impersonal sex. Pruitt and LaFont (1995: 423) attempt to explain the difference between masculine sex tourism and feminine romance tourism:

"The term *romance tourism* is used to distinguish these relationships from those of sex tourism. Rather than a simple role reversal, the fact it is women rather than men traveling in pursuit of relationships is central to their nature. Gender is constitutive of the relationship, not ancillary to it. The purpose is not to debate whether these men are prostitutes, but rather convey the distinctive

meaning these relationships hold for the partners and to acknowledge their definition of the situation...The actors place an emphasis on courtship rather than the exchange of sex for money...Whereas sex tourism serves to perpetuate gender roles and reinforce power relations of male dominance and female subordination, romance tourism in Jamaica provides an arena for change.”

However, I found that the female romance tourist of Bangkok not only met her suitors in ways similar to how tourists met the beach boys of Africa and the Caribbean, but she also met them in venues akin to how research has said male sex tourists meet providers. Erotic entrepreneurs from Bangkok’s informal sex market made their introductions in popular discotheques, hotel cafes and lobbies, traditional pubs, and streetside whereas those from the formal economy met tourists in gogo bars, massage parlors and brothels located inside the regulated entertainment zones. As such, the romance tourism arena has expanded from the traditional idyllic beach environment to urban settings showcasing more risqué venues. What remains constant is the exchange of cash or kind for amorous relational interactions.

As a way of demonstrating how romance tourism works in Bangkok, I provide the following examples from guided conversations and informal interviews I had with Ploy and Tammy as well as Chai and Jennifer. Ploy is a lesbian and was previous discussed in the unintentional sex tourist category. Chai is a heterosexual male entertainer who works at one of the more popular male gogo bars in Bangkok that sees a substantial number of tourists. It is important to take note that the tourists in other categories also use entertainers as cultural

brokers. In fact, the benevolent tourist often uses this angle to justify paying sex workers for their time and knowledge of the Thai language, Buddhist religion and other areas of interest relating to Thailand. Even the intentional sex tourist uses her partner to negotiate purchases, provide travel arrangements, order food and interpret what locals are saying.

The relationship that Ploy and Tammy share is ongoing, but they only get to meet with each other a few weeks per year. They have been in a relationship off and on for nearly three years. When the relationship is on, the intent is to be monogamous, but when it is off they are free to see other people. Both Ploy and Tammy described a similar understanding and history of their time together. Due to visa restrictions, Ploy is unable to visit Tammy in the United Kingdom. Ploy would be barred entry based on her occupation if she demonstrated candor to immigration officials. Although she lives comfortably by local standards, Ploy does not possess the requisite economic or social capital to be favorably adjudicated for a short-term visitor visa. Tammy also comes from modest means and is restricted to limited holiday durations because of her need to work. She does not have adequate financial savings or employment skills to make a transnational move to Thailand. However, Tammy is able to shift her relative lack of privilege in England as a working-class queer woman to privilege in the transnational intimate geography of Bangkok. Purkayastha (2020: 111) explains that “people who can access transnational social spaces attempt to balance their lack of privilege in one country (their raced/classed/gendered/ability/age/nationality status) by actively seeking out privilege and power in another place...” In this case, Tammy has more economic advantages in Thailand, and her queer relational status is not stigmatized and scrutinized to the same degree as it is in England.

Despite the distance and hardships associated with living apart, Ploy expressed that she is content because she has hidden relationships from Tammy and on occasion receives monthly

remittances from other romantic partners. Hoang (2010: 266) calls this a form of “expressive emotional labor” and explains that in Vietnam’s mid-tier sex sector “women enact forms of expressive emotional labor as a strategy to obtain multiple remittances, and advance their standard of living.” Even though Tammy learned of some of these relationships, she professed her affection and loyalty to Ploy. She also admitted that during short breakups, she, too, connected with other women in her home country. Although fidelity was regularly mentioned as being important to both parties, extra-relational affairs seemed to be more normative than an anomaly, especially with Ploy and Tammy. Still, both of them talked about their time together with terms of endearment.

They met when Ploy was a masseuse and Tammy was between jobs traveling through Southeast Asia. A relationship that transcended sexual exchange quickly developed when Tammy returned daily to the parlor where Ploy worked. They would go out together during the evening hours and Tammy paid the massage owner a fee that allowed Ploy to have the weekends off so they could travel to other destinations in Thailand. They did this as a couple and presented themselves as such even though a commodified transaction sprung the liaison into motion. When holidaying together, Tammy paid for all expenses and compensated Ploy for the wages she would have earned had she remained at work. This set the tone for their relationship and the structure remained intact when Ploy left the massage parlor to work at an entertainment zone gogo bar. Regardless of the backstory, Tammy reported that she felt accepted among Thais based on the relationship she had with a local woman. She received insight to insider happenings and invitations to cultural events that the run of the mill tourist never gets to experience. In this stance, like with many other people, the broker between culture and tourism was romance. Intimacy was the vehicle from one realm to the other.

I had the opportunity to interview Tammy without Ploy's presence one evening when we went to a nearby outdoor noodle shop across the street from Ploy's place of employment. I questioned Tammy about her relationship and she was initially coy to answer. She claimed a coquettish interaction took place from the first moment she met Ploy. This only intensified during the initial massage. Tammy said that even though it was quite sensual, they "did not have sex the first time they met." Ploy told me in a separate interview that she had a very different perspective and was much blunter in her assessment. She thought Tammy was going to be a one-time encounter and only escalated the activity based on the cues presented to her. Her aim was not to gain a girlfriend, but rather increase the size of the customary tip. She was surprised to see Tammy the next day and saw it as an opportunity to advance things to the next level. This is where Ploy used sexual attraction and tourists' perceptions of culture to capitalize both economically and romantically.

Tammy described to me how she immediately looked beyond Ploy's occupation and saw her as just another woman she became attracted to. After her second visit to the parlor, they would go out for dinner, watch new releases at the cinema and shop at the nearby mall. These are all indicative of ordinary events that occur during the traditional courtship process. They are also components that cultivate an opportunity for a romantic relationship to grow. During this time, public displays of affection were present and the two would hold hands, gaze admirably into each other's eyes, and even sneak a quick kiss when they thought nobody was watching. Additional elements also helped frame Tammy's perception of a shared authenticity. She spoke about Ploy divulging deeply personal information not intended for the public sphere. Tammy further disclosed that they would talk about their ambitions, wants, desires as well as vulnerabilities such as their personal and professional insecurities. Despite the commodified

nature of their arrangement, everything else appeared to be inherent aspects of an authentic relationship.

Carbonero and Garrido (2018: 390) explain “Authenticity is manifested...through the notion that the sex worker is a normal, ordinary woman...who could be your neighbor.” This builds upon Bernstein’s (2007b: 103) *bounded authenticity* defined as “the sale and purchase of authentic emotional and physical connection.” Bounded authenticity, however, remains constrained by the parameters of time (limited to appointment), place (public sphere), and commodification (transactional arrangement). Ploy initially sold Tammy an “authentic and emotional physical connection” in the form of a girlfriend *experience* but it evolved into an authentic girlfriend *relationship*. When Tammy now visits Thailand they eat their meals together, go out together, travel together and cohabit together. As such, Ploy introduces Tammy as her girlfriend to family, friends and colleagues, but the level of authenticity provided to her customers is bounded to the transactional experience. Accordingly, authenticity, intimacy and emotional involvement are services available for the romance tourist to consume, but they are transactional in nature and generally not intended to be moved from the vector of “experience” to the realm of “personal relationship.”

Chai and Jennifer share some relational commonalities displayed by Ploy and Tammy. In addition to sexual services, Chai offers his customers a boyfriend experience for those seeking authenticity, intimacy and an emotional connection. There are many similarities between the BFE and GFE provided in Bangkok by Thai sex workers. Both act as cultural brokers and providers of emotional intimate exchange. As a service provider, Chai is compensated for his emotional and physical labor and expects all ancillary expenses to be covered by the consumer. He does not pay for meals, taxis or travel despite performing a masculinized role – the boyfriend.

This is a departure from gender roles where the male is expected to be the financial provider. Instead, he excels as a caregiver who is attentive to the sexual and psychological desires of the female consumer. This performance creates room for manipulation and contestation of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts by both parties. Milrod and Weitzer (2012: 449) indicate that male clients “want to engage with women whose capacity for emotional expression is equal to or more important than the physical attributes” of the interaction; this means “cuddling, kissing, and being emotionally cared for is often desired.” Female romance tourists make the same case for seeking the boyfriend experience. Many of these characteristics are present in the relationship between Chai and Jennifer.

Jennifer is a Latina American woman in her mid-twenties who teaches English as a second language (ESL) through a non-governmental organization (NGO) in a neighboring Asian country. She never intended to visit Thailand’s sex scene because of the tragedies she associated with human and sex trafficking. On a whim, she and some of her colleagues visited Bangkok for a bachelorette party. Over the course of the long weekend, she not only found herself clubbing and shopping, but also at a male revue counting down the hours to her friends’ matrimony. Jennifer was surprised to find out that one of the entertainers she found appealing was college educated, well-traveled and spoke several languages. Chai was one of my gatekeepers and opened up several opportunities for me to interview not just his coworkers but have several guided conversations with Western women who were in various forms of relationships with a few of his colleagues. This led to my ability to converse with Jennifer on multiple occasions.

