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The Potlatch Revisited: Distinction and Destruction among the New Global Elite

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Abstract

In an increasingly international stage, how do rich people signal their status as members of the global elite? This paper considers the formation and maintenance of reputation among rich men in a public leisure setting. Returning to classic economic anthropology, I use theories of the potlatch and gift exchange to examine how economic elites are mobilized into conspicuous consumption within a global VIP party circuit. I show how the potlatch is an organized collective accomplishment, in which men are encouraged to perform their pecuniary status. Drawing from a multi-sited ethnography conducted in the VIP party circuit from New York and Miami to Cannes and St. Tropez, I show how nightclubs organize an arena for status signaling with gendered exclusivity, gift exchange, and staged spending rituals. Such status displays, however, are situationally bound, and interviews with club organizers and customers offer strong rebukes of wasteful consumption. Beyond the club, VIP customers are subject to public critique for their spending, which they mitigate with symbolic boundaries between vulgar and legitimate tastes. By bridging the sociology of elites with economic anthropology, this paper shows the continuing significance of the potlatch among the new global elite and the contingencies of reputation within and beyond their spaces of sociality.

Words: 14,000

INTRODUCTION

The recent discourse of the global “one percent” as a distinct social group echoes the famous observation by F. Scott Fitzgerald nearly 100 years ago: “The rich are different from you and me.” Sociologists of culture and stratification have considerable evidence on the symbolic dimensions of class differentiation, identifying how taste and consumption mark boundaries between classes (Lamont 1992; Lareau 2003). As Fitzgerald knew well, the rich also

differentiate amongst themselves. They display their sheer pecuniary might, argued the economist Thorstein Veblen one century ago. But they also draw symbolic dividing lines amongst themselves, as status and belonging do not automatically stem from how much money one has, but to the contrary, in how one uses it (Bourdieu 1984).

Here we have a tension: displays of wealth can be either status generating or status losing. When is conspicuous consumption status-generating? This paper employs an interactional approach to status as a collective accomplishment (Sauder 2005). Rather than assuming *a priori* and static motivations for spending, this article uses a dramaturgical approach to observe elite spending practices as they unfold in time and place, based on a case study of high-end parties for the global jet-set. I show how rich people convert money into status with ethnographic data collected over an 18-month period in the VIP party circuit spanning New York City, the Hamptons, Miami and the French Riviera. Party organizers and brokers—called “party promoters”—produce and manage elite status as an interactional achievement by assembling an exclusive and gender-specific audience, setting up the VIP stage, and providing symbols and scripts for rich people to play competitive status games. All of this backstage work enables rituals of monetary waste akin to those described by economic anthropologies of the potlatch (Mauss 1954) in which tribal leaders are made into “Big Men” through the visible disposal of large sums of money in the presence of women with valued “bodily capital” (Wacquant 2004).

Following the traditions of Erving Goffman (e.g., 1967) and Howard Becker (e.g., 1974), I outline the organizational world and interactional scripts of an extreme case of conspicuous consumption, VIP parties for the global rich. Over the course of 18-months following the VIP party circuit from New York City, the Hamptons, Miami and the French Riviera, I observed rich men converting money into status in ritualized forms of potlatch. I also conducted interviews with 49 club brokers, 20 women guests, and 20 male spenders to assess the meanings of these displays of wealth, and their relationships to elite reputation.

To preview, I argue that conspicuous consumption is a collective accomplishment produced in a carefully staged arena that enables the transubstantiation of economic capital into status, a type of symbolic capital akin to celebrity. I show how club management constructs the VIP arena with three key components: an exclusive gender-specific audience, a spatial arrangement of status differences, and familiar symbols and scripts for rich men to play competitive status games. Beyond the club, VIP clients are subject to public critique for their

spending, which they mitigate with symbolic boundaries between the deserving and undeserving rich (Lamont and Molnar 2002). I conclude with implications for studying elite reputation, its contingencies and contestations, and its disconnect to situationally-produced status.

BACKGROUND

Elite Sociality

Amid sharply rising income and wealth inequality, much scholarly research has focused on the changing composition of contemporary elites (Piketty and Goldhammer 2014). With globalization and financialization, the world's one percent has more money than elites of generations past, so much so that they are called "super rich." Standard indicators for today's "super rich," or High Net Worth Individuals (HNWI), are financial assets in excess of \$1 million (about 11 million persons in the world), while Ultra-HNWIs have financial assets that exceed \$30 million; there are about 78,000 such persons (Hay and Muller 2012). Greater shares of elites' fortunes now come from earnings and capital gains – particularly from the finance sector - rather than inheritance as in previous generations (Atkinson and Piketty 2007; Khan 2012). The world's wealthiest stratum is growing more international, more mobile and more geographically diverse since the last two decades (Saez). The sociology of elite distinction has a long and rich history (Daloz 2012), but on this new, global stage, how do rich people signal their status as members of the global elite?

Sociologists contend that exclusive places for rich people are sites of social closure, presumably because they enable elites to generate status amongst themselves and only themselves (Domhoff, 1979). Most studies of elite society examine sociality and hierarchy in well-established institutions, such as the philanthropy and charity ball world (Ostrower 1997), corporate boards (Mizruchi), traditional social clubs and the social register (Baltzell 1996), and the university (Karabel). Here, social positions align with prestigious institutionalized categories (donors; CEOs; club member; debutante; class president, etc.). In commercial leisure and entertainment settings, however, status is much more fluid, as newcomers have low barriers to entry. It is difficult to ascertain who is who (and worth how much) in the art festival, the golf club, or the entertainment venue. With few exceptions (e.g., Cousin and Chauvin 2013; Elias

2008), we have limited understandings of those micro-interactions underlying status construction in elite social spaces.

Theorizing Conspicuous Consumption

Pierre Bourdieu and Thorstein Veblen offer two competing accounts for how consumption enables symbolic struggles between and across classes, with Bourdieu emphasizing unconscious and “second-nature” taste dispositions and Veblen emphasizing the conscious will to dominate through display.

In Bourdieu’s study of distinction, cultural and leisure pursuits are actually forms of power brokering that reproduce class structure, in for instance childhood activities (e.g., Laureau 2011). Class distinction happens through a struggle over symbolic categories that enable social groups to define and assert themselves through taste differences, and these struggles are played out in the production and consumption of cultural goods (Bourdieu 1984). Most research on cultural capital focuses on the role that “highbrow” knowledge and tastes play in social stratification (see Erickson 1996; Kingston 2001 for discussions).

In contrast, Veblen’s key concept of conspicuous consumption implies the conscious will to spend conspicuously on leisure and goods. Invoking classic economic anthropologies of “archaic” tribal societies, Veblen described wasteful consumption among the moneyed classes as competitive demonstrations of “pecuniary might.” In Mauss’ classic anthropology of Pacific Northwest tribes, organized squandering took the ritual form of the potlatch, in which rival tribe leaders attempt to humiliate each other with gifts so large they cannot be reciprocated (1954). Such games of “wealth destruction” (Bataille) are therefore status games. Hence the scandal of Veblen’s writings at the turn of the century; he likened high society to tribes and ritualized waste. The rich were not just unproductive but actually destructive with their assets in spectacles designed to signal status, especially useful for the *nouveau riche* entering a field dominated by the old elite (Veblen 1994).

Veblen centered his analysis on visible displays of privilege. The importance of public display mitigates the underlying possibility that so-called elites could exaggerate their wealth (Schor 2007). Conspicuous consumption overcomes this risk, which means that the display value of wealth is relative, not absolute. Thus with greater concentrations of wealth, we should expect to see a ratcheting upward of lavish spending as new elites face increasing pressure to

demonstrate their success. Indeed, economists have documented escalations in size and cost of homes, yachts (“super yachts”), and philanthropic gifts (“conspicuous philanthropy”), also called “luxury fever” (Frank 2009; Schor 1998).

Like any social production, conspicuous consumption requires people doing things together (Becker 1974). Sociologists have similarly analyzed status as situational and contingent on interaction orders (Goffman 1967); that is, status hinges upon configurations of social relations, context and symbols (Collins 2000; Mills 1963; Sauder 2005).¹ Or, in the language of Bourdieu, capitals are always field specific (1986). Conspicuous consumption does not reflect an inherent set of interests but, like culture itself, emerges from an assemblage of communications, relations and transactions (Emirbayer 1997). The question is, how is the conspicuous consumer mobilized?

