“Fun, Fitness, Fantasy”: Consuming Pole Dancing Classes as an “Empowering” Gendered Leisure Practice

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Abstract: This article examines the growing popularity of pole dancing classes as an "empowering" leisure activity for women, which can be seen as part of the broader consumer trend of women asserting their sexual assertiveness through the purchasing of "sexualized" commodities. Pole dancing's association with the erotic labour of exotic dancers, however, causes a tension between women's claims to empowerment through pole dancing and their dismissal of exotic dance as an exploitative occupation. I argue that the "empowering" potential of pole dancing classes is limited because it can only be understood by fixing the identities and subjectivities of exotic dancers as transgressive "others", which I explore through a variety of consumption theories. On the other hand, pole dancing studios can differ dramatically in their views towards exotic dancers and strip clubs. I conclude that further research needs to be done in order to understand these complexities and seek out a way for pole dancing to be less exclusive and exploitative as a consumption practice.

Introduction

Enjoy participating in the newest dance/exercise activity in a private studio, with like-minded women who want a fitness/dance alternative to regular exercise programs being offered; PLUS allows you to explore your sensuality and be the goddess that you are! The clothes don't come off, but the inches can! Not a spectator activity. ([http://www.studiosintheexchange.com/dancen.htm]: 2011)

Fascination does not equal cultural acceptance. (Egan 2006:2010)

Pole dancing classes have grown in popularity over the past 10 years as a fitness option for women, often offered at local gyms or pole dancing studios around North America, Australia and the UK, along with other more established fitness classes such as aerobics and yoga (Holland 2009). However, pole dancing lessons are undeniably distinct from these other forms of workouts because of the pole’s symbolic association with exotic dance, an occupation which is often constructed as exploitative (or risqué at best) through media and popular discourse.

In this paper I argue that women’s consumption of pole dancing classes is a form of “feminized” gendered leisure that fits into a broader discussion of post-modern feminist practices where women are seeking empowerment through the purchase of “sexy” goods and services in what has been termed the “sexualization of culture”, or even more blantly, “striptease culture” (Roach 2007). Although there has been very little research on the women who consume these classes, data from several of these studies (Holland 2009, 2010, Whitehead and Kurz 2009) show how the issue of female “empowerment” is constantly discussed as a consequence of attending pole dancing classes. However, these researchers have discovered that feelings of empowerment experienced by participants were problematized by their view of exotic dance as an undesirable, degrading, and stigmatized career; in addition to their acute awareness of the public view of pole
dancing’s association with commercial sex work.

Several questions arise from this conundrum and will be addressed throughout this essay; how do women that attend pole dancing classes resolve contradictions between claims to empowerment through this practice and their dismissal of exotic dance as an exploitative profession? Why is pole dancing considered empowering and by (for) whom?

Although Holland (2010) attempts to answer these questions in her book *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*, I find her analysis lacking. Although it addresses claims to empowerment as potentially problematic for the women who participate in pole dancing classes, it fails to adequately engage with how these practices might negatively affect other groups of women, namely exotic dancers, and its tendency to exclude non-white, and/or non-heterosexual women. Thus, lastly, I argue that the empowerment offered to women through the consumption of pole dancing lessons may be limited, not because, as Holland (2010) argues, it is associated with a career that caters to heterosexual men’s fantasies, but because of its potential to further stigmatize, exclude, and stereotype women who actually work as exotic dancers. I will explore this claim through a variety of consumption theories, beginning with a discussion of pole dancing’s position within gendered leisure and the “sexualization” of culture.

**Gendered Leisure and the Sexualization of Culture**

*No longer is seediness ugly, it is now a sign of authenticity* (Zukin 2008:727)

*All the world’s a strip club* (Roach 2007:100)

Men and women may spend their time and money on a variety of leisure practices, however the types of practices they engage in, the space in which these activities take place, as well as the free time and access to funds required can differ dramatically by gender (Aitchison 2003), and, I would add, by sexual orientation. By this definition, I argue that engagement in pole dancing classes is a gendered leisure practice because the classes are taken predominantly by (heterosexual) women in a female dominated environment (Holland (2009) noted that most pole dancing studios did not allow men on the premises, which was confirmed by my own perusal of some local pole dancing studio’s websites). Furthermore, I contend that this practice can be equated with (heterosexual) men’s attendance at strip clubs as a gendered leisure practice- or what Frank (2002) would call a “masculinizing practice” defined as “practices that are governed by a gender regime, embedded in social relations, and work to produce masculinities in particular settings and by certain institutions” (20). According to this definition, we could also call engagement in pole dancing classes a “feminizing” practice because they work to reify a certain type of heterosexual femininity and offer a gendered setting in which this particular femininity can be enacted. Therefore, both of these practices could be defined as specific types of leisure that are not only gendered but *sexualized*, or sexualized gendered leisure.

