



## Putting sexualized labour in the picture: Encoding 'reasonable entitlement' in the lap dancing industry

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## Abstract

This paper is based on a semiotic analysis of corporate websites in the lap dancing industry. Forming part of a larger ethnographic study of the UK lap dancing industry, it focuses on how the exchange relationship between dancers and customers is shaped by the industry's online presence. Methodologically, it draws on Hancock's (2005) semiotic approach to the analysis of organizational artefacts and Brewis's writing on the importance of understanding how sex work is constructed and perceived (Brewis, 2005; Brewis and Linstead, 2000a, 2003). The paper shows the importance of corporate websites as virtual spaces that landscape customer expectations of the exchange relationship emphasizing how these expectations perpetuate, on the one hand, a very prescriptive range of body images shaping the performance and consumption of lap dancing work, and on the other, an ambiguous suggestion of open-ended possibility. The paper argues that, in combination, this landscaping of prescription and possibility constitutes a powerful organization of anticipation underpinning perceptions of reasonable entitlement within the lap dancing exchange relationship considering how this impacts upon the dancers' experiences of this relationship. The analysis highlights both the importance of virtual corporate spaces in landscaping interactive service exchanges, as well as the intensification that results from the ambiguity encoded within these spaces, requiring service providers to reconcile anticipation and experience, prescription and possibility, within the exchange relationship.

## Introduction

In *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild (1983) examined the significance of customer perceptions of reasonable entitlement to the intensification of interactive service work, highlighting the implications of this for the performance of emotional labour. Subsequent research has shown that customer expectations of service encounters have become more intensive, that is performance-orientated and demanding for service providers, following the aestheticization of work (Belfrage, 2011; Böhme, 2003; Chugh and Hancock, 2009; Hancock and Tyler, 2007). The increasing significance of digital, visual media has arguably added to this intensification, bringing with it a distilled expectation of what customers might feel they are reasonably entitled to expect from a service encounter (Bell and Davison, 2013; Gustavsson and Czarniawska, 2004; Meyer et al, 2013). Thinking about what this means for the commercial sex industry, Hearn (2014) has emphasized how the growing speed and ease of ICTs creates many new possibilities for sexual consumption, bringing with it an expectation of increasingly intensive experiences of sexual pleasure. As he puts it, this ‘virtualization’ presents multiple sites for both the reinforcement and contestation of gendered, sexual hegemonies through, for instance, recurring imagery on corporate websites.

In this paper we consider: What role do virtual organizational spaces such as corporate websites play in shaping customer expectations of the exchange relationship within interactive service work? What implications might this have for perceptions of reasonable entitlement within exchange relationships, and for the performance of interactive service work? To respond to these questions, we present a semiotic analysis of the landscaping of reasonable entitlement, and of the organization of anticipation, within the lap dancing industry<sup>1</sup>.

Gagliardi (1990) uses the term ‘landscaping’ to describe the processes through which material organizational artefacts (such as websites) shape the values and beliefs surrounding a particular organizational setting or industry. As he puts it, ‘artefacts evince and reflect social and cultural dynamics’ (Gagliardi, 1990: 26); in other words, they provide reference points for cultural perceptions and associations including, we might argue, anticipatory encounters. Throughout the paper, we draw on this way of thinking about landscaping as an analytical lens through which to consider the ways in which cultural artefacts, such as websites and the bodies and settings they depict, come to shape meanings and expectations associated with lap dancing encounters. Specifically as an example of intensively interactive service work, we

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3 consider the virtual landscaping of perceptions of entitlement within the industry, examining  
4 how customer expectations of the service encounter are shaped through a semiotic analysis of  
5 the ways in which corporate websites constitute the symbolic landscape of lap dancing.  
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8 In developing our analysis of these websites, we also draw on Campbell's (2005 [1987])  
9 account of how contemporary consumerism rests on the construction of perpetual  
10 anticipation. Campbell (2005: 92, *emphasis added*) emphasizes how the anticipatory,  
11 'imaginative enjoyment of products and services is a crucial part of contemporary  
12 consumerism'. In other words, it is a desire for the anticipated pleasure that experience  
13 'promises to yield' (ibid: 77) that drives consumption whereby, as he puts it, 'the illusion is  
14 always better than the reality: the promise more interesting than actuality' (ibid: 90).  
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20 We consider what this anticipatory 'promise' might mean for those who work in the lap  
21 dancing industry, taking the term promise to denote both: (i) open-ended, enticing potential,  
22 as might be expressed in the phrase 'full of promise' or simply the term 'promising' and (ii)  
23 an agreement or commitment based on mutual understanding of perceived entitlement (as in  
24 'we made a promise', 'you promised'). Wider connotations of implied sexual innocence,  
25 waiting to be 'taken', connect these two sets of meanings, as suggested by the phrase 'on a  
26 promise', used colloquially to refer to the possibility of sexual intimacy. We explore how  
27 these entwined meanings are encoded into the semiotic landscape of the industry through the  
28 images and textual references that constitute 'constellations of meaning' (Hancock, 2008) on  
29 lap dancing club websites.  
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37 Campbell's analysis stresses the importance of understanding and engaging with the  
38 signifying role of imagery. For him, images that do not conform to what experience and/or  
39 understanding leads an individual to believe will actually occur require consumers to  
40 undertake what he calls 'an "imaginative construction" or anticipation' (ibid: 83). He calls the  
41 pleasure derived from this imaginative anticipation a 'double desire' (ibid: 85), referring to  
42 the desire to experience desire. 'The generation of longing' is therefore a key component of  
43 what Campbell (ibid: 85) describes as modern hedonism: the inducement or enticement to  
44 experience the pleasure to be derived from anticipation itself. It is arguably this enticement  
45 that lap dancing, as part of the wider 'seduction industry' (O'Neill, 2018), is premised upon  
46 with this 'double desire' or imaginative anticipation being encoded into what the industry is  
47 and means. To put it simply, the generation of longing that Campbell describes is what the  
48 industry trades on. We consider how this is encoded into the industry's visual imagery and  
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3 online presence, into its cultural 'landscape' (Gagliardi, 1990), exploring what this means for  
4 the nature of the exchange relationship involved.  
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7 The lap dancing industry sits in an ambiguous area between sexualized labour and sex work  
8 (Bott, 2006), an ambiguity that the industry thrives on. While the term 'sexualized labour'  
9 has been used to refer to work in which sexual desire is commodified as part of a broader  
10 exchange of goods or services (Elmer, 2010; Pettinger, 2005; Riach and Wilson, 2014; Smith  
11 Maguire, 2008; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009), 'sex work' is generally taken to describe the  
12 exchange of sexual interaction as the sole or main focus of a transactional relationship  
13 (Bindman and Doezema, 1997; Grandy and Mavin, 2012; Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Sanders,  
14 2005). Yet these two forms of work are not distinctive but operate along a continuum with  
15 much of what Sanders (2008) calls the 'shadow' sex economy, including lap dancing,  
16 occupying the ambiguous and fluid middle ground.  
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24 The ambiguity of the industry and of the work undertaken by a lap dancer means that  
25 interactions with customers tend to be particularly open-ended (Barton, 2007; Wesely, 2003),  
26 yet research suggests that customers have clear expectations of what they are reasonably  
27 entitled to within the exchange relationship (Brewis and Linstead, 2000a and 2000b, 2003;  
28 Pettinger, 2011; Sanders, 2005). To consider where these expectations come from, we  
29 examine the social and cultural context of the exchange relationship focusing specifically on  
30 how this context contributes to the ambiguity and anticipation shaping the expectations and  
31 sense of 'promise' referred to above.  
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39 As Riach and Wilson (2014: 329) have argued, 'organizational spaces afford or mitigate  
40 possibilities for particular bodies, which simultaneously shape expectations and experiences  
41 of sexuality at work'. As visual and virtual spaces become increasingly significant in shaping  
42 these expectations and experiences (Grandy and Mavin, 2012; Gustavsson and Czarniawska,  
43 2004; Hearn, 2014; Sullivan, 2014), more research is needed in order to understand the ways  
44 in which virtual organizational spaces such as corporate websites impact upon perceptions of  
45 the exchange relationship and the performance of work. This is particularly the case in terms  
46 of understanding the shaping, or landscaping, of customers' perceptions of reasonable  
47 entitlement, and the impact of these perceptions on what service workers might be reasonably  
48 expected to provide.  
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3 With this in mind, and with the questions posed above as our starting point, our focus in this  
4 paper is three-fold. First, our empirical concern is with understanding how the exchange  
5 relationship within intensively interactive service environments such as lap dancing clubs is  
6 landscaped, framing particular expectations of reasonable entitlement in a relatively under-  
7 researched but important sector of work. Hardy and Sanders (2015) estimate that around  
8 20,000 women currently work in the lap dancing industry in the UK. Although it is difficult  
9 to be certain about the commercial 'value' of the industry, the Office of National Statistics  
10 conservatively estimates the sex industry in the UK to be worth at least £5 billion, with lap  
11 dancing, pornography and chat lines accounting for a large proportion of that figure<sup>ii</sup>. Yet to  
12 date, we know relatively little about how the lap dancing exchange relationship comes to be  
13 perceived and understood by those who work and consume within it. Second, our analysis  
14 highlights the significance of virtual organizational spaces such as corporate websites to  
15 shaping expectations of the exchange relationship, focusing on how these spaces are encoded  
16 with images that are, on the one hand, highly prescriptive and on the other, suggestive of  
17 open-ended possibility in the service encounter. Third, we emphasize the value of a critical,  
18 semiotic approach to understanding how the exchange relationship might be anticipated  
19 within an intensively interactive service environment, adding to the development of semiotics  
20 within work and organization studies. In this third aspect of the paper, we draw largely on  
21 Hancock's (2005) semiotic approach to analysing the landscaping of corporate artefacts, in  
22 order to understand how particular regimes of meaning frame, or 'landscape' (Gagliardi,  
23 1990), expectations of the lap dancing industry and of the organization of anticipation in  
24 particular. We use the latter term to describe the combination of on the one hand, a relatively  
25 narrow set of prescriptive images of lap dancers' bodies and other cultural artefacts that serve  
26 to shape customer expectations of the exchange relationship, and on the other, the ambiguity  
27 and perpetual possibility that is also encoded into these expectations; in combination these  
28 shape a customer's anticipatory sense of 'promise' as outlined above. Our analysis shows the  
29 significance of virtual spaces such as websites for processes of organizational meaning  
30 making and we explore what this implies for lap dancers as sexualized interactive labourers  
31 given, on the one hand, the prescribed expectations customers are likely to bring to the  
32 encounter, and on the other, its apparently open-ended possibilities.

