
An Analysis of White, Euro-American Female Sex Tourism in Thailand: Cross-Border Desire as an Outlet of Racial, Gender, Class, & Sexual Power

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Female sex tourism in migration and tourism studies is understudied. This gap in the literature has caused conventional definitions of sex tourism to be oversimplified and conceptually constrained. Although cross-border sexual encounters by women in the tourist landscape are becoming more frequent due to gendered trends of globalization, their presence and role as sex tourists are rarely considered. This paper refocuses the conceptual frame of sex tourism onto white, heterosexual, Euro-American female sex tourists in Thailand. Thailand, popularly known as a global sex tourist hub for males, is rarely recognized for its presence in female sex tourism. By focusing on this regional context, this paper advances a new perspective of sex tourism through the lens of race, gender, class, and sexual hierarchies. The intersections of race, gender, class, and sex in this tourist setting emerge to reveal complex power dynamics that shape the social position of the white female sex tourist. Findings reveal that interactions between white female sex tourists and local, heterosexual Thai men are patterned and enabled by their racial, gender, class, and sexual identities. These interactions, engendered by the intersection of these identities, are not limited to the stereotypical sex industry. White female sex tourists were found to negotiate and redefine these identities in ways they find authentic and suitable to their tourist experience. In conclusion, a new definition of sex tourism that aligns with these findings and new directions for research are offered to expand on the oversimplified, standard definitions of sex tourism.

Introduction

The prevailing western-centric image of sex tourism effortlessly invokes the image of a western male traveling to the developing world to purchase sex from

local women. Studies on sex tourism derived from the west; therefore, have focused overwhelmingly on males from developed nations traveling to engage in sexual activity, their female sex worker counterparts, and their motivations.¹ This paper expands the literature on sex tourism by shifting the spotlight to the phenomena of female sex tourism, defined as females from developed nations traveling to the developing world to purchase sex from local men.

Female sex tourism has been widely omitted from the analysis of sex tourism, especially in varying regional contexts. Although recognition of female sex tourism is infrequent relative to the male counterpart, the study of female sex tourism offers key insights surrounding racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies. Cross-border sexual encounters by women are increasingly popular, and the frequency and variety of different regional contexts provide a new lens for understanding power hierarchies. The discussion in this paper will interrogate and deconstruct the interplay of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the tourist landscape of sexual encounters between middle-class white, heterosexual, female migrants from economically developed states, such as the US and Great Britain, and young local Thai males and the wider sex industry in Thailand. This research will underscore this interplay of identities of white female tourists, seeking to fulfill romantic or erotic desires with young Thai gigolos that develop complex entanglements with these female visitors. This analysis will expand knowledge concerning racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies, which will emerge to confirm and further uncover global power structures inherent in these asymmetric, cross-border sexual encounters.

My central research question is “How do constructs of race, class, gender, and sexuality interact and impact interactions between white female tourists and young, male Thai locals?” In addressing this question, this research will advance an intersectional, transnational approach to sex tourism by arguing that an interplay of racial and class constructs reinforces an asymmetric power structure that these female sex tourists consciously and unconsciously wield. Commercial and non-commercial sexual encounters and relationships between white, heterosexual, female tourists and young, heterosexual Thai males are also shown to allow white female tourists to negotiate and redefine their conventional sexual and gender constructs internalized from their home culture. This paper will conclude by arguing

1 Martin Oppermann, “Sex Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, no. 2 (1999): 251–266; Héctor Carillo, “Sexual Migration, Cross-Cultural Sexual Encounters, and Sexual Health,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 1, no. 3 (2004): 64.

that global inequalities in economic and racial power are the primary drivers facilitating cross-border sexual encounters in the tourist landscape.

To probe this question, a textual analysis of news commentary and tourist internet forums is performed to gauge conventional beliefs and prevailing ideas concerning race, gender, class, and sex in the discussion of white female sex tourists in Thailand. This analysis is informed by secondary research and theory in race, gender, and tourism studies. Limitations and challenges to the study of sex tourism and this methodology are discussed in the following sections.

Literature Review: Sex Tourism and its Conceptual Constraints

Research on sex tourism has been established as a legitimate area of tourism studies since the 1970s. Yet, the field remains constrained conceptually. Sex tourism is essentially a facet of the global sex trade, where travel is undertaken to engage in some type of sexual activity. Despite the reality of the broad scope of sex tourism, research has been narrowly confined by the definition of the topic. According to several dictionaries with a marked history in shaping the English language, the standard definition of sex tourism involves traveling to exchange money for sexual activity.² Likewise, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines sex tourism as “travel planned specifically for the purpose of sex, generally to a country where sex work is legal.”³ The conformity of these definitions signals that the concept of sex tourism has been funneled to the realm of commercial sex work. Traditionally, research has also followed this tendency and has oversimplified the roles between males and females into the dyad of local female sex workers and male tourist consumers that rely on monetary exchanges (See *Figure 1*).⁴ This focus reflects the paradigm of the sex trade as a feature in a market economy where liberalization has been extended to human bodies in a

2 *Cambridge Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Sex Tourism,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/sex-tourism>; *Oxford Reference Online*, s.v. “Sex Tourism,” <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199599868.001.0001/acref-9780199599868-e-1667>; *Macmillan Dictionary Online*, s.v. “sex tourism,” <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/american/sex-tourism>.

3 “Sex Tourism,” Travelers’ Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified November 18, 2019, <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/sex-tourism>.

4 Oppermann, “Sex Tourism,” 252; Andrew Spencer and Dalea Bean, “Female Sex Tourism in Jamaica: An Assessment of Perceptions,” *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* 6, no. 1 (2017): 14.

framework of supply and demand.⁵ This paradigm is often constrained by the conventional image of male sex tourists and their patriarchal and economic power intrinsic in their travels to the Third World, leading researchers to ignore other important and relevant social phenomena.⁶ Ryan and Hall (2001) argue that despite the trend toward male client and female sex workers as the most prominent form of sex tourism, these images are rooted in a wider social context of issues materializing in the modern era, where different perspectives are often omitted and marginalized in the analysis of sex tourism. Thus, Ryan and Hall acknowledge that these interactions often go beyond the traditional sex worker and client paradigm, where both non-commercial and commercial transactions occur (See *Figure 2*).⁷ By acknowledging the nuanced nature and plurality of actors in sex tourism, simplified definitions of sex tourism lose their validity.⁸ Overall, the traditional view of sex tourism is oversimplified and inadequate; therefore, more recent literature moves beyond commercial sexual relations as the defining criteria for sex tourism.