Jennifer described her romance with Chai as both a blessing and a curse. She explained that on her initial visit, she exchanged contact information and then found herself texting and video chatting with him in the weeks following their first encounter. Two months later, she not

only returned to Bangkok, but found herself at the male revue in which he worked. She became a fixture during the evenings he was there and intently watched his interactions with clientele. This was interesting for me, the participant-observer, because she was able to identify a couple of underlying patterns that I did not initially recognize. Because Chai was popular based on his physique, good rhythm and ability to converse in a number of Asiatic and European languages, Jennifer sometimes displayed bouts of jealousy and relayed concerns about his loyalty to her and the possibility of more affluent women stealing him away.

The bulk of Chai's earnings came through tips instead of carnal physical exchanges for cash or kind. Jennifer, too, found herself contributing to the surrounding spectacle not just by purchasing cocktails, but she also tipped Chai for his performances. She said the purpose was twofold. First, it helped generate tips from other women watching the performance. Second, it was a public demonstration to Chai that she could also be a financial provider. Jennifer expressed real concerns that a wealthier and more established woman in her career would poach him away when she was out of town. This turns out to be a common theme of insecurity with female romance tourists. Tammy also shared this concern, and rightfully so, because it happened to her once already. Several other informants expressed this as one of the minefields inherent to dating a sex worker. This is not isolated to Thailand; in fact, Pruitt and LaFont (1995: 434) discuss their own observations from the women in their study:

“Cast in the role of financial provider, the women may become enmeshed in an exchange relationship that did not define their initial impulses. These women often face insecurities about the man's commitment to her, fearing he might get involved with

another woman who is in a better financial position to take care of him. Furthermore, if the woman decides to remain in Jamaica, unless she is independently wealthy, she may lose the financial advantages she brought to the relationship or grow weary of the economic demands placed on her.”

Just like the way Ploy included Tammy in social gatherings, Chai also provided a platform for Jennifer to engage in aspects of culture she found authentically Thai. He took her to local restaurants, social gatherings and markets outside of the established tourist zones. Although Jennifer was expected to pay for these excursions, she expressed to me these acts gave her an insider status and Thais did not view her with the same suspicion they do with interracial couples seen walking the popular tourist areas. When I pressed her on this point, she lamented that interracial relationships are only accepted when it is a true romance; hence, a real commitment. This is generally not the case in tourist zones where White women and Thai men are often viewed no differently than the White male sex tourist who is presumed to have a sex worker embracing his arm. In this case, the intersection of Westernized racial privilege and economic class is not an asset to the tourist in the local context and, as Jennifer astutely points out, cultural and racial difference can indeed be a liability to social standing when residents perceive the relationship stems from the stigmatized sex tourism industry. Jennifer went on to explain that true acceptance is not through long-term courtship or marriage but is only achieved by having a baby. Jennifer told me how she has entertained this thought as a way to get Chai to “settle down.” As drastic as it may be, Bauer (2013: 23), Dahles and Bras (1999: 281) and de Albuquerque (1998a) suggest this is a major motive of female sex tourists who enter into

romantic relationships with local men. Pruitt and LaFont (1995: 435) take it a step further when claiming it happens with such regularity that the children from these relationships are easily recognized:

“Many of the men describe feeling used by foreign women, only important to them so long as the desire for an exotic liaison lasts, or merely the instrument for her to have a ‘brown baby’ to display her liberal ideas. The instances of children from these liaisons are noticeable but not easily quantified. The men are subject to being left behind as the woman returns home or moves on to new adventures.”

When I asked Chai if he ever had intentions of fathering children with Jennifer, he smugly replied “It’s not in the plan and won’t be unless she moves me to America.” The impression I was left with is that he was not dependent on Jennifer or her money. He worked in the sex tourism industry to fulfill a lifestyle that could not be easily replicated working normal business hours for a standard salary. As an entertainer, he had significantly more options to meet women who were in a position to relocate him to the West. Chai was content with his life in Bangkok and frequent jaunts around Southeast Asia accompanying foreign women who want to enjoy a romantic or sex filled holiday, but emigrating from Thailand to the West was the goal – only if he found a compatible partner.

I witnessed several entertainers like Chai who were economically successful romantic entrepreneurs. They had mobility options based on education and skills, but they elect to work in

the sex industry because it affords other possibilities that more conventional means do not. With entertainers of a lower economic status, regardless of their gender, it is not uncommon for female romance tourists to use their economic capital in a way to exert influence over the relationship. This manifests when visitors dictate to their local partners in terms of what to do, where to do it, and how it is going to be done (Frohlick, 2013; Phillips 2008; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995). This leads to those like Ploy remaining dependent on the commodified nature of the relationship and endure it only as long as their partners financially subsidize their lifestyle. Because of limited education, economic resources and social capital, I came to understand why several sex workers willingly pursue erotic labor as the quickest means to a desired end.

I found Asian female tourists to be an important part of the scene as well. While romanticizing Othered bodies was key for tourists in Barbados, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Western Africa, a considerable number of romance and sex tourists in Bangkok shared the same race of their service providers. Several women from China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand, whether it was for personal romance or performances by erotic entertainers in the red-light districts, sought Asian providers. Many Asian sex workers shared this same-race preference in the formal economy at gogo bars, massage parlors and live sex shows. It turns out that this is not uncommon in the male sex tourism sector as demonstrated by Hoang (2015, 2014) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and Weitzer (2021) in Bangkok and Pattaya, Thailand. Their informants shared, just like mine did, that Asian customers usually do not negotiate the price for sexual exchange as part of their cultural custom but they do have cultural aesthetic expectations that are based on racialized perceptions of class such as having whiter skin. Both female and male sex workers discussed how they use skin whitening creams to appear more attractive to East Asian customers. They do this to demonstrate a better class

position than sex workers who possess darker skin color or work in lower tiered positions associated with illegal street prostitution.

Westerners, however, routinely attempt to bargain the lowest price possible but remain more desirable for longer term romance because they are more likely to provide steady income and financial remittances after their departure. These are significant findings because as Banyopadhyay (2013) astutely points out, understanding the role of Asian sex tourists is undertheorized, and relatively absent from the literature. Filling this void becomes more important given the economic development of most ASEAN countries and an industrial boom that has enriched significant numbers of its inhabitants since the 1990s allows more opportunity for business and leisure travel.

My first key informant into the female sex tourism industry was an early career professional from Singapore. I struck up a conversation with Zara outside one of the male gogo bars near the Patpong night market. I explained what I was researching and she took an interest in the topic. Up to this point, I found it extremely difficult to interview single women who would openly talk about their paid sexual encounters without an intermediary providing an introduction. Countless times potential informants were less than forthcoming even when I knew beforehand the answers to some of the questions I had asked. Some questions were as simple as asking what type of entertainment a particular establishment offered. Others were more personal in nature. Meeting Zara was a relief because she openly fielded my questions and ultimately led me to male revues that catered to Asian clientele. This is where I first learned of the same race preference held by some of the Asian women visiting sexualized venues.

I classify Zara as a consumer that shifted between various classifications. First, she was an unintentional sex tourist, then a romance tourist and finally consumed the scene as an

intentional sex tourist. She was previously involved with a male entertainer who she met while vacationing in Thailand. She said she was reluctant, at first, to pursue her physical attraction with an erotic dancer due to prevailing stigmas associated with those in the sex industry. Zara explained her relationship in a way that I commonly heard other romance tourists explain their connections and encounters with sex workers. Simply put, she said her relationship “was different” than those who paid to have a brief sexual rendezvous. Zara’s attraction to a male stripper quickly moved from physical to emotionally intimate. As the relationship blossomed, she was able to procure work projects that regularly routed her through Bangkok for long weekends. The layovers allowed her to pursue this romance and, as a result, she was introduced to a variety of clubs that her boyfriend worked. In the end, the relationship did not last but Zara’s attraction for the scene did. This is very similar to the narratives found from studies in other part of the world that attempt to understand female romance tourism. While romantic interactions develop with men from local populations, perhaps the greater allure is either with the broader destination or the sexually charged environments within them.

Zara introduced me to a couple of venues near Ratchadapisek Road that attract largely an Asian crowd. Some women were regular visitors to these establishments while others were one-off calls for a ladies’ night out. Unlike in the tourist zones, I found these establishments to be more restrictive in their entry allowance. As a White male, I was refused entry until Zara vouched for my presence. It was explained that heterosexual men, foreigners in particular, were not welcome because the clubs did not want them poaching customers away from the hired entertainers. The men who worked there were primarily straight and generally did not entertain the few guys who sat in the audience. This translated to the environment being strongly heteronormative and discriminating against gay clientele. There were some limited exceptions to

this normal routine. For instance, some of the entertainers were open to engaging couples seeking an outside partner. Zara told me that most men in these spaces identified as heterosexual but they would participate in multiple partner sex with their customers who desired it.

