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DANCE CLUB CULTURE

by

Amy M. Iseler

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts
Department of Sociology

Western Michigan University
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Amy M. Iseler

DANCE CLUB CULTURE

Amy M. Iseler, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2006

My research examines the dance club culture in a mid-sized Northwestern city. I explore this subject through participant observation and interviews with dance club patrons. The issues I address in my research include dance club music, music videos, alcohol, clothing, sexual behavior, non-verbal communication and the dance club environment. The purpose of this Masters Thesis is to determine whether dance club culture perpetuates sexist attitudes and beliefs within its patrons.

This original piece of research is based in existing literature which informs the individual elements of the dance club culture. The experiences of dance club patrons demonstrate how these elements combine to create the unique culture found within dance clubs.

This study promises to expand our understanding of how the popular dance club culture impacts individual's normative values and influences behavioral changes. What occurs in dance club culture is influenced by sex roles and gender norms as presented through media images. While these expectations are not expressed as blatantly in other venues, there are still traditional and/or stereotypical expectations about men, women, and sex. The research I carry out permits further exploration of this subject matter within a multitude of settings.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Modern dance clubs create a unique cultural experience not present in other social settings. Upon entering a club, your pulse begins to quicken as the bass of the dance beat pounds against your chest. Music plays at deafening levels making most communication impossible. Patrons rely upon body language and non-verbal cues to exchange and interpret information.

Sexually explicit music videos and images played throughout the club set the tone for the experience. Women arrive decked out in their tightest, sexiest clothing. Dancing is sexually explicit and often mirrors the images in music videos. Alcohol is advertised, available and consumed at every turn. Even in bathroom stalls, patrons are bombarded with posters advertising brands of beer and vodka.

Dark corners and flashing lights help create the exciting and surreal experience. It is easy to get lost in the sea of people crowding the dance floor and bars. More significantly, it is easy for club goers to lose their inhibitions in this atmosphere of anonymity and excess.

This project explores the physical elements and culture of modern dance clubs. I examine the combination of social phenomenon that creates this unique subculture. What occurs in dance clubs that sets them apart from other social gatherings? How do these experiences play out for the patrons? Specifically examined are: the genres of music played in mainstream dance clubs; the physical elements (including lighting, music volume, location of security, video screens); consumption of alcoholic beverages; style of dress; dancing; and non-verbal communication used by dance club patrons.

My research addresses the following questions: 1) How does dance club culture contribute to violations of personal norms, and; 2) Do men and women have different perspectives on what occurs in clubs?

Dance clubs provide a multitude of stimuli that support traditional gender roles. For example, often women do not pay for entry into dance clubs, while men are expected to pay full price. Music played in dance clubs frequently focuses on men's sexual conquest of women and these scenarios are described in graphic detail. Women wear tight; skin baring clothing while men are dressed as they would to a causal day at work.

The dance floor itself takes on an arena-like atmosphere. Men stand along the dance floor or peer down from the balcony while they watch women dance. While it is not unusual to see men on the dance floor, the majority of dancers are women and the majority of spectators are men. These men will often spend the entire evening watching the action without any attempt to participate.

I examine the objectification of women through music and music videos. For many club patrons, music videos are a primary source of exposure to current dance styles. In these videos, women are frequently depicted as props while the male singer dances behind them looking directly into the camera. Dance clubs often show music videos on large television screens to correspond with the songs playing. It reinforces the video images as a "how-to" guide on the dance floor. When a music video demonstrates highly sexual dance moves, that way of dancing is adopted by those modeling it in dance clubs.

Non-verbal communication is especially important in the dance club culture. Music plays at such high volumes that club goers must rely on body language, clothing

and other visual cues to interpret meaning. This can often lead to confusion and the misinterpretation of non-verbal messages.

During this research, I asked patrons asked to characterize women's dress and demeanor in dance clubs. Their interpretation of these non-verbal cues described an atmosphere of sexually motivated and manipulative women. However, when women were asked directly about their motivations for coming to dance clubs, their answers did not reflect this at all. Instead, women said they came to social with friends. They used their time at the dance club to escape from every day pressures, dance, and drink and have a good time. With rare exception, men and sex were not mentioned.

I chose participant observation and interviews as methods of data collection. Participant observation enabled me to inject myself into the dance club atmosphere. To experience dance club culture, all five senses are utilized. If you cannot feel the beat, smell the smoke and perfume, taste the alcohol, hear the chaotic blend of music and yelling and see the jaw dropping clothes and dancing, it is difficult to capture the experience.

I visited five dance clubs in a mid-sized Northwestern city over the course of six weeks. The clubs were selected randomly from a pool that met the four following criteria: located within a five-mile radius of each other, served alcohol, advertised a DJ, had a 21-year-old age requirement. Outside of those standards, the dance clubs varied in music, dance style, atmosphere and clientele. By allowing for a wide range of variables, my objective was to obtain a broad sampling of dance club experiences.

By placing myself inside the dance club, I was able to collect first-hand information rather than relying solely on the accounts of others. I entered each club with

specific research agenda including: non-verbal communication between club patrons, the physical features of dance clubs, dance style, music, patron dress and demeanor, and alcohol consumption. These observations were later compared with the information I collected during patron interviews.

Interviews were conducted in the same dance clubs used during the participant observations. The interviews were anonymous. It was not important for my research that I record identifying information. Participants were selected for interviews out of convenience. This decision was made based upon the number of patrons and chaotic atmosphere in the dance clubs. These factors made a random selection sample impossible. Instead, I selected club goers that were in close proximity to me. As I moved throughout the different areas of the clubs, I continued to interview patrons. While the sample was not random, my objective was to achieve a broad range of dance club experiences.

Interviewing participants in the clubs during normal business hours was particularly appropriate and important to the research. Patrons were in the midst of the dance club experience and could feel, smell, hear, see and taste the dance club environment rather than simply recalling past experiences. This also created unique challenges including: difficulty in verbal communication, poor lighting, crowded areas and intoxicated patrons. I was able to adapt to the chaotic surroundings and work through the limitations on-site interviews created.

Questions asked in the interview addressed participants' reasons for coming to the dance club and their personal experiences and observations while in the clubs. They were asked to characterize the dress and demeanor of women in clubs, report on alcohol

consumption and music/dance styles observed in the club. The information gathered was combined with my participant observations. By using both research methods, I achieved a more balanced body of research. I was able to use this information to identify consistencies and differences in responses.

The literature review laid the groundwork to support my research. It enabled me to explore individual components of the dance club culture including: non-verbal communication, sexual coercion, music and music videos and alcohol use. By using existing research, I was able to add depth and credibility to my own exploration of the dance club culture.

The elements present in mainstream dance clubs create an atmosphere that thrives on miscommunication, exploitation of women, sexual aggression, alcohol use and excess. Traditional gender stereotypes are allowed to thrive and are encouraged through club policies and practices. By exploring the individual elements of dance club culture through participant observation, interviews and literature review, I demonstrate how dance club culture impacts the normative beliefs and behaviors of their patrons.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dance club culture encompasses several different areas of social phenomenon. Non-verbal communication, sexual coercion, music and music videos and alcohol use are primary components of the dance club experience. Each area must be explored to understand dance club culture as a whole.

Non-verbal Communication

Elgin (1993) reports body language conveys ninety percent of emotional information and sixty-five percent of all information is carried through nonverbal communication. This method of communication becomes even more important when talking is restricted. The combination of loud music and hundreds of people in a dance club make nonverbal communication the primary and often only means of gathering and interpreting information. Non-verbal communication allows individuals to communicate their feelings, interests and intentions. However, it does not allow for clarification of information. Ambiguous signals increase the potential for messages to be misunderstood.

Studies have found distinct gender differences in how nonverbal signals are interpreted. Abbey and Melby (1986) found when men are presented with ambiguous cues such as a man and a woman sitting with their shoulders touching or maintaining prolonged eye contact, they are more likely to assume sexual intent on both participants' part than women are. Men interpret women's behavior as seductive more often than women did. The men were also more sexually attracted to the opposite sex target than women were.

Men's tendency to attach sexual meaning to a woman's friendly behavior is related to their adoption of sexually relevant attitudes. These attitudes often predetermine how they process the behavior of others. Men are more likely than women to see interactions, particularly mundane dating behaviors, as sexual in nature. By endorsing sexually relevant attitudes, these men are primed to perceive non-verbal communication in a manner consistent with this schema. It is because of this predisposition that men and women's perceptions diverge most when communication is mundane and not overtly sexual (Abbey, 1991).

Kowalski (1993) identifies gender socialization as one of the reasons for this discrepancy. Men are raised to believe women are interested in sex and view women's friendly behavior as evidence of this. Conversely, women are taught to be polite and sociable as proper etiquette for a lady. Women exhibit friendly behavior and believe they are behaving as they have been taught. Men identify this behavior as sexual. Both parties assume the other understands the message being communicated, but neither does.

