Devalued, Deskilled and Diversified: Explaining the Proliferation of Lap Dancing in the UK

Abstract

This paper looks beyond the commodification of erotic labour debates to examine the question as to why lap dancing clubs have proliferated and found a permanent place in the night-time economy in the United Kingdom. Using empirically based arguments drawn from qualitative and quantitative research findings from the largest study into the lap dancing industry in the UK to date, we challenge the common assumption that ‘demand’ is responsible for the rise in erotic dance. Instead, we argue that the proliferation of erotic dance is largely due to the internal economic structures of the industry. First, we argue that owners profit from individual dancers through an exploitative system of fees and fines, rendering a lap dancing business a low cost investment with high returns and little risk to club owners. Second, we note that the last decade has seen diversification of the industry accompanied by deskilling and devaluing of the job. These changes in standards can be described as a ‘race to the bottom’ as dancers undercut each other to make some income above the heavy overheads, which in turn reduces standards further. Ironically, we demonstrate these negative changes have lead to the industry’s expansion as the supply of dancers increases because of the perceived advantages of the flexible, cash-in-hand employment. This evidence leads to the conclusion that the lap dancing industry is supply - rather than demand – driven, yet apparently contradictorily the labour processes and working conditions for the majority of women, despite appearing favourable, are economically exploitative.

Keywords: employment, gender, lap dancing, night-time economy, sex industry, supply
**Introduction**

In April 2010, provisions were brought in under the Policing and Crime Act that introduced a new licensing system for lap dancing clubs in the United Kingdom. As a result they are now licensed as ‘sex establishment venues’ (SEVs) with many Local Authorities (LAs) opting for policies that reduce the number of clubs in their jurisdiction or ‘nil policies’ that remove them altogether. The change in law followed as a result of campaigns from pressure groups who sought to resist the apparent growth and visibility of lap dancing clubs and what they argued was the growing objectification of women. Many of these concerns and the common discourses surrounding the rise and proliferation of lap dancing tended to rest on the ‘demand’ for stripping as the core explanation for the industry’s existence (see Jeffreys 2008). These include organisations such as Object, who with the Fawcett Society ran an anti lap dancing campaign called ‘Stripping the Illusion’ from 2008.¹ The arguments emanating from these particular groups of feminist, there is a new culture of misogyny, coupled by a ‘sex object culture’ which fuels demand for lap dancing clubs and this leads to violence against women (see Object 2008). This legal change - and the responses of Local Authority Licensing Committees to it - was therefore heralded a success by those who supported the shrinking (if not closure) of the industry (for a more indepth analysis and discussion around the legislative changes see Author A & Author B forthcoming).
This paper uses empirical data from the largest research project into lap dancing in the UK to address the false assumption that lap dancing is a demand led industry, and that the industry exists and has proliferated because of the growing desire for female sexual and bodily objectification. We address this assumption by examining the internal economics of lap dancing clubs and the ways in which profit is produced through labour power within them. In turn we suggest that the economic dynamics offer a more accurate analysis of the reasons for the proliferation of clubs in the UK, and whilst a market for erotic dance obviously exists, this is not the sole or even the main factor contributing to the growth and apparent permanence of the industry.

This paper first examines the location of lap dancing within the night-time economy, as part of the post-industrial shift to consumption within the broader economy and specifically as part of the leisure industries. Second, it examines the ways in which profit and surplus value are produced within lap dancing clubs, primarily by charging women to dance and through a combination of fees, commission and disciplinary measures based on financial punishment. We use findings from the study to argue that it is these processes that produce profit and facilitate the expansion of the industry, and not growing demand from customers. Third, we look at the supply of women into the industry and argue that the increase in available places to work as a dancer has occurred as a result of a decline in standards that affect working conditions and income levels for all. These decline in standards are harboured
by harsh competition between dancers, high house fees and reduced customer, creating a ‘race to the bottom’ for workers.