Building on the status-in-interaction approach, this article uses a dramaturgical approach to study elites in exclusive luxury settings, noting how status performances are situated in specific places, involve symbols with collectively agreed-upon meanings, and are driven by particular spatial arrangements and scripted interactions (Blumer 1969; Sauder 2005).

Because legitimacy is situation dependent, my approach allows for a plurality of symbolic capitals. This approach is similar to micro-studies of deviance which show how particular spatial arrangements can normalize all kinds of social infractions, such as “flashing” during Mardi Gras (Shrum and Kilburn 1996). In party contexts, Tutenges documents considerable organizational and emotional work among a host of backstage intermediaries to get people acting wild on their holidays (2012).

This paper takes one site of elite sociality, the global VIP party circuit, as a case to examine how rich people construct status and, albeit not always deliberately, reputation. Because of its relationality, status does not necessarily map onto reputation, brand, or other long-term identity projects. Conspicuous consumption in the VIP likewise generates status that does not necessarily “stick” to the spender upon his exit from the club. Interviews reveal quite the opposite: a reputation for playing the potlatch is ascribed low-status by those within the VIP and beyond it.

THE CASE: THE VIP SCENE

¹ Organizational sociologists have demonstrated the relational nature of status as the outcome of patterns of deference observed by third parties, as well as associations with other high-status actors (Podolny 2005; Podolny and Phillips 1996).

To observe conspicuous consumption among global High Net Worth Individuals, this paper centers on the case of VIP parties catering to economic elites. VIP, or “very important people,” is a purchasable status that denotes valued participants. In the context of VIP parties, elites are recognized as those who have demonstrable economic resources, not necessarily cultural status or political power as sociologists have previously conceptualized elites (see Khan 2012). In keeping with new sociology research on economic inequality, I use the term “economic elites” to denote VIP customers, called “clients,” because they have large stocks of economic capital; this conceptualization of class foregrounds the power of economic resources, rather than Weberian notions of status (Savage 2014). Of course, not all elites participate in VIP parties, and many participants, especially women, are economically insecure. Thus I use the term “economic elites” to describe clients who pay for bottle service, while “VIP” describes more generally the space of the party.

VIP parties are globally dispersed, since the world’s wealthiest stratum is today characterized as more international, more mobile and more geographically diverse than generations past (Atkinson and Piketty 2007). As such VIP parties appear in nodes in the global circulation of the business class, which follows a transatlantic calendar of high-end events and holidays from St. Barts in January to St. Tropez in July (*FT* 2012).

In such nodes, economic elites frequent VIP nightclubs, which offer “bottle service.” Rather than order drinks at the bar, clients rent tables and purchase whole bottles of alcohol, which come with ice and mixers, at prices ranging from \$250 per bottle of Absolut vodka (750 ml which retails for \$25) to \$5,000 for a magnum-size (1.5 liters) bottle of Cristal champagne (which retails for \$750). The average price is \$1500 per table on a Saturday night at one exclusive nightclub (Elberse, Barlow and Wong 2009). Clubs showcase big purchases by lighting firework sparklers affixed to the bottles and carried to the clients’ tables by “bottle girls,” attractive waitresses in revealing clothing. Unlike expensive purchases in luxury markets like contemporary art or cars, the value of the bottle drops precipitously upon crossing the club’s exit. Consumption in the club is an end in itself, which makes it a compelling case to study status via spending, as there are no physical utilities purchased beyond the experience of the purchase.

Entry to these clubs requires the purchase of bottle service, or is free (“comped”), depending on status determinations made by personnel at the door, which are gendered and class-coded (May and Chaplin 2008; Rivera 2010). The door screening ensures that the bottle service club is an exclusively VIP place.

METHODS

I gained access to VIP clubs from previous fieldwork in the fashion modeling industry, which has substantial ties to nightclubs and specifically, to promoters. In my earlier fieldwork, promoters invited me to their parties free of charge with dinner included; to begin this project, I accepted their invitations and, after explaining my research intentions and securing their informed consent, I began going out with them. I invited 57 promoters to participate. If I saw the promoter out at a club on more than one occasion, I would write to them for an interview or ask them in person. Three declined my face-to-face requests out of privacy concerns; ten did not reply to my Facebook messenger requests.

Over the course of 18 months in New York, I attended 17 clubs and went out with promoters on over 120 nights, in addition to taking four trips to VIP destinations. I interviewed a total of 44 promoters (all of them working in New York). Methodologically I followed Kusenbach’s go-along ethnographic method, which combines interviewing and participant observation by following promoters on their daily and nightly rounds to trace the social architecture of the VIP scene (2003). Of the 44 promoters interviewed, I accompanied most to their parties, usually repeatedly, such that I typically visited up to three or four clubs over the course of one night, usually beginning with dinner at 10 p.m. and ending around 3 – 4 a.m., with occasional after-parties stretching beyond 8 a.m. the next day. Daytime observations proved as important as nighttime encounters, as one promoter told me: “There can be no night without the day,” albeit the promoter’s day rarely begins before 11 a.m. and often as late as 2 p.m. when he wakes up. I memorized an interview schedule which unfolded over the course of several hours or days while “going along” with promoters, and with their permission, I recorded their responses either by audio or by typed notes on my phone. Promoters generally welcomed my presence, since their job is chiefly in getting women to hang out. In exchange for promoters’

participation, I dressed the part and went out with them at night; thus through my own bodily capital I was able to maneuver the problem of ethnographic access in studying up (Gusterson 1997).

Reflecting the demographics of promoters, my sample is majority men and includes five women. Half of the 44 promoters interviewed are immigrants (n=22). Most of them speak multiple languages and can converse with international clients and models. Out of the 44 promoters interviewed in New York, just eight of them are white Americans.

I also accepted invitations to VIP destinations on four occasions: five nights in Miami (March), two separate weekends in the Hamptons (June), and one week in Cannes (July), with most expenses paid by promoters, clubs, and VIP clients, though I paid for my own flights. Copious amounts of alcohol and sometimes drugs are supplied to women free of charge; I generally held a glass of champagne during the parties but refrained from drinking more than occasional sips, enough to fit in. Taking notes was easy, as everyone is constantly tapping on their phones, especially promoters, even as they dance in the club.

I interviewed a convenience sample of 20 women and 20 clients in New York, whom I recruited in three different ways: through face-to-face meetings at dinners and parties; through promoters; and through snowball sampling. I recruited women primarily from club tables and pre-party dinners, where I initiated conversations that typically led to me explaining my role as a writer working on a project about nightlife. Interviews with women focused on their relationships with promoters and clients and their careers in the scene. Among the 20 women interviewed, their median age is 23. At 31-32, I was regularly the oldest woman at promoters' tables but still welcome because I looked younger.

Clients were the most difficult to approach for interviews, as few opportunities arose inside clubs in which I might speak with them about my research, given the loud music. If clients attended pre-party dinners, I was able to explain my research, and on quieter nights in clubs I could seize on moments to explain my work and request interviews. Therefore I primarily relied on snowball sampling and recommendations from promoters to interview clients, focusing the interview on their party careers and motivations, and their personal and business relationships forged in nightclubs.

I entered all interview transcripts and field notes into my computer and coded them with the software Nvivo, which enables coding schemes to emerge inductively in accordance with the

analytical strategy of grounded theory (Charmaz 2001). I have replaced all names of persons and organizations with pseudonyms and removed potentially identifying information.

FINDINGS

I. THE POTLATCH: THE PRODUCTION OF STATUS

Curating the Audience

If the potlatch is, as I argue, a situated collective accomplishment, its production begins with the right audience, carefully curated to be so by club management.

A party becomes VIP if it is relatively more exclusive and harder to access, as scarcity lends higher status (Bourdieu 1986). All respondents identified between 10 – 12 nightclubs in NYC as places for socializing with the global VIP. Respondents were immediately able to say which among these were the “hottest” clubs at the moment, so-called “A-List” clubs as opposed to “B- and C-List,” citing the quality of a club’s crowd. A quality crowd with more “very important people” than others will exhibit visible cues of wealth and status: bottles with sparklers and beautiful women.

