



# Tourism for Sex: Bystanders Reviews in Bangkok Red Lights Hotspots

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## Abstract

This paper will discuss a few results of content analysis of travellers' reviews (a total of 800 messages in English, Italian, Spanish, German and French) in three infamous red-lights hotspots in Bangkok (Patpong, Soi Cowboy and Nana Plaza), that have been reviewed on Tripadvisor.com. The reviews analyzed were posted since August 2008, before the tightening grip following the military coup, which among other things enforced a nighttime curfew. As part of this analysis, we will identify main themes related to sex tourism in Thailand as reported by travellers/reviewers/visitors/bystanders. Despite the quantity and the formal variety of the messages, a qualitative text analysis and an interpretive approach showed that the explicit contents of the messages could consistently be divided in a few groups. These divisions emerged through coding procedures that clustered the data in analytically relevant ways. First we identified more positive vs. more negative reviews. Second, amongst positive accounts we identified themes of fun, lack of moral judgment, voluntarism and consumerism. Third amongst negative we identified messages with themes of bad business, bad atmosphere, personal distress and danger, disgust and repulsion and rarely reviews of moral condemnation emerged.

**Keywords:** Content analysis; Sex tourism; Bangkok red lights; Bystanders; Tripadvisor.com

## Introduction

Trafficking in women for sex tourism, and its political and academic awareness are a rapidly growing phenomenon. Since sex trafficked women constitute a hidden population the increasing or decreasing figures are most probably educated guesses [1]. If we see this phenomenon as a sort of human exploitation its economical potential stems in part from the low investment, low risk and reusable nature of the commodity itself. This phenomenon is a recent development and part of a global gendered industry and international economic system [2]. For a few scholars, it can be seen as a commercial activity carried out by mostly developed countries<sup>1</sup> adult male tourists exploiting poor young women from third world countries [3]. Sex tourism has been studied using various ethnographic methods, interviews with women, participant observation etc. Thailand in general and Bangkok in particular have attracted the attention of different scholars [4,5]. The three red light hotspots (Nana, Soi Cowboy and Patpong) are considered to be the most popular nightlife and sex activity sites in Bangkok and have been the focus of academic research on sex tourism and prostitution [6-8]. Moreover they served as the setting for popular Western bestsellers and movies<sup>2</sup> and are known attraction sites of local organized tours (*Hangover Tours* offer stag and bachelors' nights in a safe and fun way, see: [bangkokhangover.com](http://bangkokhangover.com)). In academic research less is known about the attitudes, the perceptions and the accounts of bystanders who visit these areas.

## Literature Review

The feminist approach views sex tourism (a.k.a prostitution tourism) as part of the exploitation of women who are encouraged to participate, voluntarily or forcibly, in the sex business [9,10]. According to this view, Third World countries are forced into the female and 'penetrated' for money [11].

On the other hand, other scholars define the phenomenon of

<sup>1</sup>This term is somehow problematic. Sometimes they come from Western countries, and sometimes they come from reacher developing countries.

<sup>2</sup>e.g., John Burdett's Bangkok detective novels and the American movie *Hangover 2*.

prostitution in general and sex tourism in particular as a part of a continuum. Most of these women are living in the grey zone of sexually involved workers, and explicit sexual activities can happen in a short period or part-time business [12]. Involvement in sex is sometimes a result of situational opportunities, rational choice based on free will, cost-benefit considerations etc. [13]. According to this perspective, sex tourism depends more on the opportunities available in everyday routine activities and in the natural ecology surrounding the men, women, traffickers etc. [14]. It may be easier to tempt people with the opportunity to make money with an associated low risk, or to offer more independence and upgrading standards of living [15].

Sex work is an important service industry for tourism in Thailand as well as a significant sources of remitted income for poor families in particular the rural north-east regions [6]. With the development and growth of the tourist industry beginning in the 1980s, Bangkok sex areas became institutionalized as tourist attractions, a naturally accepted element of the city's nightlife. Many male customers from richer, or Western or developed countries (and also Thai men) are drawn to these areas owing to the abundance and even spectacle of commoditized sexuality<sup>3</sup>. For feminist scholars this form of 'tourism constitutes their power in terms of class, race and gender' [8]. However, despite its contribution to Thailand's income, sex tourism has had a negative impact on the country's reputation in the West [16], particularly in light of its coverage by Western media [17].

<sup>3</sup>Mainly European and North American, but also Japanese, Australian tourists etc. Moreover we identified messages from Japan and South Korea. Indian and Pakistani visitors wrote their comments in English. We also know about some reports of wealthy clients from Muslim countries: see for example Sasson, 2004).