Something else of interest in these particular clubs, and a pattern most prevalent among those I classify as romance tourists, is a territorial jealousy some women displayed when their entertainer of choice diversifies their attention across audience members. During my observations I noticed a clingier demeanor among female clientele at these establishments catering to Asian women. Zara and the staff explained to me why this occurs and I then realized these were mostly repeat customers that expected to be attended to by their favored companion. I was told that the attraction is strong and despite women viewing these men as “boy toys,” they feel the same emotions as if in a traditional relationship where one partner is flirting with an outsider. Beyond some women only engaging in intra-racial relationships, the female romance tourist of Bangkok also displays expectations found in the affinity of conventional courtships.

Chapter 7

Benevolent Tourists

In this section I discuss a group of consumers that make up the smallest percentage of sex tourists in this research. The benevolent tourist is comprised of individuals, couples, and sometimes groups, who pay barfines for sex workers so they can avoid having intimate relations with tourists. Beyond attempting to obstruct physical contact, benevolent tourists also seek to curb industry workers from exposing their bodies for consumers to exploitatively gaze. This group does not see sex work as a legitimate form of labor and considers the exchange one-sided and nothing short of sexual predators inflicting violence for self-gratification. They view those who do engage as sellers of sex to be forced and traumatized participants. The base perspective of benevolent tourists, in many ways, aligns with political arguments and illustrations of skewed power dynamics held by some schools of feminist thought. This particular framework is a central argument advanced by radical feminists like Melissa Farley (2003) and Shelia Jeffreys (2009, 2003, 2000). They start from the premise that those who sell sex are not engaging in the practice as active agents negotiating a mutually beneficial transaction; instead, they are unwilling victims who are *prostituted* through coercion as well as unjust economic, institutional and social forces. Although none of the subjects that I placed in this category of the typology self-identified as a sex tourist, let alone supporting the sex industry, their actions did, in fact, aid not only the sex worker as an individual, but also assisted in financially sustaining the industry they vehemently abhor. Despite this group framing their motives from a position of altruism and benevolence, it was not usually perceived that way by several of the industry stakeholders I conversed with. Just like traditional notions of exploitation pegged with historical depictions

associated with the intentional male sex tourist, benevolent tourists coincidentally perpetuate stereotypes of their own that also result in several adverse outcomes for those they intend to help.

This practice is not isolated to formal sex-based establishments located in Bangkok's adult entertainment zones. It also occurs with freelance sex workers who solicit their services streetside, in dance clubs, and traditional pubs that do not employ members of the informal economy. This is not to say that some establishments are unaware of what is happening on their premises. While most of these businesses do not formally employ sex workers, some do incentivize them by providing free admission, drinks, food, and informal commissions based on the expenditures from clientele they bring into the establishment. Some benevolent tourists intentionally frequent these under the radar spots because they do not want to patronize businesses that profit from what they see as sexual victimization of prostituted people. With freelancers, barfines are not paid because of their self-employed status; instead, they are only compensated for their time and negotiated services by the benevolent tourist and any side hustle they have with local businesses for bringing customers through the door.

Although framed from a position of benevolence, this remains a commodified business arrangement whereby each side leaves with something gained through the orchestration of the interaction. Benevolent tourists usually enter into this type of agreement for one night, but it can sometimes lead up to the duration of their entire holiday stay in Bangkok. Although much rarer than the one-day and short stay scenarios, some sex workers become indefinitely sponsored by receiving remittances sent by foreigners as an exit strategy from the sex tourism industry. Unlike with romance tourists who make propositions of a similar long-term arrangement, this particular payment scheme is more likely to be solicited by sex workers rather than the benevolent tourist.

Benevolent tourists, as with most categories that fall within this typology of sex tourism, provide an economic contribution to the Thai sex tourism industry through monetary remuneration to sex workers. They financially compensate companions for their time as well as support other stakeholders in a variety of camouflaged ways that simply appear to be the purchase of food and drink. Conversely, forms of overt support that remain undisguised include the occasional entry fee charged by adult entertainment businesses. Although benevolent tourists do not engage in carnal activity with sex workers, their presence does help sustain the industry by patronizing sex-for-sale establishments and other nearby enterprises that have a direct interworking relationship with the entertainment zones. Ironically, the goal of the benevolent tourist is to reduce, if not eradicate, the need for people to work in the sex industry; yet, they both succor and subsidize the incomes and lifestyles of those who are employed by, and perhaps even own, these types of businesses.

It is important to note that sex workers of all genders are recipients of the intended benevolence, but my observations revealed that women received by a far margin the most consideration due to their massive presence in Bangkok's entertainment zones. While this was no surprise since women generally make up the largest segment of sex workers, it is worthy to consider that men, irrespective of sexuality, received minimal benevolence. This remained constant even when comparing to trans-women who make up an even smaller number of sex workers in Bangkok's red-light districts. When I questioned these benevolent tourists, they used assumptions about traditional sex roles and gender scripts in deciding whom to pay. Some of these consumers explained that the selling of sex was associated with trafficking, trauma, and victimization. This was a prevailing depiction of what they assumed female sex workers endure and they believed men were more capable of avoiding these particular harms than other genders.

Because of this, men were very rarely considered for charity in the same way as other sex workers even though they remain situated in an eroticized industry, share the same entertainment zones, and make money in an identical manner – the selling of sex. A Thai expression, same-same but different, which is spoken in English, comes to mind when attempting to make sense of this rationalization. This is a major reason why I link the base thought of benevolent consumers to that of sex work prohibitionists. Both groups prioritize one's gender as having more impact than other variables such as socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and race, especially when it comes to prostitution (Jeffreys, 2003).

For the more inclusive members of the benevolent classification, one defining characteristic remained constant with those that favored a prohibitionist point of view. All viewed the Thai sex industry in a binary way – the victim and the victimizer. They do not see those who work within the industry as possessing agency due to the perception of financial dependence associated with transactional sex. As such, benevolence occurs solely as a way to help exploited people overcome the victimization inflicted by ill-intentioned tourists and predatory traffickers. Over the course of this study, deviation from this standpoint was nonexistent among consumers who are placed into this category.

Some benevolent tourists, however, do realize that paying a bar fine and requesting a sex worker to leave their shift for the evening, sometimes longer, does not always result in the intended outcome. This happens when enterprising recipients continue to ply their trade as a freelancer outside the scope of their place of employment. To help combat this and attempt to instill a sense of legitimate work, sex workers are regularly requested to be tour guides by benevolent consumers. It is naively assumed that Thai sex workers will have a working knowledge of the broader tourism industry. For example, benevolent tourists expect Thais will

be familiar with popular local attractions and sites that are off the beaten path. While some sex workers do experience touristic activities with their suitors, most excursions remain within the hospitality industry and nightclubs. In the capacity of being a tour guide, benevolents rationalize that the exchange has now become legitimate since the sex worker will provide a personalized element to the tourists' excursion. Hence, renting a guide is perceived as humanizing and normative whereas renting a boyfriend, girlfriend or lover is engaging in immoral and deviant behavior.

Beyond narrating as a tour guide, an expectation to translate linguistic interactions between the paying tourist and other locals lead the benevolents to believe they are receiving a more authentic Thai experience. This is an interesting dynamic because on one hand entertainers are viewed as unskilled people who resort to sex work as a form of survival, but on the other hand are expected to skillfully translate a variety of Thai dialects and foreign languages. One example of how this interaction develops can be seen in an excerpt of my conversation with Lauren from Germany. I was introduced to Lauren by one of my key informants, Noi, who was employed as an entertainer at a famous venue in one of Bangkok's red-light districts:

Me: You told me that you met Noi at one of the gogo bars here at Soi Cowboy. Noi mentioned that she gave you a tour of the town last night and then visited some of the famous Temples earlier today. Why did you ask Noi to be your guide?

Lauren: Look at where she works. Nobody should have to work like this...the girls here are so desperate to survive and wouldn't be here if given another choice.

Me: Did Noi seem desperate to survive when she was out with you?

Lauren: No, but I didn't expect her to show me that side either. She's very nice and seemed to like that it was me who was with her.

Me: Did she express dissatisfaction with her work or interactions with other customers?

Lauren: I'm not a customer...Somebody else will take her out of the bar for the wrong reasons, but I'm trying to show she can do something else to support herself.

Me: Have you ever done anything like that before...I mean pay someone's barfine and take them out for the night?

Lauren: I did it last time I was in Thailand. I was with my friends and we had a wonderful experience, but so did the girl who went with us. She showed us around Bangkok so we could see a side we wouldn't normally get to see. It was similar to what I experienced with Noi.

Me: Okay, but what did Noi get out of it?

Lauren: She earned a good wage without selling her body. I can take a tour with a company or do it by myself, but that's not the point. Tour operators cannot provide the same experience that these girls can.

Me: What do you mean by they cannot provide the same experience?

Lauren: Companies don't take you out dancing...help barter in shops or at the market. Noi was excited to go shopping and see the Temples and that made my experience better than a packaged itinerary. It's just not the same as buying a package.

Me: What do you think Noi got out of the experience other than money?

Lauren: She got to be herself. I think she understood why I paid for her to get away. We both win and I got to make a friend too!