It is imperative to locate this type of consumption in a specific time and place because both are relatively recent entrants to the market, with strip clubs emerging in their present form sometime in the 1970’s (Frank 2002) while pole dancing lessons began proliferating in the early 2000’s (Whitehead and Kurz 2009). During this time period, the media began heralding the advent of a new type of sexualized
consumer culture, or what Roach (2007) identifies as “sex positive capitalism”, where women were beginning to flaunt their (hetero) sexuality and assertiveness through the purchase of “sexy” commodities like thongs and sex toys while re-constituting this type of consumption as a post-modern feminist practice (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010b). This “sex positive capitalism” can also be located in an even broader discourse which emphasizes choice and democratization in consumer culture in general, which Featherstone (1987) describes as “moving towards a society without fixed status groups in which the adoption of styles of life (manifest in choice of clothes, leisure activities, consumer goods, bodily dispositions) which are fixed to specific groups have been surpassed” (55).

While Featherstone illustrates some important changes in consumer culture, a major flaw is that he does not recognize gender as a possible “fixed status group”, which is problematic in this discussion, as it is quite obvious that leisure and consumption practices are highly gendered. Indeed, in Evans et. al (2010b) study of women’s negotiation of the sex shop space, the women interviewed wondered why there were not similar sex shop spaces in visible places like shopping malls where men would feel comfortable, yet at the same time also recognized that men who were viewed entering sex shops would probably be seen as “seedy”. Conversely, however, their own use of sex shops as women was identified as “empowering”. Taken together with the emergence of strip clubs marketed towards heterosexual men, and pole dancing classes for women, consumer culture does not seem to be heading towards equal access for certain spaces of consumption as Featherstone (1987) would have us believe.

In terms of the sexualization of culture, feminist critiques have tended to divide into two camps, with some arguing that purchasing sexualized commodities can be empowering because women are taking ownership of their sexuality, while others claim that this still promotes a heteronormative (and neo-liberal) view of female sexuality and therefore excludes certain bodies from this potentially empowering act (Evans et al. 2010a). These “empowering” practices are stratified by social class, limiting the engagement in these activities to certain women with the time and money required as an investment. Leisure time, and what is done with it, according to Bourdieu (1984), is a part of an individual’s class habitus, and in the case of pole dancing lessons, most likely restricted to the middle classes.

Holland’s (2009, 2010) interviews with pole dancing women reveal some of the time and money constraints they faced in attending their lessons, especially because the classes were significantly more expensive than a gym membership. However, the extra expense was justified because “you have a lot of fun and it is interesting (Lilia)” (Holland 2010:114). For Bourdieu (1984), this would be an example of classed leisure; however he does not address how access to leisure is limited by gender, in which women could be identified as a less privileged class. Holland (2009) elaborates on this by interviewing women about how they found the time to attend pole dancing lessons (or indeed, probably any leisure activity) and discovered that they had to contend with issues of family responsibility and childcare which were usually seen by the women’s partners as their responsibility.