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53 The paper begins by positioning its contribution to relevant work and organization studies  
54 literature on symbolism, sexuality and landscaping, identifying important and emerging  
55 threads on which the paper draws. Then, the contemporary lap dancing industry in the UK is

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3 introduced, in order to describe the context of the research. The methodological approach  
4 taken to the study, including details of how the websites were analysed is explained and  
5 evaluated, before presenting the findings of this analysis. The discussion focuses on two key  
6 themes that emerged from the study – prescription and possibility. We consider how these  
7 two themes are interrelated in the organization of anticipation in the lap dancing industry, an  
8 interrelation that, we argue, intensifies the demands made upon those working within the  
9 industry. In conclusion, the paper emphasizes that more research is needed into the semiotic  
10 context of the sex industry, and interactive service encounters more generally, in order to  
11 understand more about how customer expectations are framed. We also argue that within  
12 work and organization studies, more critical, analytical attention needs to be given to  
13 corporate websites, in order to consider the impact they are likely to have on lived  
14 experiences of organizational exchange relationships, especially within highly aestheticized  
15 service encounters that thrive on ambiguity and anticipation.  
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#### 24 Symbolism, sexuality and organizational semiotics

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27 A wealth of literature exists within the fields of marketing and communication studies  
28 focusing on the impact of advertising on customer expectations of reasonable entitlement (see  
29 Keller, 2016; Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Ryan, 2017). By comparison, relatively limited  
30 consideration has been given within work and organization studies to the implications of the  
31 semiotics of advertising and marketing for the experiences and perceptions of those working  
32 in front-line, interactive service roles. This is not to suggest, however, that the significance of  
33 symbolism for the meanings attributed to organizational encounters has been neglected.  
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38 Indeed, a considerable wealth of literature has evolved in recent years focusing on the  
39 contribution of organizational symbolism to processes of meaning making (Acord, 2010; Ahn  
40 and Jacobs, 2017; Cutcher et al, 2017; Davison, 2010; Hancock, 2005; Hancock and Tyler,  
41 2007; Mack, 2007). Picking up on these threads, this paper seeks to bring together insights  
42 from a concern with the role of symbolism in shaping expectations of organizational  
43 exchange relationships. It also aims to bring the significance of virtual organizational spaces  
44 to the fore by highlighting how these spaces constitute arenas for meaning making.  
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50 Much of the recent literature on sexuality within organizational life has emphasized the  
51 significance of organizational symbolism in shaping perceptions and expectations of sexual  
52 interactions. Green et al (2010: 8) focus on the ‘symbolic backdrops’ associated with sado-  
53 masochistic settings, highlighting the importance of the virtual spaces ‘against which actors  
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3 build and negotiate erotic meanings and practices'. Similarly, Mills (2006: 4) describes the  
4 symbolic context of changing perceptions of idealized feminine sexuality in his longitudinal  
5 analysis of British Airways, emphasizing the significant role played by corporate symbolism  
6 in shaping 'the cultural dynamic that generates ways of being in an organization' (see also  
7 Mills, 1995). Riach and Wilson (2014: 329) similarly emphasize how sexuality is 'not only  
8 an undercurrent of service environments, but is integral to the way that these workspaces are  
9 experienced and negotiated'. Recent research has also highlighted the role played by  
10 corporate symbolism in shaping the performance of sexualized labour within the context of  
11 commercial exchanges (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). An interesting example is Murray's  
12 (2015) study of a Manhattan bar, which examines how the embodied experiences of women  
13 working there, and in particular their performance of sexualized labour, are shaped by  
14 gendered customer expectations. Brents and Sanders (2010: 45) have similarly emphasized  
15 how the 'mainstreaming' of the commercial sex industry is shaped by twin processes of  
16 economic and social integration, fuelled by wider patterns in leisure consumption and the  
17 'hedonistic search for relaxation and pleasure'. Taken together, this research highlights the  
18 significance of a critical understanding of the role of symbolism in shaping perceptions and  
19 experiences of the commercial sex industry, and of customer expectations of the exchange  
20 relationship involved, as well as the possible implications of these expectations for the  
21 performance of sexualized labour and sex work. To focus specifically on how these  
22 expectations are encoded into perceptions of what the lap dancing exchange relationship  
23 'promises', we turn to the inroads that semiotics has made thus far into work and organization  
24 studies.