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Sex industry in Thailand in general and in Bangkok in particular is varied. If is taken for granted from a radical feminist point of view that any form of sex industry are intrinsically exploitive and like prostitution any sexual encounter doesn't differ from rape<sup>4</sup>, it seems that the reality is more complex: the Western attitude to post-colonial (and post-war) Indochina ignores codes, mores and informal norms in these societies [18]. Sexual performances are a ritualized production, under and through the force of religion, economy (debt bondage) and tradition. Sex market in hotspots areas reflects both migration patterns of urbanization, poverty in agrarian regions, corruption of the army, the police, there religious and the political system etc. Many sex workers enter the trade of their own volition, from among very limited choices [19]. But they also interrupt this activity to return to their villages, having periods of religious purification and being reintegrated in the role of daughters and good brides. They do so in a social context in which they are expected to support their families, some of whom had lost their land to debt and could no longer live as agrarian peasants [20]. The forms of sexual interactions are various: from women who work as free-lance to escort girls, from women who are enslaved by debt bondage to aged mamasans, from massage parlours that can provide any extra service, to go bars girls, from scanty brothels to first class hotel "room service". The sexual performances, the age of the girls, and the presence of male, bisexual, transgender, transsexual prostitution, with different levels of relationship (intimacy and friendship) with bachelor adult or aged clients make this reality very complex [4,5,21]. As a reviewer of the Nana Plaza wrote like this: "BUT be aware you might fall in love with the girls". Of course patterns of prostitution are also influenced by new forms of mass tourism, corruption and health issues [22].

## The Current Study

Academic research on various forms of sex tourism focuses in general on the interplay between four actors denoted by varied terminology:

1. Female sex workers, prostitutes ('ladies', 'whores', 'girls', 'escorts', 'hostesses', etc.)
2. The peasant family of origin, often involved in procurement.
3. Pimps, madams, traffickers, mamasans, etc.
4. Clients, customers ('johns', 'sex tourists', 'visitors', 'punters', 'patrons' etc.).

The terminology represents different moral, legal and cultural constructions in different societies [17].

This paper will focus on an additional actor involved in the vicious circle of sexual market: the bystander (for a general overview of bystanders' roles in human suffering, atrocities and crimes see [23,24]<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>See for example Adrea Dworkin speeches in the web under the title "Prostitution and Male Supremacy".

<sup>5</sup>Despite this issue is beyond the aim of this paper we have to remind the continuum between literal denial, interpretive denial and implicatory denial (Cohen, 2001). Literal denial is the perception that a condition of human suffering is not happening or is not true ('it couldn't have happened without us knowing'). Interpretive denial means attributing a different meaning to what seems apparent to others, when harm is cognitively reframed and then re-allocated to a different and less pejorative class of events ('trafficked women are not prostitutes, they are escort girls, sex employees, top models, etc.'). Implicatory denial means attributing a different meaning to the results of the harm ("sex trafficking is a safety valve for the society: more prostitutes = less rapes", "women will become rich"). We should also remind many studies of Staub which focused on psychological, social and interactive conditions (awareness, perception, responsibility, imitation, decision making, reaction etc.) to interact with human suffering.

The popular term of *bystander effect* was coined by social psychologists, following the murder of Kitty Genovese, stabbed to death outside her apartment three times, while bystanders who observed the crime did not step in to assist or call the police. Latané and Darley attributed the bystander effect to the diffusion of responsibility (onlookers are more likely to intervene if there are few or no other witnesses) and social influence (individuals in a group monitor the behavior of those around them to determine how to act). In Genovese's case, each onlooker concluded from their neighbors' inaction that their own personal help was not needed.

Since the Genovese's tragedy, the bystanders' perceptions of criminal scenes became a significant focus of research. Researchers among other things examined cases when bystanders protected and saved victims although it was beyond their duty [24], and examined psychological and social and environmental factors that may influence the behavior of good bystanders (aka Good Samaritans) [25].

On the issue of prostitution in general and sex tourism in particular, among helping bystanders we can identify some individuals who are influenced by their professional ethics or by their moral world as lawyers, social activists, feminist organization and NGO, health workers [26], and bystander states that are sensitive to issues related to human rights [27,28]. Some rare stories report actions of courageous whistle-blowers (as in the case of Kathryn Bolcovac who exposed women trafficking during the Balkan war) or male rescuers (as ex-cop rescuer pastor of call girls in American reality show<sup>6</sup> or the male Western hero acting in the far east, as portrayed in *Holly* a realistic drama film, distributed in 2006).