During my conversation with Lauren she kept mentioning how the sex industry is a major form of exploitation. This was a common theme across the board with benevolent tourists and the primary factor that motivated most who chose to engage with entertainers positioned within the sex industry. I guided this conversation in a direction that questioned whether removing people like Noi for a day or two away from their job is also a potential form of exploitation. When I did this, Lauren became extremely defensive and began to aggressively counter the suggestion. I mentioned that she, and many people who engage in similar benevolent activities, typically compensate far below industry standards charged by professional tour agencies offering formal leisure excursions and translation companies that act as linguistic intermediaries. I explained that these businesses are officially registered with local municipalities and licensed by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. When I pointed out that Noi only received a fraction of the prevailing wage garnered by the formal market, I could tell that Lauren was upset with the assertion. The point was not to deride Lauren or her underlying motivation, but to elicit information that would help me better understand the benevolent tourist. Lauren indicated she was well aware that exploitation can take many forms even when the underlying intent was to do no harm. The key for Lauren and benevolent tourists more generally, is to lessen perceived forms of exploitation endured by those they believe are being prostituted.

Lauren's experience is not unique when it comes to tourists purchasing nonsexual services from adult entertainment workers. In fact, several sex workers indicated that couples and small groups of female tourists would regularly solicit them to be tour guides and to act as chaperones. While the benevolent members I interacted with were uniformly adamant about their noble intent to provide humanizing relations, the vast majority were also keenly interested in learning where Thais go to eat, navigating the nightlife scene, and negotiating prices like a

local resident. When questioning whether benevolent consumers participated in similar activities in their home country, I was surprised to find out that almost none did. Two common themes developed in the answers to this line of questioning and they revolved around the illegality of prostitution and how hardships in developing countries are considerably different than those in more affluent nations.

The closest deviation that I observed to this pattern occurred with a few former Christian missionaries and church group members who also displayed benevolence in their interaction with sex workers. This subgroup isolated their efforts to freelancers because many red-light businesses will forcibly eject from their establishment any religious groups who attempt to recruit entertainers into their ranks. I periodically encountered organized displays at the periphery of popular entertainment zones where free health services, educational opportunities and cash payments were touted to those who will leave the sex industry for a more modest life within the Church. When interviewing tourists with affiliations to religious groups that actively resist the sex industry, I noticed a major contrast with other benevolent tourists. The primary difference is that they engage in the same active resistance to the sex industry in their own hometowns and when traveling in the West. Despite the similarity of paying for the time of the sex worker, faith-based benevolents also see this as a recruitment opportunity to provide a pathway to exit immoral sexual engagement and simultaneously as a way to instill a sense of religious faith among prostituted people.

When talking about these benevolent tourists, many sex workers viewed those with strong religious affiliations with deep skepticism. In fact, I was pointedly told several times from those who sell sex that this group is not advancing goodwill or an opportunity for a better life, but rather they are trying to feel better about themselves and convert Buddhists to

Christianity. Ironically, a few sex workers confided this to be a form of exploitation and why they refuse to engage with this subgroup of benevolent tourists. This is not to say that benevolence fails to take place entirely with faith-based groups and missionary-like tourists. In fact, I learned that occasionally some sex workers do indeed voluntarily leave the entertainment trade because of a new opportunity presented to them. While contentious to stakeholders who profit from sexualized activity, the outcome from religious benevolence can be successful in the right circumstances.

Benevolent tourists make up a small segment of the Thai sex tourism industry. Even though their numbers are substantially smaller than most other members of the larger typology, their presence is well-known to sex workers, industry employers, and even other groups of tourists. In most cases, benevolents are seen as a small supplemental source of revenue when more enterprising opportunities are not available. I heard several stories from entertainers who would use this to their advantage when wanting to dine at a new restaurant or visit an attraction they normally would not be able to attend. Aside from those with strong religious motivations, benevolent tourists are especially welcomed on slow evenings and during the off-season.

Chapter 8

Spectacle Seekers

Up to this point in the typology, I have demonstrated how sex tourism participation moves along a continuum based on (1) type of service, (2) type of connection or level of intimacy and (3) method of payment (direct fee for service, gift exchange, indirect payments). I have also shown how the sex tourism industry is catering to a growing number of female travelers by welcoming them into spaces that were once reserved for male tourists. I now present the final categorization of the typology – the spectacle seeker. This consumer is the largest segment of sex tourists and operates in a novel way by engaging primarily with one or more of the tremendous number of public performances that are on display within the entertainment zones. Consumption ranges from watching tourists, sex workers, the interaction between both, as well as using one's senses to take in the surrounding environment aroused by visual titillations, exotic smells and loud noises. I observed two distinct ways that spectacle seekers found their way to the public performances on display. The first was a result of those who happened to be coincidentally passing by sexualized spaces and previously did not plan for it to be part of their vacation experience. The second way is more deliberate by knowingly visiting these areas, but having no intention to pay for sex or enter an establishment overtly related to the sex industry.

Spectacle seekers make a conscious decision not to financially support venues or those employed within them. They will neither pay an entry fee nor purchase anything on offer ranging from alcohol and food to erotic services. Regardless of the way spectacle seekers find their way to the scene, they tend to gaze from a distance. Nevertheless, make no mistake about

the fact they remain consumers of the exhibition on display. I will show that it is irrelevant if they merely happen to stumble upon a show or make a conscious decision to visit the area. Once a tourist engages the spectacle, it is impossible to undo and the consumption results in an experience that cannot be forgotten. Spectacle seekers regularly told me that they find the display to be either fascinating or repulsive, but regardless of position, also consider it to be an aberration of traditional moral principles.

The spectacle seeker sits at the opposite end of the continuum from the intentional sex tourist and possesses many distinct qualities that are easily differentiated them from those who are situated more heavily in the realm of prostitution. Other noticeable differences are quite apparent compared to additional groups categorized within the typology. For example, unlike both the unintentional sex tourist and romance tourist, the spectacle seeker does not ordinarily have physical contact with industry workers or financially contribute to, at least directly, establishments situated within Bangkok's adult entertainment zones. Even so, they do share a common characteristic demonstrated by each of the other classifications regardless of typology placement – visually consuming sexualized spaces and the people within them. In a large number of destinations that cater to adult entertainment and especially those that make sexualized services readily available, consumption of the local population is habitual whether it be physical or visual in nature (O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 1999: 37; Phillips, 2008; Sanders, 2010b; Sanders-McDonagh, 2017; Sanchez Taylor, 2006, 2001).

Notwithstanding that, I aim to demonstrate how many spectacle seekers passively participate from a distance and use their perception of remote proximity to deny any sort of involvement with the sex tourism sector. One thing to keep in mind when considering this insulated perspective employed by the spectacle seeker is that the greater sex tourism industry

capitalizes on Western notions of morality to paradoxically draw tourists in even closer. Wilson (2004: 80) aptly points out how this manifests when she says “It is the women workers – the spectacle – who attract spectators and transform them into consumers.” This inclusion is carefully crafted by industry employers and workers alike to manipulate passive presence into a genuine form of consumption. Although I agree with Wilson (2004) in principle, the sex tourism industry has changed significantly since her investigation into the diversity of Bangkok’s economic markets back in the 1990s.

There are two noticeable differences in the intimate economy since Wilson left the field. First, there has been an explosion in the number of sex workers who are men and those from the LGBTQ community. The second relates to the significant influx of female tourists who now have open access to spaces that are no longer exclusively reserved for men. Even Wilson (2010: 65), nearly a decade later, acknowledged the increase in female tourist participation by going on to say “Bangkok sex shows have become institutionalized as a tourist attraction.” Do not misunderstand sex shows to simply be a ping pong ball performance, watching intercourse between two people, and lesbians engaging in cunnilingus for all to see. Rather, sex shows go beyond that to include public displays of erotic exchanges of all sorts, even the gaze that takes place when walking down a street in a red-light district. Accordingly, this results in women having the ability to participate in the spectacle via a myriad of ways regardless of one’s sexual orientation, if they attend alone, in tandem with a partner, or with a group of friends. This framing also coincides with the position of Ryan and Hall (2001) wherein they declared not only is vacation travel linked to aspects of the spectacle, but sex tourism is inherently connected to it as well.

Sanders (2010b: 9-10) points out that visual consumption of the spectacle, specifically displays of a sexual sort, is so common that it has become a standard form of engagement in the realm of adult leisure. Surprisingly, given its significant prevalence, this remains an understudied phenomenon and is often an overlooked part of the experience women have when traveling. Hence, women are left as inconspicuous and unseen participants in much academic literature on sex tourism even though they are easily observed in sexualized spaces. I find this to be extremely troubling given the fact that over the nearly two years I spent in the field, there was never a single night that I did not witness at least dozens of female tourists positioned in these spaces. Sanders-McDonagh (2017) goes on to argue that in the case of Thailand, and Bangkok in particular, the gaze is routinely used by women as a form of Othering those in marginalized occupations like sex work.

Sex workers in Bangkok, perhaps in most cosmopolitan cities, often fall within the narratives of these categories; however, it is extremely important to note that even those possessing economic and racial privilege can also be Othered. By working in an industry that is broadly considered deviant, immoral, and exploitive, stigma becomes the defining factor of fringe placement. At my relatively privileged research site, I met many sex workers of all genders and racial backgrounds who were financially secure, but were still viewed differently solely based on their occupational status. Some sex workers in the Thai informal economy are local populations that are economically and racially disadvantaged, but there are an increasing number of transnational sex workers, both men and women, who are Black and White and come from the Global North. There are also Burmese, Khmer, Laotian, Thai and Vietnamese selling sex in Bangkok, but at the sites I studied, these were by no means the only players.