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40 In his discussion of semiotics within organizational analysis, Hancock (2005: 32, *emphasis*  
41 *added*) highlights the importance of giving critical consideration to the ways in which  
42 organizational imagery and artefacts are imbued with aesthetic meaning. Through his  
43 semiotic analysis of a particular corporate artefact – namely a graduate recruitment  
44 advertisement, he introduces 'an alternative way of analysing organizational artefacts that  
45 sets out to understand the ways in which such artefacts are *made to mean*'. He draws on  
46 earlier writing within the fields of semiotic linguistics and aesthetics, emphasizing how a  
47 critical analysis of organizational sign systems provides valuable insight into the ways in  
48 which particular sets of meanings come to shape perceptions of workplace identities and  
49 relationships, effectively setting out an 'organizational semiotics'. Of particular relevance to  
50 our discussion here, is the acknowledgement of simultaneous ambiguity and specificity  
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3 within organizational symbolism, as Hancock shows how specific meanings come to be  
4 generated when encountered in particular contexts. Brought to the fore is an appreciation of  
5 how the aesthetic functions as an *organizing* medium of meaning making ‘whereby certain  
6 constellations of signifiers can communicate *a class or regime* of aestheticized experience’  
7 (ibid: 41, *emphasis added*). This leads us to understand ‘not only what organizationally  
8 located artefacts mean aesthetically, but also *how they mean what they mean*’ (ibid: 41,  
9 *emphasis added*). To examine this process of meaning making, we now turn to a  
10 consideration of the landscaping of customer expectations, or the organization of anticipation,  
11 in the lap dancing industry.  
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18 The lap dancing industry: Staging desire and imagining intimacy  
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21 Lap dancing is a commission based sales role that involves the buying and selling of topless  
22 and nude dances within a club setting. In addition to selling dances, lap dancers may also sell  
23 so-called ‘sit-downs’ to customers. These involve the customer paying for a period of time  
24 with a particular dancer during which the dancer will drink, socialise with and dance for  
25 them. While not with customers, dancers are expected to perform on stage and interact for  
26 short periods with customers to entice them into paying for dances or sit-downs.  
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31 The semiotic analysis of lap dancing club websites on which this paper is based is part of a  
32 wider ethnographic study of the industry, a setting in which ‘work and leisure, production and  
33 consumption, naturally intersect’ (Brewis and Linstead, 2000a: 84). Previous research has  
34 suggested that dancers’ bodily boundaries become fluid so that the way lap-dancing work is  
35 constituted requires a continual negotiation of bodily boundaries (Wesely, 2003). Yet the  
36 embodied practices that previous studies have focused on, such as ‘strategic flirting’  
37 (Deshotels and Forsyth, 2006) have consequences for the on-going creation of the  
38 organizational setting that stretch beyond the immediacy of individual experience. This  
39 highlights the importance of understanding the situated context of the industry, particularly of  
40 appreciating the semiotic framing of landscaping of lap dancing work, and its implications for  
41 those working in the industry, with wider relevance for the study of other intensively  
42 interactive and highly aestheticized service environments.  
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51 At the risk of over-simplifying a rich and sophisticated body of literature, much of the  
52 research on the industry has focused on the stigma associated with working in it (Bindel,  
53 2004; Grandy and Mavin, 2014; Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Wahab et al, 2011; Wesely, 2003).  
54 Lap dancers’ performance of aesthetic labour has also been highlighted (Mavin and Grandy,  
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3 2013), as has the demand for 'strategic flirting' (Deshotels and Forsyth, 2006), and the  
4 presentation of a reified feminine sexuality (Jackson, 2011). The embodiment of fantasy  
5 (Wood, 2000) and the ability to convincingly perform 'counterfeit intimacy' (Barton, 2007)  
6 has also been emphasized. Recent research has also provided insight into the techniques used  
7 by lap dancers to negotiate the ambiguous and often fluid boundaries characterising the lap  
8 dancing transaction (Wesely, 2003). Relatively neglected within research on lap dancing is a  
9 sustained, critical consideration of where customer expectations come from, how they are  
10 shaped, and what impact they might have on customer anticipation of the exchange  
11 relationship. Also relatively under-researched are the processes through which the demand  
12 for aesthetic labour, for strategic flirting and the negotiation of ambiguity and fluidity on the  
13 part of those working within the industry come to be organized aesthetically, that is, 'made to  
14 mean' what they do in Hancock's (2005) terms.

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23 Focusing on lived experiences of ambiguity and the negotiation of boundaries, Barton  
24 (2007) emphasizes that the adoption of a 'persona' within lap dancing interactions provides  
25 an important coping device to protect workers' own (out of work) identities, as they take on  
26 a different name and often also personality as part of their performance as what Wood  
27 (2000) calls 'fantastical actors'. Barton (2007) shows how this adoption of a lap-dancing  
28 persona allows dancers to perform a fantasy for customers in accordance with the latter's  
29 pre-conceived expectations about what the encounter is likely to involve. The latter is crucial  
30 to the performance of 'counterfeit intimacy' (Wood, 2000; cited in Barton, 2007). Being  
31 skilled in this performance requires dancers to be able to feign sexual desire and attraction to  
32 the customer. Sanders' (2005) emphasizes something similar in her study of sex workers  
33 who, she argues, produce a manufactured identity that allows them to construct a sexualized  
34 version of themselves that meets customer expectations. Through a similar process in the lap  
35 dancing industry, this enables the club to capitalize on the dancer's sexuality through the  
36 performance of aesthetically specific forms of archetypically feminine embodiment.