**Locating lap dancing in the night-time economy**

It is important to locate and understand the position of erotic dance in the night-time economy, and therefore the broader nexus between leisure and work in the post-industrial UK economy. The rise of the night-time economy (NTE) as a key part of the economic infrastructure in Western societies and indeed British culture, occurred alongside a wide range changes and urban shifts as cities became re-structured in the context of de-industrialisation (see Harvey 1987). Hobbs et al (2000) describe how the NTE became a powerful outcome of post-industrial society by firstly representing a shift in economic development away from industrialisation to a post-industrial / post-Fordist economy (for instance where service and leisure industries are core economies and employment changed to reflect dominant characteristics such as flexible, casual, temporary and twenty-four hour work patterns). Secondly, they note a move to a specific form of urban governance that facilitated this form of economic growth. Cities became re-invented as sites of consumption (Zukin 1998) and leisure and tourism became central in attracting investment to support extensive urban regeneration plans (Urry 1990). Cultural industries, including ‘popular’ culture, were seen as key to urban prosperity. As such, both local and national government promoted the growth of the NTE through shifts in policy and underlining objectives to achieve prosperity in the city.
The changing place of British towns and cities in local and global economies is ‘underpinned not only by structural and economic demands, but also by a fundamental shift in the political-ideological paradigm of local government’ (Hobbs et al 2000:703). Forms of de-regulation such as the loosening of alcohol and gambling licensing (see Hadfield 2006), represent a shift away from traditional industrial authorities found in the factories and civic institutions in favour of ‘a commercial ethic based upon a hedonistic dynamic’ (Hobbs et al 2000:704). These changes in powerbase and authority happened at the same time that there was a shift from Calvinist work ethic to a lifestyle which centred as much on work as it did on leisure and pleasure. These changes in values and ‘spirit’ resulted in structural changes. Hence, changes to city centre environments have been rapid, constructing urban space as an arena for leisure and pleasure (Holland and Chatterton 2003). The broader macro social and economic processes that have allowed and encouraged the NTE to flourish opened up the opportunity for entrepreneurs to include profit-making sex industries as part of this NTE (Frank 2002; Hubbard et al 2008).

While post-industrial cities emphasise a burgeoning NTE as essential for growth, prosperity and image, this does not explain why a ‘deviant’ and transgressive activity such as stripping have been so incorporated in recent years. The closure of many London stripping venues in the late 1930s (see Mort 2006 for an historical overview) saw a turnaround towards the end of the 20th Century, resulting in around 250-300 clubs in the UK today, with many more venues holding occasional strip nights. Arnold’s (2010) historical
analysis of sexual consumption in London reminds the urban analyst that
sexual desire has always been a motivator to enter the city and search for
pleasures in the backstreets and bawdy houses. Now, without too much
difficulty in seeking out such venues, formalised, regulated clubs offer sexual
fantasy and titillation at a price most (usually male) revellers can afford
(Collins 2004; see also Author A).

Brents and Author A (2010) argue that across the Western world there are
clear examples of how the economic mainstreaming of the sex industry and
sexual consumption has taken place due to both cultural changes (such as
sexual practices and relationship patterns) and neo-liberal policies (such as
the encouragement of the market to dictate and control supply and demand).
Scholars such as McNair (2002) and Attwood (2006) have further
demonstrated how the sex industries have gained increased respectability as
a business, leisure pursuit and employment option in late capitalism. In our
research, virtually all of the owners and managers had initially been involved
in ‘everyday’ retail, restaurant, or service industry businesses until the
opportunity to own, franchise or be a financial partner in a lap dancing club
arose. Branching out into the adult entertainment industry was considered a
low risk investment as the option to revert the business to an alcohol selling
venue remained. Equally, in cities where there were already several existing
venues this was not considered fierce competition or a saturated market, but
rather a chance to diversify and target a specific niche in the customer base.
Integrating the sex industries in a formal business setting, especially in a country like the UK which leans towards a criminalised regulatory system of controlling the sex industry, meant that lap dancing owners needed to be strategic in their interactions with Local Authorities and the established business community. Similarly to the ‘economic mainstreaming’ that has taken place in terms of horizontal integration into other businesses by using the same marketing techniques and advertising strategies as ‘ordinary’ NTE businesses (Brents and Author A), vertical integration has been achieved by adopting corporate structures such as chains, franchises, and traditional forms of financing and business operations. Colosi (2010a:19) notes the cross-over between NTE investors and those in the UK lap dancing industry. Despite the imagery promulgated in much popular culture and media, the industry in the UK has not – in the main - been created by Mafiosi gangsters, but has grown out of the existing business networks and contacts on the British high street.

Fieldwork demonstrated that the internal operations of many licensed venues mirrored other businesses; for example files were kept on dancers, despite the face that they were not employees, but independent contractors. Standard policies were written and updated (such as staff conduct; complaints procedure; drugs policy; security policy etc) to show any inquiring licensing official that the premises are operating professionally and aligned with other business infrastructures. It is through such practices that mimic non-sex
industry businesses and also by increasing security, upholding strict door policies, offering plush and non-aggressive environments, and co-operating efficiently with policing and regulatory agencies, that economic mainstreaming of the lap dancing industry has been successful in the UK.