Of course, pole dancing isn’t just any leisure activity because it is sexualized and cannot escape associations with strip clubs. It is here where Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of class habitus on its own becomes inadequate in describing women’s choice to
attend pole dancing lessons. Although it is mainly middle class women participating in them, they are learning the dance moves and skills of a job that employs socially marginalized women, which could be seen as an example of the societal move from elitism towards cultural “omnivorousness”, where the upper and middle classes are “more likely to be involved in a wide range of low-status activities” (Peterson and Kern 1996:900). Cultural omnivorousness can be understood as the de-classing of consumption and leisure where class “has been abandoned by in favour of the more fluid and indeterminate concept of lifestyle in which cultural actors construct their identities almost at will, subject only to the vagaries of choice” (Emmison 2003:212). Peterson and Kern (1996) optimistically conclude that omnivorousness is indicative of greater acceptance in an increasingly globalized world because social elites are now taking up the cultural practices of the socially marginalized and neglecting “snobbish exclusion” (906). This democratic conclusion, while tempting to believe, is much too simplistic and has been critiqued by several researchers (Emmison 2003, Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2007) because only certain types of people (upper/middle class) hold the cultural capital to participate in omnivorousness to the exclusion of the groups they are borrowing cultural practices from. In other words, omnivorousness itself could be viewed as another form of middle class snobbery, rather than as a radical move towards greater inclusiveness. This is certainly evident in the responses Holland (2010) received in her study from women who pole dance. None of the women spoke about actually wanting to become exotic dancers, or ever interacting with any women who pole danced for a living, indicating that the cultural acceptance through omnivorousness that Peterson and Kern (1996) envisioned is far from being realized.

Women who take pole dancing lessons are not only predominantly middle class and heterosexual, but they are also mostly white, which raises more questions about the “empowering” potential of pole dancing classes. Indeed, Holland (2010) explores this issue briefly in her work, where she interviews women (and one man)\(^1\) from the UK, Sydney, and New York who all participated in pole dancing classes. She notes that while the US classes seemed a little more diverse in terms of ethnicity than the classes held in the other locations, the majority of participants were still predominantly white. Even in cases where non-white women were interviewed by Holland, these interviewees recognized pole dancing classes as a “western” practice, explaining their choice to attend classes as partially because they were “westernized”. Issues related to the racialized body and how this may limit women’s participation in sexualized leisure practices seem particularly relevant to this discussion, especially in terms of access to such commodities, but was not discussed at length by Holland (2010). Nonetheless, she does seem to recognize that this is a significant problem that should be explored in future research on pole dancing.

**Empowerment through Consumption of the “Other”**

*Allowing who we are to come out when we are working on the pole, will make a pole dancing experience go from just a good work-out to something so much more... something empowering (Rhae, pole dancing Winnipeg website: 2011)*

\(^1\) Holland (2010) found that a few pole dance studios offered classes for men which instructors explained were based on “strength” and “cirque du Soleil” type moves rather than empowerment.
Subversion is only intelligible vis-à-vis the normative (Evans et al. 2010a:123)

Evans et al. (2010a) articulate a theoretical approach to study the complexities of women seeking empowerment through consumption, stating; “In relation to agency and contemporary female (hetero) sexuality, we theorize a technologies of the self in which one works upon oneself and one’s body (as an expression of agency) to reproduce oneself through discourses of sexual liberation (as the available discourse provided through neo-liberalism and consumerism) (pg. 121, emphasis added). In other words, women are asserting power through sexualized consumption and neo-liberal discourse, as this is what is available to them, but also, importantly, working on the body and exploring its possibilities as a form of subversion.

What is important to consider, however, is that this type of subversion is only possible for certain types of women because “these discourses intersect with factors that produce particular limitations on who can take them up” (Evans et al. 2010a:123), and that even when subversion takes place it is only intelligible because of its reference to the “other” (Evans et al. 2010a). Therefore, in order for pole dancing classes to be seen as an empowering practice, there must be strippers and strip clubs existing as an “other” in order to render the empowering aspects of pole dancing legible. In this sense, pole dancing classes offer middle class women a safe space to flirt with danger and be a bit “naughty” or “cheeky”; good girls get to be the bad girl without really being bad; “fun, fitness, fantasy” as the Pole Dancing Winnipeg website banner reads, but what is this fantasy and whose fantasy is it?

Roach (2007) explains that an exotic dancer’s fantasy of herself in the role of the stripper is one of the most important positive aspects of her work, and many of the dancers Roach (2007) interviewed discussed how they could embody power, sexiness, and assertiveness and often felt like goddesses. Of course, for exotic dancers, this goddess-like power was kept in check by moralizing discourse and social censure; however the stripper/goddess fantasy on its own was recognized as having economic value. For those selling pole dancing lessons to female customers, then, to appropriate the goddess/stripper fantasy as a product that could be potentially consumed by everywoman without negative social consequences was a particularly lucrative move, because, in Ahmed’s (2000) words, women could now “become without becoming”.

In Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality, Ahmed (2000) addresses “encounters in which the “stranger” is the object of desire, or comes to embody “the place” that the subject seeks to inhabit” (115). Through consumption, Ahmed (2000) claims, the subject can engage in the fantasy of the “other” without actually becoming the “other”. This last point is vital, as Ahmed explains, “subjects can almost become the stranger, or can become or smell like the stranger” in a form of “stranger fetishism” (114). Furthermore, Zukin (2008) points out that the pursuit of authenticity has become extremely important in the construction of a cosmopolitan identity, or “hybrid subjectivity”, that mixes traditional middle class tastes with consumption of lower class commodities and leisure (735), especially for the young, white, and educated in urban centers, who “found beauty in the tumble

2 www.polefitcanada.ca
down and excitement in the rough” (726). However, for Zukin (2008) and Ahmed (2000), this new middle class taste for “seediness” that drives the consumption of certain commodities and spaces also drives out the “authentic” people who once inhabited these spaces because the desire for seediness is also tempered by the desire for access to more traditional goods and services that excludes the very people that made a particular consumption space or neighborhood seem desirable in the first place.

Ahmed’s (2000) “becoming without becoming” and Zukin’s (2008) “hybrid subjectivity” is evident in the marketing and consumption of pole dancing lessons. Some (but not all) institutions that offer these classes seek to differentiate themselves from “real” strippers by emphasizing that their focus is on athletic ability, that the classes take place in an all female environment, and most importantly, that clothes will not be taken off. Take, for instance, the following quotes from the fall 2010 edition of Canadian Health Magazine:

The name may raise a few eyebrows, but the only things you’ll be stripping off at a pole dancing class are your love handles…women who attend Morris’s classes are not professional dancers, nor are they interested in ever becoming such (La Giorgia 2010:51 emphasis added)

This revealing statement reflects Ahmed’s (2000) and Zukin’s (2008) position; women can experience the positive aspects of pole dancing and leave the negative, stigmatizing parts.

Ahmed (2000) critiques the popular belief that globalization ushered in an era of cultural acceptance; in fact, she claims, differences are acceptable only when they are consumable, consequently, “differences that cannot be assimilated into the nation or body through the process of consumption have no value” (118). With the consumption of pole dancing lessons, we can see that this process is at work by women’s actively pursuing the body of the exotic dancer- “the stranger”- but differentiating themselves at the same time by disavowing any interest in actually pole dancing for a living. This last point is crucial to understanding women’s claims to empowerment through pole dancing; exotic dancers are paid to work the pole and act out a fantasy as part of their occupation, while middle class women are paying to work the pole and act out a fantasy for fun. The direction of payment, then, stands as a marker of middle class good girl identity; “I can afford to pole dance” which is permitted because it has the potential to please her heterosexual male partner and/or takes place in an all-female environment, juxtaposed to “I can’t afford to not pole dance”, which would necessitate her dancing nude in front of a male audience and violate the male partner’s exclusive access to all aspects of her sexuality.

In Holland’s (2010) and Whitehead and Kurz’s (2009) work, the ability to pay for pole dancing classes was seen by participants as one of the reasons why pole dancing was empowering, rather than being paid to pole dance which was constructed as an exploitative practice. One of the women’s narratives in Whitehead and Kurz’s (2009) study illustrates this point explicitly, she explains: “If you’re being paid to do it then it’s like you have your like your choice has been taken away” but by taking pole dancing lessons, “the powers kind of with you it’s kind of who has the money is the one that’s controlling the intent” (236). This participant has identified choice and consumption, then, as the source of power, while exotic dancers are branded as powerless because they are the producers of pole dancing which necessitates the
assumption that exotic dancers are not able to control the transaction.

While many women may find pole dancing classes a positive, liberating experience, to claim that pole dancing is inherently empowering for women because the women are not dancing for men in exchange for money (or only for their male partner for no compensation) is to consequently claim that exotic dance is inherently dis-empowering for women because they would be dancing for men in exchange for money; an idea which is extremely problematic and has been complicated and contested by many researchers (Frank 2002, Egan 2006, Egan and Frank 2005, Barton and Hardesty 2010, Hanna 2010). This reveals the troubled boundaries between labour and leisure, production and consumption; poignantly highlighting the cultural tendency to associate leisure and consumption with power while assuming labour and production are always exploitative.