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46 In their study of the lap dancing industry, Mavin and Grandy (2013: 11) pay particular  
47 attention to physical appearance as a key element of selling lap dances, considering the  
48 significance of these aesthetic forms. Through interviews with lap dancers, they found that  
49 dancers increased their earnings by becoming skilled in performing a 'narrow depiction of  
50 femininity'. In particular, they found that dancers sought to embody the physical attributes  
51 that they had come to associate with an idealized feminine sexuality within the industry.  
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56 Their analysis focuses on the implications of this for dancers' preoccupations with body  
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3 management techniques such as changing outfits throughout the night, with monitoring their  
4 weight and physical fitness, and with managing aesthetic associations of the ageing process.  
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6 In this sense, Mavin and Grandy (2013) take the analysis of lap dancing work in an  
7 interesting direction, emphasizing the embodied performativity of lap dancers by illustrating  
8 the ways in which their work brings particular subjectivities into being as an active process.  
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10 In doing so, they open up important questions about how dancers become aware of these  
11 expectations, and interpolate them into their workplace personas, coming to embody them  
12 through their workplace interactions. They argue that the media plays an influential role in  
13 shaping idealized perceptions of the lap dancing industry (Grandy and Mavin, 2012), yet this  
14 theme remains relatively under-developed in the wider literature to date. Relatively little is  
15 therefore currently known about how, and indeed why, particular performances of sexualized  
16 personas come to be valued and deemed desirable within the industry. Grandy and Mavin  
17 (2012) suggest that occupational image is partly informed by the industry's media presence,  
18 emphasizing the importance of considering the broader social, symbolic context of lap  
19 dancing work, in order to understand how perceptions of the industry, and performances  
20 within it, come to take the form they do.  
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29 Research that has explored the interaction between customers and dancers has begun to  
30 highlight the ambiguity of the expected role of a lap dancer, particularly through discussions  
31 of boundaries within the industry (Barton, 2007; Wesely, 2003). So far, research has focused  
32 largely on physical boundaries. In particular, attention has been paid to the presumed fluidity  
33 of bodily boundaries (Wesely, 2003) as well as to the performance of intimacy during the  
34 transactional process (Barton, 2007; Deshotels and Forsyth, 2006). Implied in this research,  
35 but also yet to be explored in any sustained way, are how negotiations over bodily boundaries  
36 and displays of intimacy are shaped by expectations encoded into industry's advertising and  
37 marketing, into its virtual spaces, and into popular perceptions of what lap dancing work and  
38 the exchange relationship involves.  
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46 Pettinger's (2013) analysis of *Punternet*, a discussion forum documenting commercial sex  
47 encounters, highlights the importance of a critical, contextualized consideration of customer  
48 expectations and their implications for commercial sex encounters. Pettinger (2013) suggests  
49 that customers of sex workers expect or feel entitled to a 'good service', and that perceptions  
50 of what constitutes a quality service are framed very much by social and semiotic  
51 expectations of sex work as an aesthetic, emotional encounter. Perhaps not surprisingly,  
52 customers feel they have received a good service when workers are professional and  
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3 committed to pleasing them. While this provides important insight, *Punternet* is a very  
4 specific subscription forum; lap dancing club websites are arguably more widely accessible  
5 and ambiguous, more ‘mainstream’ (Bretners and Sanders, 2010; Hardy and Sanders, 2015),  
6 so that customer expectations are shaped more by implication and connotation than is the  
7 case in a setting such as *Punternet*. Developing an appreciation of how these connotations  
8 are communicated, and what impact they have, is therefore important to developing a more  
9 critical understanding of the organization of the lap dancing industry specifically, and of  
10 sexualized labour more generally. With this in mind, we now turn to outlining the semiotic  
11 approach we took to analysing lap dancing club websites.

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18 Methodology: ‘Uncovering the semiotic’ in the lap dancing industry

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20 As noted above, this paper draws from a wider ethnographic study of the lap dancing industry  
21 based in the South East of England. Data was collected and analysed from a total of nine lap  
22 dancing clubs that were selected on the basis of their geographical location (for practical  
23 reasons associated with the larger study). The research involved three dimensions of data  
24 collection: website analysis, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Our  
25 discussion here draws specifically on the data collected during the website analysis in order  
26 to explore how encoding a perception of ‘reasonable entitlement’ into the symbolic landscape  
27 (Gagliardi, 1990) of the lap dancing industry frames the organization of anticipation, or  
28 ‘generation of longing’ in Campbell’s terms, on which the industry depends. Specifically we  
29 consider what this means for those who work in the industry.

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37 In studying the meaning making processes through which anticipation is encoded into  
38 perceptions of reasonable entitlement, we took our methodological starting point from  
39 Hancock’s (2008) semiotic analysis of corporate artefacts. Following Hancock, we  
40 considered the relationship between signifiers (sensory artefacts such as pictures or words)  
41 and signifieds (the concepts denoted, and their wider connotations). We undertook this  
42 analysis within the context of the broader ‘critical hermeneutic framework’ (Morrow and  
43 Brown, 1994, cited in Hancock, 2005: 40) because, as Hancock puts it, without the culturally  
44 specific relationship between sign systems and their wider social settings ‘the sign would in  
45 effect be meaningless’. However, in order to look beyond simple iconic, indexical or  
46 symbolic associations, and to move into the realm of aesthetic meaning making, Hancock  
47 also emphasizes the importance of considering how certain constellations of signifiers work  
48 in association, through wider, rhetorical connotations, and we consider these in our analysis  
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3 as well, in order to explore the wider social, symbolic context of lap dancing work (Grandy  
4 and Mavin, 2012).  
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7 To consider the way in which websites contribute to the semiotic landscaping of anticipation  
8 in the lap dancing industry, we drew from Gagliardi's (1990) suggestion that landscaping can  
9 be understood through the examination of cultural artefacts, and from Hancock's (2005)  
10 emphasis on the analytical value of analysing constellations of signifiers using semiotic  
11 methods. To this end, we considered recurring signifiers, and their range of possible  
12 signifying effects by reflecting on their immediate denotations and broader cultural  
13 connotations in a total of nine corporate websites for lap dancing clubs. Our focus included  
14 themes such as colour, pattern and texture in visual imagery. Tactile fabrics and rich colours  
15 were widely used to connote intimacy and passion, as discussed below. As Beyes and De  
16 Cock (2017: 59) have noted, colour is an affective force that is 'often simply taken for  
17 granted in organizational life'. Focusing on colour and other aesthetic signifiers, we treated  
18 each of the nine individual websites we examined as an artefact, subjecting it to semiotic  
19 analysis before considering recurring semiotic themes that seemed to be present across the  
20 websites so that it was possible to build an understanding of the broader landscaping of the  
21 industry. In this sense, it was important to our approach not to isolate the websites from their  
22 wider cultural context. Lap dancing clubs do not exist or operate in a semiotic vacuum but  
23 against the broader cultural backdrop of the social meanings and associations of commercial  
24 sex, of masculinity and of heteronormativity. Of course as researchers, we ourselves are  
25 immersed in these wider meanings.  
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29 Although we endeavoured to take a critical, reflexive approach to analysing the websites,  
30 inevitably semiotics involves an element of situated, hermeneutic interpretation. This means  
31 that the analysis we present largely reflects our own assumptions about the meanings denoted  
32 or connoted by particular images or textual references. We tried to counter any limiting  
33 effects of this by making the analysis as dialogical as possible, between ourselves and with  
34 academic colleagues, as well as lap dancers interviewed in the wider study. Another issue  
35 arising from our approach is that although we are arguing that lap dancing club websites are  
36 part of a wider cultural landscaping of the industry through which expectations are produced  
37 and circulated in a broad set of discursive practices and effects, we limit our analysis here (as  
38 noted above) only to the websites. However, as noted above, a specific aim of the research  
39 was to explore how the websites construct and shape the expectations of the dancer-customer  
40 interaction. This means that within our analysis, particular emphasis was placed on how the  
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3 exchange relationship is ‘made to mean’ on the websites, for instance through textual, visual  
4 (and in some instances) sonic references to the clubs and the services they offer, as well as to  
5 the lap dancers themselves. While the websites are by no means the only contributor to the  
6 landscaping of the industry, we would therefore argue that they are an important one, namely  
7 as a cultural reference point connecting anticipation, entitlement and experience. This latter  
8 point draws on Campbell’s (2005: 93) idea that combined ‘fragments’ derived from media  
9 sources are often cited in the construction of consumer fantasies and anticipatory pleasures.  
10 His account pre-dates the development of the virtual sex industry (Hearn, 2014; Pettinger,  
11 2014) and of the ubiquity of corporate websites as reference points for consumer choice, and  
12 so in this sense, we hope to update aspects of his analysis with this in mind.  
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19 All of the nine websites we analysed included a permanent recruitment section for lap  
20 dancers, a theme to which we return below. But for now, it is important to note that the  
21 presence of these sections, combined with the general advertising of the clubs themselves,  
22 suggests that the websites were intended to be ‘read’ and engaged with by actual and  
23 potential customers, as well as by dancers.  
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28 Our analysis of the websites consisted of identifying broad themes that emerged from the  
29 website as a written and visual (and in some examples, audible) text. These were discerned  
30 both through reading ‘with’ the text and sceptically, in order to draw out underlying sets of  
31 denotations and broader connotations. The latter refer to the wider but socially situated  
32 cultural associations of the constellations of signifiers such as colour, texture, phrasing and  
33 so on. Semiotic analysis was used to decode signifiers and their associated meaning  
34 (Barthes, 1977). Following Barthes (1977) and Hancock (2005), this involved a first stage of  
35 ‘translating’ the visual or textual symbols on individual websites into thematic concepts that  
36 we used to convey their meanings. For example, we took leopard skin printed fabric to  
37 denote a reference to animalistic sexuality, taking the wider connotations of a woman  
38 wearing leopard print underwear or a mini dress to be suggestive of women’s sexual agency  
39 and availability. This was followed by cross-website comparisons of the themes in order to  
40 identify those that recurred across websites and hence, we would suggest, contribute to a  
41 wider landscaping of the industry more generally. Examples of the latter include a  
42 recurrence of the colour red, or textual references to ‘VIP experiences’, both themes we  
43 return to below. By connecting semiotic themes discerned on individual websites as well as  
44 those recurring across websites this ‘first order’ analysis of thematic concepts evolved into a  
45 ‘second order’ analysis through which the theoretical concepts discussed below were  
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3 discerned. We give examples of the latter in our discussion below, and show how they  
4 enabled us to connect and begin to make sense of the themes identified.  
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6 As suggested above, the analysis was undertaken dialogically, between the three researchers  
7 working on the project, to make the analysis as interactive and reflexive as we could.  
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9 Emergent interpretations were discussed with lap dancers during interviews (which formed  
10 part of the wider study), and with other academics in seminars and at conferences. This  
11 wider discussion also helped to contribute to making the analysis as inter-subjective as  
12 possible, taking account of different viewpoints and cultural associations.  
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17 Findings: Encoding ‘prescription’ and ‘possibility’ in lap dancing  
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19 Our semiotic analysis of the club websites shows how the industry is underpinned by  
20 connotations of both prescription and possibility. On the one hand, websites are dominated by  
21 prescriptive images of idealized sexual desire, and of dancers that embody these  
22 prescriptions. Simultaneously, websites cultivate a landscape of possibility through the use of  
23 deliberate ambiguity surrounding the nature of the exchange relationship within the industry.  
24 Customers are seemingly enticed with the open-ended promise that, within the clubs,  
25 anything is possible, particularly for those customers who pay extra for what are ubiquitously  
26 referred to as ‘VIP experiences’. Drawing on examples from our analysis, it is this blend of  
27 prescription and possibility that we turn to next.  
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### 34 *Prescription*