Interestingly, several consumers whom I situated as spectacle seekers assumed most sex workers were disadvantaged Asian women or acted upon other stereotypes. On one hand, they viewed women and transgender sex workers, and to a lesser extent men employed in entertainment venues, as victims forced into prostitution; yet, on the other hand, morally disengaged (Bandura, 2016, 1999) by dehumanizing them with derogatory words and attributing blame as self-inflicted because of the type of work they perform. For instance, there was a consistent theme among women who attended in small groups who believed sex workers probably did not possess agency and were forced to be in these spaces by debt or abusive relationships. Even from that standpoint, several tourists suggested that a lack of legitimate ambition, laziness and poor decisions is why sex workers, particularly women, were forced to ply their bodies in the sale of sex. This is why, despite witnessing the spectacle, they refused to knowingly contribute monetarily to the sex industry. Deborah, Ethel and Fran from England are good examples to convey this scenario:

Me: What made you decide to visit Nana Plaza?

Deborah: We were leaving the mall and saw droves of tourists walking down the road. We asked what was over there and someone said gogo bars so we walked in the opposite direction. The whole way down here there were vendors selling all sorts things, even the naughty stuff. The ladyboys were trying to sell us a good time too. They were on each corner and really fancied Fran. There was no way we were going anywhere with them so we just kept walking and was amazed with how many people lined the streets. The more we walked the crazier it got. We couldn't believe all that was available right

out on the street....dildos, vibrators, butt plugs, prostitutes! It was all for the taking.
They even had Viagra for women!

Me: Did you purchase anything?

Fran: No way!

Ethel: We're not interested in that stuff. We knew places like this existed in Thailand, but didn't expect it to be taking up the entire street along the Metro. We just couldn't believe our eyes with all the hookers picking up anyone sick enough to take them.
And Fran, poor Fran, she kept getting felt up by the ladyboys.

Me: Fran, how did that make you feel?

Fran: I didn't like it and was worried they were going to lift my wallet. They just kept coming at me and there was nowhere to go but forward to the next bunch that was waiting to size me up.

Deborah: C'mon Fran, that's the most attention you ever had.

Fran: It's not the attention I want!

Me: Okay, but why come here if you don't like it? This is one of the biggest red-light districts in all of Asia.

Deborah: We just followed the crowd and this is where we ended up. It's madness, just mad!
Look at all the prostitutes selling themselves. This makes me nauseous seeing this. I didn't want to see any of this, none of us did. It's disgusting watching these guys waltz around Thailand with prostitutes in tow. It's not how I want to remember Thailand.

Me: I get it, but why stick around if you find this place to be so off-putting?

Fran: I don't want to be here, but these two like people watching. I guess since we're already here we'll look for a bit.

Deborah, Ethel and Fran knew of the existence of red-light districts in Thailand, but intentionally wanted to avoid them. When they were up north in Chiang Mai they stayed at a hotel near an entertainment zone and observed what they believed to be a significant amount of [male] tourist-prostitute relationships. They considered the liaisons nothing short of exploitation despite not interacting with the involved parties. The opinion they formed was enough to not want to seek out the spectacle in Bangkok despite being well aware of its popular presence with tourists from all over the globe. What was surprising to them was how closely the sex scene was integrated into adjacent areas lined with corporate headquarters and spaces advertised as being family friendly. Their intent was to avoid sex zones altogether; in fact, they believed they were escaping one but did not realize their location was sandwiched between two of the most infamous naughty nightlife areas in Bangkok. As a result, walking away from one unknowingly put them in the heart of an even bigger red-light district. Fran did not like being groped by transgender sex workers, but indicated she did not feel victimized with their aggressive touching. Even though the group felt as though commodified sexual interactions are inherently harmful, Deborah and Ethel found the attention Fran received to be comedic. Despite saying the scene repulsed them, they decided to stay and watch the streetside performances that were on display. This is important to note because even those who inadvertently find their way to the spectacle often find themselves fixated on the exhibition. This is key to understanding how passive consumption becomes active when presence leads to visually exploring the breadth of the spectacle.

This is ironic because they failed to realize that they were no longer passive observers; instead, they became a functioning part of the spectacle. The example of this particular group of women and their reaction was not unique or outside of the ordinary. In fact, it was just one of hundreds, if not thousands, of performances that made up the spectacle on that given evening in this particular location. Their participation, whether viewed as active or passive, is irrelevant because it is their presence alone that makes the spectacle happen. One sex worker explained to me in a very simple way why the spectacle exists: “If *farang* (Caucasian foreigners) did not come here we would not be here. We are only here because they show up every night.” This group of ladies remained in the realm of spectacle seekers, but countless others transitioned to unintentional sex tourists and beyond once the exhibition became financially and intimately consumed.

Single women and those who attended with their romantic partners often held a different perspective of moral disengagement when viewing their surroundings. They were put off when sex workers approached them to solicit their services. It did not matter if they were selling drinks, entertainment or sex – merely being approached was viewed as a nuisance. This is where I find the “disgusting others” concept depicted by Sanders-McDonagh (2017) to be relevant. In her research of women visiting red-light districts in Amsterdam and Bangkok, she observed how some women viewed sex workers as lower forms of Othered people. Disgusting was an adjective used to describe not just the acts of sex workers, but also the lowly placement they hold on the social hierarchy of respectability. This is where I regularly heard female tourists use labels of whore, slut, bitch and gold-digger when referring to sex workers. This was especially so with Thais and other Asian women being on the receiving end of the pejorative labels.

Viewpoints that once held sex workers are coerced into selling their bodies quickly became forgotten when interactions took place. Being approached was met with adversarial suspicion and discontent. Dehumanizing language usually occurred when tourists' boyfriends, husbands and partners received cat-calls, sensual strokes and arm tugs. This shift in mentality quickly took place since sex workers were now viewed as competition and exploiters instead of victims or people experiencing a hard lot in life.

A typical example of this can be seen with the case of Dianne and James. They are a married couple in their late thirties from the United States. During my conversation with them I asked about their views relating to the spectacle, their presence and motivation for indulging in it. When discussing the size of the scene, both were truly amazed with the magnitude of visitors, sex workers, public displays of eroticism and the number of venues providing sexualized entertainment.

Me: This area is quite the spectacle. What do you think about it?

Dianne: I cannot believe so many people are here. It's astonishing how many are here. I've never seen anything like this, not even in Phuket. We heard about this place, but didn't realize it's so big. It's not what I was expecting to see. I thought it would be contained behind closed doors or an area cordoned off and separated. This is so in-your-face. A lot more people than I expected.

Me: Are you talking about the number of sex workers or the people interacting with them?

Dianne: Both.

Me: What do you think James?

James: I agree with Dianne. It's extremely different than what I've seen back home or even at other paces in Thailand. I thought there would be a few strip joints and raunchy shows to see, but never imagined it to be so big. There has to be dozens of girly bars just in this alley alone.

As I was talking to them, James was constantly being targeted as a potential client. Even though James repeatedly dismissed the advances, Dianne was annoyed with the attention and became infuriated as it intensified. This did not go unnoticed by the sexual entrepreneurs so Dianne also began to receive advances, but she remained more concerned with James' popularity. This led me to question how they felt about being propositioned even though moments earlier Dianne made it clear some of the prostitutes were likely to have been forced to be there.

Me: What are your thoughts relating to how the sex workers are approaching you?

James: They don't care that I'm with Dianne, they still pull my shirt sleeve and openly grope me. Maybe some guys like that, but not me and certainly not Dianne. They're pretty bold. I would hate to see what they would do to me if Dianne weren't with me.

Dianne: Some of them are testing my patience. If it's like this out here, I can't imagine what it would be like if we went inside. They know he's with me, but they won't leave him alone. He's never going anywhere with them no matter how many times they ask.

Me: I see couples here every evening picking up sex workers. Maybe they think you're interested and that's why you're out here tonight.

Dianne: Not a chance! We just came to look around and I never would have done it if I knew it was going to be like this. We only wanted to walk down a few of the alleys to see the neon lights, listen to the music and watch the people come and go. I never thought we were going to talk to any of them or have to fight them off. Some of them are just way too aggressive. Even if I was excited at first, their persistence is a turn off. It's hard to feel bad for some of them when they don't listen or respect boundaries.

While a number of visitors shared this pecking order of social superiority and shift from pity to disgust, several female tourists did not make the same connection. In fact, I regularly encountered women who had visited the red-light district multiple times and made no qualms about it. They claimed their motivation was the thrill associated with people watching and witnessing interactions considered taboo in their homeland. Even among those who found their way there by happenstance, a good number did not employ a measure of moral judgment. Instead, they recognized that they elected to remain instead of entering into a mode of retreat. Regardless of if they knew precisely what occurs in these spaces, these tourists make a conscious decision to visually consume the spectacle.