These economic processes have only been enabled and supported by significant changes in social attitudes, sexual and relationship practices that allow adult entertainment to form a legitimate place in mass consumption/culture. McNair (2002) refers to this contemporary phase as the ‘striptease culture’ which is reproduced by media and popular culture to the point that adult sexual entertainment has become normalised and legitimised as leisure, and - in some cases - as work (see Bradley 2008). The mainstreaming of the sex industries and adult entertainment is part of what Hobbs et al (2000:701) call ‘the promotion of liminality’ in which city centre pleasure zones offers multiple audiences a range of options. If they were not nestled amongst the late night cafes, taxi ranks, wine bars and nightclubs, there would be an obvious gap in ‘playspace’ which forms the NTE.

**The Study: Researching Sexual Consumption**

This paper is based on a research project funded by the ESRC, which aimed to explore the structural integration of lap dancing into the night-time economy; to explore the working conditions of those women who worked in
the industry; and to uncover the competing interests between erotic dance businesses, law enforcement and licensing processes. The research took place during 2010-2011 across England. The project used triangulated methods to illicit a broad range of data. An interviewer administered survey was conducted with 197 dancers, mainly currently working in two cities, one in the North and one in the South. However their experiences spanned across 45 towns and cities in the UK and 16 other locations worldwide. We asked dancers about the last four clubs they had worked in to ensure a national picture of the industry was captured, as well as a range in quality and experiences. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 35 dancers, 15 regulators (police, health and safety, licensing and enforcement officers) and 20 club owners, managers, ‘house mums’ and other club workers. Researchers visited 20 clubs and strip pubs, observing practices, reading workplace documents and looking at facilities. Informal conversations with dancers and managers was key in understanding the complexities of the industry. These observations formed a significant part of the ethnographic data. Data was analysed using SPSS and Nvivo, finding cross cutting themes that emerged from the qualitative data, which was supported or refuted by the quantitative findings.
Internal economics: profit and surplus value in the lap dancing club

One of the most prolific sociologists who has produced detailed scholarship and thinking on this subject, Danielle Egan (2004), has eluded to the notion that exploitation and control occurs in stripping through the internal organising (particularly the surveillance methods) and financial control of the work by the management, rather than the men who gaze at women while they strip for cash. Contesting the traditional ideas that it is the customer who is the exploiter, Egan (2004:305) reflects from her participant-observer diary as a dancer:

‘I always heard that it was the men at the stage that sought to objectify us, but I think it is the man in the office, who seeks to make us the objects of his profit, who is far more dangerous. As I do my dance for a dollar I look up and wink at the camera – all the while worrying more about the manager’s classifications of my behavior than the fleshy customer in front of me.’

The surveillance tactics of management are core control mechanisms for the dancers. Whilst there are insightful auto-ethnographic accounts of the experiences that emerge from this from researchers such as Egan (ibid), Frank (2002); Barton (2006) in the USA and Colosi (2010a) and Vernon (2011) in the UK, our contribution to the discussion lies in exposing how the
industry is premised entirely on profiting from intense forms of financial control, which depend on a unique system of power relationships between the dancers and the managers.

Primarily our empirical data demonstrates the internal economics of the lap dancing club offers the key analytic in explaining why the clubs have proliferated in number and grown in visibility. Profit for the owners is created within the clubs through five modes of payment to the club: entry fee from customers; revenue from drink and sometimes food sales; ‘house fees’ and commissions; fines; and tips (the latter three of which are all paid by dancers). In what follows, we outline the ways in which this operates to shift all of the economic risk away from club owners and on to dancers. The extent to which the industry operates in this way is reflected in the alarming figure that 70 per cent of dancers in the study reported they had worked shifts in which they had lost money by attending work.

Entry Fee

The standard entry fee from a customer ranges from £0-£50 depending on the location and quality of the venue, and the type of customer the club owner wishes to attract. For example, those who catered for younger men, promoted ‘student’ nights where the entrance fee was minimal if not wavered. Various playful activities were held such as wet t-shirt competitions in a sports bar atmosphere in order to appeal to younger men who did not just want stripping
as the sole activity of the evening. Some clubs constantly attempted to entice
custom in with offers such as: free entry before 10 pm, half price entry,
discounts for large groups, ‘free for couples’ or even ‘buy one dance get one
free’! These gimmicks were often measures to compete with neighbouring
venues, other businesses in the night-time leisure market, or a dwindling
customer base (particularly on week days and holiday times, or when events
such as national or local football matches were on).