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36 The lap dancing club websites that we considered (which we refer to below using  
37 pseudonyms) contribute to a landscaping of expectations within the industry through the  
38 semiotic staging of very particular sexualized imagery. Through this imagery, dancers and  
39 customers might come to understand what they could ‘reasonably expect’, in Hochschild’s  
40 (1983) terms, and what may be anticipated by customers, within the context of the exchange  
41 relationship. Most notably perhaps, lap dancing club websites are replete with images of  
42 toned, youthful, slim bodies. Dancers are often depicted in ‘lounging’ or reclining poses in  
43 their underwear. For example, an image on the ‘Elegance’ website shows a young, topless  
44 woman with blond hair, wearing fishnet stockings lying on a cream lace covered bed,  
45 holding the receiver of a ‘candlestick’ style gold-plated telephone in one hand, and a  
46 casually extended, gold cigarette holder in the other. Taken together, these signs work to  
47 emphasize the woman’s toned skin, her apparently young, fit body and her sexual  
48 availability (signified by the reclining open pose, and the positioning of the woman on the  
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3 bed), at the same time as connoting opulence (through, for instance, the rich, sensual fabrics  
4 and colours, including the gold telephone and cigarette holder). The woman's sexual allure is  
5 suggested by her stockings, her innocence by the lace textured, cream fabric; taken together  
6 and combined with her setting and pose, both connote her sexual availability, imbuing her  
7 with the sense of 'promise' referred to above. Adding to these connotations of implied  
8 sexual innocence on her part is that her relaxed pose seems to suggest that she is unaware  
9 that she is being watched, adding a voyeuristic dimension to the imagery. In combination  
10 with the implicitly phallic signifiers of the telephone mouthpiece and the elongated cigarette  
11 holder, this 'constellation of signifiers' (Hancock, 2005) suggests sexual availability and  
12 voyeuristic desire as the basis of any potential exchange.  
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19 While the aesthetic on 'Spirit's website is quite different, the whole constellation of  
20 signifiers has a similar effect. Unlike the sensual lighting on the 'Elegance' website, one of  
21 the pages on the 'Spirit' website shows a woman against a backdrop that appears to be lit by  
22 means of dimmed, fluorescent or specialist lighting that gives the whole picture a clinical,  
23 shadow-like tone. The image depicts a topless woman wearing over the knee, stiletto-heeled  
24 boots. She is kneeling down but elongating her upper body by holding her arms above her  
25 head and posing with her legs slightly apart. Interestingly, this image crops the dancer's head  
26 out of the picture; in combination with the cold hue, this serves to dehumanise her while  
27 simultaneously emphasizing her sexual availability through the wide legged pose. Through  
28 quite different aesthetic signifiers, the broader connotations of both images convey idealized  
29 prescriptions of very particular body types ('this is what a lap dancer looks like'), at the  
30 same time as emphasizing the dancers' sexual availability that directly addresses the  
31 potential customer ('this is what a lap dancer might do for/with you').  
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41 Taken together, websites such as these portray a relatively narrow range of body types and  
42 of gendered sexuality that serve to reproduce prescriptive images of sexuality in the industry  
43 and simultaneously landscape customer expectations of the exchange relationship in terms of  
44 both what a dancer might be expected to look like, and what kind of interaction might be  
45 anticipated.  
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50 As well as these general images, recruitment sections, which were permanent features on the  
51 websites that we analysed, also play an important role in shaping perceptions of idealized  
52 sexuality and body image in the industry. They do so by perpetuating idealized norms  
53 governing who might be perceived as suitable for lap dancing work, largely aesthetically, but  
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3 also in relation to an implied capacity to embody the ‘promised’ sexual availability referred  
4 to above. To illustrate, the recruitment pages feature recurring images of highly sexualized  
5 women with particularly youthful, toned physiques often dressed in bikinis or lingerie.  
6 Applications to become a dancer tend to require a close up facial photograph and a full-length  
7 body shot of the applicant in a bikini or underwear. Some websites include examples of  
8 photographs, establishing the normative parameters around what is seemingly expected.  
9 Thus, the implication is that you need not apply unless your body looks a particular way and  
10 falls within the prescriptive expectations signified by the imagery on the recruitment pages,  
11 and websites more broadly (all of which customers and the general public have access to).  
12 Contributing to the constellations of signifiers that characterize the industry, and  
13 marginalising those who are not consistent with its normative expectations, is the request on  
14 many websites for measurements such as bust, hips, waist and cup size. In addition to these  
15 physical parameters, certain personality traits are specified; on the ‘All Things Nice’ website,  
16 for example, the recruitment section states that potential applicants should be ‘energetic and  
17 enthusiastic’. Alongside images such as those described above, the general effect of this text  
18 is to connote an expectation that applicants must be youthful, fit and sexually available.  
19 Consequently, this closes off those who do not fit with the physical ideals perpetuated  
20 through the website imagery, as well as feeding into the aesthetic expectations that customers  
21 might form regarding the visual nature of the exchange, and the kind of interaction they  
22 might reasonably expect.  
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36 The websites signified sexual availability in three main ways that we identified. First,  
37 through a variety of poses, including facial expressions, dancers’ bodies connote sexual  
38 desire and availability, portraying the kind of ‘fantastical acting’ that Wood (2000)  
39 describes. For example, the ‘Stars’ website that we examined showed a dancer smiling  
40 suggestively whilst holding a lolly, surrounded by sweets. Arguably, this equates her with  
41 the lolly itself, as a ‘sweet’ treat that is pleasurable to consume (but of no ‘nutritional’ value  
42 or substance), and with an object that can be tasted and licked. The latter has wider  
43 connotations of sexual intimacy, particularly with the lolly serving as a signifier of oral sex.  
44 The lolly also connotes, perhaps more ambiguously, a child-like sexual innocence, with  
45 implications of youthful if not virginal sexuality presenting the customer with the fantasy  
46 that he might be the first and only ‘one’ she makes herself available to; both the dancer and  
47 the encounter presented as being full of ‘promise’.  
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3 Second, many of the images we examined portrayed the dancers' bodies in powerful, yet  
4 available stances suggesting their own sexual desire, and positioning the customers as the  
5 ones who will be able to satisfy this desire. This was emphasized by the perspective or  
6 position from which photographs seem to have been taken, possibly signifying the viewpoint  
7 of the potential customer, looking up at dancers on the stage. As an example, one particular  
8 photographic image we came across, on the 'Elegance' website, appeared to have been shot  
9 from underneath the dancer's body so that the perspective served to elongate her legs,  
10 making her appear physically strong and seductively powerful but also sexually available.  
11 The combined effect of the positioning of her body and the perspective from which she was  
12 viewed suggested that any possible future encounter with her might be full of the afore-  
13 mentioned 'promise'.  
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22 Third, many of the website images showed off the pole skills of the dancers, depicting them  
23 in upside down split stances, demonstrating their athleticism. Arguably, this simultaneously  
24 exhibits their bodies as powerful but also ready for (implied) male consumption, as both  
25 desiring and receptive. One particular example on the 'All Things Nice' website emphasized  
26 this: the black and white image, somewhat connoting a human 'hot dog' depicts a highly  
27 toned woman with long blond hair, backed up against a phallic pole that is sandwiched  
28 between her naked buttocks. Her flesh appears to be enveloping the pole, soft in contrast to  
29 the hard steel, with connotations of anal sex. She appears to be wearing only a tightfitting  
30 black sports vest and thigh-high striped-top sports socks. On the woman's right buttock is a  
31 faded, heart shaped tattoo. The latter adds an interesting dimension to this image that could  
32 perhaps be taken as a contrived symbol of the dancer's affection for customers (with tattoos  
33 traditionally depicting names and hearts of loved ones to whom one declares a permanent,  
34 embodied commitment), or as a branding of property (in a more animalistic sense). That the  
35 tattoo is faded further suggests that perhaps the dancer has a tattoo that includes someone's  
36 name or that it is simply a 'personal' marker, and concealing make-up has been used to blur  
37 this, in order to maintain the illusion that she is available (only) to the customer, adopting a  
38 persona to meet his expectation of perceived entitlement and counterfeit intimacy (Wood,  
39 2000). Another connotation of the tattoo could be that the dancer's body is 'fading' as in, she  
40 is jaded, used up, hinting at an underlying acknowledgement that the intimacy on offer is  
41 actually faked. However these different meanings (and others that may not have occurred to  
42 us) might be understood, taken together, these various signifiers suggest that customers can  
43 expect an impressively athletic performance from the dancer they might reasonably expect to  
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3 encounter, whose body again, they might reasonably expect will be young, fit and toned. At  
4 the same time, the connotations of the pole itself suggest that it would not be unreasonable  
5 for a customer to anticipate the possibility of sexual availability and intimacy through the  
6 implied associations of the phallic signification of the pole itself. The image, like those  
7 considered above, is highly prescriptive at the same time as being semiotically suggestive.  
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12 In these images and many others, dancers were positioned as products to be purchased. We  
13 found an interesting example of this on ‘Spirit’s website, which is set up almost like a  
14 computer game; the images are quite heavily modified and there is a list of dancers’ vital  
15 statistics, matching them with their ideal man (again, conveying heteronormative  
16 assumptions). Their favourite item of clothing is also specified, contributing to their  
17 aesthetic portrayal as gaming avatars. All images of women on this particular website are  
18 faceless or silhouetted, so that the dancers are positioned as de-humanized characters in a  
19 game. The connotation in terms of the exchange relationship is that the dancers are  
20 aesthetically configured ‘characters’ with whom customers can ‘play’ as they might in a  
21 game. The construction of lap dancing club websites in this way allows customers to view  
22 and develop preferences for particular women, or ‘types’ of dancers, who they might  
23 potentially interact with within the club setting. Yet at the same time the range and scope of  
24 these types is relatively narrow, limited to only a heteronormatively prescriptive selection of  
25 idealized physiques and characteristics. Arguably, taken together, this perpetuates both a  
26 narrow sense of what an idealized dancer looks and behaves like, as well as reinforcing a  
27 perceived sense of entitlement that customers could recreate within the club setting during  
28 the process of selecting dancers to buy dances from. This consumption expectation is shaped  
29 also by a second, related, theme that recurred in our analysis of the websites, namely the  
30 ‘promise’ of open-ended possibility attached to the service encounter.  
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#### 44 *Possibility*