However in the field of research knowledge about immediate bystanders or passers and prostitution tourism is very poor. Bystanders visit hot-spot places (in this case in Bangkok) where explicit forms of sexual market, pimping, strip performances and prostitution is present and very visible<sup>7</sup>. Based on their reviews, they do not engage in explicit libidinal or sexual acts (or they conceal such activities), but rather view explicit interactions related to various forms of sexual activity (which in the strict legal definition are crimes) mostly from a distance, or from the street. As noted by a visitor to Bangkok's Red Light Nana Plaza area, they do not 'indulge in the sin but get a first-hand review of what Bangkok is famous for'. Or, in the words of another tourist, they 'sit and watch the world go by' and 'absorb the atmosphere'.

## Method

The methodology of this research is grounded on content analysis of website reviews posted on Tripadvisor.com. In its simplest form, the content analysis approach posits that life is experienced as a constructed story: as a visitor in Soi Cowboy said: "Forget all the bad things you might have heard or read about Bangkok's red light districts, they *are what you want to make of them*" (our Italics). Using coding procedures that cluster sentences from the reviews, similarities in the messages were mapped and conceptual themes and patterns were identified to buttress the interpretation of symbols, perceptions and meaning of the reviews [29]. Detailed examples (message quotations) are offered to substantiate our interpretation. The reviews are a form of text with manifest and latent contents: there are elements that are explicit and physically present and countable and also deeper structural meaning conveyed by the reviews.

<sup>6</sup><http://www.ew.com/article/2014/12/10/prostitute-intervention-reality-show>

<sup>7</sup>According to Thai "Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act, B.E. 2539 (1996)" soliciting and procuring prostitution is illegal.

The reviews were collected from messages posted on Tripadvisor.com, a website which defines itself as ‘the world’s largest travel site, enabling travellers to plan and have the perfect trip [...] the largest travel community in the world, reaching more than 260 million unique monthly visitors’<sup>8</sup>. This research examined the personal reviews of these bystanders, specifically tourists who visited Bangkok hotspots and their view as reported in their messages [30]. Tripadvisor.com differs from other travel websites and forums which focus specifically on sex tourism and on the reviews of (mostly) male clients in this market.

On the one hand it differs, from worldsexarchives.com and similar websites claiming to be ‘the largest database about adult travel in the world’. Sex tourists report their sexual adventures on these websites, providing insights about the best places, tips regarding prices, addresses and lists of conquests and performances [31].

On the other hand, tripadvisor.com differs from websites with a moral and political agenda related to human rights, as for example NGOs or non-profit organizations and volunteer tourists<sup>9</sup> who are involved in Thailand for the protection of children and women from sex exploitation, to remind a few: COSA, ECPAT, Tiny Hands International, ZOE international.

On Tripadvisor.com, meanwhile, sex and prostitution are marginal topics, mentioned only with respect to high profile areas where this reality is conspicuously visible and cannot be obscured. The reviews we analysed in our study of Tripadvisor.com were more ‘scophilic’ (literally ‘loving to observe’), stressing for the most part what could be seen from the street, not what people do (if indeed they do) inside go-go bars, brothels, massage parlours or sex shows. Tripadvisor.com as a medium does not have an official moral agenda; it merely delivers the message which can be useful for other travellers. It does not take a stand on moral issues, neither encouraging nor highlighting comments that could hopefully create awareness nor ‘help some come to their decisions in case they’re unaware of the issue of ethical travelling’ (a female reviewer on Patpong Market)<sup>10</sup>.

This paper will discuss results of a content analysis of all reviews (888 reviews mostly in English, but also several in Italian, Spanish, German and French) of three red-light hotspots in Bangkok (*Nana Plaza*, *Soi Cowboy* and *Patpong*) posted on Tripadvisor.com since 2008 and retrieved in April and May 2014<sup>11</sup>. Since most of the reviewers wrote in English and used nicknames, this paper did not examine the different attitudes of male and female reviewers, and cannot identify the country of origin of the reviewer. To some extent we do not have any demographic information, with the exception of the content of their reviews. As we will stress in our discussion this method do have some advantages and some limitations.

### Statistical Data of Reviewers’ Ranking

*Nana Plaza Area* with 148 reviews (lastly retrieved in May 21, 2014) ranked 17<sup>th</sup> out of 74 on Tripadvisor.com’s Bangkok Nightlife category for the period examined. It should be noted, however, that

<sup>8</sup>[http://www.tripadvisor.com/PressCenter-c6-About\\_Us.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/PressCenter-c6-About_Us.html)

<sup>9</sup>[www.thailand4life.net/care](http://www.thailand4life.net/care)

<sup>10</sup>Another female visitor in Patpong wrote: Being original wasn't my top priority at the time. Trip advisor should accommodate comments that encourage ethical travelling regardless of how it's written. I will try to be more original next time if that's your only reservation with my post.