The entry fee promotions that included free dances meant that dancers
needed to agree to such ‘offers’ which essentially cut their earnings whilst still
having to perform. Dancers were sometimes ordered distribute flyers in the
street (outside the club door and in popular alcohol zones) as part of their
employment conditions, or were asked to travel around the city in limousines
or ‘stretch-hummers’ touting for business on behalf of the club and offering
free lifts to the venue, with no extra remuneration for dancers. Other clubs
would pay dancers a nominal fee of around £20 in order to flyer, in recognition
of the fact that it was not part of their job description and that many women
were uncomfortable being seen in public associating with the club. These
conditions were presented as part of the ‘rules’ imposed by management, and
protests were often met with the general retort that the dancers could simply
choose to work elsewhere if they did not find the conditions amenable.
Ultimately the entry fee for customers was often used to pay other workers in
the venue: security personnel, bar staff, waitresses and the ‘house mum’
figure that organised the dancers, yet was generated and subsidised by
dancers even though they had no control over price-setting.

*House Fees and Commission*

The vast majority of dancers had to pay the club to work per shift.\(^2\) Whilst this
is not uncommon in other ‘self employed’ professions such as hairdressing
and taxi driving (Gametta and Hamill 2005; Cohen 2010), fees operated in a
distinctive way within the clubs that frequently worked to dancers’
disadvantage. Dancers reported paying house fees that ranged from £0 -
£200 per shift, though the average amount was £20-30 in the North and £80
in the South. One dancer explained: ‘In the clubs the house fees are so
enormous it puts you in such a stressful position to start up with; it’s not a
good attitude to go and start working from’ (Dancer A). Key to this was the
fact that the level of fees was wholly unrelated to the level of custom available
to customers or the income they received.

Two core issues which dancers explained impacted on their ability to earn
money and therefore the fairness (or not) of the house fee. First, the capacity
to earn money depended on how many customers were attracted to the club
and the opportunities to offer private dances. It depended secondly on the
number of women who were working on any one shift. This meant the ratio of
customers to dancers was often very low, again hampering the opportunities
to earn money and heightening the competition between dancers (a key point
discussed later). A key pattern emerged across the industry in which, as demand reduced due to recession and fatigue with striptease set in, clubs simply increased the numbers of dancer working on any one evening, also sometimes increasing the cost of the fees. This increased revenue for clubs, but decreased dancers’ possibilities for earning income through the intense competition that emerged due to a high number of dancers and low number of customers. As Dancer F explained:

‘As the number of girls carries on increasing and the house fees continue going up it’s putting us in more and more of a pressurised financial situation. So suddenly instead of paying £5 you pay £30 [house fee] and instead of being with three other girls you’re with eight other girls, you’re getting pushier cos you have to be and again it’s the sort of downward spiral’ (Dancer F).

In addition to set fees, dancers also paid commission to the club for each private dance. Few dancers reported being paid for stage shows in lap dancing clubs, as they were considered an expected part of self-advertising and taking part several times each shift was an obligatory ‘rule’. This was another mechanism through which owners extracted free labour from dancers. Commission on private dances ranged from 0-66 per cent, though the standard rate was 30 per cent commission on each dance. In the North, a 3 minute dance usually cost the customer £10, with the dancer taking away £7. In the South this figure was usually double. The structure of fees and
commission had a strong impact on the relationship between club owners and
managers vis-à-vis dancers and the way in which surplus value was created
within them:

‘It’s 20 pound for a dance but because you pay a flat house fee. This is
the thing, the commission structure will vary and affect how the club is
with you and how you all make your money. I worked in a club recently
where the owner took a third, which is a lot of money out of the dance
fee. Whereas other places where there is a flat house fee are o.k. Other
clubs… take a percentage commission but the owners are quite
involved, they will encourage you and support you and the will try and
make it more fair’ (Dancer Z).

When commission is charged owners had a vested interest in working with
the dancers in order to ensure that there were a sufficient number of
customers and opportunities to get private dances. However, when fees
and commission were charged, club owners had little risk or sometimes,
interest in generating custom, as they had generated sufficient revenue
from dancers’ fees alone and commission could be considered a bonus.

The ‘downward spiral’ mentioned by Dancer F above was evident in many
clubs and a number of dancers referred to the fact that conditions were
increasingly hard in clubs, reflecting in reduced income. This ‘race to the
bottom’ not only resulted in lower income for dancers, but also heightened
tension between them and lead to many dancers offering ‘more for less’. This often lead to dancers pushing or breaking rules regarding touching and distance, as dancers’ competed with each other to gain custom or repeat custom. The impact of the house fee and commission system, taken together with the dynamics of reduced custom and more women allowed to work in the venues, meant that even starting work was stressful and pressurised, often with very little financial reward to show for it:

‘I earned 50 pounds to myself last night [after fees]. I was fuming. It’s a total waste of my time because you get fined if you leave early so you’ve got to work out the whole shift; you’re sitting there hour after hour not earning any money. So I could earn more money doing a normal job. I don’t – I don’t do the job to earn regular money. I do it to earn really good money that I couldn’t earn anywhere else. And to earn that kind of money, I just think why am I even doing this?’ (Dancer Y)