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46 As discussed above, the websites entice customers by shaping perceptions of their possible  
47 encounter with a lap dancer in a number of specific ways including implied proximity and  
48 anticipatory intimacy, suggesting that dancers will discern customers’ specific desires and  
49 work out how to satisfy them within the terms of the exchange relationship.  
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53 Taking the first of these two themes – implied proximity – encoded into the websites were  
54 an apparent set of expectations shaping what customers might anticipate from their potential  
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3 interactions with dancers. For example, the experience was described on 'Spirit's website as  
4 'an up close and personal experience you will never forget', and on 'Sinful's website as  
5 'closer and more personal, up close and personal, very *very* personal'. The use of terms such  
6 as 'closer', 'personal', 'up close' and the repetition of 'very' for added emphasis all suggests  
7 that a sexualized, physical proximity is possible during the exchange between customers and  
8 dancers, a suggestion that plays an important role in shaping expectations surrounding  
9 interactions within the industry, and of the service encounter more specifically. This is  
10 because this type of language holds the implication that boundaries within, and the terms  
11 surrounding the exchange, are potentially fluid and open to negotiation during the encounter.  
12 As well as proffered sexual intimacy, these terms also connote a more inter-personal  
13 connection, suggesting a close bond between customer and dancer, echoing Campbell's  
14 (2005: 77) observation that 'pleasure is sought via emotional and not merely sensory  
15 stimulation'.