Bottles are purchased by clients, almost always men, the most prized among them are the “whales,” a term also used in finance and gambling talk to denote big spenders with purchases of at least \$10,000 in a single night. Whales and their displays of spending are rare occasions, and while talked about frequently, they are infrequent visitors to any given club, in part because they travel so often. Promoters told me that a single bill worth upwards of \$10,000 is unlikely to manifest more than once a month, and is more likely to occur during high profile parties like those during the Cannes Film Festival. While promoters generally inflated the presence of big spenders in the VIP, several of them were more realistic and cautioned that potlatch spending is mostly hype. Aldo who explained to me night one when I asked if he ever hosted whales at his table:

Aldo dismisses my questions about whales, he says a good spender, a big spender, means someone who is reliable, a frequent spender of \$3,000. If he spends \$10,000 one night but only once a year, it is not as big to him.

- Field notes, 12 a.m. in May, Meatpacking District club

Also highly prized are celebrities, who may or may not pay for their drinks but are valuable for their symbolic capital. More than the celebrity or the whale, clubs earn their bulk of profits from affluent businessmen like Wall Street workers and affluent tourists, who spend in regular and smaller amounts of \$1,000 – 2,000 a night:

Big spenders that drop 50,000 a night, they only do that once every three months and then disappear... Who are our target clients? Affluent New Yorkers, tourists. It's like making a salad. What's the most important ingredient, the biggest ingredient in a salad? Lettuce. That's our affluent New Yorkers, guys with small bills of three to five thousand.

- Co-Owner of several high-end clubs and restaurants, field notes.

Conversing with clients nightly, I learned that they were typically either living in New York or visiting here from other major international cities. They were businessmen from finance, natural resources, medicine, real estate, and technology industries. Among my sample of 20 interviewed clients, slightly over half of them worked in finance (n=11), were American (n=11), were *nouveau riche* from middle-class families with mostly earned rather than inherited wealth (n=12), and all of them identified as wealthy, upper-middle class, or "one-percent" (see Table 1). Half of them have had table bills of at least \$10,000, which they either paid themselves or shared with friends. Their average age was 41.

= Insert Table 1 here: Client Sample Descriptives =

Origin Country		Occupation		Class of Origin		Class position		Age
USA	11	Finance	11	Middle	12	Wealthy	Min.	23
Other*	7	Small/med biz owner	4	Upper-class	5	Upper-middle	Avg.	41
France	2	Entrepreneur	3	Aristocratic	2	"One percent"	Max.	65
		Dentist	2	Poor	1			

* Other Countries (1 each): Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, Iran, Italy, Philippines, Ukraine

At the bottom of male patrons are “fillers,” men who buy drinks at the bar but have some cultural capital, which keeps the club from looking empty. One estimate suggests as much as 80% of the club’s profits come from bottle service customers, though they account for only 40% of the club’s customers (Elberse, Barlow and Wong 2009). Below fillers, male patrons with low cultural capital are described as “bridge and tunnel,” so-called because they are not recognized as Manhattan dwellers. Other terms promoters and club owners used to describe men who are perceived as not possessing enough capital are “tools,” “losers,” and so on. They are barred entry even if they offer to buy bottle service.

To attract whales, clubs use women as bait. Consistent with past research on nightlife, promoters explained that clubs like to have more women than men (Rivera 2010). However, the quantity of women does not alone suffice to distinguish a place as VIP. A club needs a high quantity of so-called “quality” women, measured along a clear hierarchy defined exclusively by female beauty. Exploiting the correlation between attractiveness and status (Webster and Driskell 1983), clubs and their promoters target women whose bodies correspond to those valued in the high-fashion arena as models. Such women are ubiquitously called “girls,” a term which signifies a distinct social category (Weinbaum et al. 2008).² In the VIP scene, girls are young (roughly 16 – 25), thin (size 0 – 4), tall (at least 5’9” without heels), and typically though not exclusively white.

Clubs use restrictive door policies to screen girls based on their height, clothes, and looks. All promoters described models as inherently valuable for their looks alone, as New York promoter Sampson explained: “When I walk into the club with ten models, it catches your eye.” Super models are at the very top of valuable girls, working or “signed” models with well-known agencies are also highly prized. These women are considered the most hot (i.e., “physically attractive”) and “cool,” meaning high in cultural esteem. In this field, the model is embodied symbolic capital; she carries the current status of high fashion to denote a space as elite.³

After authentic models, the next best thing is a woman who looks like she could be a model, called a “good civilian.” She has the two most important bodily cues to signal high

² The term “girl” came into popular usage in England in the 1880s to describe working-class and middle-class unmarried women who occupied a social space between childhood and adulthood. Globally, imagery of the girl spread between the 1920s and 1930s, such as the “It girl” of American flapper, and she was and continues to be associated with the “frivolous” pursuits of consumption, romance, fashion (Weinbaum et al. 2008, p. 9).

³ Fashion models have been high status symbols since ever since the “supermodel” craze of the 1980s, which exalted the fashion world into entertainment spectacle (Entwistle and Wissinger 2011).

status: height and slenderness. Below them women described as “civilians,” as in the military to designate people who do not belong to the field. One promoter explains such women are “Normal, like normal girls,” e.g., those with low conformity to the model look who are usually screened out from the door, including older women who appear past their mid-30s. The least valuable are short and/or heavy and/or older women, who are described with vitriol as liabilities (“midgets,” “gross,” and so on). Promoters who bring models to clubs are paid more and have higher status than those who bring civilians.

The distinction between models and civilians is chiefly one of visibility, in that models draw more attention:

Say there’s a promoter who’s gonna bring a whole bunch of girls who are 5’3” and cute, whatever. Or you want to hire people like us, who are gonna bring you the *It* girls... The girls that turn everybody’s heads, the high-fashion models, and celebrities as well. So we went from quantity to quality.

- Jay, 29, black promoter for eight years, from NYC

The VIP nightlife formula is sometimes called “models and bottles:”

Models and bottles *everywhere!* The crowd is amazing and the space is designed so that I can relax, I can have a conversation with important people or I can go crazy in the club. The door is screened to let in only the best crowd. I won’t go someplace where door isn’t screened and crowd isn’t beautiful.

- Dre, 40, Black male from France, promoter for 22 years

Because such girls are thought to attract clients, clubs go through elaborate endeavors to ensure they have a high quantity of quality girls. To these ends, clubs hire promoters on a contractual basis to recruit a quality crowd, paying them between \$200 and \$1,000 per night, depending on the perceived worth of their crowd. In any VIP club, promoters compose between 20 – 50% of the tables. In addition, promoters receive between 10 – 20% commission from bottle sales when they arrange tables for clients. Girls are typically not paid, but instead offered free dinners in expensive restaurants, free drinks and occasionally also free trips to luxury

destinations for parties, all paid for by clubs or promoters. Promoters usually focus their efforts on finding models, recruiting them from Facebook, on the street, at model castings, and through friend networks. Physical looks take primacy over girls' affect or other embodied cues of class such as accent or charm, especially given clubs' low lighting and loud music.

To catch whales and get them to spend large amounts, clubs rely heavily on girls as bait. Clients for the most part agreed that a room full of good-looking girls was an important draw for them. Without highly valued girls, clients are unlikely to spend, or even to stay:

I ask Timati if beautiful women really are that important to his enjoyment of a nightclub. He pauses, and after a moment tells me that, Yes, it happens. If I'm going to a place and I don't see a crowd that I like, I will leave. And I preferred to be around beautiful girls yes.

- Interview with Client Timati, 44, works in NYC Finance, from Europe

I don't know how to explain it, but I have seen in situations where famous people, or very wealthy guys walk into a room, and the room is average civilians or pedestrians, as they call them, and the guy is like, "I don't like this. This is not a beautiful crowd." So they go to another club where there's models.

- Travis, 28, black male from Jamaica, promoter for four years

A status hierarchy of clients, almost always men, and the beauty of women corresponds to their recognizable value to the club, as Dre explains, "Everyone has to bring something to the table," to sit with him in the VIP club (see Table 2).

