

PERCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES IN ASSESSING THE HARM OF PATRONIZING ADULT ENTERTAINMENT CLUBS

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Prostitution is one of the most severe social problems in Taiwan and a long-term concern of numerous studies (Chiu, 1991). Although it is illegal, prostitution appears almost everywhere in hotels, night clubs, underworld brothels, massage parlors, teahouses, hair salons in business districts as well as residential areas. Among places of prostitution, adult entertainment clubs are the most widespread (Hwang & Bedford, 2003). According to a survey by the Taiwan Academia Sinica in 1994, 68 percent of the respondents perceived prostitution as a serious or very serious problem for Taiwanese society (Chang & Fu, 2002). In 2001, the percentage of Taiwanese who perceived prostitution as a serious or very serious social problem increased to 75 percent.

Previous research on prostitution focused on assessing public attitudes toward prostitution and the sex industry (Chang, 1997; Chang & Liu, 2003; Yang, 2003). Other studies analyzed the problem from a legal and policy-making perspective to explore approaches to restrict adult entertainment establishments (Cheng, 2000; C. C. Hsu & Y. S. Chen, 2003; H. Y. Hsu & C. Y. Chen, 2003; Yang, Yi, & Chiu, 2003). None of the previous studies, however, examined the public's perceptions of the harm of adult entertainment clubs, especially the perceptual discrepancy in assessing the vulnerability of self relative to others. The purpose of this study is to fill the gap by exploring the perceived harm of visiting adult entertainment clubs and whether the perceived harm will influence the public's support for restrictions on the sex trade.

In the context of assessing the effect of media content, the third-person effect hypothesis proposes that people tend to perceive mass media as having a greater effect on others than on self (Davison, 1983). Numerous third-person effect studies suggest that people who tend to overestimate media effects on others are more likely to support restrictions on media content to protect the others (Gunther, 1991; Lo & Wei, 2002; Salwen, 1998). In the context of assessing vulnerability to risks such as contracting HIV/AIDS, the optimistic bias hypothesis holds that people tend to underestimate their probability of encountering negative life events (Weinstein, 1980). The hypothesis explains why people fail to take preventive action (Chapin, 2001). With a self-other comparative perspective, the present study has two goals: (1) it seeks to examine the self-other gap in perceiving the negative influence of sex clubs, with an emphasis on the role of personal experience in visiting these clubs as an influence on the perceptual discrepancy; (2) the study investigates the gender difference in self-other comparisons and in support for restrictions on sex clubs because the relationship between gender and perceptual bias regarding risks

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has rarely been a focus of investigation. The present study will explore whether males and females have different perceptions of the harm of adult entertainment clubs on self and others, and why such gender-based discrepancy occurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Sex trade in general refers to adult entertainment and prostitution. For the purpose of this study, sex trade refers broadly to the exchange of money for sex. We focus on sex-oriented adult entertainment establishments, which are the most dominant sector of the sex trade in Taiwan. Young women offering sex-oriented services such as flirting, dancing, touching, massaging, masturbating, oral sex, and sexual intercourse typically staff these establishments. Adult entertainment establishments are found in a variety of venues including cabarets (e.g. nightclubs and theaters, Karaoke TVs with private rooms), teahouses, massage parlors, hair salons with private rooms for massage services, and sauna parlors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS EXPLAINING THE SELF–OTHER PERCEPTUAL BIAS

This study's focus on examining public opinion about the perceived harm of adult entertainment clubs with a self–other comparative perspective is based on the rationale that the less-regulated sex-oriented entertainment venues are at odds with mainstream values and may affect moral standards in society. Surveys of the Taiwan public indicate that adult entertainment clubs are as undesirable as pornography (Chang & Fu, 2002). As discussed earlier, two theoretical streams offer explanations of the self–other difference in perceptions of media power and risks. The first is the third-person effect hypothesis, which states 'that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others' (Davison, 1983, p. 3). Further, the hypothesis holds that perceptions of media effects on others, relative to self, predict support for restrictions on controversial media content (Gunther, 1995; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996).

Numerous studies have overwhelmingly supported the perceptual component of the third-person effect hypothesis (see Perloff 1993, 1999; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000). Recent research suggests that the less desirable the media content is, the stronger the third-person effect will be (Lo, 2000). Past studies (Duck & Mullin, 1995; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Henriksen & Flora, 1999; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000) found that people tend to believe that others are more likely to be affected by controversial media content such as violence, pornography, negative political news reports, gambling advertising, and attack ads.