According to Muelenhard (1988), this miscommunication is the result of men viewing women as sex objects. Men look to women's behavior and communication to confirm their sexual interest. Because they are focused so intently on women's sexual qualities, the relational messages are ignored. Men's interpretation of these messages is arbitrary because they view women as sexual objects first and foremost. Their appearance is more valuable than the content of their character.

Women go to great lengths to obtain a sexually desirable body. Today, that requires women to be both thin and buxom. This is often achieved through countless hours at the gym, restrictive diets and cosmetic surgery (Weitz, 1998). It is also extended

to the clothing women wear. Goodchilds and Zellman (1984) and Abbey (1991) found men are more likely to perceive revealing clothing, especially when the clothing was worn by a woman, as a sign of sexual interest.

Heavy use of cosmetics has also been linked to incidents of sexual harassment (Workman and Johnson, 1991). The heavier cosmetics were applied, the greater likelihood that women will be harassed. These findings reflect a misinterpretation of clothing and cosmetics as a cue symbolizing sexual interest or consent. Women may believe they are increasing their physical attractiveness while men believe the clothing and make-up is intended to convey sexual intent.

Physically attractive people are thought to be warm, sensitive, kind, interesting, strong, sociable, and outgoing (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). As such, it is no surprise that women, as men, often attempt to make the self as attractive as possible. However, while increasing one's physical attractiveness may accrue the social benefits of being physically attractive, wearing revealing clothing or using cosmetics may also be interpreted as an "invitation" to the opposite sex (Workman & Johnson, 1991). Women are then expected to perform a balancing act between being attractive and being too attractive: behaving in a friendly manner and appearing flirtatious or overly assertive. Henley (1977) found that women also have significant social restrictions on their body language. While men are encouraged to make eye contact as a sign of confidence, women who do so are considered sexually aggressive.

Weitz (1998) believes the women practice self-surveillance as a form of obedience to patriarchy. Women spend an exorbitant amount of time and money to prepare their bodies, faces and clothing for social display. The majority of men would

not even consider these preparations much less put forth that level of effort. Men's appearances are not monitored and judged to the extent that women's are. Women are aware of this surveillance and take measures to make certain they appear socially acceptable. Evidence of this can be found in any public restroom. Men wash their hands; check their reflections and leave. Women retouch their make-up, style their hair, look over and adjust their clothing and often elicit the opinions of others in the restroom.

Through gender socialization men are taught to value masculine traits such as aggression and physical strength. They also learn to view women as weak and submissive. When this is translated to a dating or social situation, men see themselves as the aggressors. They are always ready for sex and will readily seek it out. It is men's primary role to attain their sexual conquest and they are entitled to do so (Morris, 1997).

Sexual entitlement gives men permission to objectify women and avoid emotional entanglements during interpersonal or sexual interactions (Muenlenhard, 1988). Women become sexual objects rather than men's equals. Their value lies in their sexuality, not their intellect or individuality. Men use derogatory terms such as "slut" to describe women they have never met and women are devalued, regardless of their actions or intentions. "Exaggerations of what is thought to be real masculinity and male sexuality masquerade as the real thing" (Morris, 1997).

If men infer sexual intent in mundane dating situations more often than women do, both sexes will have a difficult time understanding each others' reactions to these incidents (Johnson, Stockdale, & Saal, 1991). Men, acting on their belief structure, will feel justified in situations that women feel are unsolicited and unjustified (Abbey, 1982). Men expect women to be flattered by this attention and sexual interest. On the other

hand, women view this behavior as inappropriate and are often offended by men's focus on their bodies and sexuality. They expect men to be apologetic when they misinterpret women's intentions as sexual. Instead, men often become frustrated and accuse women of sending mixed messages. When alcohol is consumed, there is direct link between the use of alcohol and the perception that sexual activity will likely occur (Fromme & Wendel, 1995).

Alcohol

In a study by the National Centre for Research into the Prevention of Drug Abuse, it was found that drinking settings indicative of high risk consumption of alcohol were "a hotel or nightclub; the clientele being predominately male; music being the main form of entertainment; drinkers dancing and/or listening to music" (Lang, Stockwell, Rydon, & Lockwood, 1993, p. 144).

Individuals' use of alcohol is viewed as correlating with frequency and level of sexual experience. Fromme and Wendel (1995) state "People believe alcohol enhances sexual desire, facilitates sexual interest and enjoyment, and increases the likelihood that sex will occur" (p. 2100). In the study by Corcoran and Thomas (1991), all subjects in the study believed sexual activity was more likely to be initiated when alcohol was consumed.

Not only is the consumption of alcohol linked to the perception of increased sexual intent and activity, but the availability of alcohol also has a significant impact. Corcoran and Thomas (1991) found that the very presence of alcohol indicated an increased expectation of sexual activity. Hull and Bond found the perception that alcohol

was being consumed was enough to increase sexual arousal (as cited in Fromme & Wendel, 1995).

This is important to consider in a dance club environment where alcohol is ever present. Corcoran and Thomas (1991) found men were perceived to be more likely than women to initiate intercourse across all drinking situations, particularly when the subjects believed alcohol was being consumed rather than soft drinks. The presence of alcohol rather than the quantity consumed was the deciding factor. It is impossible for an observer to differentiate between an alcohol beverage and a non-alcoholic one simply by appearance. Thus, it's left up to the observer to decide. If observers think that alcohol is being consumed, assumptions regarding the likelihood of sexual activity are also increased.

Abbey and Harnish (1995) report women are perceived as being most sexual when both men and women are drinking alcohol. In a situation in which both individuals are consuming alcohol, regardless of her demeanor or activity, women are already perceived as highly sexual. The likelihood non-verbal cues will be misinterpreted is substantially increased with this predisposition.

These perceptions become highly problematic when they result in unwanted or coercive sexual activity. Fromme and Wendel (1995) found college students believe sexually coercive behavior is more likely to occur after alcohol consumption. In addition, alcohol intoxication may be used as an excuse for this behavior and absolving males from responsibility for their coercive actions.

Dimeff, Baer, Norris, and Marlatt (1992) found that men with a history of sexual aggression had greater sexual expectations when they consumed alcoholic beverages.

These expectations did not occur in the men without a previous history of sexual aggression. While this does not mean that men with a history of sexual aggression will take action based on this expectation, it is cause for concern. Conversely, the relationship between alcohol and sex is often depicted in a positive light by the media.

When sex is used to advertise alcohol, the messages are typically subtle and appear to relate more to seduction than to blatant sexual behavior. In an analysis of 45 commercials featuring Billy Dee Williams, Strate (1992) found that themes associated with alcohol as an aphrodisiac, logos as phallic symbols and alcohol as a confidence builder. Alcohol consumption by women was prominently depicted as a method for easy access to sexual favors (Morris, 1997). Researchers have found that frequently the (male) offender and less frequently the (female) victim have consumed drugs and/or alcohol prior to an incident of sexual coercion, and that consumption is a useful predictor of assault (Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan 1996; O'Sullivan, Byer, & Finkelman, 1998).

Alcohol advertisements are used to create a specific image of the ideal man and woman in the perfect drinking scenario. These images are used to influence our drinking behavior and prompt us to consume more alcohol and feel good about doing so. Another media outlet that uses imagery in this way is music videos.

Music Videos

Nearly 75% of concept music videos (excluding concert videos) contain sexually suggestive material (Sherman & Dominick, 1986). As a result, club patrons mimicked these sexualized dance moves over and over again throughout the night. Women in these

music videos were commonly depicted in either a sexually dominant or subordinate roles (Sherman & Dominick, 1986).

A study of college females found exposure to MTV was a powerful predictor of sexual permissiveness (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987). Another study conducted in 1995 (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Edgar), found women exposed to popular music and music videos were strongly linked with accepting attitudes towards sexual harassment. While studies have traditionally found males more accepting of adversarial sexual beliefs, gender role stereotyping and rape myths (Kalof, 1999; O'Sullivan, Byer, & Finkelman 1998), this research suggests heavy exposure to popular music and music videos eliminates this discrepancy. When men and women hear popular music and watch videos on MTV, their acceptance of sexual harassment converges.

Research has found music and lyrical content have a significant effect on people's moods and can evoke very strong emotional feelings. The mood-altering effects of music make people more susceptible to behavioral and attitudinal changes (Ballard and Coates, 1995; Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Edgar 1995). Nearly every person interviewed during my research reported people behave differently when they are in dance clubs. They tend to be less inhibited and more sexual. They are willing to try new experiences, consume more alcohol and engage in behavior they normally would not.