== Insert Table 2: Gendered Capitals and Corresponding Payments in the VIP ==

Clients	Primary Capital	Payments
Whales	Economic, Social	\$5,000 - \$100,000+ or Comped
Celebrities	Symbolic, Social	Comped
Affluent New Yorkers	Economic, Social	\$500 – 3,000, avg. \$1,500
Fillers	Cultural	Entrance fee (\$20 – 100), Bar drinks
Bridge and Tunnel	None	Denied Entry

Women	Bodily Capital	Payments
Models	High	Comped
Good Civilians	High	Comped
Civilians	Low	May Be Denied Entry
Bad Civilians	Low	Denied Entry

The VIP organizational structure assures that the space includes only those recognized as “very important people:” girls with valuable bodily capital, and economic, social, and celebrity or symbolic capital among men. This curated audience is necessary for elites’ spending displays to be meaningful:

You wanna be where everyone is. See what I mean? You wanna show off. That’s the point of the show. I’m not gonna come here and order a bottle of Dom Pérignon [we are at a Mexican sidewalk café]. So everyone goes to St. Tropez. Why do people go there? Because they wanna be in the same place. These jet setters, they wanna be in the same place because they feel more comfortable, they know who’s who, and then they can show off. So it’s a game.

- Luc, 48, white, small business entrepreneur, from France with inherited wealth

Like the dependents who surround the “Big Man” among Pacific Islanders (Sahlins 1963), the VIP crowd is an entourage of a special type, an ephemeral entourage of relative strangers gathered to display the status of clients. Since status is a function of one’s positioning vis-à-vis other actors, including the number and prestige of members in one’s entourage (Podolny 2005), promoters expend considerable efforts to assemble this crowd.

Setting the Stage of Status Differences

For consumption to be conspicuous, it must be visible (Veblen [1899] 1994). The physical space of the club is arranged to maximize the visibility of status symbols. Clubs rely heavily on girls as props to incentivize client spending:

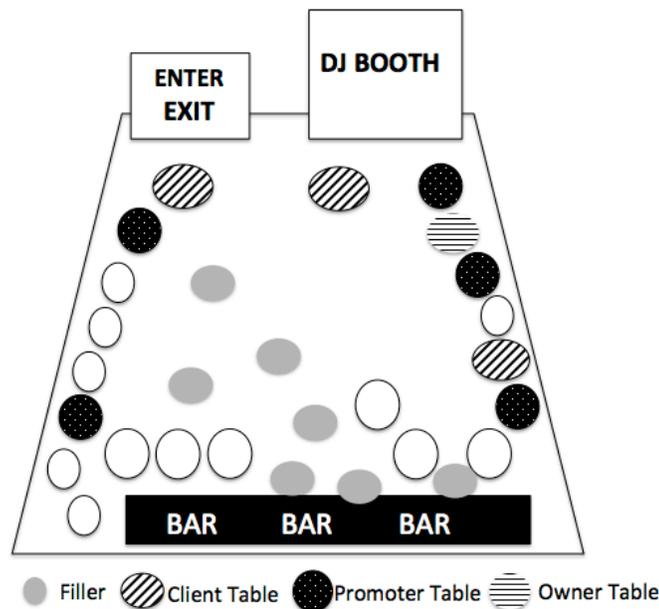
For an owner to push a client to spend, he'll be like, "See? See, this is my place, like, surrounded with gorgeous girls. This is a hot spot. So you have to spend to be here." I mean, it's not their exact words—of course, everything is sugarcoated. But that's basically what they're saying.

-- Vilma, 25, Asian female promoter of three years, from Korea

Inside a typical club will be between 15 – 25 tables alongside a central dancing area. About four or five of those tables on average will be promoter tables, for which the club provides free of charge a set amount of cheap prosecco and vodka with mixers. The most expensive tables are closest to the highest quality girls who are often near the DJ, which is the focal point of action in the club. Most clubs situate tables on slightly elevated platforms, that patrons can overlook the fillers by at least a foot, sometimes several.⁴ This strategic seating arrangement ensures that big spenders will have the illusion of being surrounded by beautiful women throughout the room (see Figure).

⁴ Elevation symbolizes high social position in other ritual forms, a prominent contemporary example is the "command paradigm" of Mardi Gras parades, in which masked float-riders throw gifts of beads and tokens to the masses below, functioning as allegorical aristocrats expressing the largess of hereditary elites in agrarian societies and their hierarchical class relation (Shrum & Kilbourn 1997).

= Insert Figure: Inside the VIP Club =



It is common practice for a promoter's table to be moved midway through the party to another table, closer to a big spender. Multiple times during fieldwork at promoter tables, I was directed to move along with the group to a different table when a client arrived, either to sit or dance at the client's table or at the neighboring table. As Jacques, an African immigrant male and promoter for 18 years put it:

A lot of guys have money from their bonuses or whatever, but they got no swag, so we bring them the party to make them look good.

Central to this arrangement is the visibility of appropriately good-looking girls, who are encouraged to dance at all times and typically in the most visible places: on top of chairs, tables and on the highest banquettes lining the room. Women's attire is also meant to draw the eye: in my time in the field, several promoters followed their invitations with sayings like, "Dress to impress, Ash" or "Dress sexy." Girls are reminded constantly by promoters to wear high heels, the current fashion being platform heels of four inches, such that girls at promoter tables stand at least 6' tall. When I didn't have high heels in my bag and I was already on my way to the club, I texted the promoter: "No heels on me today, flats ok right?" She replied, "Flats look old,

Ashley.” Visible display of girls is further maintained as girls are discouraged from sitting, which is met with immediate attention by promoters (“Baby, what’s wrong?”). Girls are encouraged to stay at the table, for instance by small bribes paid by the promoter to security personnel to allow smoking at the table, rather than outside.

In contrast to the visibility of economic and girl capital, the backstage nightclub personnel are nearly invisible: bus boys and custodians are young dark-skinned Latino males below average height, between 5’3” – 5’5”, wearing plain black uniforms, who weave between and below the crowd carrying trays, mops and broken glass. They embody their marginality and go almost sight unseen.

The club also maximizes the visibility of clients. This is evident with access to seating, as people who get to sit at tables and drink, rather than standing at the bar to order their drinks, connote privilege. Most clubs situate the tables on slightly elevated platforms, so that clients overlook the fillers on the dance floor by at least a foot, sometimes several.⁵ Additionally, guests at tables are likely to stand on their sofa seats, or sit perched up high on the sofa’s upper back. For example, one evening at Club X, Dre sits at his table, on top of the upper back of the sofa, and he says to me, looking around at the crowd:

You can only be in here if you are rich or are hot. That’s who has access here. You’re not rich, you don’t belong here. If you don’t have a table, just look around here. [He motions to the crowd swelling between the tables.] Where you gonna go? You can’t stand at the bar all night. Where do you go without a table?

- Dre, 40, black French promoter for 22 years

Whales are typically placed nearest to the DJ booth, the focus of attention in the club. There are additional strategies to draw the room’s eyes to them. One club owner in Hong Kong explained, “Those guys, they want to show off. I always say the club is a boxing ring. You get them in so they can do this”—and he flexed his bicep muscles. So he came up with the idea of shining a bright flash light, he calls it the “torch,” over the head of whoever settles the bill at the end of the night: “It’s so everyone can see who’s paying,” he explained.

⁵ Elevation symbolizes high social position in other ritual forms, a prominent contemporary example is the “command paradigm” of Mardi Gras parades, in which masked float-riders throw gifts of beads to the masses below, like aristocrats expressing largess of elites in hierarchical class relations (Shrum and Kilbourn 1997).

High-priced bottles are delivered to tables with a sparkler firework affixed to the bottle's neck, carried high in the air by "bottle girls," club waitresses who are also high-heeled, tall, slim and dressed in revealing clothing. The sparkler is a live firework that shoots out as high as eight inches, lights up the faces of s whale's tables.

Size also catches the eye. In the past decade bottle sizes have increased from Magnum (1.5 liters) to Jeroboam (4.5 L) and Methuselah (6 L, the equivalent of eight standard bottles, priced at \$40,000 for Cristal champagne at one NYC venue). As bottle sizes increase on the menu, their prices rise exponentially, not linearly (see also Cousin and Chauvin 2013).