The intent to refrain from making a direct financial contribution was widely cited by female tourists who fit consumption practices associated with this classification. Although not wanting to financially support the sex industry was a common theme among spectacle seekers, the rationale was debated among both consumers and industry workers. Some felt as though it was a dissociative technique used to create an illusory barrier from engaging in sex tourism practices. The belief is that they can go see the spectacle, but seeing it is not the same as participating in it. This perspective was regularly paired with the position that it is the financial

contribution that supports the sex tourism industry, not the voyeur. This point is worthy of future investigation because several industry insiders held the opinion that presence alone indeed makes a financial contribution. The reasoning provided was consistent and claimed that when the crowd grows larger it attracts people who are willing to consume more than just the visual spectacle. Hence, crowds pique curiosity and curiosity is the foundation that the spectacle builds upon. When this perspective was presented to female tourists, some found merit in it while others were adamant it was a legitimate delineation and not a dissociative technique.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

This research is an ethnographic study of female sex tourism in Bangkok, Thailand and explores how women, as consumers, participate in activities and spaces that were historically reserved for male tourists. Much of the existing scholarship on sex tourism focuses on the role men play in this phenomenon and how they perpetuate the exploitation of sex workers (Cohen, 1986, 1982; Enloe, 2000; Jeffreys, 2003; Manderson, 1997, 1992; Montgomery, 2008; O’Connell Davidson, 1999; O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 2005; Sanchez Taylor, 2006, 2001). A growing number of studies investigating aspects of sexual commerce and sex work are beginning to look at more complex dynamics (Ham, 2020; Hoang, 2015, 2014a; 2014b, 2011). Intersectional frameworks (Collins, 1998, 1990; Crenshaw 1991, 1989) assert that the interlocking nature of social structures such as race, class and gender affect opportunities and experiences. Specifically, intersectionality looks at how multiple structures shape advantages, disadvantages and lived experience based on contextual factors, time and place.

My research finds that there are multiple privileges and oppressions that simultaneously coexist. I began my dissertation by problematizing the focus on male consumers and female providers, a single-issue analysis focusing on gender dynamics alone. First, I point out that significantly more women are visiting Thailand than in years past. Second, I show that not only are large numbers of Western women finding their way to adult entertainment zones in Bangkok, but Asian women of varying ethnicities are as well. During their visits to these sexualized spaces, female tourists are recognizing that a variety of establishments and service providers are facilitating a welcoming environment to a variety of sexual orientations by actively and passively

soliciting their presence. I also draw attention to the way female consumers ‘do gender’ by contesting traditional notions of gender roles and sexual scripts moving away from seeing gender as consisting of mutually exclusive masculine and feminine sexuality. I find a variety of ways individuals perform and do gender, class and race, including blurring the lines around intimacy and sexual gratification. I contend that in order to understand this growing market of consumers, we must first identify the participants, the spaces where they participate, how they do and perform gender, class and race in these spaces, and the organizational mechanisms that orchestrate participation.

Answers to Research Questions

To guide this research, I asked three questions. First, how do female tourists participate in the Thai sex tourism industry? Second, what common characteristics do female sex tourists display? Third, how is the sex tourism industry organized? I answered these questions by creating a typology of sex tourists that shows the different ways in which women visitors consume sex, romance and the public spectacle. In developing this typology, I spent nearly two years in the field making observations, participating in touristic activities, engaging in guided conversations and conducting interviews. I met with tourists and sex workers of all genders and sexualities from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Additionally, I had several interactions with key stakeholders whose livelihoods were significantly dependent on the sex tourism industry. This provided an opportunity to gain crucial insight into cultural contexts and how they intersect with complex social arrangements within the sex tourism industry. These interactions combined with my shifting role performances as researcher created room for the typology categories to be validated by varying groups of study subjects.

In Chapter 4, I explained how some female consumers are intentional sex tourists. Their consumption is deliberate and planned. They knowingly and willingly visit sexualized spaces, engage the people who work there, and financially contribute to the sex tourism industry. The intentional consumer supports sex tourism practices by visiting eroticized venues, paying entry fees, purchasing drinks and tipping entertainers. Sometimes consumption also includes participating in commodified full-service sex, sensual massage but almost always encompasses a voyeuristic element by watching live sex shows, striptease performances and the public spectacle on display in red-light districts. The female tourists who do purchase impersonal sex typically do so in limited increments and are not isolated to monogamous relationships. One way this happens is by entering into an arrangement for one or two nights as opposed to the entire holiday. Another way is they remain open to the possibility of paying for services rendered by multiple providers. Intentional sex tourists take pleasure in selecting partners who have an appealing aesthetic, kink or skill. The broader industry carefully crafts an inviting environment that greets the intentional sex tourist and caters to a large number of sexual orientations and entertainers from a variety of genders. The industry is organized to ensure participation is diverse, inclusive and not limited to those from a certain age, economic, ethnic, racial or sexual background. In fact, this research shows that the broader industry does not alienate the intentional sex tourist but rather facilitates their consumption by offering a plethora of entertainment options.

In Chapter 5, I explored how the unintentional sex tourist consumes Bangkok's adult entertainment zones despite not initially aiming to do so. Just like participation with the intentional sex tourist, this form of consumption manifests through economic contributions to both entertainers and establishments within the vast sex tourism industry. I show that once

introduced to the erotic landscape, a significant number of female tourists with no prior intent elect to participate in sexual and non-sexual services. As pointed out in the research by Wilson (2010, 2004) and Sanders (2010b), some of the stakeholders I interacted with confirmed that alcohol sales are the single largest source of revenue for most establishments that employ sex workers. In fact, one of my gatekeepers – a mamasan – explained that alcohol is used as a device to lessen inhibitions and get consumers primed to engage in services they would normally refrain from outside this liminal space. Alcohol purchases are not just for personal consumption, they also include those bought for staff members which are priced at up to triple the standard cost. Although most women I spoke to did not purchase full-service sex, some did decide to do so once engulfed in the scene. Voyeuristic activities, however, remain popular with this group of consumers but what separates them from the spectacle seeker is that they pay entry fees, provide gratuities and purchase other items from those who profit off of the selling of sexual entertainment. Therefore, these tourists use class-based economic power to consume racialized and sexualized bodies that are not ordinarily available to them outside of this liminal space.

In chapter 6, I show the role that perceptions of authenticity play in economic-emotional and physical transactions. Carbonero and Garrido (2018: 387) differentiate authenticity and commodified intimacy by making the following delineation: authenticity is the “intimacy that remains un-commodified and constitutes the escorts’ life outside work” whereas commodified intimacy is “offered in the service.” In light of this, what consumers believe to be authentic may indeed be genuine or just a type of service – bounded authenticity (Bernstein, 2007a, 2007b) – that only the provider knows is real or not. Milrod and Weitzer (2012: 456) call the former “authentic, mutual intimacy” and this occurs when a sex worker shifts from “bounded” to “boundless” based on intimate reciprocation that is not contingent on the outcome of a financial

transaction. The female romance tourists of Bangkok, however, are not necessarily seeking a relational authenticity from their service providers; instead, some are looking to consume only an emotive-intimate exchange; others desire to consume intimacy in the form of physical sex; while some want both. It is the sex workers, however, who ultimately decide if intimacy is bounded or authentically boundless. Both the perception of authenticity and commodified intimacy often take the form of the boyfriend and girlfriend experience. In this study, intimacy was usually consumed in a bounded way. Accordingly, intimacy can be full-service sex or acts such as caressing, cuddling and kissing. It can also appear as conversation, being an attentive listener, and exposing personal vulnerabilities. Thus, it is the exchange that is internalized by the consumer as an authentic bond; however, authenticity is typically something that is perceived and not necessarily genuine because it has become a commodity that is bound to the parameters of the transactional relationship.

Romance tourists occasionally transcend the initial interlude to longer-term commitments that are often intended to be monogamous. I provided two examples of romance tourists, Jennifer and Tammy, who began their trajectories as unintentional sex tourists, then intentional and finally entered into bonafide commitments with partners who were once their service providers. Despite this, the romance tourist maintains a presence in Bangkok's adult entertainment zones when visiting their partner. They do not view themselves as customers even though they continue to be the financier and the sex worker the economic and material benefactor. The romance tourist believes she has a form of cultural and social capital that differentiates her from short-term transactional clientele because she engages in local activities and with people introduced from outside the sex tourism industry. Just like with the (un)intentional sex tourist, the romance tourist is diverse in age, class, gender, race and sexuality

and seeks intimacy from providers regardless of whether they are positioned in the regulated formal economy or unregulated informal sector.

In chapter 7, I outline how a small group of benevolent tourists interpret sex work as a form of survival and victimization of sex workers. Rather than consuming physical sex, romance or emotional intimacy, this group of women seeks to consume sex workers' time and cultural capital. The intent of the benevolent tourist is to temporarily remove female sex workers from erotic environments. I did not hear about male sex workers receiving the same type of benevolent offers. When I asked about this, I was usually told by benevolent tourists that women and child are victimized from their participation in the sex industry. I observed that this sort of consumer was found in the entertainment areas that overwhelming employed women and transgender entertainers. These female tourists perceive sex workers as prostituted people and want to eliminate, even if it is just for one night, harms they associate with commodified sex. Benevolent tourists, from their point of view, humanize the economic exchange by allowing the beneficiary to sell legitimate forms of labor. Ironically, the result is often paradoxical because remuneration is usually less than what licensed agents would make performing the same duties. This takes place when the tourist assigns the burden of being tour guide, translator, epicurean and cultural broker onto the sex worker. Sometimes the consumer is a solo traveler, other times she is part of a couple or small group of friends, but the benevolent tourist occasionally is a religious missionary attempting to lead the sex worker away from their current occupation in the adult entertainment zones. Benevolent tourists are viewed as suspicious and unless business is slow their offers are usually unwelcomed and rejected.