In addition to the sexual nature of music videos, they also portray elevated levels of violence (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993) and exposure to rap music videos has been shown to increase females' acceptance of dating violence (Hansen and Hanson, 1988). In the videos used in this study, women were portrayed in sexually subordinate roles. This research indicates women's exposure to music videos has a

profound effect on their views of relationships and tolerance of sexual violence. Rap music is very popular in dance clubs and rap videos are played in heavy rotation on MTV. If women become more accepting of sexual harassment and dating violence, they are setting a dangerous precedence.

The combination of the right type of music, lyrics and visual images can have a powerful impact on club goers. It is the job of the club DJ to make certain this blend is achieved night after night. Patrons can listen to music or watch MTV at home. The dance club offers a forum to explore and expand upon your feelings related to this material; to act upon your emotions in a relatively anonymous environment.

Dance club patrons appear to have an allegiance to the content of music videos. They follow the dance moves, they wear the same clothes and they adopt the attitudes conveyed in these videos. As music videos push the boundaries of cultural acceptance, the line of decency appears to move with it. As Chuck D of Public Enemy states, "People aren't stupid, but life is imitating art more than ever, which is not good, because it should be the reverse" (Oumano, 1996 p. 3).

A lack of meaningful communication, alcohol consumption, exploitive lyrics and music videos all have the potential to create problems between the sexes. The existing literature finds that even ambiguous messages are often interpreted as sexual in nature. The messages communicated in dance clubs often highly sexual in nature. The relationship between gender and social construction provides insight as to how traditional gender roles exploit women and feed into the stereotype that they are sexually available.

The theory of look-ism addresses the dance club culture's practice of attaching value to a person's physical appearance. Once a person's value is assessed, labeling is

used to broadly define individuals. By attaching labels, we are able categorize people based on stereotypes rather than acknowledging them as unique individuals.

CHAPTER III

THEORY

Gender and Social Construction

Pleck (1981) suggests gender identity is socially constructed. His gender role strain paradigm states gender roles are defined by prevailing stereotypes and norms. As these roles are socially constructed, they are often contradictory and inconsistent.

Dance clubs create a breeding ground for dissonance between and within the sexes. The dance club culture flourishes through the promotion of traditional gender stereotypes, particularly as they relate to women. These roles have been created through modeling the content of popular music and clothing styles, music videos and alcohol advertisements. They are also in conflict with the attitudes and behaviors generally accepted and practiced in the larger society. While the social climate outside of dance clubs has been progressing towards a culture of gender equality and a merit based value system, the dance club culture continues to reward sexist ideals and behavior.

Looks-ism

As a means of enforcing traditional gender roles, dance club culture has established a social hierarchy based on physical appearance and sex appeal. These traits are used as a classification system in the dance club environment. A woman's physical appearance will determine her value and afford her rights and privileges not available to her less attractive counterparts.

Male-dominated societies routinely subject women to controls aimed at regulating sexuality (Chancer, 1998). In dance club culture, women's sexuality is regulated through the gifts and special treatment they receive from club personnel. MacKinnon (1993) states social inequality is created and enforced through words and images. Social hierarchy cannot exist without meanings and the enforcement of this structure. In dance club culture, this is witnessed in music, music videos and advertisements.

As I demonstrate in my interview and participant observation research, club patrons have largely accepted this practice. Women are defined in terms of their sexuality. By participating in the dance club culture, women are thought to be attracting male attention and advertising their bodies. The adoption of such beliefs creates the potential to misunderstand non-verbal communication and define other's intentions by a predetermined set of expectations.

Labeling

The practice of labeling provides insight into how and why women in the dance club culture are defined by their sexuality. de Beauvoir (1968), reports that, in our culture of institutionalized heterosexuality, women are expected to make themselves both object and prey. If a woman dresses in a particular way or carries herself in a certain manner, she is doing so to catch the attention of men. Every aspect of women's behavior is dependent upon and motivated by male approval.

While dance club personnel reward women for dressing, dancing and behaving in a sexually suggestive manner, club patrons label these women as sluts. This label narrowly defines sexually promiscuous and devalued persons, yet it was used to broadly

describe women's dress and behavior. Club patrons used labeling as a means to challenge the hierarchy established through looks-ism. Once the label of slut is applied all other characteristics or traits are secondary. The individual no longer exists, only the slut.

From the male perspective, the women identified as sluts were not viewed with the same type of negativity. According to Chancer (1998), this is due in large to the role of the attractive whore role male fantasy. The attractive whore is desirable because she wants sex and is actively seeking to pleasure him. She is not only interested in catching his attention, but her motives are taken one step further and she craves sex with him. Not only does he desire her sexually, but also she wants him even more. People do not respect a whore and they are not expected to do so. She is less than a person. What identifies someone as a whore in this case is highly subjective and appears to have little bearing on clothing or demeanor and more to do with the observer's belief system.

CHAPTER IV

METHODS

My study is an exploratory investigation focusing on the relationship between modern dance club culture and club patrons. Two research questions guide the study: 1) How does dance club culture contribute to violations of personal norms, and; 2) Do women and men have different interpretations of what occurs in clubs? While dance club culture is the overall independent variable in my research, I use several variables to reveal patterns of this social phenomenon. These contributing factors include: alcohol use, music and dance styles, security and female patrons' dress and demeanor. Throughout my study, I looked for patterns of drinking, dancing, talking, and other forms of interpersonal interactions to address my research questions.

Sample

Over the course of six weeks, I interviewed forty-eight dance club patrons and conducted participant observation in five dance clubs in a large Northwest city. The participants in this project frequented dance clubs twice per month. Through their repeated patronage, they have become part of the dance club culture. They understand the social dynamics of this environment and have learned to embrace, or at the very least, accept it.

The dance clubs in this study were located within five miles of each other. While close in proximity, each venue has its own unique atmosphere. The dance clubs varied from a retro themed party to a sophisticated upscale nightclub to a crowded hip-hop event. These specific club environs were achieved through variances in the physical layout of the

dance clubs, lighting, alcohol, staff, and music featured. From the moment I stepped through the door, it was obvious that each club strives to create a specific attitude. These differences influenced the clientele each club attracted and impacted the behavior of club patrons while they were present. A more detailed description of each club is found in Appendix D.

Participant Observation

The first research method utilized in this project was participant observation. The coding sheet I used to record my observations is located in Appendix A. Participant observation allowed me to experience the dance club culture as other patrons do. I heard the music, danced along, watched club goers interact with each other, watched the video monitors and felt the heat of the tightly packed club. I was also able to experience this culture from a woman's perspective. As sexist beliefs and behaviors are part of the dance club culture, my gender is significant to my role as a participant.

I took steps to minimize the impact of my presence during this phase of my research by avoiding conversations with other patrons and dressing in conservative clothing. I continuously looked around the club collecting research data, but also avoided prolonged eye contact. While on the dance floor, I did not actively engage with other club patrons. It was my objective to observe the dance club environment, not alter it.

The information obtained during participant observation helped provide a complete picture of the dance club environment. I collected data on the dance clubs' physical structures, alcohol advertising and distribution, music and dance styles and dance club staff. The culture of a club is manufactured largely by these elements. For the most part, the club goers are reacting to the stimuli they've been given.

The information collected through participant observation was relevant and provided reflection on my experiences and observations. However, I wanted more information than participant observation alone could provide. Conducting interviews allowed me to address specific issues directly with dance club patrons and obtain additional insight into this culture.

Interviews

My objective was to develop an interview schedule that addressed issues relevant to this research. The areas identified were: motivation for going to clubs, activities conducted in clubs (including dancing, drinking), music, dress, demeanor and demographic information (age, gender, and ethnicity) (See Appendix C). I designed the questions to be straightforward without leading the subjects or purposely identifying an agenda. In the letter of consent (See Appendix B), participants were told this research is designed to explore the beliefs and behaviors of dance club patrons. My hypothesis or expected findings were not discussed with the participants at any time during the interview process.

I conducted the interviews in the same dance clubs in which the participant observations were completed. By performing interviews inside the clubs, I ensured contact with my target population. The questions were short and straightforward, so the interview subjects would not be confused or need additional clarification. I purposely avoided questions regarding illegal conduct, including drug use and sexual assault. Aside from demographic information, including age, ethnicity and gender, there were no other identifying information asked or obtained during the interview process.

Face-to-face interviews can never be truly anonymous; however, it was my intention to protect the participants' identity to the extent possible. Knowing the participants names or detailing aspects of their physical appearances would not add benefit to the project. It could also impede my ability to gather information, as club goers may be hesitant to disclose their identity to an interviewer.

