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Sex, nipple caps and smoke and mirrors : an interpretative phenomenological approach to the subjective meaning making of strippers in the South African context.

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Abstract

The majority of literature on the adult entertainment looks at objectification and subjugation of women. Women's experiences in such arenas are negotiated through circumstances beyond their immediate control. In fact many find themselves in this profession out of destitution and need. The result of which is an experience that is even more harrowing, and psychologically and physically destructive. Previous research suggest that many women in this profession then find themselves in precarious relations, often turning to drugs and alcohol to deal with the highly negative aspect of the industry. However, what is not that often reported on are those women who decide to explore this profession out of mere curiosity or even as a career choice. This analysis aimed to investigate one area of this industry, namely striptease. With focus on the *high-end* (a more regulated and lucrative end) of the striptease spectrum, this analysis was aimed at investigating the phenomological experiences of women in this sector. We look at the experiences of four women at one of the more prestigious strip-clubs in Johannesburg, referred to as *The Club*. This study aimed to provide some insight to why some South African women *chose* to enter striptease—as not much research has been done in this area. More high-end clubs seemed theoretically the most practical site to investigate such a choice. This study was based qualitatively, with the use of semi-structured interview which were analyzed through thematic content analysis. The results of this study are categorized into three sections and framed from an *emotional labour* perspective. Firstly, the experiences on these women provide a challenge to the traditional feminism perspective—exposing a dynamic power relation that may suggest that, within the high-end at least, women may experience a sense of liberation. Secondly, this study aimed to expose the emotional laboriousness of enacting a sexualised fantasy that is convincing. It was found that such an enactment requires an intense interplay between what is considered the real self and the embodiment and portrayal the *girlfriend experience*. Lastly, we look at the psychological defensive dissociation that occurs though this interplay between fantasy and reality. In essence this analysis has shed new light on striptease and has provided many new avenues for future research in South Africa.

Keywords: Striptease, Emotional Labour, Emancipation/Liberation, Feminism and Sexualised work.

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