The second is the optimistic bias hypothesis, which states that people tend to view oneself as less vulnerable than others to risks (Weinstein, 1980, 1984, 1987; Weinstein & Klein, 1996). Optimistic bias was found to be a robust phenomenon in a large number of empirical studies examining perceptions of various risks between personal and societal levels, that is between self and others (Tyler & Cook, 1984). In general, others were perceived to be more vulnerable than self to such risks as sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS (Chapin, 2000; Ellen, Boyer, Tschann, & Shafer, 1996), cancer (Aiken, Fenaughty, West, Johnson, & Luckett, 1995; Fontaine & Smith, 1995), smoking

(Williams & Clarke, 1997), substance abuse (Hansen, Raynor, & Wolkenstein, 1991), and campus violence (Chapin, 2001, 2002).

Informed by the above theoretical streams, the first hypothesis to test the self–other comparisons is stated as follows:

H1: Respondents will perceive adult entertainment clubs to have a greater negative influence on others than on self.

GENDER, SEX-ORIENTED ESTABLISHMENTS AND PERCEPTUAL BIAS

Gender-based differences in the self–other perceptual bias were found in studies on pornography (Mosher & MacLan, 1994; Wilson & Abelson, 1973; Zillmann, 1998). Women were more likely than men to associate pornography with negative effects. Thiessen (1994) noted that women were negative about the use of pornography. A recent study (Lo & Wei, 2002) found that females tend to perceive greater negative effects of Internet pornography on males than on other females. Similarly, the risk communication literature identified gender as a factor affecting differential risk perceptions. Empirical evidence shows that women are systematically more likely to perceive higher levels of risk in most situations (such as rape, health, radon, and water contaminants) than men (Furby, Fischhoff, & Morgan, 1991).

In the context of adult entertainment clubs, gender appears to account for the perceptual gap in assessing the harm of sex trade. First, people tend to perceive men as customers and women as service providers in sex-oriented venues (Chang & Liu, 2003). Men dominate the patronage of adult entertainment clubs. Second, there is a double standard in Taiwan toward men and women with regard to marriage and sex (Wang, 2000). Female virginity is touted; married women are expected to be faithful to their husbands. No such social expectations are placed on men. Moreover, men's patronage of adult entertainment clubs is tolerated. Women who go to those places are not only viewed as socially unacceptable, but also considered as cheating on their marriage and risking family breakup (Chang & Liu, 2003). Drawing from previous research on pornography and risk communication, two more hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Female respondents are more likely to perceive adult entertainment clubs to have a greater negative influence on self than male respondents are.

H2b: Both male and female respondents tend to perceive adult entertainment clubs to have a less negative influence on males in general, but a greater negative influence on females in general.

PATRONAGE OF ADULT-ENTERTAINMENT CLUBS AND PERCEPTUAL BIAS

The third-person effects and optimistic bias literature suggest that media use or personal experience of a risk contribute to the self–other perceptual gap (Chapin, 2001; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997). Empirical evidence is, nevertheless, inconsistent (Brosius & Engel, 1996) with the correlation between media usage and perceptions of media power on self and others being either negative or positive.

However, previous research on pornography suggests that the more pornography people are exposed to, the weaker is the negative effect they perceive on self and others, a *desensitizing* effect (Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987; Zillmann, 1998). According to this desensitization view, people who are extensively exposed to pornographic or violent content are more likely to be desensitized than those who are exposed less. Moreover, because visiting sex-oriented establishments is viewed as being socially undesirable, patrons are likely to be motivated to defend their self-esteem by perceiving less negative effects on self and others. Accordingly, we propose that people who frequently patronize adult entertainment clubs are more likely to be desensitized: They tend to perceive that visiting these places has a less negative effect on self and others. The third hypothesis is formulated:

H3: The more frequently the respondents patronize adult entertainment clubs, the less harm they tend to perceive on self and others.

GENDER, PERCEPTUAL BIAS, AND SUPPORT FOR RESTRICTIONS ON ADULT ENTERTAINMENT CLUBS

A major issue of past third-person effect and optimistic bias studies is the behavioral consequence of the self–other perceptual gap. In third-person effect research, the focus was on public support of restrictions on undesirable media content. In optimistic bias research, the failure to take action was the focus. Gender is an important predictor of support for restricting pornography. Almost all empirical studies reported that females tend to support restrictions on pornography in traditional media (Lee & Yang, 1996; Thompson, Chaffee, & Oshagan, 1990) and the Internet (Lo & Wei, 2002). The risk communication literature also suggests a gender-based difference in behavior—men who tend to perceive themselves removed from a risk are less likely to take actions to avoid that risk (Tyler & Cook, 1984).