<sup>11</sup>88 reviews were written in languages unknown to the author and a few were unclear or empty messages. All reviews were posted before the tightening grip following the military coup, which among other things enforced a nighttime curfew (May 22, 2014). The first message posted in Patpong appeared on August 2008, in Nana on January 14, 2011 and in Soi Cowboy in February 23, 2012.

as an area or a precinct it is ranked number one behind local private pubs, nightclubs and bars. *Soi Cowboy Area*, with 195 reviews, ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> out of 74 in the same category (lastly retrieved in May, 21, 2014). *Patpong Night Market*, with 545 reviews, was only rated in the Bangkok Shopping category and ranked 128 out of 216 in this category (lastly retrieved in May, 21 2014) (Table 1).

There may be several explanations to review for Patpong’s low ranking - albeit in a different category - as compared to Nana Plaza and Soi Cowboy. It is considered by many tourists to be a busy market, a place to find good bargains, purchase fake designer goods and enjoy haggling. Consequently, it attracts tourists interested in the market that rank it as such rather than as a hotspot for fun and sex. Furthermore, the area has lost its glamour as a sexual hotspot over the past two decades and is increasingly known for its ‘dark side’ of degrading sexual activities, in particular Ping-Pong shows, go-go bars and aggressive touts with laminated sheets hassling tourists in the street. In general, reviewers report that the atmosphere in the Patpong area is less relaxed compared to the other two areas, and according to tourist reviews they are not treated like people but rather like commodities [8]. Scams are also reported time and again by reviewers, involving mostly developed countries tourists enticed into shows and forced to pay huge sums of money in the form of tickets for the right to leave. These scams will be discussed in the last session of this paper.

### Content Analysis Results: Positive Messages

As we can see in table one, most of the reviewers ranked these hotspots between excellent and average. Poor and terrible experiences ranged about 6% for Nana Plaza, 10% for Soi Cowboy and 30% for Patpong Area. Based on Tripadvisor.com reviews of red-light hot-spots in Bangkok, we identified various more positive attitudes regarding the messages of reviewers. Among them we can point out a few tiers: fun, the lack of moral judgment, the use of euphemism, voluntarism and consumerism.

#### Fun

Tourists in general are in a luminal state outside the total system and its complexities. They are separated from the place they visit while far away from their normal existence, duties and routine. Pleasure, leisure and desire become central to non-work life, whilst the disorder becomes in itself a delight to be sought and savoured without moral judgement [32]. Scholars have described holidays as opportunities for regression into childhood, relaxation, fantastical escape, adventure and doing something different [30]. Most of the visitors described their visit to these hot-spots as providing thrilling anthropological insights - an adventure - or as a form of leisure, exoticism or innocent voyeurism. Reviews refer to go-go bars and exotic sex shows where a variety of ‘vaginal gymnastics’ are displayed in addition to sex. Shooting, tricks and stunts with items such as coins, balls, petty animals, lighters and bottles - trivial objects used in the routine consumerist society, are transformed in these performances into something fun and erotic. But

	Nana Plaza Area Bangkok Nightlife category	Soi Cowboy Area Bangkok Nightlife category	Patpong Night Market Bangkok Shopping category
Excellent	39	38	60
Very Good	64	88	154
Average	30	41	159
Poor	10	15	82
Terrible	5	13	89

Table 1: Statistical data of reviewers’ ranking.

as Wilson [8] noted “the bar’s symbolic micro-economy of machines in operation, goods for sale and exchange relations foregrounds Asian women’s bodies, while obscuring the role of the male customer in commercial sexual exchange”.

### Lack of moral judgement

In most reviewers’ reviews, we identified rhetoric of freedom from obligation, in other words ‘it is a Third World problem’ whereas they are merely tourists visiting a place which is outside the realms of their normal moral life. In this context we found forms of moral tolerance, indulgence and ethical relativism. As stressed by reviewers: ‘Go enjoy and don’t pass judgment’ (Nana Plaza). Some recommended that visitors not only change their outlook but also undertake an act of personal disinhibition.

### Euphemism

Normalization can also be seen in the vocabulary used in the reviews to describe the experience and atmosphere in these hotspots: adult playground, a happy place, a place to relax, friendly, crazy, vibrant, awesome, amazing, interesting, great laugh, funny, playful, open minded, safe and very professional “ladies”. Considering the truth behind these adjectives, they sound at best ignorant and at worst almost cynical by using euphemistic terms.