The dynamics of the dance club environment made a random selection of participants impossible. Patrons are admitted into the club at a rapid rate and disperse to various locations upon entering the building. Instead, I selected interview subjects based on their proximity to me. I never interrupted conversations between patrons to request an interview or made contact with a potential interview subject while they were dancing. My goal was to be as minimally intrusive as possible. This meant I would not be able to interview particular people or I would have to wait until they became available.

I approached the potential interview subject, introduced myself and read the letter of consent (See Appendix A). I then asked the schedule of interview questions in the order listed on the Research Questionnaire (See Appendix B). I had originally planned to record my interviews on audiotape to preserve participants' direct responses. However, the volume of noise within the dance clubs prevented me from doing so. Instead, I recorded all responses on the interview instrument itself and made every attempt to capture the exact language used by the participant. Given that most interviews were conducted while I was standing, lengthy responses were paraphrased for practical purposes. While respondents' exact words were often not recorded, I took care in capturing the flavor of these conversations.

After I completed the interview, I approached another interview subject. I continued this practice until I had collected between 8-10 interviews at that dance club. By continuing to move throughout the club I achieved a diverse sample, including people who came to the club to dance, drink and/or socialize. I did not select interview subjects based on age, sex, dress, or ethnicity. It was my objective to collect a sample of the clubs' general clientele rather than examine a particular population's experiences in dance clubs.

While I conducted my research within the dance club setting, I did so as an outsider. Any participation on my part was as a researcher and could not be considered an organic experience as a club patron. As such, my presence as an interviewer may have affected my interactions with club patrons. While reviewing the data I collected, I became aware of several instances in which patrons' had given socially desirable responses to my research questions. While these statements may have accurately reflected their observations and beliefs, they appeared to have taken special care in choosing the words and tone of their responses. On more than one occasion, male patrons refused to answer my questions regarding women's dress and demeanor. One woman seemed to be attempting to create an alliance with me by thanking me for dressing appropriately; or better than the other women at the dance club.

While conducting my participant observation, I was able to engage in the dance club setting. However, as an outsider, I was unable to fully immerse myself into the culture. I did not know the people I was observing nor did I know the relationships they had with one another. I could only reflect upon what I saw that night. If I saw people arrive together, I assumed they were friends, but they could have met outside in the line

to get in the club. However, I attempted to report from the position as an observer rather than a regular dance club patron. I took care to avoid making assumptions about relationships amongst dance club patrons and instead, reported events as I saw them.

My first goal in exploring the variables of this study was to determine how club culture affects personal norms of club patrons. Data gathered during participant observations and patron interviews was used in conjunction with existing research to make this determination. This was the foundation of my study and I had to discover the answer before I could proceed in determining the outcomes of my other research questions.

My research findings examine individual variables and determine how they contribute to the overall culture in dance clubs. I look at the nature of patrons' behavioral changes and identify contributing factors. I explore patrons' relationships with alcohol and how this relates to research connecting alcohol and sexual expectations. I address the relationship between MTV and the style of dancing reported and observed in dance clubs.

Finally, I review respondents' comments regarding women's dress and demeanor in the dance club setting. I also looked at how men and women respond to questions of perspective. I categorize these answers based on gender and analyzed them for pattern of response. Based on this information, I determine whether response variations along gender lines were indicative of a difference in male/female interpretations.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

The dance club culture clearly impacts the attitudes and behaviors of club patrons. The elements found within the club setting (alcohol, music, security, visual images and appearance based value system) are used to create a specific atmosphere. Dance clubs operate according to their own set of norms and they are often inconsistent with accepted societal practices. These inconsistencies can lead to dissonance among club patrons and have the potential to create physically and emotionally harmful situations.

To begin my analysis, I examine elements that I believe are central factors in the dance club culture. I next seek to answer my two research questions about how dance club culture impacts patrons' behavior and their interpretations of the dance club environment.

The Alcohol Effect

All five dance clubs in this study served alcohol, as did most of the dance clubs in this Northwest city. Three of the five venues prominently featured alcohol advertisements inside of the clubs. Posters of beautiful women and shirtless men holding beer bottles hung throughout the venues. Neon signs advertising liquor were positioned near the bar and served as beacons to patrons across the dimly lit rooms. Liquor companies often collaborate with dance clubs to promote their particular product. Clubs also offer drinks featuring a particular brand of vodka or serve beer in glasses with a company logo.

Dance clubs promote alcohol use by featuring drink specials throughout the evening. While it is commonplace for most bars to advertise daily specials, dance clubs

specifically focus on shots of liquor rather than drinks with lower alcohol content. All drink specials encourage the consumption of alcohol; however, specifically advertising shots of alcohol encourage alcohol to be consumed quickly. It is a much slower process to drink five beers than it is to consume five shots of alcohol.

The featured shots often have sexually suggestive names such as Blowjob or Slippery Nipple to catch patrons' attention. The drink specials also include a specific delivery system, such as leaning backwards over the bar while shooting a Kamikaze or putting your mouth around the entire shot glass when drinking a Blowjob. The more sexually suggestive the drink, the more club goers lined up to buy it. Dance clubs are obviously aware of the sex-alcohol relationship and use these tactics to exploit it. This pays off financially for the club, as well as creating a fun, sexually uninhibited atmosphere.

Dance Style of Clubs

While patrons struggled to categorize the style of dance in these clubs, I observed two distinct trends amongst the five clubs. Club A had music from the 1970s and 1980s. Club B, Club C and Club D featured techno or house music and Club E played hip-hop. However, the dance styles were determined by each dance club's atmosphere in combination with the type of music featured.

The music played in Club B and Club D had a high energy, bass heavy beat and the lyric-less songs often blended seamlessly from one into another without pause. This music is a popular genre in dance clubs, but receives little radio coverage and is absent from MTV and other music video channels. Women crowded the dance floors in these clubs

while men watched from the sidelines. The hyper-fast beat was met with a jerky, bouncing dance style, rather than close, intimate dancing.

Club D had video cameras positioned around the dance floor to record patrons as they danced. The images played on large screen closed circuit televisions throughout the dance club. The camera operators focused on the most attractive and scantily clad female dancers. I found once women noticed they were the focus of the camera's attention, they began to dance more provocatively and even turned to face the camera. The sexier they behaved, the longer the camera focused on them. The camera's presence changed the atmosphere on the dance floor. When the cameras were activated, women were no longer dancing for their own enjoyment, but rather for an audience. The audience in this case was the large group of male patrons standing at the bar watching the video screens.

The primary dance style in Clubs A, C and E was a highly sexual bump and grind. A woman in Club C likened the display to having sex on the dance floor. Another woman in the same club described a dancing-sex relationship in which club goers take off most of their clothes and rub against one another.

I observed this dance style in the three clubs and found that, in nearly every instance, a man approached a woman on the dance floor from behind so her back was turned to him. He began dancing with her by rubbing his body against hers. If the woman did not move away or appear to object to this contact, the man placed a hand or two on her hips or stomach and continued dancing in the same manner. The woman kept her back to him and did not actively engage with him. Rather, the man guided her motions and the intensity of the interaction.

If a woman was not interested in dancing with a particular man, she moved away from him to another area of the dance floor. If the man kept pursuing her, she left the dance floor all together. I did not observe any woman engage in a verbal exchange that resulted in the man ending his pursuit of her. However, it is important to note the music levels were so intense, verbal communication was extremely limited.

On several occasions, I observed what appeared to be men collaborating on the dance floor. They looked to be maintaining eye contact with each other as they danced with numerous women, occasionally signaling toward a particular woman or group of women. The women appeared to play a minor role in this equation. These men were apparently communicating, albeit nonverbally, with each other, not the women. They appeared to be attempting to amuse or impress each other by pushing the limits of what women will tolerate on the dance floor with seemingly little regard for their female partners. This lends support to the meat market atmosphere referenced by several club goers.

Music Videos and Dancing

Music videos are central to the dance club culture. During the interview process, MTV and music videos were heavily cited as influencing club dance styles. These videos are often highly sexual in nature and depict scenarios with women in subordinate roles. Patrons who watch music videos are presented with a how-to guide for dancing to that particular song or genre of music. During the participant observation, I watched hundreds of people mimic the dance moves in music videos. Lest there be any deviation

from the formula, dance clubs often play music videos on monitors near the dance floor to accompany the songs.

Club E played sexually charged music videos on large projection screens near the dance floor. The videos corresponded with the songs played and people on the dance floor imitate the moves in the music videos. The result is “nasty, dirty grinding” as one club patron described. These videos continually push the envelope of what is considered acceptable. At the same time, the dance club culture adopts these images as its own. Thirty-five percent of the participants interviewed reported people learned to dance by watching music videos/MTV. While the majority of respondents reported they learned to dance by watching others, I suspect MTV’s influence weighed heavily in that equation as well.