In the context of adult entertainment clubs, men are the major patrons (Chang & Liu, 2003) as they are the major consumers of pornography (Dines, Jensen, & Russo, 1998; Thompson et al., 1990). Studies have found that men tend to advocate that people in the sex trade have the right to run their businesses, but women are inclined to disapprove such sex-for-money businesses (Chang & Liu, 2003). Thus, the fourth hypothesis is made:

H4: Female respondents are more likely to support restrictions on adult entertainment clubs than male respondents.

Finally, in the behavioral domain of the third-person effects, the theoretical assumption of previous research rests on the fear that undesirable media messages will make people feel that others will be more affected by the messages than they are themselves (Davison, 1996). Past studies on pornography focused on public opinion about regulations (C. C. Hsu & Y. S. Chen, 2003; Cheng, 2000; H. Y. Hsu & C. Y. Chen, 2003). Other studies sought to investigate the effects of public attitudes toward restrictions on pornography on support for restrictions (Yanget al., 2003). The Lo and Paddon (2001) study showed that the more negative effects the respondents perceived media pornography has on self

and others, the more likely they would support restrictions on pornography. In the case of adult entertainment venues, as patronage is considered socially undesirable, the self–other perceptual discrepancy should have the utility to predict behavior. Specifically, we propose that the perceived negative impact of patronizing adult entertainment clubs on self and others will significantly predict support for restricting adult entertainment clubs. The last two hypotheses are:

- H5a: The more harm that respondents perceive adult entertainment clubs to have on their selves, the more likely it is that they will support restrictions on these clubs.
- H5b: The more harm that respondents perceive adult entertainment clubs to have on others, the more likely it is that they will support restrictions on these clubs.

METHOD

SAMPLE

This study used data from the 2002 Taiwan Social Change Survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica in Taiwan in 2002. A random sample of the general population with respondents older than 18 years was drawn using a multistage sampling plan. A total of 3,735 respondents were selected in the sample, and were interviewed face-to-face between July 15 and September 30. Completed interviews totaled 1,983 with a response rate of 53 percent (AAPOR standard RR1). Among the respondents, 976 were male (49.2 percent), and 1,007 were female (50.8 percent); 44.6 percent were aged between 18 and 29, 36.5 percent were 40 to 59 years old, and 18.9 percent were 60 or older. Of the sample, a majority (69.2 percent) had finished high school or ended their school education before that, and the rest had completed college or graduate education.

SELF–OTHER PERCEPTUAL MEASURES

The self–other comparisons were measured by three separate questions on (1) perceived harm on self, (2) perceived harm on males in general, and (3) perceived harm on females in general. Specifically, perceived negative effects on self refer to the perceived undesirable consequences of frequenting sex-oriented adult entertainment clubs on self. It was measured by asking respondents to estimate the likely harm of ‘patronizing adult entertainment clubs’ on one’s (a) moral values, (b) attitudes toward the opposite sex, and (c) sexual attitudes. The scale ranged from 1 to 5, where 1 meant ‘no negative consequence at all’ and 5 meant ‘a strong negative consequence.’ Results of a principal components analysis showed that the three self items grouped in a single factor, suggesting that they measured a single underlying concept (*Eigenvalue* = 2.73, explaining 90.91 percent of the variance). The three items were added and divided by three to create a composite measure of ‘perceived harm on self’ ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.37$, $\alpha = .95$).

Perceived harm on males and females in general refers to the perceived harmful consequences of patronizing adult entertainment clubs on males and females. Operationally, respondents were asked to estimate the likely negative consequences of ‘patronizing adult

entertainment clubs' first on males' and then on females' (a) moral values, (b) attitudes to the opposite sex, and (c) sexual attitudes. Results of another principal components analysis found that the three 'males in general' items were grouped in a single factor. They were added and divided by three to construct a measure of 'perceived harm on males in general' (*Eigenvalue* = 2.77, explaining 92.45 percent of the variance, $M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.25$, $\alpha = .96$). Similarly, results of the third principal components analysis showed the three items concerning perceived negative consequences on females were grouped in one factor (*Eigenvalue* = 2.82, explaining 94.02 percent of the variance). A composite measure of 'perceived harm on females in general' was built ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.21$, $\alpha = .97$).