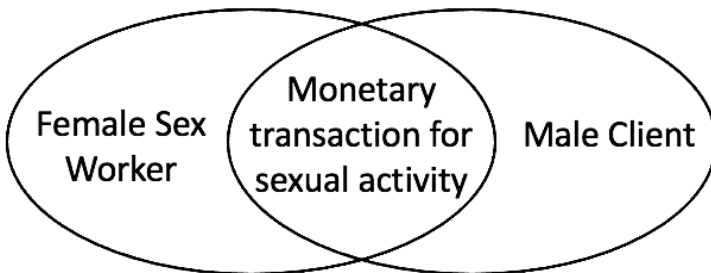


Figure 1. The traditional paradigm of sex tourism: sex worker and client. (Diagram by author, Adapted from Oppermann, “Sex Tourism,” 252).

5 Jeremy Seabrook, *Travels in the Skin Trade: Tourism and the Sex Industry* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 129.

6 Deborah Pruitt and Suzanne LaFont, “For Love and Money: Romance Tourism in Jamaica,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 22, no. 2 (1995): 437; David Leheny, “A Political Economy of Asian Sex Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 22, no. 2 (1995): 368–69.

7 Chris Ryan and Michael C. Hall, *Sex tourism: Marginal people and Liminalities*. (London: Routledge, 2001), 47–62.

8 Oppermann, “Sex Tourism,” 262.

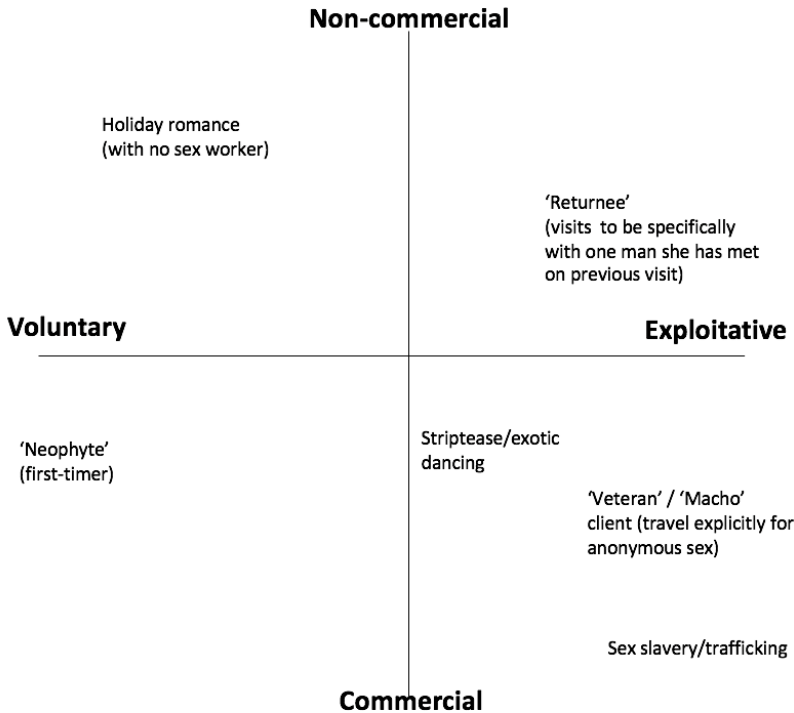


Figure 2. “Sex tourism encounters,” in Chris Ryan and Michael C. Hall, *Sex Tourism: Marginal People and liminalities* (London: Routledge, 2001), 62, fig. 3.1.

Despite the abundance of past research attention on male sex tourism, recent years have increased the recognition of the reality that the sex tourism market includes a plurality of actors, including female clients. These studies have usually focused on relationships between North American and European female tourists that travel to underdeveloped countries for a holiday, including sexual relations with local males often referred to as “beach boys.”⁹ Although research on female sex tourism and male sex workers is less explored, there have been an array of studies done, encompassing multiple locations, which expose varying subjectivities underpinning female sex tourist interactions. Various studies involving female tourists and local

9 Joan Phillips, “Female Sex Tourism in Barbados: A Postcolonial Perspective,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2008): 203.

males have been conducted, including one in Kenya,¹⁰ and several in the Caribbean,¹¹ which includes various destinations, such as Jamaica,¹² Barbados,¹³ and the Dominican Republic.¹⁴ Some of this research theorizes that sexual relations in the Caribbean have been linked to the traditional power of European colonizers over colonized people and have emphasized structural inequalities that underpin these relations.¹⁵ Therefore, these studies have affirmed that sex tourism is underpinned by global inequality. However, debates concerning the motivations driving female sex tourism have obscured other factors that drive these asymmetric relationships.

Previous research describing female tourists' involvement with local men has also hinged on a debate of their objectives: to search for romantic love or desire for sexual excitement and novelty. According to a study done by Albuquerque (1998),¹⁶ relationships between female tourists and local males indicate the exchange of sex for money. However, most researchers argue this view is too narrow and highlight various additional motivations for female tourist involvement with local males, such as the roles of romance and companionship rather than purely economic and sexual motivations.¹⁷ Thus, Pruitt and LaFont (1995) coined the term 'romance tourism' to distinguish the sexual behavior between male and female tourists.¹⁸ Yet, regardless of

10 Kempe Ronald Hope, "Sex Tourism in Kenya: an Analytical Review," *Tourism Analysis* 18, no. 5 (2013): 533–42.

11 Klaus D. Albuquerque, "Sex, Beach Boys, and Female Tourists in the Caribbean," in *Sex Work & Sex Workers*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 87–112; Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, "Dollars Are a Girl's Best Friend? Female Tourists' Sexual Behaviour in the Caribbean," *Sociology* 35, no. 3 (2001): 749–64.