The expense of getting to work (often women worked a considerable distance from their home town to either protect their identity and keep their work secret, or to work in a more lucrative venue), preparing for work in terms of time and money spent on costume, make-up and appearance, then payment of a house fee with no guarantee of making that money back made the job very insecure. When asked about the disadvantages of the work, 59 per cent of respondents said that one of the worst aspects of the job was that they did not know how much money they would make each shift.
The financial system in the clubs has a major bearing on how women experience the industry, and with no clear parameters of their status and rights as independent contractors, they are left in a vulnerable and weak position:

‘My first kind of six months I was just like I had found the perfect job and then the kind of problems like not making very much money started, and feeling kind of exploited by the fact of paying large fees to clubs without there being guarantees of making money. It puts you in a weaker position. In fact you're not really in control. I mean if you really wanted to say no to a customer, you kind of can't because you actually need the tenner, because you've got to pay your rent or pay the commission, but I mean you've - like we're there to earn money so actually it's not as, the fact that there's too many girls working, and no real regulation. It's just a completely unregulated industry with no, kind of not much structure to it’.
(Dancer Z)

The uncertainties of working in the typical lap dancing venue meant that some women preferred to work in a strip pub. These operate significantly differently to the high street lap dancing club. In a strip pub there are no private dances, only stage shows, for which all the viewers are expected to contribute a pound into a pint pot that the dancer circulates before the dance (known as juggling). Typically a dancer would perform three or four times per shift, but would be
guaranteed some income by the end of the shift as long as there are customers in the pub. Here, the fee is relatively lower (often around £20) and no commission is charged. One dancer explained that this financial system was the reason why she moved from a high street chain club to a local strip pub:

‘I prefer the fact that the transaction’s clear. Like I work at the pub so if I am doing a stage show I collect from everyone the same amount of money; if they want to tip that’s great, if they don’t tip they still need to pay something. That’s my fee for that show and that’s it. No extras, the house is not taking a cut... [The] house don’t take as much. All that the house take is they take care of the bar and you pay them a small house fee – ten to twenty pounds... So I prefer less money but being able to control my own work better and not be stressed, actually enjoy it and the hours are shorter, so... great!’ (Dancer E).

The strip pub system is more financially transparent, but the absence of private dances means that there is not the opportunity to earn a larger sum from one high spending customer or make money on hourly rates for a ‘sit down’ encounter. There are also fewer strip pubs (most of which are located in London) than typical gentleman’s clubs, so the majority of women have no option to opt out of lap dancing clubs to instead work in the pub system.
The house fee and commission that dancers pay is so central to the operation of the clubs, that the owners constantly encourage new and more workers onto their books. Most interviewees noted the increase in women coming into the industry: ‘There’s three times, four times, as many girls working on a night which makes it mega competitive and I suppose they just think I’ve got to get like an edge up on everyone else. I need to do a little bit more to make a bit more money’ (Dancer M). There was also the suggestion that because of the competition between dancers and the perceived customer base / available earnings shrinking, some dancers were offering sexual services to make extra money. Whilst we found no evidence throughout the research of any links to organised prostitution, there was anecdotes and one interviewee who admitted that entrepreneurial women were offering touching, masturbation or fellatio in the private booths: ‘I’ve seen more and more girls that weren’t doing extras before, doing it because they see all the other girls doing it and they fear that if they don’t do it, they’re not going to earn money anymore’ (Dancer M). Although there was a strong narrative from all the dancers that sexual services was a ‘sackable’ offence, and that management were strict about the conduct of the dancers as they were mindful of their reputation, there were also management who would ignored reported behaviour, preferring to turn a blind eye.
Fines

The most contentious form of payment the dancers make to the management is in the form of ‘fines’. In our study, 61 per cent of dancers reported having been fined at some point during their dancing career. The highest reported fine was £100 for a missed shift. The most common fines were for chewing gum, using a mobile phone on the floor and lateness. One dancer who had worked in twelve different clubs across the country, commented on the unfairness of fines and how this additional fee often goes directly to the management and is sometimes not declared by them, offering an incentive to managers to issue a large number of fines:

‘Fines are a big thing in the clubs. The clubs have fines so that they can make as much money off the girls as possible because they are there to run a business too. With some clubs you get really ridiculous fines and they will fine you for anything if they are in a bad mood. But most clubs tend to be alright with fines, it’s just fees for being late, or, everyone has the house fee. I guess it’s also good from the club’s point of view because we are all self-employed, we can all work as and when we want. I guess it is good, if girls just don’t show up to a shift it gives them motivation to at least give the club notice if they can do. I think clubs can be a little bit over-enthusiastic with fines sometimes. If it’s an emergency, if it’s a girl who’s got kids that are sick and cancels you get clubs that will still fine you, even if it’s not your fault’. (Dancer P)
The arbitrary use of fining was reportedly used to bully some unpopular dancers and favour others. It is these kinds of ‘rules’ that were often unsaid or unwritten which contribute to Egan’s analysis of the power relations between the female workers and the male management (2004:317): ‘The owner, by never making the rules explicit, enforces a flexible and omnipresent form of social control. Through surveillance technologies dancers learn self-surveillance and become a docile workforce’. Internal financial systems encourage the passivity of the dancer, who has little recourse to complain or redress other than leaving and finding work elsewhere. Fining systems also operate as behavioural sanctions and financial discipline tactics encourage dancers to survey and report on each other, eroding solidarity between the dancers and transferring further power to managers.

**Tipping**

Although by no means a universal system, 50 per cent of dancers reported working in clubs where there was an internal tipping system to other staff including DJs, waitresses, bar staff and house mums. In some venues which operated a tipping system, this was considered compulsory, effectively becoming another fee system. For instance, in the few venues where dining is part of the experience, the waitress would be tipped by dancers in order for them to direct customers towards certain dancers, with a similar system happening with doormen. Others reported that the custom was to tip the
security in order to avoid fines: ‘[How good security are] depends on how much they earn and how much they are craving. If security don't earn anything, they just fine you’ (Dancer, M). Other workers in the club who had influence over proceedings were also on the look-out for tips. One dancer explains how the ‘house mum’ (in this case a gay male) could make their working experience miserable ‘He’d just be awful. Really demoralised the girls, he had his favourites, if you didn’t tip him at the end of the night you were frowned upon’ (Dancer X).

More common still, tipping was associated with buying favouritism from the DJ regarding the music that was played. What music gets played in a club is an important issue for a dancer, and they will often supply their own playlist of songs they like to perform to when on the pole, or even their own music (Egan 2006). Doing a ‘good show’ is important advertising time, generating interest from customers who may request a private dance, or even better, time in the VIP suite. Hence, the DJ has a core role in the organisation of the club, and the potential for dancers to boost earnings.

There was an overall sense that in harder economic times since 2008, management were squeezing the dancers for more money through all mechanisms available to them (namely fees and fines), often in order to cover the business overheads (specifically the wages of the other workers in the club) and ensure they break even or make profit even when dancers are making comparatively little:
‘Well they’re [management] definitely making a lot more money from the dancers. The one place that I’m thinking of, it used to be three girls on the lunch shift paying £5 each that was £15, four girls on the evening shift paying £10 each, so that was £55 a day that they were making...Now it’s, well I left last year but when I left it was six girls on the lunch shift paying £30 each and then eight girls on the night shift paying £45 each, so what’s that?... they’re making that in cash every day and that’s without fines for being late and stuff like that so yeah they’ve gone from, as you say making £55 a day to £500 every day’. (Dancer F)

These conditions of intense and multiple forms of economic exploitation were generally taken for granted as how things worked in the industry at the present time.

**Declining Standards: Diversified, Deskilled and Devalued**

The diversification process that the lap dancing industry has undergone in order to achieve ‘mass’ appeal has lead to a shift from lap dancing being considered as the luxury leisure domain of money making executives, to a ‘mass market’ that appeals to many diverse audiences and wallets alike. In attempts to externally ‘look’ more like other night-time economy, lap dancing venues are coded with class. ‘Upscaling’ venues through decor and appearance, dress codes, entry fees and the cost of alcohol, deters the traditional working class drinker but instead appeals to the middle class
consumer who would visit a ‘gentleman’s’ club (and not be afraid to tell his friends about doing so). Indeed the rise of the ‘gentleman’s club’, since introduced to the UK in the early 1990’s,\(^3\) provided a market for male conspicuous consumption (see Colosi 2010a for detailed account regarding the UK and also Leipe-Levinson 2002), which was specifically about overtly purchasing ‘pleasures’: champagne (poor quality at high prices), and the company of women in luxury surroundings (all clubs have a VIP area which heightens this sense of conspicuous consumption). The lap dancing industry and those who have power within it have worked hard to continue the legacy of associating visiting such a venue with glamour and celebrity culture. Colosi (2010a:23-4) describes how this feeds into attracting customers from across the socio-economic classes: ‘With the ‘lap-dancing’ brand epitomizing ‘wealth’, ‘glamour’, and ‘celebrity’, it not only becomes an important lifestyle choice for those already part of the economic elite, but significantly is attractive to those who aspire to the lifestyle image it promotes. Therefore, rather than just attracting businessmen, the lap-dancing image is increasingly attractive to young male adults with disposable incomes’.