Clubs further manipulate the crowd's attention with music and scenes of play. To mark a big purchase, in addition to the sparklers, the DJ may interrupt the music ("Alex from London is in the house and he just spent 100 K on Dom!"). One client showed me pictures on his iPhone of his bottle-buying sprees in L.A., where his hedge fund code-writing software company is based. At 24-years old, he boasted about spending \$500,000 on champagne in the last six months; his pictures included the VIP crowd holding white placards with letters spelling out his initials, which the crowd raises in the air when he makes a large purchase, while the DJ plays "his song," a hip-hop track called "I'm a Boss" by Meek Millz (not incidentally the lyrics include: "You a boss; He don't care what it cost").

Clubs may arrange more elaborate "bottle staging," as at one nightclub in L.A., where big spenders received bottles from "flying midgets" hooked to aerial cables (Vankin and Donnelly 2011). At Club L in Manhattan, expensive bottles are delivered by characters ranging from Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. Here on a Saturday afternoon the restaurant attached to the club serves brunch, and firework-lit bottles were delivered by the club's manager wearing a gladiator costume, carried to the client's table by a bus boy-drawn chariot, cheered loudly by the crowd.

"The chariot blew my mind," said Bryan, a financial advisor I met at the table next to me and interviewed the next day. Bryan and his five colleagues were in town from Arizona for two weeks on business. They are what a club owner would call the lettuce at the party. Their \$6,000 brunch tab at Club L, modest by comparison to whales, seemed reasonable considering all the fun and champagne. "I didn't know it was going to be a nightclub!" Bryan told me. "I loved it. All right, the chariot went out in a mass text. I was like, this is insane, it's out of control! I'm thinking that stuff's not like actual pyrotechnics because I'm looking for the exits, hah! ... That

chariot though,” he says, shaking his head in amazement.

A carefully staged potlatch produces this dynamic of recognition between the spender and his audience: his spending rouses the crowd, whose energetic shouts further boost his status, and meanwhile the club strategically ratchets upward this collective affect. The experience in the room is one of excitement, gaiety, for everyone: girls, Big Men, even the lettuce from Arizona.

Staging the Potlatch

With clients and girls staged, the club next mobilizes conspicuous consumption with scripted performances of status games, manipulating escalations in spending with gifts and competition. In the short term, gifting is a way to incentivize further spending. A club owner in Hong Kong explained how he encourages clients to buy bottles:

I start ordering bottles in the club when I see other people do it... If I give a bottle of Dom to a customer at a table, what do they do? They have to buy one, or two, or buy one that's bigger! That's how it works, and it goes up and up and it can't go down.

-- Don, 45, Chinese client and club owner for 20 years, from Hong Kong

Competition makes the night's action more exciting.⁶ To these ends, clubs deliberately place whales at tables opposite each other near the DJ booth, to fuel rivalry through the public comparison of their purchases. Club managers hope that a large purchase at one table will encourage a larger purchase at an opposite table. Club owners are known to be in constant communication with whales, sending text messages to them like, “It's on tonight,” to rouse the spirit of competition. This can escalate into a “champagne war,” a ritualized potlatch in which bottles become idioms of rivalry, much like cocks in the Balinese cockfight (Geertz 1973). Clubs provide the ammunition of bottles to engage in one-upmanship, sending out bottles in trains, processions carried by bottle girls with sparklers, illuminating the entire club.

Bottle trains often bring more alcohol than can be consumed by the spender; clients often destroy the excess. As the potlatch begins as a feast and culminates in a bonfire (Mauss 1954),

⁶ On this, Goffman quotes Hemmingway: “Bullfighting is worthless without rivalry” [1967].

bottle purchases sometimes escalate into “champagne showers,” where excess bottles are shaken, sprayed, and dumped onto nearby revelers, thus also destroying designer shoes and clothes. Such spending becomes the center of attention in the club, frequently photographed and video recorded by other revelers, who cheer and toast the expenditures. At Nikki Beach Club in St. Tropez, crates of empty bottles are displayed next to their buyers’ tables for the duration of the party, evidence of wealth destruction.

At other times, the potlatch takes the form of magnanimity without rivalry, as when whales gift bottles of champagne to every other table in the club. It is generosity on a scale of charity which, Collins notes, is one of the purest forms of the conversion of wealth into status: if someone cannot recompense the gift, the giver reaps a return in prestige (1992). Fillers, affluent businessmen, and girls serve a specific role here as the ephemeral entourage. Third-party witnesses of the gift, they bestow value by their dominated position marked in space and in their bodies; a purely private competition between two whales would be mostly meaningless.

Partiers sometimes walk out of parties with unopened gifted bottles of Dom Pérignon champagne in tow, prices ranging from \$500 – 1500 from the menu but worth \$240 in retail from the liquor shop down the street.

Ultimately, the purchase gives the spender status, marked in bodies, space, and money objectified in the size of bottles, the brightness of their fireworks, and the lavishness of their display and destruction:

Bottle service is about status and if you have a table then you're a person of value. It's giving you value in a way, like how does a woman know if you're wealthy? Yes, how you dress. She's going to look at your watch, she's going to look at your shoes. ... If you have nice shoes and a good watch then she knows, but other than that when you go to the club and there's hundreds of men there, how do you separate yourself from everybody else? You know how: you buy 300 bottles of champagne and you shoot it all over the walls. They need everybody to know that “Hey, I'm the top dog.” You have a lot of girls, a lot of champagne, you have the prime table, not the one all the way in the corner, you have the prime table in the VIP room. Then you're the top dog.

- Client, 44, CEO of a food company, from New York

Potlatch displays, so often discussed in and among the VIP and entertainment press, is an exceptional occurrence, already an exceptional and small slice of the world's moneyed class. Over the course of my fieldwork, I would expect to see bottle trains a few times a night with 5 -6 bottles of fireworks-illuminated champagne bottles going to multiple tables. On only a handful of occasions did I observe multiple bottle trains, such as those described above, arriving to a single table; I witnessed just one sprayed champagne fight, and two "bottle wars" of competitive one-upmanship. But such events took prominence among my interviews' concerns, and I came to know about several enormous expenditures that had become nightclub lore. These potlatch rituals therefore hold symbolic significance in orienting VIP participants' attention, confounding such worlds of leisure with ostentation, and organizing club owners' business strategies, who are likely to have on hand and at the ready preparations should a whale come through that night. The bulk of their business is "the lettuce," affluent businessmen and tourists in relatively modest but consistent sums; however, the night's look and feel are aimed at the presumed expectations of free-spending high net worth individuals.

II. CONTESTED MEANINGS OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Like the champagne bottle, the status of playing at potlatch drops precipitously beyond VIP club walls. In interviews, club owners, promoters, and women ubiquitously critiqued excessive nightclub spending, and in particular, those clients whom they perceive as spending specifically to gain status—to "show off:"

They have, like, a psychological problem. Like, they want to be seen. Most of them, that's the point. Maybe they feel lonely sometimes, or they just need to be recognized as, like, a big boy. You know, a guy comes in the club, he's gonna drop ten grand, there's something wrong in his mind.

– Claude, 27, white promoter of four years, from France

Their most common words to describe rituals of bottle buying were "ridiculous," "stupid," "gross," "retarded," "waste," and "crazy." They described whales as socially

incompetent or motivated by personal life failures like divorce, using descriptions like “idiots,” “imbeciles,” and “guys that have a lot of money but don’t know what to do with it.” Here is another description of one well-known whale in Miami:

He has all this money and he doesn’t know how to interact with people, so he thinks he has to like, pay people to hang out with him, you know? It’s weird [laughing].

-- Hannah, 19, white American model, from CA

Clients who have big expenditures on bottles, while celebrated in the club, were mocked for lacking cultural capital, for which they compensated with sheer economic power. Everyone in my interviews described whales as consuming for the wrong reasons—to show off with forced, unnatural acts of striving for recognition—a hallmark of the *nouveau riche* that betrays one’s lack of an elite habitus (Bourdieu 1984).

Clients themselves were more nuanced in interviews, and they drew from multiple discourses to erect symbolic boundaries between their own habits and the perceived illegitimate spending of other, bigger whales. While using the language of waste and stupidity, these men always put money in a relational context. In an arena such as the VIP where such vast financial resources are on display, even small whales could see their purchases as relatively modest.

In interviews, conducted outside of the club context in corporate boardrooms and quiet cafes, clients invoked norms of restraint and described conspicuous consumption as vulgar. Consider the following comments, typical of a client who critiques his own wasteful spending:

I was young. I was stupid. I just threw money away. When I think back on it now, I think it’s so stupid, going out like that, buying bottles. It’s retarded... I mean do you know how many people you could feed or give water to in Africa?