In chapter 8, I discuss the final and largest group of the typology – the spectacle seeker. The spectacle consists of many public performances that are on display within the red-light

districts. This category of tourists makes a conscience decision not to financially contribute to the sex tourism industry. For some spectacle seekers their presence is incidental and not planned while others purposefully decide to attend. Regardless of how they find their way, they are resolute in their intent not to economically support sex workers or the businesses found there. Forms of consumption encompass watching tourists, sex workers and the interactions between them. It also includes visually consuming the surrounding sea of neon lights, unique architecture, and other types of infrastructure not commonly seen in Western culture. The spectacle, however, is not confined to the visual sphere because it is inclusive of other senses. The spectacle seeker encounters a variety of exotic smells emanating from cuisine sold by street vendors representing the diversity of Thailand's many provinces. Auditory overload takes place as a result of music blaring in English and Thai as well as hearing conversations in languages representing cultures from across the globe. The reverberation generated by deep bass sounds coming from outdoor bars can be felt, not just heard. Touch also contributes to the experience because droves of tourists, locals and expatriates rub shoulders as they pass through narrow and heavily trafficked walkways. Sex workers and industry touts seize upon the density of the crowd to make a pitch knowing that attempts to escape will be hampered by the sheer number of people in such a tight space. Accordingly, the spectacle is not designed to be a passive experience. Attending the spectacle is an interactive encounter because it engages a range of the tourists' senses. Although spectacle seekers choose not to financially contribute to the sex tourism industry, they still voyeuristically consume the gendered, racialized and sexualized environment that surrounds them. The meaning they give to the spectacle and social interactions within it are contingent on how structural forces impact their own unique lived experience. Furthermore, their presence provides an opportunity for others to profit as a direct and proximate result of their

attendance. Thus, the spectacle seeker makes the scene larger, more intriguing, something to be seen and, most importantly, experienced.

Scholarly Contributions

This research contributes to the current body of scholarly knowledge by examining consumption patterns of female sex tourists. Very little is known about this group of consumers outside of studies of Africa and the Caribbean. Studies of sex tourism, especially those that investigate female tourists' consumption, are generally limited to seaside settings and do not include major urban landscapes. They also attempt to make distinctions between romance and sex tourism that reproduce traditional and dichotomous assumptions of masculine and feminine sexuality. In contrast to those frames, I demonstrate that in Bangkok female tourists are actively consuming many of the sexualized and intimate offerings that are available to their male tourist counterparts. This is the beginning of a form of sexual convergence in the consumption of adult entertainment because the activities in these spaces are becoming substantially more similar across genders and sexualities. I also provide an additional layer of depth examining non-heterosexual transactions. This helps fill the void of bisexual and same-sex arrangements that are missing in the existing literature. Furthermore, I depart from the research on romance tourism by Pruitt and LaFont (1995) and Dahles and Bras (1999) by situating this type of consumption as a component of the larger sex tourism industry in Bangkok. Contextual factors of the local market are dynamic and the fluidity of consumption patterns show that that romance tourists are not substantively different than other categories of consumers participating in sex tourism.

Moreover, I expand the sex tourism literature by revealing that in the Thai market intimacy is sometimes sold as a commodified experience that was once reserved for the private sphere. Recent scholarship by Carbonero and Garrido (2018), Hoang (2015) and Weitzer (2021) on sexual commerce and sex work highlights the relationship intimacy plays between the buyer and seller. I incorporate this connection into the study of female sex tourism in Bangkok and show that women consumers have the option of purchasing either the boyfriend or girlfriend experience based on their partner preference. My research shows that intimacy can be emotional, physical or a combination of both in the Thai sex tourism sector. At times, intimacy may be romantic and develop organically over time, but in most instances, it is a commodity sold by the service provider and consumed by the sex tourist. Authenticity is usually presented in an illusory way so that the consumer believes she is attaining a form of cultural capital. This allows the tourist to think that her affective, benevolent, and intimate interactions are forging genuine relationships with members of the host community.

I make another contribution with the introduction of the benevolent tourist. I show that benevolent strategies – which are mobilized to reduce harms the tourist associates with prostitution – may actually help sustain the sex tourism industry despite the intended purpose to suspend, albeit temporarily, sex worker involvement. Benevolent tourists employ a novel approach trying to connect to Thai culture through the assistance of sex industry insiders. Even though their objective is not to seek physical or romantic relationships, they strive to experience genuine representations of local life through their interaction with a member of the marginalized local population. These tourists make classed, gendered, and raced assumptions about female sex workers. They believe these women are exploited as a result of their sex worker status and various social identities. In doing so, the benevolent tourist unintentionally reifies structures that

situate women of color as poor and victimized. Tourists view themselves as privileged actors and use both classed and nation-based forms of masculinity by seeing themselves as lifting downtrodden women out of poverty. They view their transaction as an opportunity for entertainers to engage in legitimate and valued forms of labor. The sex workers I met in the tourist zones see things very differently and routinely resist these offers. I learned that if other money-making opportunities for the evening appear unlikely, then they will consider engaging the benevolent offer if one becomes available. When doing this, they embrace their perceived subaltern status as a way to extract as much cash and kind as they can by manipulating the benevolent urge to help. When servicing benevolent tourists, sex workers will often discuss issues of financial distress and the familial hardships they endure. When using this tactic, sometimes the accounts are exaggerated depictions of real stories or they can be entirely fictive to fit the narrative the benevolent tourist expects to hear. The hope is that they will become sponsored by the tourist and receive financial remittances for a period of time. Although this form of consumption occurs at a significantly lower rate than the other types I outlined, it is on the rise with female tourists and similar depictions also occur with the romance tourist.

My findings also contribute to the scholarly literature by demonstrating that experiences in the relatively privileged Bangkok sex tourism sector I researched, participants from both sides of the exchange negotiate class, race and gendered power, status and inequalities of varying capacities. For example, I revealed the dynamic between Chai and Jennifer and how class complicates relations of gender and sexuality. Although structural factors impact both parties and the Western heterosexual middle-class tourist often has more money than the provider, the operation of power is more complex. Ploy and Tammy are both members of the working class but Tammy has enough financial resources to travel internationally whereas Ploy does not.

Despite Tammy facing class-based inequalities of her own being a working-class queer woman from the United Kingdom, she is still able to benefit from her economic advantage in her relationship with Ploy. However, just like the female sex worker who engages the benevolent White tourist, Ploy gains economic benefits from her cultural and sexual capital in her relationship with Tammy.

The experiences in these two examples cannot be adequately explained by single-axis analyses alone. Both Chai and Jennifer possess social capital as graduates of higher education, multiple language speakers and members of the middle-class. However, from a Western context, they face inequalities in a globalized world as racial minorities and as connected to the stigmatized sex industry. In this example, both inequalities and forms of privilege are contextual based on local, cultural and transnational power structures. Similarly, Ploy and Tammy are both queer women, economically challenged, and do not possess highly marketable employment skills that are easily transferable in a global market economy. Despite these sociopolitical marginalities, Tammy is able to perform race and class in a way that benefits her in Bangkok's intimate economy. Ploy does not possess the same privileges but uses her own social capital to improve her financial wellbeing and status among family and peers. Ham (2020: 563) points out that "intersectionality offers an opportunity to think about social difference and power in the sex industry beyond risk and vulnerability." Focusing solely on single-level analyses of inequality provides only a partial glimpse of a bigger picture and has the potential to omit the meaning that insiders give to their lived experience and interpersonal interactions. Ham (2020: 564) asserts that "...it may be more fruitful to consider how social difference shifts power in the sex industry, rather than assuming that it reduces power."

Other aspects of the female sex tourism industry provide rich understandings of the ways race, class and gender dynamics interact. Some research suggests that sex tourists are typically from the affluent industrial North and sex workers from the developing South (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Dahles and Bras, 1999; Enloe, 2000; Manderson, 1992; O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor; Phillips and Dann, 1998; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995; Richards and Reid, 2015; Ryle, 2018). Even though the formal sector does restrict employment to Thais, there is a large portion of tourists originating from Thailand and Southeast Asia. Further, race itself is socially constructed. Asian tourists incentivize entertainers to match racial stereotypes by lightening their skin while Western tourists incentivize entertainers to darken theirs. The informal sex industry is made up of more service providers and consumers from diverse races and nationalities than the formal sector. Because Bangkok’s adult entertainment zones are multilayered and stratified between the formal and informal economies, interactions and consumption practices are complex and dynamic.