Rather than broadcasting music videos, Club C placed television monitors around the dance floor and played soft-core gay porn. The highly sexual scenarios included simulated sex acts featuring scantily clad actors. While these films had no audible music accompanying them, the images were strikingly similar to those in the music videos. The dance floor was filled with club goers bumping and grinding to the music. Aside from the same sex pairings on the dance floor, the scene was the same at both Club C and Club E.

Women’s Appearance and Clothing

In most dance clubs, women outnumber men. As I observed and club goers confirmed, women come to dance clubs in groups and are comfortable dancing alone or with their female friends. However, men only remained at a dance club if women are available to dance with them. With rare exception, i.e. gay clubs, they do not need to

market to men. If the dance club is successful in attracting women, men will follow regardless of the cost of entry or alcohol.

Dance clubs frequently offer incentives to bring women into the clubs and keep them there throughout the night. Attractive women get free passes to the dance club and are often placed in highly visible locations on the dance floor. In Club D, dance club staff encourages these women to dance on raised platforms above the dance floor or position them so the closed circuit cameras are able to see them clearly and broadcast their images throughout the club.

Shot specials advertised throughout the night are clearly marketed for women. It is highly unlikely a man would order and consume a Blowjob at a dance club or lean over the bar and have alcohol poured into his mouth. I witnessed men's responses to women consuming alcohol in a provocative way. Men, especially groups of men, watch with extreme interest and often attempt to talk with them or offer to buy the women more alcohol.

In addition to drink specials, dance clubs waive admission fees for attractive female patrons or give them passes to use during their next visit. Club A and Club B, did not charge women the same admission fee men were required to pay. In Club A, I observed staff offer free drink passes to young, attractive women as they left the club. Club personnel appeared to select patrons to receive passes based on appearance, particularly dress. The more skin women show, the more benefits they appeared to receive. The only club offering an incentive for men was Club C, a gay club that waived the cost of admission on Mondays if men arrive shirtless. This practice in both clubs is based on

physical appearance. Club C provided incentives to bring in male patrons. That is the clientele they wish to attract and they outwardly encouraged the display of skin.

Several elements promoted in dance club culture contribute to the violations of personal norms. Dance clubs have been able to encourage drinking by identifying a direct correlation between drinking and sex. They accomplish this by advertising sexually suggestive drinks and encouraging sexually explicit delivery methods. While men line the bars every night, the dance clubs focus on getting women to consume more alcohol. “Ladies Nights” promotions offer women reduced priced alcoholic beverages while men are required to pay full price. Club personnel also offer free drinks to attractive women.

Attractive women get free passes to the dance club and are often placed in highly visible locations on the dance floor. Dance club staff encourages these women to dance on raised platforms above the dance floor or position them so the closed circuit cameras are able to see them clearly and broadcast their images throughout the club.

Dance clubs are designed in such a way that communication is extremely limited. Music levels and crowd noise drown out talking. Lighting is concentrated over the dance floor and bar while the remainder of the club consists of dark corners and balconies. The only people who are highly visible are those on the dance floor. Dancing is the primary means of conveying information at the dance club. As such, the style of dance becomes an extremely important communication tool.

Images from music videos inform the dance style in clubs. These videos are often highly sexual in nature and depict scenarios with women in subordinate roles. MTV was often referenced as the guiding force behind patrons’ dance style and I witnessed examples of this during my research. Dance clubs also show music videos on large

projection screens surrounding the dance floor. The visual images in the videos were directly translated onto the dance floor, complete with lyrics detailing men's sexual conquest of women.

Dance club staff actively promotes a value system based on appearance. They cater to attractive women by offering incentives to come into the dance club and stay once they are inside. Women are offered free drinks and the best placement on the dance floor. They do not pay for entry into the dance club and are given free passes for future visits.

Reasons for Coming to Dance Clubs

Regardless of the dance club's genre, the majority of patrons interviewed cited either dancing or socializing with friends as the primary reasons they come to dance clubs. They described the experience as a "girls' night out" and a reason to spend time socializing. Others interviewed said dance clubs were a way to escape boredom and the everyday responsibilities of school and family. Aside from dancing, patrons could have been describing the reasons they go to the movies or almost any social function. Dance clubs are a place to escape their responsibilities and relax with friends.

Despite the heightened sexual atmosphere present in dance club culture, i.e., dancing, sexual images on TV monitors and alcohol use, only two men and one woman admitted their primary purpose in coming to dance clubs was to meet members of the opposite sex. Responses of this nature may be limited in part because respondents found it embarrassing or uncomfortable to disclose their motivations to an interviewer. However, I suspect most club goers' initial motivation is not to meet potential sexual partners. I observed that most patrons' come to dance clubs with their friends and, initially, appear to be focused on socializing within that social circle.

Largely absent from the identified factors that bring patrons in to dance clubs, was the availability and consumption of alcohol. Only five club goers reported one of the reasons they come to dance clubs is to drink. However, when I asked patrons to describe what actually occurs during their typical night at a dance club, drinking and engaging with new people were frequently cited. A man at Club C told me he comes to dance clubs to hang out with his friends, but later reported he usually spends his nights waiting for guys instead. Another man in Club E said he comes to spend time with friends, but usually ends up getting “way too drunk”. A woman in the same club stated she frequents dance clubs as a way to get away from school. Once there, she typically meets people, drinks beer and dances.

Patrons may not come to dance clubs for the expressed purpose of consuming alcohol or meeting new people. However, they engage in these activities once in the environment. The dance club atmosphere influences patrons’ behavior and decision-making process.

Dance Club Culture and Participants’ Behavior

Over ninety-three percent of patrons report people behave differently in dance clubs than they do in other social venues. A large number of respondents describe an atmosphere of uninhibited, sexual behavior. A female patron in Club B reported that women are more likely to tolerate inappropriate behavior from men in dance clubs. A man in the same club stated that people in dance clubs engage in sexual activity that normally they would not. A number of patrons report that both men and women are there to “hook up” or “get laid.” These behaviors and motivations were almost entirely absent

from the responses given when people were asked to describe their own reasons for coming to dance clubs and their personal experiences.

While I did not specifically ask club goers to identify the factors contributing to these behavioral changes, many patrons offered their unsolicited explanations. About one fourth of respondents cited alcohol consumption as the catalyst for these behavioral changes. Others identified dancing and the physical exertion, touching and the lack of verbal communication that accompany it. A woman in Club D likened the experience to watching a mating ritual on the Discovery Channel. Club goers in Clubs A, B and E referred to the dance club environment as a “meat market” in which women and men are looked over and selected as if they were objects: pieces of meat.

A woman in Club A pointed out the lighting (or lack thereof) as a contributing factor. She did not like the dim lighting and though it was a bad idea to have dark corners in a crowded club. In the dance clubs visited during this project, lighting was concentrated over the dance floor. The remaining areas of the clubs were dimly lit. As I looked around the club, I found it nearly impossible to see into certain areas, including entries to the bathrooms and exit doors.

In Club D, the main floor was brightly lit and packed with people, while the balcony had almost no lighting and very few patrons. The upper level had tables and a small bar in the corner. As in Club A, only single men and couples occupied this dark space. The single men watched the dance floor from their perches and couples cuddled at tables. If it were not for the bar and bartender’s presence, the balcony would have seemed uncomfortably isolated.

Two of the five dance clubs had a visible security presence inside the buildings. Security personnel monitored the dance clubs for inappropriate or illegal activity. While their main function appeared to be limited to pulling women off tables and maintaining clear walkways, they were easy to identify and provided a sense of safety and order. The remaining three clubs had security personnel posted at the front door, but there was no security staff visible inside the building.

Patrons appear to accept the dance club environment as permission to express themselves in ways they normally would not. As one woman stated “It’s like Halloween. People can bring out their alter egos.” Patrons who are normally shy and reserved are encouraged to let go of their inhibitions. They dress provocatively, dance freely and drink as much as they desire. A woman in Club A stated that people in dance clubs do not have to be themselves. They are able to adopt another persona and pretend they are someone else. A woman in Club B viewed this as patrons hiding who they are rather than simply taking on different personality traits. The dance club environment thrives on ambiguity and, if the crowded venues are any indication, people are anxious to abandon their inhibitions.

Dance clubs are designed in such a way that communication is extremely limited. Music levels and crowd noise drown out talking. Lighting is concentrated over the dance floor and bar while the remainder of the club consists of dark corners and balconies. The only people who are highly visible are those on the dance floor. I had difficulty communicating during interviews and was reduced to yelling directly into patrons’ ears. As a woman in Club E stated, “People start dancing rather than talking with each other.” A woman in Club D took it one step further reporting that “dancing equals touching” and

used this as evidence that club goers come to dance clubs to “get laid.” Dancing is the primary means of conveying information at the dance club. As such, the style of dance becomes an extremely important communication tool.