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17 Along with the implied promise of intimacy in terms of physical proximity, ambiguity was  
18 further enhanced through the implied level of commitment the dancers would have to  
19 anticipating and satisfying their customers' (sexual) needs. For example, the 'All Things  
20 Nice' website repeated the phrase 'we will cater to all your needs' which suggested there  
21 was no limit to the lengths that would be gone to, to please customers. The use of the term  
22 'catering', deriving from the Old French 'acater' (to buy) suggests a servile relationship  
23 within which appetites would be satisfied through the purchasing of not only the service  
24 encounter, but access to the dancer's body as the object of consumption. Consequently, the  
25 use of language in this way provides customers with a particular set of expectations of the  
26 service that they can reasonably expect before they enter the club which combined with the  
27 kinds of images referred to above (for example, of the dancer sucking the lollipop) to  
28 landscape customer expectations of the service encounter in a very particular way. Due to  
29 the nature of the industry, the responsibility to respond to and manage these expectations  
30 might in turn, be assumed to fall on the dancers. Dancers have to negotiate managers'  
31 expectations that they will adhere to club regulations (and therefore keep within the terms  
32 specified by licensing agreements – Hubbard and Colosi, 2012; Colosi, 2013), but also give  
33 enough to customers to keep them spending money.

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35 Our analysis suggested that the concept of the 'VIP experience' was an important semiotic  
36 mechanism, or aesthetic medium in Hancock's (2005) terms, through which this negotiation  
37 was played out. All of the nine websites that we analysed promoted or made reference to

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3 VIP experiences, areas and/or dances. For example, on ‘The Den’s’ website the VIP lounge  
4 was advertised as providing ‘special treatment’, implying that a more exciting or intimate  
5 interaction might occur in this area. Overall, the implication of VIP experiences across the  
6 websites was similar - that paying extra for the VIP treatment meant that in some respect  
7 customers would get better treatment, where ‘better’ is taken to refer to more intimate,  
8 proximal. The connotations are that within these encounters, as Campbell (2005: 84,  
9 *emphasis added*) describes it, the chance remains that ‘something new and exciting *could*  
10 *happen at any time*’ so that customers are enticed by this open ended possibility.  
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16 This suggests to potential customers that, because they are paying more money, they can  
17 reasonably expect a ‘better’ experience. Crucially, the parameters of what ‘better’ might  
18 mean are not specified but are left open, leaving customers to develop their own expectations  
19 of what might be reasonably anticipated. Once again the wider implication of this is that the  
20 need to negotiate this ambiguity – the experiential ‘gap’ between the promise and its  
21 realization within the context of a commercial transaction - is likely to fall on the dancers,  
22 making it necessary for them to become highly skilled in doing so as a vital part of their  
23 work.  
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30 The overall landscaping of the exchange relationship therefore appears to be underpinned by  
31 a deliberately encoded ambiguity that, in turn, frames and maintains the exchange  
32 relationship as one of infinite possibility, in contrast to, but crucially alongside (as part of the  
33 same constellations of signifiers) highly prescriptive images of the bodies of lap dancers.  
34 Through the exclusion of specific details of the exchange relationship such as the rules of the  
35 club (for instance, ‘no touching’), the customer, or viewer of the website, is left to anticipate  
36 the terms of the exchange relationship by effectively filling in the gaps and building up their  
37 own image of what the encounter might involve, particularly that of the VIP experience.  
38 Encoding ambiguity into the implied terms of the exchange relationship means that customers  
39 can slot themselves in to an open-ended series of connotations shaping what they might  
40 anticipate if/when they enter the lap dancing club. The deliberate ambiguity surrounding the  
41 exchange relationship that is present on the club websites contrasts with the stringent  
42 guidelines set out in licensing regulations (see Hubbard and Colosi, 2012; Colosi, 2013). Yet  
43 the websites set up an enticement to touch through the presence of recurring suggestive and  
44 ambiguous signifiers combined with images of dancers’ sexual availability, despite formal  
45 no-touch rules being in place according to these licensing conditions.  
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3 This ambiguity was not portrayed simply through the language and imagery landscaping the  
4 exchange relationship, or through the depiction of dancers' bodies, however, but also  
5 through the ways in which the settings of the lap dancing venues were depicted aesthetically,  
6 including by means of the use of sound to accompany website images and text. For example,  
7 the club décor that was portrayed on the websites added to the suggestion of infinite  
8 possibility. This possibility tended to be enhanced through portrayals of colour, texture and  
9 patterns in the décor that, when taken together, produced an atmospheric image of ambiguity  
10 and possibility. Enhancing these visual constellations (Hancock, 2005), clubs such as 'Spirit'  
11 also had rhythmic soundtracks on their websites, connoting pounding movements,  
12 accompanied by (seemingly pleasurable) female moans and groans.  
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19 The use of colours such as reds, golds, blacks and purples in the décor hold associations with  
20 opulence and indulgence as well as mystery and secrecy (Edwards-Wright, 2011; Morton,  
21 2016); all of the colours, or combinations of them, were prevalent across the websites.  
22 Similarly, baroque style patterns, along with velvet drapes and images of chandeliers (in the  
23 case of 'Champagne', for instance) all combined to enhance a 'boudoir', bordello-style  
24 aesthetic, emphasizing lap dancing venues as simultaneously theatrical and glamorous  
25 spaces, but also located in the margins of society in some kind of (manufactured)  
26 bacchanalian underworld (Shteir, 2004).  
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33 Discussion: Landscaping anticipation and 'promissory' exchange  
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35 Gagliardi (1990) introduces the term 'landscaping' to describe the symbolically staged,  
36 multi-levelled backdrop compelling perceptions of, and behaviours within, a particular  
37 organizational context or setting. This concept highlights the importance of understanding  
38 the processes through which material organizational artefacts, such as bodies or in this case  
39 depictions of bodies on corporate websites, have the capacity to shape particular  
40 organizational interactions and associations. The findings discussed above show how,  
41 through a combination of prescription and possibility, specific expectations of the role of a  
42 lap dancer are encoded within the organizational landscape (Gagliardi, 1990) of the industry.  
43 Specifically, the imagery used on the websites, as discussed above, constructs lap dancers as  
44 displaying a particularly narrow and heightened form of sexuality, one that conforms to a  
45 prescriptive body shape and size embedded in the landscape of the industry. As well as this  
46 narrow aesthetic prescription, the websites were underpinned by possibility or, in other  
47 words, deliberate ambiguity, particularly surrounding the exchange relationship in the  
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3 industry. The landscaping of both prescription and possibility has implications for how  
4 customers perceive the industry, and what they are reasonably entitled to within it. For  
5 example, the highly prescriptive, narrow forms of femininity portrayed on the websites  
6 provide customers with a clear picture of the types of women they can expect to interact with  
7 in the lap dancing club setting, as well as the types of interaction they might reasonably  
8 anticipate. As described above, this occurs largely through the repetition of particular images  
9 of dancers as well as the language used to describe the possible range of interactions  
10 customers might expect to have with them. In combination, these signify to customers that  
11 they might reasonably anticipate (i) a particular aesthetic experience; (ii) an emotionally  
12 attentive connection, and (iii) a heightened level of sexual intimacy. If not an authentic  
13 experience of these phenomena, the customer might reasonably expect that, at the very least,  
14 the dancer will work to conceal the extent to which these forms of proximity – aesthetic,  
15 emotional and sexual – are perpetually elusive, as the interaction is (semiotically,  
16 simultaneously) loaded with ‘promise’ through a distinctive combination of prescription *and*  
17 possibility.