12 Pruitt and LaFont, "For Love and Money," 422–40; Andrew Spencer and Dalea Bean, "Female sex tourism in Jamaica: An assessment of perceptions," *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* 6, no. 1 (2017): 13–21.

13 Phillips, "Female Sex Tourism," 201–12.

14 Edward Herold, Rafael Garcia, and Tony DeMoya, "Female Tourists and Beach Boys: Romance or Sex Tourism?" *Annals of Tourism Research* 28, no. 4 (2001) 978–97.

15 Phillips, "Female Sex Tourism," 202; Spencer and Bean, "Female sex tourism," 13.

16 Albuquerque, "Sex, Beach Boys, and Female Tourists," 89.

17 Pruitt and LaFont, "For Love and Money," 422–40; Herold, Garcia, and DeMoya, "Female Tourists," 993.

18 *Ibid.*, 423.

any subtle and essentialist gender assumptions between women's 'romantic' and men's 'sexual' encounters, Taylor (2001) argues that any differentiation relies on the separation of the activity rather than the gender of the actors, and that female traveler behavior perceived as romance should be included in the category of sex tourism.¹⁹ Likewise, Taylor (2006) argues that this 'double-standard in labeling, applied to differentiate between male and female tourists' sexual behavior, overlooks more complex understandings motivating these relationships and obscures the significance of race and other factors that shape these encounters.²⁰ Regardless of the label of the pursuit, other findings support the idea that there is little difference between the two.²¹ Therefore, Herold et al. (2001) employ a continuum of romance/sex motivations to accommodate the complexity of sex tourism encounters.²² Their research also recognizes that encounters may be motivated by companionship, where neither love nor sex is desired (See *Figure 3*). Because of the varying subjectivities and motivations underlying female sex tourist interactions, it is critical for the literature to explore new terrains that present a broader framework than the dichotomy of 'romance' and 'sex' tourism, and further advance an intersectional, pluralistic framework to capture complex understandings and the diversity of these exchanges.

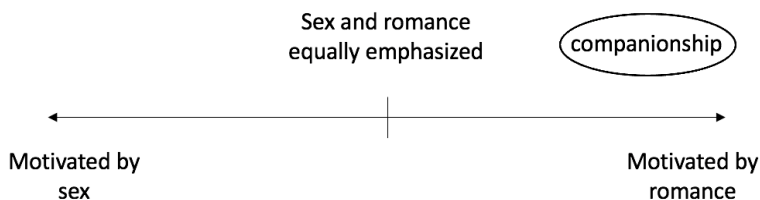


Figure 3. A continuum of romance and sex motivations in female sex tourism. (Diagram by author, Adapted from Herold, Garcia, and DeMoya, "Female Tourists and Beach Boys: Romance or Sex Tourism?" 994).

Unlike Africa or the Caribbean, female sex tourism has been relatively

19 Taylor, "Dollars Are a Girl's Best Friend," 761.

20 Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, "Female sex tourism: a contradiction in terms?" *Feminist Review* 83, no. 1 (2006): 43–44.

21 Irmgard L. Bauer, "Romance tourism or female sex tourism?" *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease* 12, no. 1 (2014): 25.

22 Herold, Garcia, and DeMoya, "Female Tourists," 994.

unexplored in Southeast Asia. Discussions on female sex tourism in Southeast Asia have often focused on Bali's infamous Kuta Beach, where "muscular, bronzed Indonesian men with big smiles and long, wavy hair have been seducing foreign women..."²³ However, Bali, Indonesia is the only mainstream location, well-known for its presence of western female sex tourists in Southeast Asia. Thailand is also recognized as a significant site of sex tourism. However, anthropological literature on sex tourism is nearly exclusive to male sex tourists and female sex workers in this regional context.²⁴ This idea is epitomized by the expression developed in Germany, where "the men go to Thailand, and the women go to Jamaica."²⁵ Yet, some contributions to the literature have recognized the evolving stage of the sex industry in Thailand, identifying that Japanese female sex tourists traveling to Thailand have overtaken their Japanese male counterparts.²⁶ Accordingly, Carillo (2004) suggests that the study of sexual migration will illuminate more understandings of varying sexualities across the globe, especially in the arena of sex tourism, where "bodies carry with them ideologies, practices, desires, longings, and imaginings about ways of enacting sexuality differently in faraway locations."²⁷ Since each destination and plurality of actors has a unique history and culture of sexuality, it will also be prudent to explore the intersectionality of white, Euro-American female sex tourists and young local males in Thailand.

Brief Background on Thailand as a Sex Tourist Destination

As a popular destination for white western tourists, Thailand is frequently depicted as exotic and erotic. The designation of Thailand as a sex tourism destination was formulated during the Vietnam War, which continues today. In the late 1960s and 70s, Thailand's economy became dependent on US military personnel, where the central commodity became sexual pleasure. Thailand's sex industry was developed partly due to local demand represented in terms of the available number of sex providers and customers, which promoted it as a "Rest & Recreation" hotspot to

23 Shay Christopher, "Gigolos on the Beach: Cracking Down on Bali's 'Kuta Cowboys'," *TIME*, May 6, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1986847,00.html>.