While socializing and dancing are cited most often as the reasons club goers continue to pack dance clubs night after night, it is apparent that there are other motivating factors involved. Dance clubs take patrons out of their everyday environments by creating an atmosphere that allows them to lower their inhibitions and abandon everyday behavioral restraints. People behave differently in dance clubs than they do in other social venues. Strategically placed lighting, a lack of social barriers, loud music, sexual images and the physical experience of dancing all contribute to this unique environment. However, an important element of the dance club culture is the role of alcohol and its effect on patrons’ dance club experience.

Over twenty percent of respondents identified alcohol as a catalyst for behavioral change in club patrons. This is not surprising considering alcohol’s important role in the dance club experience. What is more significant is that seventy-five percent of patrons interviewed identified it as contributing to lowered sexual inhibitions in the dance club setting. This indicates a strong connection between drinking and sexual behavior at least in the minds of dance club patrons. While other factors may contribute to behavioral changes, alcohol is almost always involved.

Consuming alcohol in dance clubs is also a spectator sport as I observed men lining the bar to watch women drink and cheering them on as they do. Research has already established that the presence and consumption of alcohol contribute to an increased

expectation of sexual interest and intent. These drinks take it one-step further and bring attention to specific sexual acts or parts of the body.

Over two-thirds of club patrons report consuming more alcohol than they had planned at a dance club. This is consistent with the behavioral discrepancies that occur in dance club culture. Just as patrons reported reasons for coming to dance clubs that were inconsistent with their behavior once they are inside, club goers behavior regarding alcohol changes once immersed in the dance club environment.

Over half the respondents reported negative consequences to their overindulgence. Many reported becoming physically ill at the club or feeling “hung over” the next morning. Others experienced negative consequences including bad decision-making, fighting or behaving foolishly. A woman in Club B reports her personal values decrease and she finds herself more easily persuaded to do things she normally would not. Another woman admits to going home with “the wrong guy.” As a result of his alcohol consumption, a man in Club D reports getting into fights and arguments.

A smaller number of patrons reported positive behavioral changes occurred with their increased use of alcohol. A man in Club E reported becoming more comfortable within the dance club setting. A woman in Club D thought of herself as more outgoing and able to talk with people with whom she normally would not. A male patron interviewed in Club B found that the increased consumption of alcohol resulted in behavioral changes in others, but it did not affect him. I found this a particularly telling statement relating to how dance club patrons view themselves and their own behavior versus their perceptions of others. Although the majority of patrons interviewed reported

negative consequences to this behavior, they return to dance clubs and continue to consume alcohol.

I questioned patrons as to whether they believed dance clubs encourage alcohol consumption to the point of intoxication. Over half the respondents report that clubs do encourage this level of consumption. Drink specials and elevated temperatures were cited as evidence of this. A man in Club A stated, “I believe they encourage intoxication, but that’s not a bad thing or too much alcohol.” Another man in Club D reports that all bars encourage their patrons to drink until they are intoxicated. Others believed dance clubs do nothing to discourage drinking to intoxication.

Several patrons cited free will as dictating alcohol consumption, not the dance clubs’ influence. However, it was admitted that dance clubs do nothing to discourage intoxication. Alcohol consumption is not only important for club profits, but it also contributes to the uninhibited dance club environment that patrons seek.

It is illegal for any establishment to continue serving alcohol to an intoxicated customer. However, the layout of most dance clubs does not allow for any reasonable level of monitoring to be conducted. In four of the five dance clubs, patrons were required to go directly to the bar to order drinks. There is no wait staff circulating throughout the clubs taking and distributing drink orders. As a result, no one actively monitors alcohol consumption in these venues.

The bars were staffed with multiple bartenders, who struggled with keep up with drink orders throughout the night. As I observed, it would be impossible for them to see beyond the mob of patrons at the bar. Often bartenders glanced at people only long enough to hear the drink order and take their money. There was no identifiable means for

club employees to monitor patrons' consumption of alcohol or behavior throughout the evening. Only in extreme cases, such as fighting or nudity, did club personnel respond to intoxication.

During my research, I observed several instances of public intoxication. In Club B, I watched a woman standing at the bar slide down the front of her male companion, stopping near the top of his pants. She moved her head back and forth, appearing to simulate oral sex. After several seconds, the woman stood up laughing and nearly fell over. Her companion caught her and helped steady her until they left the bar together. The club staff did not appear to notice this display and the woman continued drinking.

In Club E, I watched an obviously intoxicated woman pull up her shirt and expose her breasts to a security guard. When he failed to react to her behavior, she pulled up her shirt again and this time pressed her breasts against him. The security guard removed her from him, but she was not escorted out of the club. She continued to drink and dance throughout the night.

Club goers initially report that they come to dance clubs to socialize and dance. However, once inside, drinking becomes a central part of their evening. Dance clubs advertise alcohol throughout the venues and offer drink specials throughout the night. The consumption of alcohol is largely unregulated and staff appears to turn a blind eye to displays of public intoxication.

Over half of the patrons interviewed reported drinking more alcohol than they had planned and believed dance clubs actually encourage alcohol consumption to the point of intoxication. Nearly seventy-five percent of respondents believe consuming alcohol results

in behavioral changes. Dance club culture appears to influence how patrons view their use of alcohol and, as a result, change their behavior.

Communication in dance clubs is largely non-verbal and club patrons rely on appearance as a primary means of gathering and interpreting information about one another. Given the dance club culture's focus on sexual appeal, it is hardly surprising that over 80% of patrons describe the way in which women in dance clubs dress as sexy. Women's clothing was form-fitting and revealed more skin than is usually displayed in public. A woman in Club B described it as "tight and skimpy." A woman in Club D reported that women wear "tight pants and a shirt that shows their tits." I observed many women wearing clothing that revealed their cleavage and it was common to see thong underwear straps peeking out above the pant line. However, this did not apply to every woman in the club nor would I describe it as typical dance club attire.

Patrons enthusiastically identified women in the dance club who had their "tits hanging out" or "looked like sluts." The women used as examples did not dress differently than other women in the dance clubs. However, when these women were identified, they were usually talking with men or dancing. This is normal dance club behavior, but it appeared to draw inferences from other patrons. A woman in Club D believed the message being conveyed was "take me home, I'm a slut." In an environment with little verbal communication, this categorization of women was created through observing non-verbal cues such as dress, dancing, drinking, and the personal biases club goers bring with them.

Nearly half of all respondents described the demeanor of women in dance clubs as slutty, sexy, uninhibited, or flirtatious. This was consistent with the descriptions of women's dress. Slutty was one of the most oft-used descriptors and spoke directly to

women's character. While slutty and flirtatious may be at opposite ends of the continuum, the general consensus among women was that women at dance clubs are sexually available. A woman in Club E believes women in dance club act like they are "out to find someone". Several women in Club C report women are trying to find a man, playing hard to get and coming on to men. In contrast, only two men reported that women's behavior reflects a desire to attract the opposite sex.

Women were resistant to identify similarities amongst themselves and instead made statements that demeaned other women. Female club goers were quick to point a judgmental finger at others, while they avoided identifying any personal connection with this phenomenon. Other women dressed like sluts, they did not. They identified themselves as fun-loving, social people while using terms like slutty and available to describe other women.

While some male participants used the similar descriptors, several referred to women's dress as "nice" or "appealing" rather than using a more unflattering term such as slutty. Many male respondents appeared hesitant to answer this question. Two men refused to answer the question altogether. I am not certain if it was the nature of the question or because it was being posed to them by a female interviewer. Men may have been anxious to respond in a socially acceptable way while women used this opportunity to criticize other women in the dance clubs.

A woman in Club A thanked me for wearing "decent clothing and not looking like a slut" after identifying several women in the club wearing similar styles that she believed were dressed inappropriately. She appeared to be taking special care in setting both herself and me apart from the other women at the club. Given the descriptors of

women's dress and demeanor in dance clubs, this is hardly surprising. This woman was creating an alliance with me. She was not only paying me a compliment, but by doing so, she had identified that we were more respectable than the other women at the club.

During the interview process, female club goers repeatedly characterized women's dress and demeanor as slutty. However, none of these respondents identified themselves as behaving or dressing in this typical manner. Responses were premised with "they" or "them" to separate their own dress and demeanor from other women. Women were left pointing at each other saying, "slut" while taking care to avoid acknowledging they were wearing the same clothes and behaving in the same manner. A woman in Club A not only criticized another female club goer for her behavior, but went as far as stating that she must have been drunk to be "making out" with the man she was with. The assumption that the other woman was drunk rather considering that there may have been a relationship between these two people demonstrates the influence of alcohol may have over both behavior and perception in the dance club setting.