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19 This means that, in contrast to this prescriptive form of perceived entitlement, exactly how  
20 dancers will accommodate customer desires or needs during the exchange relationship is left  
21 ambiguous, or with many potential possibilities. As discussed above, this creates an  
22 incomplete picture or fragmented story, to borrow from Campbell (2005) for the customer.  
23 This is one that ‘he’ (for the range of phallic signifiers suggests that the customer is firmly  
24 positioned as male) is invited (enticed) to complete for himself in order to develop an  
25 anticipatory sense of what can be reasonably expected to take place within the terms of the  
26 exchange. In turn, this suggests that dancers have to negotiate these expectations against the  
27 organizational backdrop of licensing regulations, and in doing so, perform intensive levels of  
28 physical, emotional, sexualized and aesthetic labour. In Campbell’s (2005: 90) terms, this  
29 means that dancers have to ‘continually strive to close the gap between imagined and  
30 experienced pleasures’.

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32 Our analysis adds to the growing body of literature concerned with symbolism and meaning  
33 making in organizations by illustrating some of the ways in which websites produce and  
34 reproduce cultural norms (Acord, 2010) and deliver symbolic messages (Ahn and Jacobs,  
35 2017) that value particular ways of being, and consequently devalue others (Cutcher et al,  
36 2017). It extends this research by demonstrating, using the lap dancing industry as a notable  
37 example, that the production and reproduction of such organizational values and norms has  
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3 implications for how particular forms of labour come to be understood and performed. In  
4 this case the deliberate ambiguity underpinning the lap dancing industry intensifies the work  
5 dancers are required to do to manage this organizational landscape of prescription and  
6 possibility.  
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10 The corporate landscape of the lap dancing industry produces and reproduces expectations  
11 for both the dancer, in so far as it constitutes how a dancer can/should 'be' within the  
12 industry, and for the customer, in terms of reasonable entitlement. These perceptions are  
13 intertwined such that the dancer is expected meet the prescriptive demands landscaping the  
14 industry to become the 'product' that the potential customer is expecting. At the same time,  
15 the ambiguity of the incomplete picture set up by the websites means that the labour the  
16 dancers must engage in to negotiate this ambiguity intensifies, increasing both the demand  
17 for sexualized labour and the level of occupational risk for the dancers. The latter relates  
18 particularly to the tension between implied intimacy and 'no touch' rules within clubs and  
19 licensing regulations.  
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#### 26 Concluding thoughts

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29 Our analysis has highlighted processes of prescription and possibility that, in combination,  
30 encode a powerful organization of anticipation into the lap dancing industry, and, in  
31 particular, the exchange relationship underpinning it. We might surmise that this organization  
32 of anticipation constitutes an important feature of the semiotic landscape shaping exchange  
33 relationships within other settings and sectors that are part of what Sanders (2008) calls the  
34 'shadow' sex industry, and which, she has argued, is rapidly becoming a feature of the more  
35 'mainstream' economy (see also Brents and Sanders, 2010).  
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41 On the one hand, websites (re)produce highly prescriptive images of feminine sexuality,  
42 defining a narrow range of body images that are commercially viable, and available, within  
43 the industry. On the other, deliberate ambiguity is used to suggest endless possibility within  
44 the exchange relationships involved. Taken together, this blend of prescription and possibility  
45 contributes to the organization of anticipation underpinning the industry by framing  
46 expectations of what customers are reasonably entitled to during the transaction. This means  
47 that customers have a clear idea of the body images and personas of dancers they can expect  
48 to 'consume' in the club setting, but also a relatively open-ended understanding of what the  
49 exchange relationship might involve. This highlights both the importance of virtual corporate  
50 spaces in landscaping interactive service exchanges, as well as the intensification resulting  
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3 from connotations of ambiguity within these spaces, requiring service providers to reconcile  
4 anticipation and experience within the exchange relationship. We have considered the ways  
5 in which websites contribute to this intensification; further research is needed to understand  
6 more about how dancers and customers perceive and experience the combined – exploitative  
7 and objectifying - effects of this. As Campbell (2005) and others have emphasized, unlimited  
8 desire and open-ended anticipation carries with it scope for a ‘practically limitless  
9 exploitation’ (Böhme, 2003: 81). As an industry premised upon what he calls ‘the generation  
10 of longing’ (Campbell, 2005: 85), lap dancing is arguably a particularly important sector of  
11 work in which to understand, and address, this exploitative capacity.  
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19 As noted above, much of the lap dancing literature to date has emphasized the aesthetic  
20 labour and body work that dancers have to undertake in order to embody distilled forms of  
21 femininity, as well as the strategies dancers engage in to negotiate boundaries within the  
22 industry. Our analysis contributes to this literature by emphasizing how the industry is  
23 landscaped in such a way that the terms of the exchange relationship are both prescriptive and  
24 encoded with possibility; customers are implicitly ‘on a promise’. This means that dancers  
25 must negotiate the implications of this ‘promise’ that serves to organize anticipation within  
26 the industry, and therefore their work.  
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33 This highlights the importance of corporate websites as virtual spaces that landscape  
34 expectations of exchange relationships. While our focus has been on the lap dancing industry,  
35 we have sought to contribute to the growing body of literature on semiotics and meaning  
36 making more generally, showing how more research is needed into understanding the  
37 organization of anticipation within intensively interactive and highly aestheticized service  
38 encounters premised upon ‘promissory’ terms of exchange.  
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34 <sup>i</sup> Lap dancing is a sexualized form of striptease dance performed in lap dancing clubs. In  
35 the UK, these clubs are licensed as Sexual Entertainment Venues (SEVs) under the  
36 Policing and Crime Act (2009). Despite the ambiguity surrounding the exchange  
37 relationship within the industry, the licensing conditions of SEV's have clear guidelines  
38 that shape interactions within the clubs. Although these conditions vary by local  
39 authority, a fairly ubiquitous licensing condition is that there will be no touching  
40 between the dancer and customer other than shaking hands when they meet and  
41 holding hands to lead a customer to a private dance area (Brighton & Hove City Council,  
42 2010).  
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45 <sup>ii</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28407999>  
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