FREQUENCY OF PATRONIZING ADULT ENTERTAINMENT CLUBS

Frequency of visiting adult entertainment clubs was measured by asking respondents to self-report how often in the past year they had gone to the following sex-oriented entertainment businesses where sex industry workers were present: Karaoke TVs, cabarets, dancing studios, teahouses with scantily-clad waitresses, massage parlors, sauna parlors, and hair salons. The response categories were 1 (never), 2 (no more than one or two times), 3 (one or two times a month), 4 (one or two times a week), and 5 (at least two times a week). The data indicated that only 10.5 percent of the respondents in the sample said they had visited adult entertainment clubs in the previous year.

SUPPORT FOR RESTRICTIONS ON ADULT ENTERTAINMENT CLUBS

Support for restrictions on adult entertainment clubs was measured by asking respondents to indicate whether they agreed with three statements: (a) the government's current restrictions on adult entertainment establishments are too loose; (b) adult entertainment establishments should be banned after midnight; and (c) the government should consider legislation to outlaw adult entertainment establishments. The response categories were a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Results of principal components analysis led to a single-factor solution (*Eigenvalue* = 1.81, explaining 60.22 percent of the total variance). A composite measure of support for restrictions on adult entertainment establishments was created by adding the three items and dividing the sum by three ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .79$, $\alpha = .67$).

Gender, age, and religious belief were the measures of demographics. Religious belief was measured by strength of faith with four ordinal categories ranging from 1 (no religious belief) to 4 (strong religious belief) ($M = 2.50$, $SD = .96$).

FINDINGS

Hypothesis 1 predicted that respondents would perceive adult entertainment clubs to cause greater harm to others than to themselves. Figure 1 shows that both male and female respondents perceived adult entertainment clubs to have a greater negative influence on males in general as well as on females in general than on themselves. The results of paired *t*-tests support a self-other perceptual discrepancy for both male and female

respondents: in the male sample, $t(889) = 2.85$, $p < .01$ for self vs. other males, $t(889) = 15.91$ at $p < .001$ for self vs. females in general; in the female sample, $t(885) = 4.21$ at $p < .001$ for self vs. males in general, $t(885) = 8.92$, $p < .001$ for self vs. other females. Consistently, the self–other perceptual differentials were significant for comparisons of self to males in general, and self to females in general in the pooled sample, $t(1,774) = 5.04$ at $p < .001$ for self vs. males in general, $t(1,774) = 17.61$, $p < .001$ for self vs. females in general. In general, respondents perceived others as being more influenced by adult entertainment clubs than themselves. Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2a predicted that female respondents would be more likely than male respondents to perceive that adult entertainment clubs would exert a greater negative influence on themselves. Results of the paired t -test show that female respondents perceived themselves to be more negatively influenced by adult entertainment clubs than male respondents, $t(1,774) = 26.99$, $p < .001$. H2a was supported. Hypothesis 2b stated that both male and female respondents would be more likely to perceive that adult entertainment clubs would exert a greater harm on females than on males. T -test results yielded strong support for this hypothesis. Both male and female respondents were more likely to perceive females to be more negatively influenced by adult entertainment clubs than males, in the male sample: $t(889) = 21.54$, $p < .001$ and in the female sample: $t(885) = 21.54$, $p < .001$. The results for both hypotheses are also visualized in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that frequency of patronizing adult entertainment clubs would be negatively associated with perceived harm on self and others. Three hierarchical regression analyses were performed separately to test this hypothesis. As shown in Table 1, while controlling for the influence of gender, age, and religious belief, frequency of patronizing adult entertainment clubs was a significant predictor of perceived negative influence on self, males in general, and females in general, indicating that the more frequently

FIGURE 1 Mean estimates of perceived harm of adult entertainment clubs on self, on males in general, and on females in general

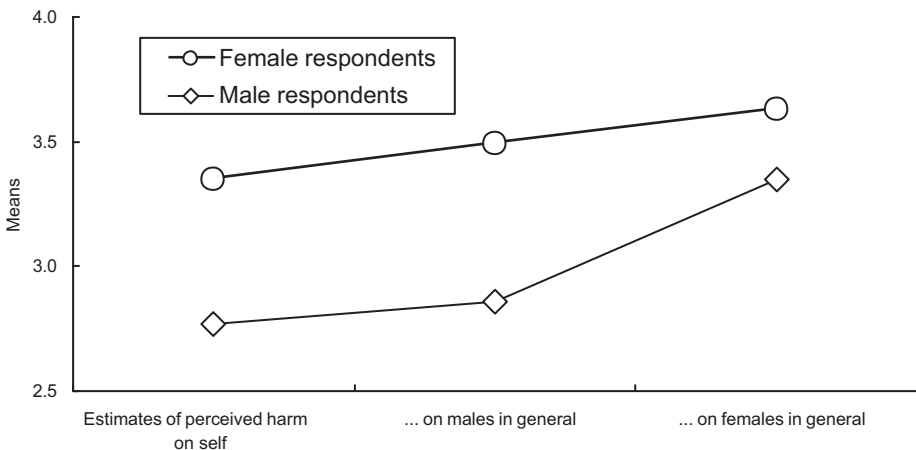


TABLE 1 Hierarchical regression analysis predicting perceived harm of adult entertainment clubs on self, on males in general, and on females in general