### Voluntarism

We found reviews that reported prostitution behind a facade of voluntarism, ignoring the fiction of consent and the tacit rules which govern this kind of interaction (which sometimes involves oppression, inequality and exploitation).

### Consumerism

It is no accident that some reviews about sexual activities taking place in these areas regard them as just another market which offers specific merchandise and huge opportunities. Thus, besides souvenirs, accessories and fake designer goods, reviewers describe the offering “ladies”, the huge quantity of ‘100’s of beautiful friendly women and different sexual performances’. In these reviews we also identified a view of prostitution as a basic human need - one expression of a natural male appetite [33] in a commodified global market. These reviews about women in the sex market often resemble reviews about fast food - the easiest, cheapest and simplest way to satisfy physical needs, saving time and effort and requiring no prior preparation. Drinking a beer and having fellatio can happen simultaneously in specific corners of bars (Soi Cowboy). Markets of fake products can offer also fake sex: “From what I’ve heard Patpong has changed a lot of the years. The current incarnation is a mixture of hundreds of small stalls hawking everything you could imagine to prostitutes offering everything you could imagine” (Patpong market). Of course, the intriguing presence of transsexual prostitutes and ladyboys (kathoey) can be seen as another form of “fake product”, a nuisance and even a trap for male heterosexual tourists<sup>12</sup> (Table 2)<sup>13</sup>.

### Content Analysis: Negative Reviews

As found in all three infamous red lights hotspots in Bangkok,

<sup>12</sup>Following Stanley Cohen’s (2001) forms of denial (literal, interpretive and implicatory) with some caveat, we may suggest for some reviewers the framing of sex tourism under meaning of consumerism, euphemism, voluntarism etc., can be seen as form of denial.

<sup>13</sup>Each comma separates different reviews. For reason of readership we just quoted significant sentences and not the whole message. Syntax and spelling mistakes are left in original

negative rankings are a minority. Who will identify a few tiers of reviews behind these figures? The answers are explained in Table 3.

In sex tourism the norm is that local women are usually in the position of the exploited party, whose body is bought for the pleasure of Western or developed countries men. But we can see some reversal of roles as reported by Tripadvisor.com reviewers. In many reviews tourists appear to depict themselves as victims: they describe their disillusionment with expensive markets, fake product, bad client service, pushiness, hassling, and various dangers including pick pocketing, drugged drinks, aggressive lady boys and other tourist traps: “We are human ATM” (Patpong market).

In some cases of this reversal of roles, fun becomes a nightmare; lack of judgement becomes an accusation against criminals, corruption and hostile local police; voluntarism of prostitutes is perceived as abuse against travellers; and tourists feel lured, threatened, cheated, ripped off and fleeced; sometimes consumed, subjugated and defeated. These experiences are a recurrent theme, in particular in reviews of Patpong market. This experience could be the main reason for this market being ranked as poor or terrible by 171 reviewers. Frequent incidents of scams that take place in this area highlight the contradictory status and nature of the commodity exchange, with customers from developed countries complaining that they feel uncomfortable and treated like a commodity: ‘As a ‘farang’ (a foreigner) every single minute will be a fight against people who try to provide you either a tuktuk or a Ping pong show or fake watches or any other stuffs’ (Patpong market). The more significant reversal of roles can be seen in reviews of Patpong market scams. Westerners report being exploited, imprisoned, threatened and humiliated, ‘attacked’, ‘held as hostage’, ‘cornered’, ‘grabbed’, ‘ripped off’, ‘sworn at’, ‘name called’. For many it was ‘a nightmare’ or ‘the most scared experience’. People have report to pay a sort of ticket for freedom in the range of 2200-6600 baht (according to our survey). They paid, negotiated, ran away or fought back. We could only find one case where the reviewers made a formal complaint with the tourist police, without any significant outcome.

### Scams in patpong area

**Luring:** Then we asked again for some clarifications if it is really free. Then He said ‘Yes, you can look first’. The Man sent us on the 3rd floor of the bar, Beware touting outside, They just get some percent, They lured us to come inside for 100 baht per person.

**Trapping:** “The girls make a show. After one show they force us to give 100 baht for TIP each Person! Then, we are planning to check the bill and we found out the bill is around 5900 Baht!! We are so shocked. And all the staff there is pushing us to pay for that price. So, it comes to the point that the said manager is touching us. And threaten us. He said ‘if you will not pay then take off and make a show now’ so, my ears get irrigated which started to make an argue with Him. He also stated that ‘I have 10 million. I will give 10 million if u will sleep with me now’”, when sitting inside and asking for a beer we were immediately requested to pay 2000 baht (in Italian).