24 Seabrook, *Travels in the Skin Trade*, 4.

25 Pruitt and LaFont, "For Love and Money," 425.

26 Leheny, "A Political Economy," 380.

27 Carillo, "Sexual Migration," 68.

become unofficially recognized as a station of “Intercourse and Intoxication” for US troops.²⁸ Thus, the international commercial sex scene in Thailand became its preferred image due to the influx of and participation by foreign sex tourists from the First World. Oppermann and McKinley (1997) found that using sexual imagery to promote these destinations was a meaningful factor in their marketing.²⁹ Similarly, Prideaux et al. (2004) illustrate how this process of eroticization overwhelmed its image as an exotic destination, which has impacted how tourists imagine its landscape and people.³⁰

Because there is no clear demarcation where ‘sex tourism’ takes place, venues of tourism and the sex industry overlap, where Thailand has been reduced to and normalized as a sexualized space in the imagination of western countries.³¹ People are naturalized as more promiscuous, and sex is naturalized as part of the cultural fabric. This is supported by Oppermann (1998), who suggests that travel destinations are impacted by the way tourists perceive those destinations.³² This would indicate that there is a link between the perception of the tourist and their consumption practices, where engaging in parts of the sex industry is constructed as visiting a tourist attraction. Therefore, the image of Thai culture and people as sexually open is reinforced by Thailand’s reputation as an international sex tourist destination. The consumption of sex shows is seen as a normal or even an authentic part of the tourist experience. Sanders (2011) reveals this is because the “[tourist] gaze is directed and mediated, and often they seek out places that are considered authentic.”³³ Although I have never physically visited Thailand, I gained similar impressions by word of the social

28 Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson, “In the Night Market: Tourism, Sex, and Commerce in Contemporary Thailand,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1999): 34.

29 Martin Oppermann and Shawna McKinley, “Sexual imagery in the marketing of Pacific tourism destinations,” in *Pacific Rim Tourism*, ed. Martin Oppermann (CABI Publishing, 1997).

30 Bruce Prideaux, Jerome Agrusa, Jon G. Donlon, and Chris Curran, “Exotic or erotic—contrasting images for defining destinations,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 9, no. 1 (2004): 5–17.

31 Sanders, “One night in Bangkok,” 128.

32 “Marketing Sex and Tourism Destinations,” in *Sex Tourism and Prostitution: Aspects of Leisure, Recreation, and Work*, ed. Martin Oppermann (Cognizant Communication Corporation, 1998) 20.

33 Sanders, “One night in Bangkok,” 148.

media grapevine. My aunt first made me aware of the phenomena when she warned about female peers traveling to various destinations in Southeast Asia to engage in temporary relationships and casual sex with local men. Before traveling or residing in Thailand, Euro-American women internalize this reputation, viewing the sex industry as a natural part of Thailand's culture, which urges the need to reevaluate their access to seemingly 'innocent' forms of Thailand's tourist locations and the more overt sex industry.

Methodology and Limitations

To understand the subjectivities of female sex tourism in the Thai context, I performed a textual analysis of approximately forty commentaries contained within user posts from three forums intended for use by tourists and ex-pats, several online media commentaries, and two short interviews contained within news articles that encode first and third-person discussions of relationships between white, western, female tourists and male Thai locals (See *Figure 4*). All these materials are based on the English language. This analysis is theoretically informed and supported by secondary research to confirm and expand on ideas present in the research of race, sex, gender, class, and tourism. I will expand the classification of female sex tourists to gain access to more discussions of tourist and local interactions. In this analysis, I will strive to explore how these tourists interact with Thailand's formal and informal sex industry and interrogate how they can (re)fashion their sexual, racial, gender, and class identities. In my conclusion, I will summarize key findings, offer a new definition of sex tourism that aligns with these findings, and raise questions and implications for future research.

Upon engaging with this topic, I was challenged in identifying and measuring what qualifies as female sex tourism. To overcome methodological constraints and fully develop classifications of female sex tourists, I want to advance the idea that sex tourism is not exclusive to commercial sex work but also encompasses a range of ambiguous relationships.³⁴ While there may exist self-proclaimed sex tourists, most foreign tourists likely do not consider themselves as such.³⁵ Because of the perceived "taboo" and potential stigma surrounding the topic, I assumed I would run into trouble locating data, as well as interviews from the subjects who were willing to post and share their

34 Oppermann, "Sex Tourism.," Erica. L. Williams, *Sex Tourism in Bahia: Ambiguous Entanglements* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 11.

35 Ibid, 91.

experiences publicly. This sentiment is shared by Albuquerque (1998), who resorted to sensational films and fiction to capture the motivations of female sex tourism because they found it difficult to find and interview female sex tourists on the record.³⁶ Likewise, Günther (1998) encountered the same dilemma in their classification of the sex tourist because subjects would reject the label in their self-definition due to the strong public stigma of sex tourists and tourism.³⁷ I anticipated that it would be challenging to source discussions about female sex tourism in Thailand because there appeared to be limited data available about behaviors of western female tourists in Thailand. This is possibly because the destination traditionally attracted a disproportionate number of male visitors, which has been a mainstay of Thailand's tourism industry.³⁸

I had further reservations due to how Asian male masculinity and sexuality are stereotyped in the west, particularly in the United States, which has traditionally reduced Asian males to an inferior, undersexed category, prescribing them as sexually undesirable.³⁹ This concern was confirmed when I uncovered unmistakable stigmatizations of Asian male race and masculinity in the forums, one which notably expressed disbelief in the concealed phenomena of white female sex tourism occurring in Thailand: "these sort of women used to go to Jamaica for the 'big members,' whether they will tolerate the small Thai members remains to be seen."⁴⁰ Adding to my concerns, most of the discussion of the sex tourism scene in Thailand is dominated by western male tourists who participate in Thailand's well-known sex industry, which appears to uphold the dichotomy of eroticized Asian women and undersexed Asian males in the western social imaginary.⁴¹ However, as I probed discussion threads within several Thai tourist and ex-pat forums, a dissertation, and general discussions of female sex tourism in online media, I found that western

36 Albuquerque, "Sex, Beach Boys, and Female Tourists," 87–112.

37 Armin Günther, "Sex tourism without sex tourists," in *Sex tourism and prostitution: Aspects of leisure, recreation, and work*, ed. Martin Oppermann (New York: Cognizant Communication Corporation, 1998), 71–80.

38 Ryan Bishop and Lillian L. Robinson, *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle* (London: Routledge, 1998).

39 Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American women and men: labor, laws, and love* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 2008), 97.

40 Darlek, "Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok," *Thai Visa-The Nation*, accessed April 30, 2021 (August 19, 2004), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/#comments>.