My research also shows the many ways women are engaging in sexual consumption within Bangkok’s erotized geography. Gendered understandings of sex tourism tend to position men as privileged actors (Jeffreys, 2003) seeking sex while women do something entirely different – pursue affective and romantic relations (Dahles and Bras, 1999; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995). I show that female tourists are not just objects of the gaze, but also subjects who voyeuristically watch and actively consume sexualized and raced bodies. My informants contested essentialist gender roles and redefined conventional conceptions by *receiving* service as well as *providing* service. This challenges traditional gendered assumptions about emotional intimacy and romantic love (Ryle, 2018). Female sex tourists in Bangkok are drawing attention to the sexual double standard whereby men can recreationally participate in eroticized activities

without being socially sanctioned but women cannot. Zöe Gross (2018: 520) points this out in her analysis of female sex tourism practices by saying women are “flipping the script on conventional understandings of male sex tourism.”

Despite women gaining entry to a variety of venues, some women mentioned that their access to some sexual services was limited and noticeably different than what their male counterparts were offered. Although I show in the typology that women of all sexualities are consumers of a variety of activities ranging from full-service options to no-touch intimacy and voyeurism, I contend they remain disadvantaged in the Bangkok market due to the gender inequalities associated with being a woman. According to Amandine Chapuis (2017: 624), regardless of their diversity, red-light districts still need to be understood in reference to “social pressure to perform normalised gender roles: man/woman. The place is framed by the norms of heterosexuality, masculinities and femininities.” Female sexuality is considered by some to be an afterthought in these spaces and I was told numerous times by women that they felt “disappointed” and “underwhelmed” with the options made available to them. Bangkok’s sexualized landscape is culturally constructed and deliberately designed for the male consumer. Live sex shows were almost always performed by women, gogo bars leaned heavily toward cisgender female entertainers, and unless venues had a ladies’ night that made women the center of attention, female tourists were often sharing male revues with what appeared to be a proportionate number of bisexual and gay men. One informant pointed this out and told me that touring women are tolerated in these masculinized spaces and are not catered to in the same manner as their male contemporaries. She implied that women are expected to be passive consumers despite gaining admittance to the spectacle. This also held constant for queer women because there are no dedicated eroticized bars in these spaces that specifically cater to them.

However, they arguably have more options than heterosexual women seeking male entertainment because of the plethora of establishments that have bisexual and lesbian women on staff who will service foreign female tourists.

Study Limitations

The findings in this study are limited to the adult entertainment zones of Bangkok and should not be generalized to other female sex tourism destinations. My field sites were the least difficult spaces to access and only included venues that were free to visit or had modest entry fees. Because my informants were limited to those who spoke English, a large number of tourists, sex workers and tourism personnel were eliminated from participating in this study. This also positions the field sites where I conducted research a relatively privileged sector of the Thai sex industry. Due to the importance tourism plays in the Thai economy, Bangkok's adult entertainment zones are heavily policed by local authorities and this is not reflective of other sexualized landscapes that do not provide the same protections to consumers and sex workers. I also realize that my gatekeepers may have had underlying motivations that directed me to certain locations and people so my exposure was contained to these introductions. I also realize there are venues outside the tourist zones and off the beaten path that may have catered to different female consumers that I did not have access to. Furthermore, the sex tourism landscape is becoming increasingly more diverse as providers begin to advertise their services online. These digitized platforms allow consumers and entertainers to maintain more anonymity in their commodified sexual exchanges so it is becoming more difficult to publicly observe their interactions. This research did not give significant attention to online consumption patterns even though a growing number of participants are beginning to use web-based forums to meet,

interact and enter into paid sexual arrangements. This research also employed an inductive approach so the findings are limited to my observations, interactions, and the meanings given to this social world by my informants. I sought to achieve an intersubjective understanding but recognize that the privileges I brought to the field as a heterosexual White-male scholar impacted what I saw, how I interpreted what my informants told me, and the way I internalized their stories. Although reflexively accounting for my positionalities helped me to remain aware of these subjectivities, I recognize that some things may have gone unnoticed or misinterpreted. The intent of this research is not to speak on behalf of my informants, but rather to understand their social world, the meaning they give to it, and how the Thai sex tourism industry in Bangkok is organized to facilitate services that cater to female tourists' curiosities, desires, needs, and wants.

Future Research Considerations

Future research should consider the role foreign male service providers contribute to the selling of sex in Bangkok. These men are not considered in most analyses despite being present in the informal Thai sex industry for decades. They receive journalistic coverage in local newspapers during immigration sweeps of red-light districts, but academics have omitted them as central players in the transnational sex scene throughout Southeast Asia. Some of the most interesting interactions I had were with informants from Africa. These men were instrumental gatekeepers to the unregulated informal economy. They provided me with access that opened up my eyes to a field of inquiry that I would have overlooked without their assistance. As my research project progressed, I learned about their compelling life histories that led to their trajectory into the Thai sex tourism industry. Investigating the role of transnational sex workers,

especially men, in facilitating sexual commerce will provide another layer of knowledge that is currently lacking in sex tourism studies. I suspect this will provide more understanding to how commodified sex leads to (e)migration, marriage, remittances, and transcontinental crime.

Besides men, I also discovered a small segment of younger women from East Asia and former Soviet bloc countries who travel internationally not just for leisure, but to earn money. They provide commodified companionship as a way to subsidize their vacation and gain access to travel opportunities that they otherwise could not financially afford. Although these women did not make it into my typology, I am left wondering if they are also a type of sex tourist. Since they fall outside the conventional way of viewing the consumer model of consumption, are they sex tourists too?

Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Demographic Information:

- What is your gender?
- What is your race?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your country of citizenship?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What is your highest level of education?
- What is your age range? 20s,30s,40s,50s,60s, older
- Have you ever lived in a country besides your country of citizenship?
- What other Southeast Asian countries did you visit? Do you plan to visit any?
- Is this your first time to Thailand? Southeast Asia?
- Is this your first time visiting a red-light district? If not, where else did you visit?

What do you think about the adult entertainment zones in Bangkok?

- What types of venues have you visited in the red-light districts?
- When you think of adult entertainment establishments, what type of venues do you consider part of the sex tourism industry?
 - Examples: brothels, gogo bars, massage parlors, live sex shows, transgender cabarets, male revues, traditional bars and pubs, etc.

Do you think it's acceptable for people to engage in adult entertainment or sexual services?

- How do you define sex tourist/tourism?
- Do you think women are more likely to purchase sex here than at home?
- Do you think women are more likely to visit eroticized venues here than at home?
- Have you seen any women tourists purchasing sex? If so, from a man, woman or transgender sex worker?
- Would you consider purchasing sex from a Thai man, woman or transgender person? What about from a non-Thai?
- What do you consider to be sexual services?
- What do you consider to be adult entertainment?
- How do you differentiate between adult entertainment and sexual services?
- Do you consider the sex tourism industry to be a form of exploitation? Why/Why not?
- Do you think sex workers are empowered by their work?

What do you think of Thai sex workers and adult entertainers?

- There has been recent concern about exploitation in the Thai adult entertainment industry, have you witnessed any forms of exploitation? If so, please explain.
- In the adult entertainment industry, who do you believe possesses more power, men or women? How about buyers and seller? Why do you feel this way?

- Do male sex workers possess more or less power than female customers? How about female or transgender sex workers?
- Do you believe sex workers choose this type of employment? Why?
- What kinds of interactions have you had with sex workers?
- Have you spoken with any sex workers or adult entertainers?
- Did you feel differently about sex workers after speaking to them?
- What were your first impressions of sex workers when you saw them?

How did you find out about Bangkok's adult entertainment zones?

- Did any of your friends, colleagues or family members tell you about the sex tourism industry before arriving?
- Did you see/read about the sex tourism industry in the media?
- Would you tell your friends, family or coworkers you had visited a red light district or participated in any of the activities (gogo bar, massage parlor live sex show)?

What types of entertainment have you participated in so far? What do you intend to do on your trip?

- Have you been to a gogo bar, live sex show, or other sexualized venue in Bangkok or Thailand? What were they? Why or why not?
- What are reasons for going/not going?
- Did you plan to go/not go prior to arriving in Thailand?
- If you did go, did you enjoy the experience? How did it make you feel? Did you go to more than one venue? Did you go to more than one red-light district? Did you go back after your first visit?
- Would you tell friends, family, or coworkers to go if they went to Thailand?
- Who did you go with?
- Did your companions influence your decision to go?
- Do you think that you're participating in the sex tourism industry by going to red-light districts?
- Would going to a sex show be considered a sexual encounter?

Business owners/stakeholders/adult entertainers

How do female tourists participate in the adult entertainment industry?

- How do you define sex tourist and sex tourism?
- What have you observed about female tourists in red light districts?
- What percentage of your business is made up of female tourists?
- Do female tourists tend to visit as individuals or in groups? If groups, do they come with women or men? If both, more men or women? As couples or singles/friends?
- Where is your largest group of female customers from? What country?
- Are your customers older or younger? What is older? What is younger?
- How do women tourists spend money in your business compared to male tourists?
- How do you cater to female tourists?
- Do you find female tourists to be one-time or multiple visit customers?

*Some of the questions used in this interview schedule were adopted from Sanders (2010b).

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Curriculum Vitae

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Professional Profile

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- College of Liberal Arts Dean's Award, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2016
- James Frey Graduate Research Scholarship, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2016
- Graduate & Professional Student Association Summer Research Grant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2016
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