We spent about 10 minutes inside and we got a bill of 2800 bahts, we refused to pay such a sum despite the owners threatened us like mafia bosses, they intimidated us.

**Epilogue:** Traumatizing: At the end we bargained and paid 600 baht (in French). We went to the tourist police but didn’t get any help. The police are also corrupted. “Then they decide we need to pay only 2000 baht. We told them that we don’t have enough money since were students. But still they are forcing us to pay and they also want to

Categories	Nana Plaza Area Bangkok Nightlife	Soi Cowboy Area Bangkok Nightlife	Patpong Night Market Bangkok Shopping
<b>Fun</b>	Let your inner devil free, Adult playground, Great fun, "La fiesta", Disneyland, A place to say farewell to celibacy, Weird and wonderful, Must try if you are adventurous, Must see, Woah! Eye popping spectacle, A dream, Men's heaven, The party never ends.	Amusing, Attractive, A place to enjoy with friends, Exuberant, Sexpat paradise, Colourful, Crazy.	Bizarro (in Spanish), Eccezionale (in Italian)Excellent, Exotic, Pitoresque.
<b>Lack of moral judgement</b>	Strictly for openminded adults, What happens in BKK stays in BKK, Immoral fun, Embrace it for what it is, Suspend your prejudice, If you are close minded stay away, Avoid any moralism, Try not to be too uptight about the experience and you'll find you will have a bit of fun, Thailand does not work in the same way as the UK/US, etc. so don't try to impose your own value systems on it, But hey Bangkok itself is not for the conservative traveler! Try not to be too uptight about the experience and you'll find you will have a bit of fun.	A little bit of fun never hurt anyone, Madness for open minded, Many girls look underage, but I am sure they are not (in Spanish), I am glad the wowsers stay away, Their reviews about child slavery and so on are hyperbole. I have been a visitor to Cowboy for some time and I have never encountered an underage girl in any bar, The whole sold into slavery thing is mostly bulls**t. Most girls last a few years on the scene then head back home to Issan; some stick around and never leave the scene.	This is Thailand also, A must for bachelors, Do not like? Stay in your hotel room.
<b>Euphemism</b>	Thai hospitality, Nubile girls in various states of undress.	Bangkok babies, Cultural anthropologist's dream.	Choreography of gentle ladies on the sides (in Italian).
<b>Voluntarism</b>	Friendly women, Nana free lancer street heaven, Anything goes, I was startled to see how the go-go girls react when some customer choose them: they scream for happiness, thank Buddha and request the benevolence of the girls that had not the luck to be chosen! "Made an effort to know some of the freelancers, to learn why they did what they did and what it meant for their lives. For some it is a way of life, for others it is a way to increase cashflow to pay for the latest iphone or pay a bill they could not afford. I made friends with some of them and would say hello each night", They weren't overly perturbed if you declined their services, someone else would come along soon enough.	Lots of gorgeous girls to be entertained by, "The vast majority of these girls come down to Bangkok of their own free will; often on the recommendations of their friends or cousins. They earn typically a lot more than your average bank clerk and shop assistant - a way, way more than a farm girl. The really successful ones have incomes the size of Thai executives. Others get married and end up middle class housewives in Scandinavia and Australia", It is what it is, if you don't like it, don't come back, Soi Cowboy rocks.	Beware lonely women, even Italian. They make you spend a lot of money but they do not give you any service (in Italian), They know what they want.
<b>Consumerism</b>	Expensive, A shopping Plaza for naughty boys, Currency exchange, Cheap drinks, Go Go Galore, Not worth money, Old and bad quality of women, Good for those who love haggling, "I did find it odd to discover some freelancers who purported to have 'morals' and would not lower their price even if business was slow. Perhaps they did not understand the concept of supply and demand".	Night life music and many bar girls.	Shopping, food und Spasse (fun in German), Todo (in Spanish). Find everything, even little girls playing little tricks (in Italian). Le paradise des affaires (French), Bargain! Market of... sex, Accessories, brands and women, all imitations, Fake market.

Table 2: Content analysis results: positive messages.

show money. Just to end the conversation with them we plan to pay 1500. They said its 500 per person", "We paid the sum of what we have consumed, and had to tackle with women who blocked our exit. Just go in groups..."

## Discussion

In this research we can suggest why the majority of bystanders' reviews hold the belief that the acts and performances they watch are voluntary or at least congruent with local value systems. Sometimes they perceive these forms of sexual activity as part of a third world 'cultural industry', as 'out of the ordinary' creative art [10]. For this reasons we can suggest that some form of denial among the reviewers can be identified.