– AJ, 38, real estate and telecom with family wealth

This client claimed to have nightclub bills on varying nights of \$20,000 and \$30,000 for bottles. He recounted with disgust scenes from St. Tropez’s Nikki Beach, a club where bottles of champagne came to his table warm, “just so you can shake them and spray them. They don’t even ice them.”

Among the men in my sample who could be described as whales, most of them expressed remorse and shame at what they described as wasted money. BJ, a 48 year old financial services manager, was a big whale after his 18-year old marriage ended:

... all of sudden, I'm free in New York, and I was making a lot of money. I was extrapolating from that — this was before the financial crisis, “You know what I was making in 2007, and probably that's what I'm going to make next year, so what's \$120,000 on bottles?” I remember, in the year 2008, [I said] “I can't believe I spent all of this on this stupid alcohol, on bottle services!”

In interviews, clients managed the tension of low versus high-status spending by drawing symbolic boundaries between themselves and *other* clients, whose claims to symbolic status they framed as illegitimate. Rhys, for instance, is a finance associate also from European aristocracy, who participates in the VIP club scene but would never participate in the potlatch, he explained:

Some people are raised to think like there's no point to basically throw money away in a flashy way... I think [the big spenders] are more after social status. It's social status but also more of a culture for them. ... I think it looks stupid. It's fine, it's good business for the guys owning the clubs, but it doesn't do anything for me. I don't know what they're backgrounds are, those guys, I think they're like, “Ok, look, I made it. I'm successful.”

-- Rhys, 35, white financial advisor from France

Similarly, a wealthy hedge fund manager also recounted scenes of excess from St. Tropez (“A real show of wealth is to buy everyone bottles...”), though he himself is disgusted by whales' deliberate status-seeking behavior:

It's disgusting, kind of. I thought about this before, like is this wrong? Is this a bad use of money? And I don't think it is, because it's money spent that creates a lot of good. The money's not better spent on like welfare, I mean I just told you I love Charles Murray, but really it's money that's going back into the economy, it's a service like any other, and it's money spent, and I don't think it's better to just give that money like to a homeless

person or anything. So when I say it's disgusting, I'm not approaching it from the lens of "Let's feed the starving babies." The reason is because it's meant to show. It's the status aspect is disgusting. They're doing it for sake of being seen. And it's for the attention or fanfare and that's why everyone photographs it and posts pictures of it on Facebook. That's the part of it that I could not stand. For me it's utility, its practical or convenient.

- AJ, 33, Asian American man, Hedge fund manager

In addition to critiquing the quest to show off, clients also looked down upon other big spenders by claiming that they haven't earned their money, nor can they appreciate its value:

Someone that can spend \$100,000 dollars on a table in a night, first of all must be a billionaire. Secondly, I don't think he's earning that money. Generally people that earn their money by working hard, don't spend money like that. They wouldn't spend it on tables. It's usually the sons of the very wealthy that would do something like that, they just inherit it. ... It's usually oligarchs; it's Russians. Arabs. People that can spend 100 K on a table are usually people that have an oilrig, they must have some connection to oil, or like the oligarchs. It's people that have not earned their dime.

- Aldo, 33, white Italian finance associate

Returning to AJ, the former bottler buyer from Ecuador, who now describes himself as a hard working telecom entrepreneur, the very same language of hard work is striking:

I think it's two things. One, you didn't work hard for your money because if you worked hard you wouldn't blow it like that because you would know what your money is worth. Two, it's insecurities. Those guys are insecure.

-- AJ, 38, real estate and telecom with family wealth:

Clients frequently distinguished themselves from Russian and Arab spenders who jointly manifest as the specter of strategic status-seeking, against which their own spending seemed both modest and justified:

Russians came in, they destroyed the scene. Before it was family, it was always friends gathering in the same place, spending a little bit of money but not crazy kind of money. But now it's these Russians or these Arabs... So the tables we had for so many years, now it's given to Russians. And they don't know how to have fun, these guys. I mean, fun for them is spending as much money as they can, but it's not fun. To have like 200 bottles coming to you... Now it's all about money. [He sighs.]

- Luc, 48, white F&B entrepreneur, from France

Super rich whales who spend famously large sums on bottles, like the cited Arabs and Russians, are presumed to have dubious sources of money. Such sums are called “stupid money,” “fuck you money,” and on a few occasions I heard “Arab money.” Its quick destruction in nightclubs suggests the money is tainted. For example, the promoter Dre alluded to one whale's illegal sources of income when I asked how he made his fortune: “You don't wanna know.”

Sociologists have examined how money's sources influence how people spend it (Zelizer 1994); for instance among hedge funders, windfalls of money are spent quickly (Delaney 2012). The VIP economy suggests a reverse process of assigning meaning to money: money perceived as poorly spent raises suspicions about its origins and owner.

Taking pains to portray their spending and their earnings as legitimate, clients frequently erected a symbolic boundary between themselves as the deserving rich, and other whales as the undeserving rich.

Consider Ricardo, the 23 year-old son of a wealthy hedge fund CEO. I met Ricardo in a club in Cannes, where he offered me a glass of champagne from his father's table, since his family was on their annual summer holiday cruising their yacht around the French Riviera. A few nights later, I passed by Ricardo again in a club, this time in St. Tropez without his parents and uncles, at his own table with a few male friends, and surrounded by waitresses and about half a dozen champagne bottles. When I interviewed him a month later in his luxurious Manhattan apartment, he downplayed his own spending in the French Riviera by invoking the biggest whales of St. Tropez, and he repeatedly mentioned how hard works now that he is employed at his family's hedge fund:

I saw in St. Tropez a guy alone spend 1.5 million on that shit, buying like 20 bottles and they cost \$30,000 each one... These Arabs have a big oilrig in their backyard. My perception is that if they're spending that amount, they've never worked for that money so they don't know what it takes to get that money... That's not me, I work my ass off, and yeah I go out after, not on weeknights because I wake up at 5:30, get into the office by 6:30. I gotta show them I'm not some lazy rich kid.

- Ricardo, 23, white finance associate from Columbia

The relative wealth frame allows Ricardo's to see his own bottle buying as pretty modest indeed. Despite securing his enviable position at his family's firm after having just graduated from an average American college, Ricardo insisted and seemed to genuinely believe that his income reflects his hard work, and he portrayed himself as deserving of occasional indulgences. In fact, when I described my research interests to one of Ricardo's family members, he summed up his orientation to leisure: "I work hard, so I play hard. I have three companies. I have to take a break."

A final approach that clients used to talk about their consumption of bottles was pragmatic: large bottle service tabs carry a practical utility of gaining access to the VIP, which is economically valuable in its own right for clients' business endeavors. Not only is bottle buying an efficient and economic way to get drinks, but being in the VIP club is itself necessary for clients seeking to network with potential business partners. Under this framing, clients could justify expensive bottle purchases as investments for future business deals. Expenses were more commonly billed as corporate entertainment before the 2008 finance regulation; still, two clients worked as self-employed commodities traders and explained that shared VIP experiences help them cement relationships with investors. Two clients claimed they had secured business deals with other VIP men specifically by spending large amounts on bottles. An additional four noted that clubs offer them business opportunities; for instance a law firm partner meets clients; a cosmetic dentist meets celebrity patients, and so on:

You don't go to clubs strategizing to meet clients, but clients want to be there. So you look around, "Who's taking a table? Who's that spending \$20,000?" And you wanna

know that guy.

- Donald, 60, white finance associate from Long Island

Sometimes if I think about it, I'm like why did I spend that? But actually, because I did a quarter million deal out of guy I met at a club, that time I spent 50 K, okay, it's a lot of money but I can write off some as a corporate expense.

- George, 24, white tech entrepreneur from L.A.

In addition to the strategic acquisition of business ties, clients spoke of wanting to belong to elite business cultures in a more general way:

I've been to all these places. Would I want to do that year and after year after year? No. But definitely having the fact that I've been to the major spots, the right places, I guess it helps on the margin, in relating to business contacts or people that – just because for some of those people that you might deal with in a business setting they say, "Oh I've been to St. Barths, have you been? Or, I've been to St. Tropez, it's so great." If you haven't been and you don't know, they'll feel you're not in the same circle, not as accomplished.