Despite claims of empowerment which were predicated on the differences between pole dancing for leisure and pole dancing as an occupation, the acute awareness of the deviant nature of exotic dance was still an extremely problematic issue for the women who participated in Holland’s (2010) study. A great deal of effort went in to attempts to de-stigmatize pole dancing classes by emphasising all the ways in which they were not associated with lap dance clubs. Similarly, In Kraus’s (2010) study of stigmatized leisure activities, women who participated in belly dance were often irritated by comparisons to exotic dance and strove to disassociate themselves with strippers. The women in Holland’s (2010) study, it could be said, experienced what Kraus (2010) calls “soft” stigma, or the type of stigma that could be experienced by seriously engaging in particular leisure activities, especially sexualized leisure like pole dancing or belly dancing. Women in Holland’s (2010) study responded to this “soft” stigma in a variety of ways, with a distinct focus on separating themselves from the source of pole dancing (and what was perceived to be the source of stigma)-the strip clubs-and emphasising the differences between the two. Some comments from Holland’s (2010) participants clearly illustrate this division:

“No one is breaking any laws, no one is taking any clothes off, no one is offending anybody…I do feel irreproachable, I do” (115).

“I do get sick of people thinking I am some sort of whore, or an idiot, when I am neither” (115).

Women also experienced stigma in their interpersonal relationships, especially with partners:

“He doesn’t really want to discuss it, I don’t think. He was shocked when I told him-I did tell him I did it last year, just so if ever it came out that I hadn’t lied to him. And I was shocked that he was shocked” (115).

What is fascinating about these comments is how they reflect the type of stigma exotic dancers themselves experience because of their occupation and the difficulty they experience in their romantic relationships (Bradley 2007). However, these responses also reveal how women partaking in pole dancing lessons think of themselves as “irreproachable” because they are not taking their clothes off, which can be read as implying that exotic dancers are reproachable because they do.

Furthermore, Holland explains how the pole community is actively organizing to de-bunk myths about pole dancing, their tactic to directly confront their association
with exotic dance in the community. An excerpt from an email Holland received from The Equity Pole Dancers Working Party states: “Do you want to be classified as a sex worker simply because you pole dance regularly? Do you want to have your advertising using pole dance images banned because you are classified as a sex worker? This is just one of the real issues that Equity is helping us with right now” (142). This distancing method is especially evident in the rules pole dancing competitions, which occasionally reveal its ambiguity towards strippers, as rules will vary according to the degree of “stripperyness” allowed. For example, Holland (2010) outlines the rules for the UK amateur pole dancing competition: “All performances need to be clean fun, no butt slapping and boob rubbing. No thongs. You may take off clothing such as costumes to dance however you must have suitable outfits underneath. No nipple tassels unless attached to a bra” (138). Similar regulations apply to the Miss Pole Dance Canada competition, which additionally stipulates that “the candidate is not employed in the pornography industry”.

These examples expose how pole dancers, by trying to de-stigmatize their sport, are contributing to the stigma of sex workers in the process. Holland (2010) does not comment on how this distancing may affect the lives and reputations of women who actually work as strippers, which is odd considering the fact that there are numerous organizations dedicated to de-stigmatizing all kinds of sex work. Naturally, it stands to reason that if exotic dance itself becomes less stigmatized, perhaps the practice of pole dancing for leisure would as well, which leads me to question why women who pole dance for fitness would not want to ally themselves with this movement rather than alienate themselves from it.

It is clear from the comments women made in Holland’s (2010) study that pole dancers are well aware of the stigma strippers experience because they face some of the this stigma themselves, however, instead of aligning with exotic dancers to combat negative stereotypes they have chosen to distance themselves from strippers by using similar tactics to those that stigmatize pole dancers. Therefore, it is not only the consumption of pole dancing classes that establishes strippers as “others”, but some pole dancers may actively seek to differentiate themselves from dancers by purposefully campaigning against their association with these “others”. These distancing techniques ignore the root of the stigma, which is not only about pole dancing’s problematic association with exotic dance, but have much deeper implications concerning the social expectations of women and how they are supposed to conduct their bodies in a patriarchal society. Wouldn’t a much more radical “empowering” approach be to suggest that pole dancers are “irreproachable” because they have the right to do what they want with their bodies, rather than emphasizing that they do not take their clothes off?