The pleasure seeking tourists, even the scopophilic ones, come from powerful nations and are a part of global economic forces and male supremacy. We can suggest that these tourists attend a form of festive excess where the pleasures of the body are foregrounded, in opposition to the dominant and accepted values of restraint and sobriety in their daily styles of life. Their behaviour may be considered outside the norm

and beyond the bounds of propriety as judged from within the 'normal' social space and calendar of everyday life [34].

In this context, we can suggest that scams are a symbolic coup de theatre that turns the tables on the traditional significance of such terms as power, class, race and gender, as victim and victimizer reverse roles. They may also be viewed as a sign of revolt by underprivileged and exploited people, a political act by those perceived to be inferior and a carnivalesque [35], expression of changing roles as the tourists are those who are touched, threatened, exploited and imprisoned. In one specific story, reported from Patpong market, the manager even threatens to turn the female tourist into a sexual object, to be watched or consumed as thousands of Thai women are in the daily routine of sex tourism. The prevalence of these scams as reported by many tourists can be seen as a warning or as a useful suggestion given in the spirit of Tripadvisor.com reviews. Moreover, analysing them in global political and gender contexts, we can state that the conventional hierarchical structure of society is reversed and the power of developed countries' tourism becomes the object of humiliation and ridicule. If only for a fleeting moment, the local and underprivileged mock the powerful,

Categories	Nana Plaza Area Bangkok Nightlife	Soi Cowboy Area Bangkok Nightlife	Patpong Night Market Bangkok Shopping
Disappoint-men of the products or the atmosphere	"Not my scene: Nana is a mess, the worst of Thailand is to be found here - streetwalkers, aggressive trans-sexuals, drunk middle-aged sex tourists", I know a lot of people come to Thailand for this side of things but if thats all you want out of the country then you will probably get what you deserve here. Full of tourist traps, When you step into Nana, if you have a tendency to get overwhelmed by a plethora of sensory stimuli, step out, It's seedy as no other place you've ever seen - it' glowing, it's loud, it's so unbelieavbly smelly - you feel like you're in an Alcatraz styled prison for adults. "Avoid ***** go go bar. If you walk by this bar ladyboy will hardsell herself to you, and if you turn her down, she will attack you! Yes!! attack!! Avoid this awful bar".	Shady, Grubby, Sleaze, Stinking, Squalid, Decaying, Musty, Sad, Replica items, Fake products, Pirated accessories. "Slum: dirty and night life dancers are bad. Smoking drunk men".	All in all, if you want some cheap fake shiz that will probably break the next day, Market of cheating, Cheap, "Fake: Everything from leather goods to watches, clothes to weaponry", Exagerated prices, Bangkok, a city of scams (in Italian)
Disappointed of the sex workers	Gloomy, worn, old women, Stay away, unless you are looking to be harassed by ladyboys and overcharged for lukewarm beer.	Drugged old women, Yes some get hooked on drugs and the scene screws up their life, There are girls aged 10 or 12 dressed as adults who offer their services in the street and disgusting OLD MEN consume them (in Spanish),	old or drugged) women as well "filled with gloomy, dead-eyed".
Physical and emotional distress	I felt pressured all night.	A hell (in Portuguese), I feel bad for these girls because they looked like they really don't want to be there but were forced to work in the industry in any case,Upsetting: While it is probably sensible to have a red-light district somewhere, this is in the middle of the family orientated tourist area, Very sad to see.	
Techniques of coping	Danger! Stay away, No go! Leave your wallet in your hotel, Avoid eye contact. Just touch and run away (toccata e fuga, in Italian)	Just for a short visit, Walk fast, Not for families, Not for children, Just ignore them! Don't take photos, "For women: dress as touristy as you can. I was wearing a short black dress and everyone asked me if i am 'one of them'."	Walk fast (Italian). Stay max. 15 minutes and then leave (Italian).

Table 3: Content analysis: negative reviews.

transgressing the normal routine of everyday nightlife. As said, in a wider perspective, they may be viewed as a form of symbolic revenge against the adult male gender exploitation of Thai women and the economic exploitation of the country by richer, developed or Western countries.

## The Research and Its Limitations

The culture of electronic communications is giving rise to focal points of new interest for researchers in sociology. Issues such as the protection of copyrights, information security, the identification and prevention of hacker activity, and phenomena like political subversion, racist incitement, and cyber-terrorism have become a challenging focus for research in recent years [36].