- Rhys, 35, white financial investor from France

Interviews afforded clients the chance to frame their consumption in relation to their productive lives, such that VIP spending became exceptional releases to their routines of hard work, or necessary to their business.

We see here three symbolic boundaries guiding clients' discursive framings of VIP consumption. First, almost all of the clients drew relative comparisons to minimize their own spending as reasonable, an expected finding among studies of elite consumption (Sherman 2014). Second, they embraced meritocracy and individualism to portray their money as earned through hard work; as the deserving rich, these men were entitled to spend on leisure, again especially compared to the undeserving rich who are perceived to not work. Third, they employ a pragmatic approach: rather than seeking status, they seek access to join an exclusive arena with its opportunities for commerce among elite businessmen.

Like the undeserving poor, the undeserving rich are maligned for their wasteful consumption and suspiciously weak ties to the labor market. This suggests the beginnings of a sociology of “rich people’s money,” with the symbolic contrast between deserving and undeserving rich orienting how people spend large sums of money. For the deserving rich, bottle service is an occasional indulgence, justified because this is consumption tied (discursively at least) to production.

There is one final outlier among these discursive framings of client’s consumption. This is the ironic orientation, perhaps the most striking because these clients unequivocally embrace being *both* an illegitimate consumer and worker. Three men in my sample employed irony to frame big spending as legitimate because they themselves recognize the public critique that such spending is in poor taste, therefore they subvert implicit rules of distinction deliberately with ostentation in practice and discourse. For example, one client, a 29 year-old college student, spent all of the money he previously earned from an internet tech company, which he claimed was about \$5 million gone in four years. He brazenly told me that when it comes to his lavish spending in VIP clubs, “I don’t give a fuck what people think anymore. I do it with an ear to ear grin.” This client emailed me photos boasting of his nights out with Jeroboam wine bottles (4.5 L) and concluded his email with:

BTW, for the record, I now see most of this as pretty gross in the grand scheme of starving children, etc... but it was fun.

-- Adam, 29, white entrepreneur from California

This use of irony legitimates Adam’s conspicuous consumption because it both recognizes and appropriates critiques of it, thus maintaining his sense of distinction. Studies of hipsters and cultural omnivores also find that irony is a distinction strategy for privileged people to consume forms of illegitimate culture (Prieur and Savage 2011).⁷

⁷ Some proponents of the omnivore thesis argue that Bourdieu conflates valued cultural capital with legitimate culture, e.g. high culture, which findings on “emergent cultural capitals” complicate (see Prieur and Savage 2011). For my purposes, the omnivore thesis usefully points out that cultural capital is relational and context-specific; the oppositions between legitimate and illegitimate forms are what matters, not the contents per se. Cultural goods bestow status, after all, so long as they are widely shared and recognized as legitimate (Lamont and Lareau 1998, 156).

The ironic orientation, like the meritocratic, pragmatic, and relatively rich boundaries, allow clients to rationalize their spending *post hoc* by specifying particularized kinds of rich people's monies and motivations for spending. By drawing boundaries between themselves and *other* conspicuous consumers, clients see themselves as "doing display" in the right ways and for the right reasons.

III. CIRCULATION: FROM STATUS TO REPUTATION

What happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas – nor St. Tropez, the Hamptons, or any other node in the VIP party circuit. Images and stories of the potlach and its players circulate throughout networks of elites, their close ties and broader publics. They circulate via word-of-mouth among VIP regulars – girls, promoters, managers, the clients and their close and arm's length ties. The VIP world itself is quite insular, and organized to be so by nightclub owners who have tapped into the global pool of HNWI's disposable income with franchising across the jetsetter circuit.

Strategic Group, for instance, owns several nightclubs and restaurants in New York City, including one of the longest-running clubs, Marquee, which became the subject of a Harvard Business Review case (Elberse, Barlow, and Wong 2009). The success of Strategic Group's first ventures in New York led to partnerships with other clubs and restaurants in Las Vegas, and eventually opened Marquee nightclub in Sydney, Australia. Owners of clubs in New York have also franchised to create the same clubbing experience, catering to the same clientele, in Miami, St. Tropez, Mexico City, and Vegas.

Clients and promoters identified with ease the "right" places to go at the right times of the year, and they had preferred locales for seasonal European and Caribbean destinations: New Years and January in St. Barthes, Uruguay or Gstaad, March in Miami, Cannes for the film festival and Monaco for the Grand Prix in May, Hamptons all summer, St. Tropez in July and Ibiza in August. Clubs cater to this mobile elite by temporarily opening local outposts called "pop up clubs." One club in New York closes its doors during August, posting a sign that reads: "The [Club] family is in Europe for the Annual summer holidays. We will return to open pre-fashion week in late August."

This creates a homogenized look and feel of the global VIP circuit. In my own fieldwork at parties in the Hamptons, Miami, the French Riviera and in Hong Kong, I heard the same popular hip hop and house songs, drank uniform brands of Belvedere vodka and Cristal, Dom Pérignon and Veuve Clicquot champagne, and saw familiar faces of clients, promoters and women I had met in New York. Clients and promoters, too, expect to see one another:

St. Tropez is about pure display of money. You'll spend forty euros for a coke. Then you look over your shoulder and see people you know from London or New York. It's a total circuit, all the same people in these places, same clients.

- Dean, 29, white American male, promoter for six years

Within this context, gossip and stories readily circulate through the VIP:

The exciting thing is to tell to your friends the story the next day, what happened, what have you done, it's silly, like kids. ... But the next day, I don't think you can say that you are happy. Because first of all the hangover, second of all you don't even know the name of the girl in your bed... The only thing you can do is brag to your friend. Most of the people they brag, "Oh, I had the best girls," you know how the guys can make a story like this.

- Luc, 48, white F&B entrepreneur, from France

Details of nights out, and of women involved, circulate among some VIP participants who showed me images on their phones of party scenes—empty bottles, designer shoes hanging out of ice buckets on club tables, men surrounded by women. "I get way more photos of girls sleeping than I should," one client told me, about his network of party friends and their communication.

Stories and imagery of big purchases also circulate on clients' social media, and those within the VIP leisure circuit including club managers and owners, promoters, girls, and other guests in attendance, all of whom can be seen taking photos during the firework displays which some will post Facebook and Instagram, tagging each other, liking one another's photos, and

coming up with clever and ironic captions to elevate the sense of ostentation and competitive one-upmanship:

Go hard or go home.

- Caption by a girl on her photo of fireworks and bottles

A Little Magnum to help out the thirsty!!! Hihihih!!! [sic] Jimmy'z Soho Rooms
Russian Private Party - Monte-Carlo

- Caption by a woman client photographed sipping a magnum of champagne.

Is there anything left to destroy in Miami?

- Facebook update by a promoter during the Ultra music festival in March.

Finally, news of large VIP potlatches circulate through the news media and its online channels of blogs and dailies. Spending sums are sometimes captured on customers' bills by club personnel and then pictured in outlets such as *Ny.Eater.com* with headlines such as "A Guide to Whale Watching in New York City" (Morabito 2013). Occasionally, larger sums appear on mainstream news outlets, like the *Telegraph*: "Russian multimillionaires rack up £130,000 bar tab at Mayfair club" (Philipson 2013) or the *L.A. Times*, "Nightclubs having a whale of a time" (Vankin and Donnelly 2011).

Stories of the Biggest Whale

Stories abounded during my field work about one whale in particular, whose spending came up in many conversations, interviews, blogs, mainstream press, and reports from anti-corruption groups. I heard of the whale Jho Low fairly soon upon entering the field, as his expenditures are famous within the scene, and beyond it.

Promoters spread details of Jho Low's potlach spending to illuminate the zenith of bottle buying:

[This club] has, uh what's his name, Jholow, who spends throughout the world a million dollars a night just for the kick of it, just because he can afford it. You know he does a lot of international deals with the governments so they can create new properties or bridges or whatever that is, his company does contracts with a team and they just sign and then that's it, he's coming in with a billion dollars or more... He's Asian, I think he's from Korea. He's making a shit ton of money so wherever he goes he spends a million dollars and laughs at everyone. Like everyone is underneath him. The guy's like 26 years old.