Perhaps de-stigmatizing the stripper is bad for business; if stripping becomes “normal” than how could pole dancing lessons establish themselves as anything other than a boring old aerobics class? It is because the stripper exists as a transgressive other that pole dancing classes can gain their meaning for women who want to participate in an activity that involves fitness, but is also more than fitness; it is a safe flirtation with danger which requires the fixing of the

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3 The complete list of rules for the Miss Pole Dance Canada competition can be found online at www.misspoledancecanada.com.
4 In Canada, for example: Stella Montreal, Sex Professionals of Canada, and The Naked Truth.
identities and subjectivities of women who strip for a living in order to retain its value.

Like Ahmed (2000), I am concerned that this consumption of the “stranger” may further homogenize and stigmatize certain groups; Pole dancing classes are liberating for some women, while at the same time, creating barriers for others. In Ahmed’s (2000) words, “images of “otherness” and “difference” function to sustain rather than problematise the imaginary boundaries between different nations, or groups of people” (116). The rise of public interest in strippers (and the increase in consumption of stripper-like commodities), therefore, does not automatically translate to a greater tolerance for stripping as an occupation (Egan 2006).

However, while the empowerment claims made through the consumption of pole dancing classes may be problematic because of the effect it may have on perceptions of exotic dancers themselves, I would not completely agree with Ahmed (2000) that the white/western consumer is a homogenous power source either. Women who attend pole dancing classes may be the consumers of “difference”, however I think it is a mistake to erase the differences between them as well, which adds another layer of complexity to this argument. After all, some of the women (usually the teachers) that Holland (2010) interviewed for her research (although very few) had actually been exotic dancers themselves either currently or at some point. Additionally, I have discovered that some pole dancing studios offer classes that specifically train women to become exotic dancers (although, again these are few and far between). Holland (2010) does not mention if any of the pole dancing studios her participants attended offered instruction to women who were interested in actually becoming exotic dancers, so it would be interesting to explore some of the conflict that arises between studios that have a distinct fitness focus as opposed to those that are more accepting of the sexual aspects of pole dancing.

**Conclusions**

*Being a stripper is almost chic (Roach 2007:101)*

*Pole dancing is discursively redefined as no longer a “seedy” or subculture activity, but as a legitimate form of artistic expression (Whitehead & Kurtz 2009:240)*

In this paper, I have identified the emergence of pole dancing classes over the past 10 years as, not only a new form of gendered leisure practice, but a particular type of sexualized leisure which is “feminized” and located in the broader discourse of the “sexualization” of consumer culture. I would go even further and conclude that the consumption of pole dancing lessons is a new middle class taste (Attwood 2007) which is part of the cosmopolitan identity formation process in neo-liberal societies which values the consumable aspects of lower class cultures and subaltern identities. While this consumption undoubtedly has many positive outcomes for women who are able to actively participate in pole dancing lessons, it is essential to be critical of this practice because of its potential to be destructive for the women from whom this skill is appropriated in addition to its exclusion of women with non-white and/or non-heterosexual identities. Therefore, the empowering potential of pole dancing is limited to certain bodies, certain classes, and certain subjectivities. Furthermore, this empowerment can only be understood as such by fixing the identities of strippers as the transgressive “strangers” from which
pole dancing gains its meaning as something more than exercise. Although many women who take pole classes emphasize the fitness aspect in order to deflect “soft” stigma (Kraus 2010), it is questionable whether they would find pole classes “fun” if they were to completely lose their association with strip clubs. However, I have also explained how pole dancing classes are offered by a variety of studios with diverse perspectives on exotic dance as an occupation, with some even run by former strippers and/or offering classes to train strippers in order to prepare them for a career in dancing.

It appears that the world of pole dancing has its own internal conflicts to contend with as it seeks to legitimize itself as an acceptable leisure activity for women. Further research should explore these complexities and compare them to the similar conflicts and attempts at destigmatization faced by exotic dancers in order to seek out a way for pole dancing to be less exclusive and exploitative as a consumption practice.

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