Although the last ten years has seen an expediential expansion in numbers of clubs after the Licensing Act 2003 (Hubbard 2009), demand for them appears to be static, or indeed, going down. Dancers attributed this to boredom, loss of novelty, their mass market status (the idea that once stripping is easily available the activity loses its attraction) and the economic crisis and recession since 2008:
‘You know, every pub is doing it. The market is saturated. And that’s why you know, the – the bubble has gone to its absolute limit and it will start deflating. You will see more of them closing over the next couple of years ‘cos they’ve sprung up like – like mushrooms. We are sadly, very much two a penny. There’s no room to do what we do anymore so – There’s more and more girls looking to do it’ (Dancer J).

Appealing to consumers at large has the effect of varying the standards that can be expected in clubs, both for customers and workers/dancers. Throughout the research there was a strong consensus amongst the dancers that standards had declined over time. Over a third of the survey sample had working for over five years in the industry, and as such were able to reflect candidly on the changes. A notable change in the industry related to the reduced amount of money that dancers were able to earn. It is a common myth that lap dancers take home hundreds or even thousands of pounds in one evening. This may have been the experience of those women who worked as dancers several years ago when there were only a few clubs in the UK and these were limited to elite, high income clubs, largely in metropolitan areas. Although an average shift earnings was £230 for the dancers we surveyed (compared to an average of £280 in their first job), this has to be considered in the context of overheads and fees. The recession in the UK since 2008 has also hit the earning potential for dancers. One woman reflects on how she started dancing in 2007, just before the economic downturn:
‘It was just the very beginning of the recession so it hadn’t hit entirely. It was like – literally just at the very top of the roller coaster bit. And you know, we were earning and making really good money. There were 25 girls on a Friday and Saturday night. The house fees was £125 but then they didn’t take commission. So that was just like house fee. So that’s 7 or 8 dances – no, it was 7 dances to break even. Which realistically, ‘cos we were working till 4 in the morning, you could still easy take home 3, 4, 500 quid a night. On Fridays and Saturdays. It was hard work. You know, people weren’t running up to you and giving you money. But it was – it was easy – it was relatively easy. Whereas now, I’ve only gone back to working weekends very recently, you know, the earnings, it’s much more up and down. It’s much more hit and miss. And even then you can still – you can have a busy club and not necessarily be able to extract money from people ‘cos people just sometimes, they simply just don’t have it’. (Dancer Z)

Many dancers spoke of the ‘lucky’ nights when they would find a customer willing to pay for their time for several hours. Most dancers relied on one high spending customer rather than a series of short private dances. With VIP ‘sit-downs’ costing around £250 per hour, even when the club had taken their commission, these nights represent a significant success for the dancer. These customers likely to buy ‘sit-downs’ and ‘splash the cash’ were often to be found as part of corporate events, or business men being ‘hosted’ by
companies. However, this opportunity was seldom found in the current climate:

‘Since the recession started, they’ve [corporations] got the money, they just don’t want to spend it. Like, taking clients out, the budgets gone down lower. So maybe they used to have £5000 for taking clients out and showing them a good time or whatever, now they’ve only got a couple of hundred. So that obviously affects us a lot...now it’s like “what, £200 for a half an hour? Oh no. I can’t do that”. And because you know you’re not going to get that out of them, you end up bargaining’. (Dancer Y)

Dropping prices and negotiating on the floor in order to ‘win’ a dance, meant that customers were charged different prices in the same club. Dancers would undercut each other, despite this being against house rules. This ‘race to the bottom’ borne out of desperation to make some earnings and not leave a shift without covering costs, had a detrimental impact on the occupational culture, morale and solidarity between dancers.

*Deskilling work to increase supply*

Expansion, diversification and owners’ desire to have more women working per shift as a source of profit has also had a profound impact on the skill base necessary for entry into lap dancing. Dancers noted a number of ways in which the work was being deskilled. This included the offer of sexual services
mentioned earlier, but many dancers also referred to looks and dancing ability. Describing changes in the capital since the 1990’s, one dancer notes the impact of changes such as higher fees and women working on the working conditions and labour process involved in lap dancing:

‘But then as lap dancing started to come in, venues saw us making more money and starting higher house fees or taking a cut of the dances. Once they [management] started therefore to view the girls as a source of direct income they started putting more girls on. The time that you might have spent relaxed, chatting to customers or maybe 10 minutes getting into an intricate outfit or whatever suddenly became time where you could be making more money by doing the lap dancing so the sort of nature of the job like that started changing. Girls who wouldn’t have got a job before, who weren’t really that good on stage or whatever started getting jobs’.