41 Ibid.

women are also engaging with the sex tourism industry in Thailand; albeit, on a curiously less recognizable scale. The concealed nature of these interactions may result because gendered norms of behavior veil their engagement with Thailand’s sex industry regarding their femininity, which allows them to deny the sexual nature of their visit.⁴² Although less visible on the surface, the liaisons of western female sex tourists with local Thai males emerge to reveal a complex interaction of race, gender, class, and sexual power relations.

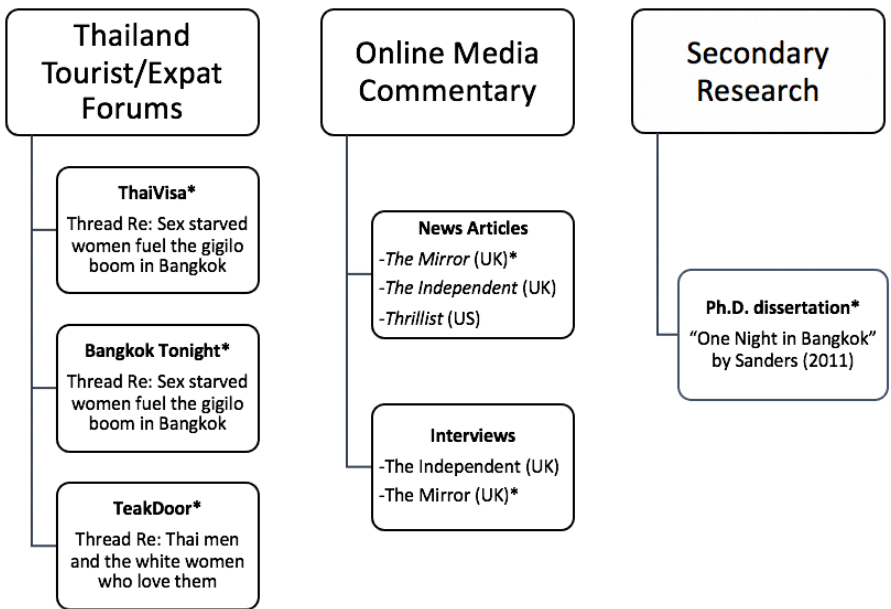


Figure 4. List of textual materials discussing Western, white female sex tourism in Thailand used in the analysis (Diagram by author). *indicates secondary discussion of or participation by both US/Canada and UK females.

Who are the Female Sex Tourists?

This discussion of female sex tourism in Thailand requires a detailed description of who the sex tourists are and their origins. The transnational

42 Erin Sanders, “One night in Bangkok: Western women’s interactions with sexualized spaces in Thailand,” (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2011), 189.

encounters of heterosexual, white female tourists from western nations, primarily the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK), and their social and sexual liaisons with young adult, local Thai males are considered within the tourist landscape. I focus on the tourist perspective due to my greater access and potential insight, my gender, reliance on English, and nationality as a US citizen. Due to the difficulty to affirm the nationality of the white female sex tourists in question, I decided to include a few cases where the white female subject in question is nationally ambiguous, but speculated to belong to a developed western nation, considered “economically rich,” such as Canada or the United Kingdom. To avoid conflating differences in culture, gender, and sexual subjectivities, I will treat this analysis with sensitivity and label my speculation when appropriate. The white, Euro-American tourists I will focus on in this analysis range from young adults, as young as nineteen years of age, to elderly females as old as fifty that are considered much wealthier than the local Thai males they interact with, according to a tabloid-style article titled “Sex Starved Women fuel the Gigolo Boom in Bangkok” from the *Mirror* based in the UK.⁴³ On this age continuum identified from trends in the composition of female sex tourists in a field report and also codified in the media materials of this paper, the older women are typically retired, assumed to be lonely, disillusioned, and bored in their home relationships. On the other hand, the younger women are viewed as adventurous and more likely to consume alcohol and drugs when partaking in local culture. Both are considered unattractive in their home country, free from social constraints, and seek “thrill” in their new landscape.⁴⁴ These female “sex tourists” can include expatriates in Thailand for study or work purposes and women on holiday. Their relationship statuses vary between single, divorced, and married. Their relationships with local Thai men vary between casual friendships with local guides, more serious relationships with Thai men, and short-time encounters with male sex workers.⁴⁵ These women are typically located in well-known tourist destinations, such as Chiang-Mai, Bangkok, Phuket, and Pattaya.

It is commonplace for white, western women to interact with the wider sex industry catered and designated specifically for men in these tourist

43 “Sex Starved Women Fuel Gigolo Boom in Bangkok,” *The Mirror*, August 18, 2004, Wayback Machine Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040528081758/http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/allnews/page...ll&siteid=50143>.

44 Bauer, “Romance tourism,” 27.

45 Phil Nicks, “Where Foreign Women Find Love,” in *Love entrepreneurs: cross-culture relationship deals in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Fast Track Publishing, 2009), 46.

destinations. Although most sexualized venues are catered and set for men, women are also allowed to enter and engage in these sexual entertainment locations as either voyeurs or clients that can negotiate sexual encounters. This is because western women's access to such venues is considered an acceptable tourist behavior, according to a study done by Sanders (2011) that traced and examined western women's interactions with sexualized tourist venues in Thailand.⁴⁶ It was found that these heterosexual women are less likely to visit sexual shows with exclusively male sex workers because it allows them to deny the sexual nature of their visit and highlight their femininity as passive, making it a point to distinguish themselves from "problematic white western males" by strategically positioning themselves away from the category of sex tourist.⁴⁷ This could explain why their involvement with Thai males was not exclusive to overt sexual entertainment venues but extends to galleries, beaches, and cafes. Bars, hotels, host clubs, massage parlors, and male-catered ping pong shows are all described as locations that enable white female tourists to interact with local Thais, corresponding with descriptions found in the following analysis.