Dance club culture's emphasis on appearance and sex appeal may provide an explanation for the "us vs. them" phenomenon occurring among women in dance clubs. In many ways, women appear to have accepted the elements of the dance club culture. They mimic the dance styles and fashion featured in the music videos promoted by the dance clubs. Women accept benefits associated with being identified as an attractive woman and take advantage of the free entry and drink specials offered to them. They also continue to pack dance clubs on a nightly basis.

However, it became apparent during my interviews that many aspects of dance club culture upset and offend them. Women in Club B and Club E describe dance clubs

as meat markets. Women are treated as objects based on others perception of them. Fending off unwanted advances and being “hit on” are regular components of their dance club experience. A woman in Club B stated that women are more tolerant of inappropriate or unwanted advances when they occur in a dance club because it is expected. Several women also cited this element of the dance club experience as one reason people avoid coming to dance clubs.

While these interview subjects continue to return to dance clubs, there is acknowledgement that women’s role in dance club culture as sexual objects is not condoned at the individual level. By differentiating one’s own behavior and dress from other women in the club, it is easier to demonstrate that you do not contribute to this negative stereotype of women in dance clubs. As one woman in Club C states “they (women) want attention.” “They” also dress like sluts, come to dance clubs to get laid and suck down drinks while lying on a bar. It is not difficult to understand why most women would not want to be part of this stereotype.

During my research, I was able to experience the dance club culture from a woman’s perspective. Each night, men approached me both on and off the dance floor. If a man began to converse with me, I kept the interaction brief and cordial. I was there as an observer, not an interviewer. Some men were very polite and respectful: other men were highly aggressive. They approached me from behind and place their hands all over my body. As the men’s arms were usually wrapped in front of me, I could not get away without forcibly removing them. This left me feeling desperate, annoyed, and angry. It disturbed me even further to see the same men approaching other women in this manner.

This behavior was not limited to club patrons. When I approached a male bartender for a glass of water in Club A, he responded by saying, “Show me your tits!” Not knowing how to respond, I looked to the other patrons around me. Most of them were laughing and looking directly at me as if they actually expected that I would expose myself. The bartender laughed and exclaimed, “That’s okay, you’re married” and handed me a glass of water. I walked feeling embarrassed and my confidence shaken.

Men and women have different perspectives on what occurs in dance club culture. Women enter dance clubs expecting to fend off unwanted sexual advances. They report it is a regular part of the “meat market” atmosphere and are more tolerant of inappropriate advances when they occur in a dance club. Men don’t report the same experiences. It is either because they don’t encounter the same advances or they do not view being “hit on” as a negative part of the dance club atmosphere.

In my findings, I have identified several factors present in the dance club environment contribute to the perpetuation of potentially sexist attitudes and behaviors. Dance clubs have been able to encourage drinking by identifying a direct correlation between drinking and sex. They accomplish this by advertising sexually suggestive drinks and encouraging sexually explicit delivery methods. While men line the bars every night, the dance clubs focus on getting women to consume more alcohol. “Ladies Nights” promotions offer women reduced priced alcoholic beverages while men are required to pay full price. Club personnel also offer free drinks to attractive women.

This research demonstrates that a dance club culture exists, and it appears to challenge personal norms and behaviors. Club patrons have described the dance club environment as a place in which normal practices and rules do not apply. Socially

unacceptable behavior, including lewd behavior and public drunkenness, are expected and encouraged by club personnel. Dance club staff also contributes to this type of behavior by actively promoting a value system based on appearance. They cater to attractive women by offering incentives to come into the dance club and stay once they are inside. Women are offered free drinks and the best placement on the dance floor. They do not pay for entry into the dance club and are given free passes for future visits. Existing literature identifies almost every element of dance club culture as having the potential to encourage traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Dance clubs combine these elements and provide a venue in which these behaviors and attitudes are accepted and encouraged.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Club goers reportedly frequent dance clubs to dance and socialize with friends. However, once inside this environment, they find themselves behaving in ways they had not planned and are faced with the decision of how to rectify the dissonance this creates. This research explored the relationship between dance club culture and the violation of personal norms experienced by dance club patrons. It also sought to discover if men and women interpret this phenomenon differently.

Alcohol plays a central role in dance club culture. Club patrons cite alcohol consumption as a key factor in all behavioral changes, particularly as it relates to sexual inhibitions. The majority of club patrons consume alcohol while at the dance club and nearly half have found themselves consuming more alcohol than they had planned while at a dance club. However, when asked about their reasons for coming to dance clubs, most respondents failed to mention drinking.

Music and music videos set the tone for the dance style and heighten the level of sexuality in dance club culture. Music videos are cited as one of the primary sources patrons turn to when learning dance styles. Typically, these images are highly sexual and depict male dominated scenarios in which women serve as props. Often dance clubs promote these videos as they are played along with the accompanying songs. Club goers adopt and mimic these moves on the dance floor while critiquing the moves as having sex on the dance floor or nasty, dirty grinding.

The dance club environment relies heavily on non-verbal communication. As such, dress and demeanor become primary means of conveying and interpreting

information. While men dress in styles you would find in an office or other social setting, women's clothing is commonly tighter and more revealing. Sexy and slutty are used to describe both the way women dress and their behavior. Both men and women made statements regarding the fit of women's clothing and the amount of skin showing, however, women's responses went further in describing women's actions and the motivations behind them.

In my research, many women made "us vs. them" statements seemingly in an effort to create a distinction between themselves and other women in the dance club. I believe by doing so they are also seeking to distance themselves from the dance club culture's appearance and sex based value system. When female dance club patrons were asked to classify the dress and demeanor of other women, they not only described the clothing worn and behavior, but they made inferences regarding alcohol consumption, sexual intentions and motivations for coming to the dance club.

When a woman in Club A noticed a man and woman kissing, she stated that the woman must be intoxicated to behave in such a manner. I found the comment to be dismissive and was surprised to hear this respondent make such an assumption. However, by labeling this woman as "drunk" she created distance between that women's behavior and her own.

Another woman in the same club drew a distinction between my clothing and the dress of most women at dance clubs. She thanked me for wearing "decent" clothing and not dressing like a slut even though my clothes were no different than most women's at that club. By making these comments, she was attempting set both of us apart from the other women at the dance club.

Women in dance clubs were also categorized as sexually motivated. While only one woman actually reported coming to dance clubs to meet men, a large number of respondents reported women in dance clubs were either attempting to attract men's attention or where there to find a man. Their clothing and willingness to dance with men were cited as evidence of these intentions. However, while this behavior was cited as typical of women in dance clubs, the respondents distanced themselves from the same behavior and motivations stating they came to socialize with their friends.

In this research, women rectified the dissonance created by violations of their norms by placing responsibility on others. Women, who maintained the physical appearances and exhibited behaviors promoted by dance club culture, were identified as sluts and drunks or were assumed to be seeking male approval. Respondents' discomforts with these standards were projected onto individuals rather than addressed as independent elements.

This study expands our understanding of norm violations in modern society. Dance club culture does not create anything new. Rather, it combines elements present in almost every aspect of our society. Music, music videos, alcohol and dress are part of this culture, but they also exist independently from dance clubs. The dance club culture may well overwhelm the senses and, as a result, distract patrons from processing the impact on their value systems.

It is important to continue studying how we process norm violations. My research can be expanded to include other areas of our society (e.g., school, work and dating relationships). This insight can assist us in understanding how people view themselves, as well as, their relationships with others.

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APPENDIX A

CODING SHEET FOR PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Club Name	
Time Arrived	
Time Departed	
Description of club (location, clientele, lighting)	
Alcohol served	
Smoking	
Posted dress code	
Security (visibility, identifying markers, actions)	
Minimum age limit	
Music style	
Dance style	
TV monitors...playing	
Number of bars in club	
Interactions with bartenders	
Interactions with security	
Advertising near dance floor	
Advertising outside of club	
Advertising in bathrooms	
Dress of male patrons	
Dress of female patrons	
Couplings or groups on the dance floor	
Demonstrated methods of communication	
Touching/intimate contact	
Fights	
Nudity/partial nudity	
Displays of drunkenness	
Advertised drink specials	
Special prices or cover charge for women	
Special prices or cover charge for men	
Bathrooms	
Women/Men ratio	
Racial make-up of clientele	

APPENDIX B

APPROVAL LETTER FROM HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD



Date: March 1, 2002

To: Zoann Snyder, Principal Investigator
Amy Isler, Student Investigator

From: Mary Lagerwey, Chair

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mary Lagerwey".