(Dancer F)

The job has become deskilled in order for erotic dancing to appeal as a flexible and ‘easy’ job for young women and to make it easily accessible. We were increasingly informed by dancers and managers that there had been an increase in the numbers of younger women, both British nationals and migrants who specifically come to the UK to work in the strip industry:
‘Basically anyone thinks they can be a stripper nowadays and they’re just be – obviously see it as an easy way to earn money. So the – there’s too many girls, too many clubs; not enough money. I think the novelty is starting to wear off’. (Dancer X).

On several occasions whilst doing ethnographic observations and interviews in clubs we spoke to younger women (under 25) who were in their first few weeks of dancing. They had never been on a pole before, and were told they did not have to when ‘interviewed’ by the House Mum or manager. The classic ‘audition’ for the manager was non-existent in many clubs, recruitment methods focused on the ‘look’ of a potential worker and a trial shift, rather than dancing or hostess skills. Indeed it was unnecessary to have any ‘dancing’ skills whatsoever, let alone the ability to do ‘tricks’ on the pole. Much of the work shifted from ‘performance’ to ‘hustling’ for private dances through conversation, sexualised interactions and banter, particularly amongst younger women. This was in contrast to the older dancers and those who had been stripping for several years, who had considered exotic dance as a profession and who had often brought specific skills to the job through prior training in the arts (see Hanna 2003). Dancers who had trained in the arts commented on how the type of women coming into the industry had changed: ‘it’s so hard sometimes to describe stuff without wanting to sound bitchy but you’d see some girl who wasn’t very pretty, couldn’t dance, had a crap outfit making a lot more money than you because she was there to make money, not to enjoy herself and be creative so she would be pushier...’ (Dancer F).
Indeed, the supply of dancers is largely drawn from two sources: students and migrant women (see Author B and Author A). Whilst this article cannot focus on the intricacies of supply, previous work suggests these two groups form the basis of the new influx of women into the industry (see also Lantz 2005; Roberts et al 2007; Roberts et al 2010).

Deskilling is an important component of the argument that regards the internal economics as the source for the proliferation of lap dancing in the UK. The expansion of the industry and the increasing number of women needed to work in them necessitates deskilling in order to ensure a constant supply of women who want (and are accepted) to work in the industry. The employment market has opened up to accept most women who are prepared to dance, have the aesthetic appearance that is expected – although in this regard it was claimed that the bar had been lowered - and is willing to accept the conditions on offer. It is for these reasons that the supply of female labour (young students and migrant women particularly) into the lap dancing industry is most likely to be at its all time high. When precarious, service sector work is the only available option for younger women in certain socio-economic positions, stripping in the informal and hidden economy provides appealing advantages that cannot be found in other precarious, unskilled and unregulated labour (see Author B and Author A).
Beyond ‘Demand’: the production of profit in the lap dancing industry

Popular discourses, promoted by organisations such as Object have focused on ‘demand’ as the key driver for the proliferation of the lap dancing industry and the wider sex industries in the UK. In this paper, we have set out the premise, evidenced from empirical data that these arguments are oversimplifying the question of the growth of lap dancing, and that focusing on demand is misplaced and detrimental to recognising the structural and economics factors which shape the industry. The argument that lap dancing is ‘demand’ driven ignores the very material relationships within the clubs and the industry. By focusing on the ‘customer’ as exploiter and objectifer (see Jeffreys 2008), not only does this misunderstand the social relations of exploitation, but also disguises the internal economics that perpetuate clubs leading to major financial disadvantage for women. We argue that it is the financial exploitation of women and lack of regulation in this regard that has lead to proliferation of the industry. The number of clubs in most high streets in towns and cities across the UK are not representative of the demand for them.

The evidence from the research suggests that core questions when thinking about the proliferation of lap dancing in the UK is not about ‘tackling demand’
for clubs, but the hyper-exploitation of the dancers that currently occurs which makes them economically viable. If the lap dancing system was correctly regulated in terms of rules that governed and checked financial practices as well as enabling independent contractors to be more supported in terms of employment rights, knowledge and representation, clubs would be less able to exploit women. With some risk transferred back to owners, fewer clubs would open or remain viable.

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1 The Object website (www.object.org) states: OBJECT challenges ‘sex object culture’ – the ever increasing sexual objectification of women in the media and popular culture through lads’ mags, advertising or lap dancing clubs (accessed July 26th 2011)

2 There were some smaller venues who did not charge a house fee unless the dancer had earned sufficient money by the end of the shift; or the fee would be waived if the evening was particularly quiet.

3 The gentleman’s club where private table dances were available were introduced in the early 1990s from the USA which presented a different form of stripping from what existed in the more traditional East End strip pubs where dancers would perform strip shows on stage for all to see.