Female Sex Tourism in Thailand: The Significance of Race, Gender, Sex, and Class

In a forum known as "ThaiVisa," intended for the use of tourists and ex-pats from Thailand, a post describing the "Thai gigolo boom in Bangkok" signals the Thai sex industry is no longer limited to Western men and testifies to the sprawling number of women "spawning a new breed of gigolos to satiate their carnal desires."⁴⁸ The central post in the thread refers to the article published in the UK-based media company *The Mirror* that describes the women as anywhere between nineteen to fifty years of age, attending so-called "sex clubs" or "go-go bars" in the Thai night scene, chatting up a young male gigolo with the purchase of a drink or meal, and eventually taking them home.⁴⁹ This single thread attracted a total of 42 comments discussing western women's visitation of both sexualized and tourist venues in Thailand to enter a form of casual and commercial sexual relationships; although, they, themselves,

46 Sanders, "One night in Bangkok."

47 Ibid, 189.

48 george, "Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok," *Thai Visa- The Nation*, accessed September 22, 2019 (August 18, 2004), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/#comments>.

49 "Sex Starved Women," *The Mirror*.

may not always see it as so. This idea is personified by the user “JemJem” in a comment describing their feeling on the matter, “I personally think sex is overrated. For me, nothing beats an evening out drinking a few beers ... and having some fun conversation with a [Thai guy] or people you have just met that evening.”⁵⁰ This sentiment also corresponds with the findings from Herold et al. (2001), which found that companionship was also a valid motivation for sex tourist encounters with locals on the romance and sex motivation continuum.⁵¹ Such an expression that denounces sexual activity allows the sex tourist to distance from labeling themselves as so. Furthermore, this reconfirms the idea that the sex tourist engages in a wide variety of ambiguous interactions that do not necessarily involve exchanging money or overt sexual venues.

In the same thread, a separate comment reads, “many people still feel embarrassed in talking about sex, so no wonder people feel they have to travel to the other side of the world in secret to relieve themselves.”⁵² This comment suggests that these women, in the period of holiday, enter these spaces seeking romantic or sexual attention associated with these venues. Perhaps “starved for love at home,” the tourist suddenly finds herself desirable to attentive, younger male companions. This sentiment is supported by another comment remarking on how

In an effort to heal the wounds from *farang* men... [these female tourists] enjoy show[ing] off their latest loverboy that they picked up at the bar and they look good to have someone hold their hand on the street, to hug at night, to make them feel beautiful, sexy, and desirable.⁵³

These venues encourage the negotiation of sexual and gender norms a woman adheres to in her home country, which may erase her reservations

50 JemJem, “Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok,” *Thai Visa- The Nation*, accessed April 30, 2021 (August 18, 2004), “<https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/#comments>.”

51 Herold, Garcia, and DeMoya, “Female Tourists,” 994.

52 dazdaz, “Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok,” *Thai Visa- The Nation*, accessed September 22, 2019 (August 18, 2004), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/#comments>.

53 jigsaw, “Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok,” *Thai Visa- The Nation*, accessed April 30, 2021 (August 19, 2004), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/page/2/>.

on the consumption of sex and simultaneously confirm her femininity as part of her tourist desire. Femininity is confirmed through the attention young Thai locals are willing to give her. By engaging in this relationship, she can reject the white men who rejected her, assigning her sexual power.⁵⁴ This comment also signals the white female sex tourist's insecurity about their physical femininity in relationships with *farang* (foreign, western) men: "What do *farang* men think about us? Our vaginas are big, the thin lines around our eyes are getting deeper, especially whenever we try to look happy and confident, our tits are hanging, we are hysterical, demanding bitches..."⁵⁵ By picking up or interacting with Thai "loverboys," the female sex tourist can destabilize traditional gender constructs and forge new gender and sexual identities by denying their perceived physical unattractiveness in their home country. While the female sex tourist can tap into this newfound sexual power in the spirit of the holiday, this negotiation is nuanced, simultaneously influenced by hegemonic notions of gender in respect to their sexual attractiveness, physical desirability, and other perceived forms of femininity. These comments in the thread of the ThaiVisa forum signal how traditional notions of hegemonic femininity revolving around their perceived attractiveness underlie their desire to pick up a Thai "loverboy."

As the white female sex tourist enters these casual and commercial relationships with Thai men, we can also witness the expression of white women's heterosexuality that influences these interactions through their desire for sexual or romantic attraction. Two comments within the Bangkok Tonight Forum, which attracted a total of 36 comments, hint at this phenomena where female sex tourists project their sexual and romantic fantasies onto the Thai tourist context, which are stagnant in their home country:

Women don't have to travel 10k miles to get laid... For the most part, it's a 'fantasy island' and that's what it ends up- being a fantasy. No doubt a few women go on vacation to get laid...⁵⁶

The woman is not paying for someone to [redacted] her, as

54 Taylor, "Dollars Are a Girl's Best Friend," 760.

55 jigsaw, "Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok," *Thai Visa-The Nation*, accessed April 30, 2021 (August 19, 2004), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/page/2/>.

56 BigDUSA, "Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok," *Bangkok Tonight Forum*, accessed April 30, 2021 (January 1, 2005, 1:24 a.m.), <http://bangkok2night.com/cgi-bin/forum/topic.cgi?forum=23&topic=532&start=0>.

she can get this anywhere... perhaps from her husband or boyfriend. No, she wants someone to make her feel special if only for a few minutes and even if only she has paid him.⁵⁷

Likewise, commentary within an article based in the UK discussing western women “chasing Thai gigolos,” endorses that the majority of these women “aren’t looking for a relationship, but they do appreciate being treated well, getting paid lots of positive attention, and having good sex.”⁵⁸ Here, the white female sex tourist is not just interested in engaging in sexual activity, but also values the romantic attention and companionship offered by these young male locals, which reaffirm their heterosexuality and femininity through attraction from the opposite sex.