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 01-12-14

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "The Dance Club Culture" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 1, 2003

APPENDIX C
CONSENT FORM

SEP 01 2002

x *May Lagay*
HSIRB Chair

Letter of Consent

Western Michigan University, Department of Sociology

The Dance Club Culture

Zoann Snyder, PhD.

Amy M. Iseler

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Subjects should not participate if this document does not show a stamped date and signature.

This interview is part of a thesis project that examines the beliefs and behaviors of dance club patrons.

For the duration of this research project, you will be referred to by your chosen pseudonym. No identifying physical characteristics will be used in this research. The dance clubs have also been given generic names unassociated with the actual club name.

The audiotape used during this interview is to assure accuracy of response. If you choose to participate, but do not wish to be recorded on audiotape, your responses will be recorded on paper.

You may stop this interview at any time for any reason without penalty. If you feel upset as a result of participating in this interview, please contact the following non-profit organization for counseling services.

Crisis Clinic of Seattle

(206) 461-3222

(800) 244-5767

(206) 461-3219 TTY

If you have any questions or concerns regarding participation in this study, you may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Zoann Snyder, at (616) 387-5278. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (616) 387-8293 or the Vice President for Research (616) 387-8298 if questions or problems arise during the course of this study.

Thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Research Questionnaire

- 1) How often do you go to dance clubs? _____
- 2) What are your primary reasons for going to dance clubs?
- 3) Characterize your typical night at a dance club.
- 4) Do you believe people behave differently while in dance clubs than they do in other venues? _____ Yes _____ No
- 5) If yes, how so?
- 6) What type of music is typically played at this club?
- 7) Characterize the dance style at this club.
- 8) Where do people learn this style of dance?
- 9) Do you think people relax or ignore their sexual inhibitions while they are in dance clubs? _____ Yes _____ No
- 10) If so, what do you believe contributes to this?
- 11) Do you drink alcoholic beverages? _____ Yes _____ No
- 12) Have you ever found yourself consuming more alcohol at a dance club than you had planned? _____ Yes _____ No
- 13) If so, how does this affect your decision-making capabilities and what are the typical results?
- 14) Do you believe dance clubs encourage patrons to drink alcoholic beverages until they are intoxicated?
- 15) Characterize the dress and demeanor of most women at dance clubs.
- 16) Why do you think people would avoid coming to dance clubs?
- 17) How old are you?

Sex _____ Race _____

APPENDIX E
DANCE CLUB SITES

Club A featured music from the 70s and 80s. Women were allowed into the club free of charge before 10:30PM and men were required to pay the \$10 cover charge at all times. The club did not have a posted dress code. It was a casual environment. Seating was sparse and the well-worn flooring and chipped paint provided evidence that the club received high volumes of patrons.

Billboard Top 40 hits from the 70s and 80s played throughout the night. And television monitors played popular TV shows from the same era. As this was a themed dance club, the wait staff was dressed in retro clothing, including bell-bottoms, mini skirts and roller blades. Couples ground against each other on the dance floor. Men danced directly behind women as they rubbed against one another. Several women danced on elevated platforms throughout the club.

The lighting in Club A was concentrated over the dance floor and the remaining areas of the club were dimly lit. Certain areas of the club were particularly dark, including the entries into the bathrooms and near the exit doors. Security personnel were highly visible in “Security” shirts and could be seen walking throughout the club and posted at the entrance and exits.

This club had four bars that were fully staffed throughout the night. Alcohol advertisements were located throughout the dance club and drink specials were posted on a board behind the bartenders and announced between songs. Often these drinks had sexually suggestive names, i.e., Blow Job, Slippery Nipple, Sex on the Beach. The bars were always crowded and the bartenders kept busy throughout the night.

Club B was a more upscale dance club. This was reflected in the employee and patron dress, interior design of the club and its trendy neighborhood location. Women

were allowed in free of charge until 11PM. Men were required to pay a \$10 cover charge at all times. The club did not have a posted dress code, but the accepted look was both sexy and chic. Men wore dress slacks and button down shirts or sweaters. Women wore tight fitting clothing, similar to that found in Club A. The primary difference was that none of the clientele or club personnel wore blue jeans, t-shirts or hats.

The walls were bare and lacked the alcohol advertisements found in the other dance clubs visited during my research. Drink specials were not posted or announced. While the bar was still busy, people did not line up for drinks. Instead, wait staff circulated throughout the club collecting and distributing drink orders.

Techno and house music played throughout the evening. Several groups of women danced together in circles while facing each other. There were very few couples dancing and almost no men on the dance floor. The hyper-fast beat was met with a jerky, bouncing dance style rather than close, intimate dancing.

The club had ample seating at tables and around the bar. The majority of people were seated and engaged in conversation rather than dancing. The lighting was low, but evenly distributed throughout the club. There were no dark or hidden corners. Club B did not have a visible security presence, but wait staff and club personnel circulated throughout the club during the evening.

Club C advertised itself as a gay dance club, but it was also known to have a mix of homosexual and heterosexual patrons. The club was located in an eclectic, culturally diverse neighborhood. Club C did not collect a cover charge from men or women prior to 10PM. There was no posted dress code. Patrons arrived dressed in jeans and t-shirts, as well as, ball gowns and tiaras. Men in drag were the most formally dressed, while the majority

of patrons wore jeans, slacks and button-down shirts or t-shirts. Unlike the women in the other dance clubs visited, the women in Club C did not wear tight or revealing clothing.

Again, house and techno music were the featured genres of music. However, unlike Club B, the dance style was highly sexual, including: grinding, kissing and fondling one another on the dance floor. Television monitors surrounded the dance club playing soft-core gay porn. By mid-night, a large number of men had taken their shirts off and continued to dance bare-chested.

Club C had two bars, one on each floor. Alcohol advertisements were located throughout the club, including near the dance floor and posted on the outside of the building. While drink specials were not announced during breaks in the music, bartenders encouraged patrons to double the size of their drinks for a minimal cost. Patrons ordered their own drinks from the bar and wait staff circulated throughout the club collecting empty glasses and bottles. They also served as security, as there was no other visible security presence.

Club D was located in a historical district of the city. There is a high concentration of dance clubs, bars and restaurants in this area and it is known for the nightlife. A \$10 cover charge applied to all patrons at all times. The club had a notice posted at the entrance of the club stating hats were not permitted, but did not list any other dress code restrictions. The interior of the club was modern with a large dance floor and booths surrounding the perimeter of the building. The clientele was well dressed and the club décor was trendy and upscale. Men wore casual shirts and slacks. Women dressed in tank or halter-tops and showed a great deal of skin.

The disc jockey played house and techno music. The club had one large dance floor with several raised platforms. Video cameras were positioned to capture patrons as they danced and these images were played on closed circuit televisions throughout the club. The cameras focused exclusively on female dancers. It appeared the women's dance style was influenced by the presence of the cameras as women danced in an increasingly provocative manner while looking directly into the camera. The cameras presence may have deterred men from dancing, as only a few men were present on the dance floor.

Security personnel were posted at the entrance and exits, but did not circulate throughout the dance club. As in Club B, servers covered the floor taking and delivering drinks. While the main floor of Club D was brightly lit and crowded, the balcony had almost no lighting and very few patrons. As in Club A, only single men and couples occupied this dark space.

The bar swarmed with patrons. The six bartenders worked non-stop and servers moved back and forth between the bar and tables every few minutes. Lines at the bar were 4-5 people deep at times. Most of the patrons in line were men. While women danced, men waited in line for drinks and watched the dance floor through the closed circuit televisions positioned above the bar.

Club E advertised as a hip-hop club. There was no posted dress code, however, several patrons were required to remove their hats before gaining entry into the dance club. The interior of the club was expansive and included: three bars, three dance floors and four separate rooms. The majority of dance club patrons in the first four clubs were Caucasian, while the clientele in Club E was more ethnically diverse. However, both Club D and Club E were located within the same city block.

Hip-hop styles for men included baggy, over-sized shirts and pants. The majority of men in Club E embraced this style. While women dressed in tight slacks, jeans and shirts. Despite the warm temperatures inside the club, the majority of men dressed in layers and continued to wear their winter coats throughout the evening. It should be noted that a coat check was available and most women took advantage of this.

Hip-hop and rap music played throughout the evening. The largest dance floor featured a DJ on a raised platform. A movie screen located directly behind him showed music videos corresponding to the songs he played. The majority of club patrons faced the DJ while men pressed themselves against the women in front of them and moved to the music. As in Club A, the dance style was highly sexual. Men bent women over in front of them while grinding against them.

Bartenders were busy at all three stations. Wait staff retrieved empty glasses, but all drink orders were placed at the bars. Alcohol advertisements were located throughout the club, including on the walls outside of the building and in the bathrooms. Security personnel were located throughout the dance club and were easily identified in matching uniforms.