- Promoter, 29 year-old Sampson

Promoters liked to described their encounters with Jho Low's infamous expenditures:

But there's a million reasons why people spend money in the clubs. I don't know why. I wouldn't do it. But take Jho Low for example, the famous bottle buyer. The last time I was out and I saw Jho Low, he bought a bottle of Patron [tequila] for every table at Club L. He spent over a hundred thousand dollars that night. And the guy doesn't give a shit. He doesn't even talk to the girls. He just sits in the back and drinks a beer. He doesn't give a fuck. He just wants to party—he wants to be like, “Yeah, I did that.” It's crazy.

- Promoter, Skinny Mike, 23 years-old, NYC, promoter for two years

One guy that comes, pays everything in the whole club, post-recession, just *one guy*. If you can get that one guy to come,” and Dre went on to recount a story he heard, in which Jholow arrives at the airport and “everybody knows.” All of the Meatpacking District's VIP club owners are waiting for him at the airport with cars, trying to woo Jholow into their service and get him to come to their club while he is in town: “So Jholow is at the airport, he was talking about it, he's at the airport like which car do I take. You see it's funny. But if you can get that one guy to come to the club it's great

- Dre, 40, Black male from France, promoter for 22 years

Jholow, obviously, takes the cake.

- Roger, 42, Asian American, in NYC promoter for 15 years

When describing the excesses of VIP club spending, St. Tropez was a frequent theme. When describing the exorbitance of St. Tropez, Jho Low's name would emerge. One of his bar tab's in St. Tropez was estimated between \$1 - 2 million for a single night, and photos from 2010 of him at a table with dozens of magnum bottles, sparklers, and even Paris Hilton have appeared everywhere from local Malaysian press to the *New York Times*.

St. Tropez is a billion dollars. This guy Jholow, you know Jholow? Yeah he spent a million dollars, and there was a competition between Jholow and the Pakistanis, so he was taking a 20,000 euro bottle and the others were taking it, and they were paying for the other tables, "Send that guy a bottle!" ... That's why I don't go out any more because ... there's no limits any more. Even with a table, nobody respects you because there's always somebody spending more than you.

- Luc, 48, white F&B entrepreneur, from France

Walking down the street with the promoter Dre and one of his friends Rhys, a finance investor and a bottle client, St. Tropez comes up again.

Rhys: St. Tropez is ridiculous. One guy alone spent 1.2 million euros on tables.

Dre: That's Jho Low, he's Malaysian. He spent one night in Club A \$1.5 million. It costs them \$1.3 million to make Club A, he paid for it in one night. The club is now just profit... [there is some discussion about which clubs Jholow goes to, and how those clubs secured his patronage through social ties].

- Field notes, downtown Manhattan sidewalk

I could not verify that any of these promoters or clients had ever really seen Jho Low in person. At least some of them are describing second-hand information, passed to them through the network of VIP workers, guests, and Jho Low's arm's-length ties, reaching me on a dozen different occasions with various details but always the same structure: Jho Low is a big whale with outrageous spending.

According to an investigative report by the *New York Times*, Low Taek Jho is 33 year-old financial investor from Malaysia involved in multiple real estate ventures in Manhattan and

businesses in the Middle East. He is an investor for the 2013 Martin Scorsese film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*. And he is a consultant on the Malaysian sovereign wealth fund, “1Malaysia Development Berhad,” which has charges of corruption (Story and Saul 2015).

Jho Low, for his part, has tried to answer the criticism with select interviews, including fielding questions from the local Malaysian press specifically about St. Tropez:

Reporter: Was there a US \$160,000 bill in Club A (nightclub)?

Jho Low: I think factually there was a party being thrown for a friend’s engagement which I was told cost around US\$160,000. Left to me, I would not spend that kind of money... I think there is a pattern of trying to paint me as this person who orders a lot of champagne excessively. But I think the fact is to realized that these are special instances where different events have been held and in many cases not organized by me. One point I want to clarify for certain is neither me nor my brother spent in excess of US \$2mil in St. Tropez. That is 100% factually not true, for sure. It was 40-50 of us friends who ordered some drinks and had a good relaxing night. For me, we all work very hard. Of course, we have a disadvantage where at our age, people may perceive it differently. At the end of the day, I run my investors’ money prudently. I generate returns for them. I am not an excessive person but I do have my breaks for relaxation with friends. (*The Star Online*, 2010).

Here it is striking how Jho Low, one of the biggest VIP whale, talks about his spending similarly to other clients interviewed for this study: the relatively of expenditures (“I would not spend that kind of money”), the importance of hard work, the justification for occasional splurges or “breaks.”

To no avail. Jho Low’s reputation as an excessive and corrupt whale continues in the international mainstream and local Malay press. He is now trying to reinvent himself as a global philanthropist (Story and Saul 2015).

The evolving story of Jho Low points to the volatility of elite reputation and its potential disconnect from the situationally-bound status of the potlatch. While the VIP carefully orchestrates the collective production of status, in which rich people are encouraged to enact the

display of power through elaborate consumption rituals – to be the Big Man as in the Pacific Islands – beyond the club walls, there are multiple and competing meanings of conspicuous consumption.

CONCLUSION

Status is a sensitive good. It cannot be purchased outright without, of course, a loss of status (Rossman 2014, p. 53). Depending on the context, conspicuous consumption generates not status but disdain; one need only consider journalistic critiques of elite lifestyles in the U.S. since the economic downturn (e.g., La Ferla 2008; Roberts 2008), as well as the interview data presented here of clients' critical discourses of their very own expenditures. Bourdieu's portrayal of elite distinction encourages us to focus not on deliberate status-seeking behavior, but rather, the slow cultivation of the seemingly natural demonstration of superior taste; indeed, elite distinction is a disinterest in distinction. But the conspicuous consumer is still alive and spending in abundance.

To explain this tension, I have outlined an approach of conspicuous consumption as an emergent collective accomplishment. Recognizing the tensions around status-seeking (and sharing their critiques), VIP organizers and clientele follow a dramaturgy of elite potlatch which enables and normalizes disreputable spending behaviors. By studying these occasions of pecuniary display in the VIP, this article shows the organizational and interactional work underlying the potlatch. Their contested meanings as status moves into reputation as discourses, symbolic boundaries, and media representations.

Consistent with theories of status-in-interaction (Sauder 2005), I find that the value of status consumption is temporally and spatially contingent. Studies in deviance show how particular spatial arrangements can suspend cultural norms and encourage all kinds of infractions, such as "flashing" during Mardi Gras (Shrum and Kilburn 1996). Similarly, when constructing a party vibe, backstage intermediaries expend enormous organizational and emotional work to get people acting wild on their holidays (Tutenges 2012). The situational contingency of status is observed in the ways that clients talk about bottle buying when they are outside of the club, where norms of restraint resume. Here, clients draw boundaries between themselves and those they frame as low-status conspicuous consumers. Interviews alone would

capture the discursive distancing elites use to frame their own purchases as more legitimate than other spenders. In situ observations, meanwhile, shed light on the processes through which wealth destruction unfolds, even among people who see this as low-status behavior. The discord between “saying and doing” in qualitative work can be theoretically productive, as the tension foregrounds the situated nature of status consumption (Jerolmack and Khan 2014).

This ethnography suggests the impacts of conspicuous consumption on clients’ mobility strategies, especially important given their oft-stated goals of securing business opportunities through their VIP participation. What is the value of the potlatch beyond its situational enactments? My interview participants suggest this may be considerable for forging ties and furthering their own entrepreneurial projects. Future research should investigate broader impacts of the VIP leisure circuit and other sites of affective bonding in terms of the potential of such exclusive elite experiences for forging connections, symbolic debts and credits, reputation, and business deals (e.g., Hoang 2016; Osburg 2013).

Paradoxically, among the most mobile part of modern society with vast sums of economic capital, the VIP setting reveals “archaic” features described in economic anthropology: the circulation and display of women, potlatch, and ritualized squandering. Veblen derided this paradox writing at the turn of the century with his satirical ethnographic comparisons of high society to tribal ones, yet the organization of ostentation is indeed a serious ethnographic object. Conspicuous consumption is not a static feature of economic elites; it is a situated, emergent collective accomplishment.

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