Due to the hedonism inherent in the western view of a vacation, these women’s sexual behavior is impacted by the tourist context. Sanders-McDonagh (2019) suggests that this is due to the “liminal nature” of the tourist context that acts as a gateway for women to undertake risky, unusual behaviors beyond their everyday experiences.⁵⁹ This allows women to access and experience spaces, such as red-light districts or strip clubs, which they would generally consider taboo or too risky. These ideas about women’s risk-taking behavior defy traditional notions of femininity, where women are typically interpreted as ‘passive victims’ rather than ‘active risk-takers.’⁶⁰ This idea advanced by Sanders-McDonagh (2019) is embedded in female sex tourist behaviors, which are epitomized by descriptions in the forums and commentaries where reservations to consume sex or interact with local men, even ones they just met that evening, are alleviated by the tourist context. A comment by an interviewee supports this “no-strings strings-attached” view, under the pseudonym Stacy, who differentiates sex tourism between males and females, stating, “when [females] go abroad for sex, it’s about wanting

57 GuestNickRoach, “Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok,” *Thai Visa-The Nation*, accessed April 30, 2021 (August 19, 2004), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/page/2/>.

58 Liz Hoggard, “Women who travel for sex: Sun, sea and gigolos,” September 17, 2011, *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/women-who-travel-for-sex-sun-sea-and-gigolos-5329678.html>.

59 Erin Sanders-McDonagh, “Ontologies of Difference: The low-Other,” in *Women and Sex Tourism Landscapes* (London: Routledge, 2019), 81.

60 Ibid, 159.

to feel special and escaping the [social] boundaries at home.”⁶¹ The women can enter informal arrangements without the luggage of a formal relationship. There is also the added value of anonymity, where “what happens in Thailand, stays in Thailand.” In this equation of anonymity and lack of formal norms and social constraints to govern their desire hinted by Stacy, these women can pursue taboo desires that would be closed off to them due to the sexual etiquette that limit the parameters of their desire at home. Another comment in the ThaiVisa forum thread highlights this dynamic, revealing, “there’s a lot of frustrated western women out there. I can understand why they come searching for something and suddenly the environment provides it.”⁶² Here, their sexual and intimate demands are listened to due to the “liminal nature” of the tourist context, whether that is companionship or oral sex: “[these women] could be a goddess starlet fine assed bitch, old divorced hag with boobs down to her chest [redacted for obscenities] ugly dog we’ve ever seen. But they still can get laid/licked/lavished when they walk into that good ol’ local pub....”⁶³

The transition into a new social environment creates the perception of spontaneity that overrides the inhibitions and physical insecurities of the tourist. Pessar and Mahler’s (2003) framework of “gendered geographies of power” and “social imaginaries” also reveal how hierarchies of power can be signified through (re-)imagined categories of gender structure that characterize the cross-border fantasies and transnational sexual encounters.⁶⁴ White female heterosexuality and gender are constituted and redefined, enabling new identities and subjectivities. The reconfiguration and inversion of traditional gender roles and intimacy for heterosexual, white women that engage in these relationships demonstrates their gender and sexual power constructed through these interactions and is enabled by their migration.

While gender and sexual power are embedded in these interactions,

61 Ibid.

62 rod_kalashnikov, “Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok,” *Thai Visa- The Nation*, accessed September 22, 2019 (August 19, 2004), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/#comments>.

63 StrayGypsy, “Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok,” *Bangkok Tonight Forum*, accessed April 30, 2021 (January 1, 2005, 5:09 a.m.), <http://bangkok2night.com/cgi-bin/forum/topic.cgi?forum=23&topic=532&start=10>.

64 Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler, “Transnational Migration: Bringing Gender In,” *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 828–31.

the dimension of race that underlies and shapes these deceptively spontaneous relationships cannot go unnoticed. In Omi and Winant's (2014) discussion of race constructs, they demonstrate how "race-making" is a process to other, which is not restricted to distinctions based on race, but argue that other perceivable distinctions underpin this process to justify power structures.⁶⁵ This can be validated in the dynamics of white female sex tourism in Thailand, where white female sex tourists actively engage in this process of othering their Thai male counterparts through their racialized and gendered tourist desires and expectations. This process of racial othering is wielded in their fantasy and desire for intimate, local, and "exotic" entanglements. For example, a comment from the Bangkok Tonight forum points to the process of racial othering, "[western women] starve for those [Thai] men who have nice asses, good manners, shave and after shave themselves, have stylish clothes and are 'young'."⁶⁶ Literature on sex tourism also elucidates this process. Taylor (2000) argues that a key part of tourism processes is tourists' desire to "consume difference."⁶⁷ In a thread discussing "Thai men and the white women who love them," an American woman, Samantha, mentions how the tourist context underpins this desire, "Both *farang* men and women 'feel like a prince or princess' when they first arrive in Thailand because they are able to [score] young, beautiful [Thai] partners."⁶⁸

The perceivable distinctions "may be arbitrary, but they are not meaningless" because they reinforce and codify perceived differences in the process of "making-up people."⁶⁹ This process is formulated through tourist expectations of feeling elevated like a "princess," signified by their comparably easy access to Thai bodies, and their desire for difference in the Thai Other's lifestyle and culture, re: "good manners," "stylish clothes," and a nice "shave."

65 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "The Theory of Racial Formation," in *Racial Formation in the United States*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 105.

66 griffin, "Re: Sex starved women fuel gigolo boom in Bangkok," *Bangkok Tonight Forum*, accessed April 30, 2021 (January 1, 2005, 5:09 a.m.), <http://bangkok2night.com/cgi-bin/forum/topic.cgi?forum=23&topic=532&start=0>.

67 Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, "Tourism and 'embodied' commodities: sex tourism in the Caribbean," in *Tourism and Sex: culture, commerce and coercion*, ed. Stephen Clift and Simon Carter, (Leicester: Pinter, 2000), 41–53.

68 Samantha, "Thai men and the white women who love them," *Teakdoor*, accessed April 30, 2021 (November 29, 2019, 3:30am), <https://teakdoor.com/the-teakdoor-lounge/194504-thai-men-white-women-who-love.html>.

69 Omi and Winant, "The Theory," 111.

Because their travel provokes attention to racial and cultural differences, the tourist context, constructed around these ideas of difference, helps enable their consumption and desire for the bodies of exotic/erotic Thai Others.⁷⁰ Consuming difference is presented as an “acceptable” and authentic aspect of tourism. Ruth Evans, a nineteen-year-old visitor to a Bangkok club from the US, was quoted in *the Mirror* stating that seeking “for sex with a Thai man” can be a “real power trip.”⁷¹ White female tourists position themselves against the lower racial Thai Other in their quest for tourist thrill, presenting them with opportunities to project their erotic and exotic expectations and desires onto these men and affirm racial, gender, and sexual forms of power. The importance of race cannot be underestimated in these interactions because these women are in a position that allows them to derive power from their racial difference.