The members of the surfing community come from their private space but do not meet in a concrete physical arena such as the town square or the ancient forum, but rather in a crowded and intensive virtual forum. This community expresses opinions and emotions directly, without intermediaries. As a result of the way in which this channel protects people's privacy, the words are set down with no intermediation of any kind. It is not surprising that the sentences are short, raw, grammatically confusing, and sometimes full of misspellings. The style is mostly direct, short, blunt, and charged with personal notes including enthusiasm, humor, cynicism, disgust, vitriol, aggression, and so on. The participants waiving political correctness and feeling free to say what comes to mind, without inhibitions and

without any need for an introduction or conclusion, for editing the content or supporting their claims. The surfer says the first thing that comes to mind, without exposing his identity. Following Gencarella Olbry's research web reviews are like graffiti, posters, flyers, currency chains with simplicity of form and lack of face-to face interaction [37].

This paper investigates a different type of encounter between the milieux of computer networks and a social phenomenon, by examining cases in which web surfing public reviewed their experience in red lights hot spots in Bangkok. The study of by-standers as an axis as significant as the perpetrator, the victim and law enforcement are not new in sociological research. But usually when we deal with prostitution and sex tourism the surveys focused on public opinion and not on onlookers or immediate bystanders. An audience of by-standers comprises an individual or a number of individuals observing an act, a quality, or a person and passing judgment on who or what they see.

However, on a methodological level, this public encounter in the virtual forum should be regarded with reservations, since those participating are not a representative sample of the population at large. Not everyone surfs or looks to the Internet for the latest news or for touristic tips on Tripadvisor.com, and certainly not everyone is likely to be involved into the arena of reviews or responses. We can assume that the respondents do represent only a certain segment of the public. A further methodological limitation is that the researcher has no control over the characters that enter his "laboratory". He has no way

of classifying and cataloging the research sample. It is very likely that a respondent may send more than one message or pose as someone he is not (man or woman, etc.). Moreover since the messages are verbal only we cannot detect forms of punctuation, emotional patterns, clues beyond the worlds and between the lines etc. Sometimes the messages are unclear, or ambivalent, with positive and negative comments<sup>14</sup>. And sometimes messages are irrelevant for our purposes, when reviewers deal with marginal issues (For example: "I enjoyed chatting with my wife and having a good drink", "I have purchased a purse and a watch"). Moreover we are aware that in loco and real time observations, participant observations and interviews with tourists, also based on their retrospective accounts can provide additional information, and overcome many limitations in our preliminary research. Further research should be supported by these methodologies [38].

## Conclusion and Implication for Further Studies

This paper discussed a few results of content analysis of travellers' reviews in three infamous red-lights hotspots in Bangkok (*Patpong*, *Soi Cowboy* and *Nana Plaza*), that have been reviewed on Tripadvisor.com. Despite the quantity and the formal variety of the messages, a qualitative text analysis and an interpretive approach showed that the explicit contents of the messages could consistently be divided in a few groups. We identified more positive vs. more negative reviews. We identified accounts that support positive reviews as fun, lack of moral judgement, voluntarism and consumerism. Moreover among the minority of negative we identified messages with themes more centered on the traveler safety, benefits, wellbeing. Rarely, forms of moral condemnation emerged.

Besides more sophisticated methodological research, like participant observation, questionnaires, interviews etc. we can suggest further forms of research.

1. Comparing tripadvisor.com accounts in other areas in Thailand (as Pattaya Night Market, Chang Mai hotspots etc.).
2. Comparing accounts in hotspots areas in other countries in the Far East (for example Angeles City in the Philippines), or in Africa and South America (Mombasa in Kenya for example).
3. Comparing accounts in hotspots areas in developed countries (Las Vegas, red light precincts in Amsterdam or Copenhagen).

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<sup>14</sup>A male visitor in Soy Cowboy asks "How to rate this place for a visitors' mainstream? I gave the place 3 stars, but the rating could be anywhere between 1 and 5 stars depending on your interest. For visitors under the age of 20, it rates a zero, as all the venues except perhaps Old Dutch are off limits... Five Star is on my BKK live music tour. Please note: there is no fee for Soi Cowboy, but you are expected to buy at least a drink (one per person, water to vodka straight) if you stay in a bar". Another male visitor "Went to this place because I'd heard so much about it. Went to see the place. The first bar on the left had a good band and no girls (except the ones hired already) seemed to be a bar for the 50+'s. I then walked to another bar with 100 plus girls and boy do you feel sorry for them, Some of them feel underage as well. so its not the same feeling as a treasures in vegas or a Men's gallery in Australia... Here you know the chicks are hot!! and make a lot of money. while in Soi cowboy you feel sorta disgusted since very few of them are actually good looking and if they are they look like slaves dancing".

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