Cross-border desires and the asymmetrical relationships of these tourists are shaped not by race nor gender alone but mutually interact among other facets of identity, such as nationality, marital status, age, and socio-economic status. Although age and marital status will not be explored in the confines of this paper, female sex tourism, with its commercial and casual engagements with local Thai men and the sex industry in Thailand, is enabled by the women’s middle-class status. Women traveling alone and in groups are observed to have the capital to depend on, enabling their travel and forming a foundation for unequal relations. Their privileged position is contrasted with their perception of “poor” Thai locals, especially those who participate in the sex industry. This material power and privilege relegates the racialized Thai Other as a commodity of their tourist desire. Gillian Kitrick, a 50-year old tourist from London, describes this material power,

I’d been in Bangkok for a week or so when a waiter approached me and asked me if I wanted to take him home. He was 22 years old and absolutely beautiful. He came with me, and I paid him for four days. It’s a nice business transaction. I know plenty of women here who are bored and horny-so they buy a boy for the night.⁷²

This is also exemplified by the fact that these women can afford an overpriced

70 Sanders, “One night in Bangkok,” 251.

71 “Sex starved women,” *The Mirror*.

72 Ibid.

beer and can access spaces that local Thai visitors are denied, which “locates them in a relative position of power over the Others they consume.”⁷³ For example, an article from a US online media company covering travel and entertainment known as the *Thrillist* quotes the experience of a young American female tourist attending an all-male host club, stated they only had to pay for a \$10 drink if they wanted to select a male escort to accompany her and her friends.⁷⁴ Another example is described by a third-party observer discussing white women in the ThaiVisa forum: “foreign women picked up Thai guys to have a fling. It was common for foreign women to hire a slow boat and its captain for \$5 to go out to the islands for a day...!”⁷⁵ Female tourists may be emboldened by their dominant economic standing and ideas of racial or geopolitical superiority signified by their purchase of “cheap” Thai male bodies or concealed through an inexpensive drink or meal. This material power encasing the geo-political and economic privilege of the First World over the Third World enables and consolidates the white, female sex tourist’s position on gender, racial, and sexual hierarchies. This material power represented by the overt purchase of Thai male escorts or concealed through a veil of companionship is embedded into the intersections of race, gender, and sexual power that enable these interactions.

Conclusion

Female sex tourism in Thailand can be interpreted as a microcosm of larger transnational and global processes. Here, the power dynamics at work should be considered through the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Viewed through the lens of class, these white female tourists are in a position of privilege, where they possess the resources to travel and purchase their racialized desires of local men. Their acquisition of economic and political capital allows them to engage in these asymmetric relationships. Viewed through the lens of gender, these female sex tourists can invert social order by accessing spaces that foster encounters that would usually be denied to them. In this process, they can affirm their femininity through

73 Sanders, “One night in Bangkok,” 171.

74 Gabrielle Davis, “My Night in a Bangkok Escort Club for Women,” *Thrillist*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.thrillist.com/travel/nation/my-night-in-a-bangkok-escort-club-for-women>.

75 dighambara, “Re: Sex Starved Women,” accessed April 30, 2021 (August 19, 2004), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/15247-sex-starved-women-fuel-gigolo-boom-in-bangkok/page/2/>

the attraction from local Thai men. In these spaces, they can negotiate and redefine their sexualities in a way that they perceive as authentic to their travel experience. Viewed through the lens of race, white female sex tourists are actively racializing their consumption practices toward local young Thai males, where desires for difference and the Other are pronounced in a tourist context. In this formula, the racialized Thai other is cast as a tourist commodity to fulfill the heterosexual desires of these women.⁷⁶

Although the Thai context is a relatively new example of female sex tourism, the emerging popularity of female sex tourism in Thailand and worldwide suggests that women are participating in power processes that underpin the sex industry. However, these power processes are not exclusive to the formal sex industry, which is consistent with the position that the definition of sex tourism needs to expand and accommodate various types of complex interactions, motivations, and migrations. Seeking commercial sex while on holiday is only a partial truth. The definition of sex tourism should not require overt engagement with sexualized venues, explicit sexual acts, and should challenge preconceived notions about acceptable tourist behavior. White female sex tourists in Thailand wield their racial, gender, class, and sexual currencies to veil local interactions with Thai men and the wider sex industry as conventional tourist activities. The sexual liaisons and temporary romances of white female sex tourists with local Thai men in tourist locations and the wider sex industry are not spontaneous but instead patterned. These patterns are enabled by fluid constructs of class, gender, sexuality, and race. Because these women do not subscribe to the standard definitions of sex tourism, this new definition must also include these intersections of class, gender, sexuality, and race that shape the undercurrents of the sex tourist's identity and their potential to destabilize social constructs that guide their behavior in the context of their migration. These intersections emerge to confirm complex power processes that characterize and enable these encounters.

Although this paper strived to expose and analyze the power processes and hierarchies underlying the white female, Euro-American sex tourist through an array of media sources, this analysis should be treated as a small sample of attitudes and motivations that underpin Euro-American white female's interactions with the informal and formal spaces of Thailand's sex industry. More ethnographic studies performed on the ground in Thailand are needed to confirm and expand on the trends found in this analysis. New

76 Taylor, "Tourism and 'embodied' commodities," 41–53.

directions for research on female sex tourism in Thailand and abroad will also include examining the subjectivities of young male locals participating in these relationships with white female sex tourists. The perceptions of the local Thai community are critical to understanding the meanings attached to Thai male's interactions with white female sex tourists. More research investigating the behaviors of both female sex tourists and their male counterparts in Thailand and beyond is required to bring new insights into the fields of tourism and migration studies, which will further modify the standard definitions of sex tourism.