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Dependent variables: Perceived harm on ...</i>		
	<i>Self</i>	<i>Males in general</i>	<i>Females in general</i>
Block I: Demographics			
Gender	.19***	.23***	.10***
Age	.15***	.15***	.18***
Religious belief	.03	-.00	.06*
Adjusted R^2 (in %)	7.2	8.5	5.6
Block II: Frequency of patronizing adult entertainment clubs			
Incremental Adjusted R^2 (in %)	1.8	1.3	0.8
Total Adjusted R^2 (in %)	9.0	9.8	6.4

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Note: Gender was recoded as dummy (female = 1, male = 0). Figures in the columns are standardized β 's. $N = 1,694$.

respondents reported visiting adult entertainment clubs, the less negative influence they perceived on themselves, males, and females in general. These results support H3.

In Hypothesis 4, we predicted that female respondents would be more likely than male respondents to support restrictions on adult entertainment clubs. Two separate hierarchical regression analyses were run to test it. Table 2 summarizes the results. As it shows, while controlling for the influence of age, religious belief, frequency of patronizing adult entertainment clubs, perceived harm on self and perceived harm on males or females in general, gender turned out to be a significant predictor of support for restrictions on adult entertainment clubs. Females were indeed more likely than males to support actions to restrict adult entertainment clubs. Hypothesis 4 was supported as well.

Hypotheses 5a and 5b predicted that perceived harm on self and others would be positively associated with support for restrictions on adult entertainment clubs. These hypotheses are tested with the same two separate hierarchical regression analyses. In the first run (see Column 1 in Table 2), predictors entered in the equation were gender, age, religious belief, frequency of patronizing adult entertainment clubs, perceived harm on self, and perceived harm on males in general (perceived harm on females in general was not entered to avoid multicollinearity). Results show that gender, religious belief, and frequency of patronizing adult entertainment clubs were significantly related to the support for restrictions. In addition, perceived harm on self and on males in general were found significantly and positively related to support for restriction on adult entertainment clubs. The unique contribution of these to perceptual measures was greater than the contribution of other blocks.

In the second run (Column 2 in Table 2) the same predictors were entered in the equation except that perceived harm on males was replaced by perceived harm on females in general. Results show that perceived harm on self and perceived harm on females in general were positively related to support for restriction on adult entertainment clubs. As a

TABLE 2 Hierarchical regression analysis predicting support for restrictions on adult entertainment clubs

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Support for restrictions</i>	
	<i>Regression 1</i>	<i>Regression 2</i>
Block 1: Demographics		
Gender	.09***	.10***
Age	.04	.05
Religious belief	.06*	.05*
Adjusted R^2 (in %)	4.4	4.4
Block 2: Frequency of patronizing adult entertainment clubs	-.11***	-.12***
Incremental Adjusted R^2 (in %)	2.1	2.0
Block 3: Self–other perceptions		
Perceived harm on self	.17***	.19***
Perceived harm on males in general	.12***	—
Perceived harm on females in general	—	.08*
Incremental adjusted R^2 (in %)	6.0	5.5
Total adjusted R^2 (in %)	12.5	12.0

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Note: Dash indicates variable was not entered in the regression model to avoid multicollinearity. Gender was recoded as dummy (female = 1, male = 0). Figures in the columns are standardized β 's. $N = 1,694$.

block, these two perceptual predictors contributed the largest amount of variance explained to the equation. These results support Hypotheses 5a and 5b.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the perceived harm of frequenting adult entertainment clubs from a self–other comparative perspective. Findings show that respondents tend to perceive a greater harm of patronizing adult entertainment venues on others than on self, providing support for a self–other perceptual bias. Moreover, as we analyzed perceived negative influence on males in general separately from females in general in exploring the relationships between gender and the self–other perceptual discrepancy, we found that female respondents tended to perceive a greater harm of patronizing adult entertainment establishments on self than males. Also, both male and female respondents tend to perceive a greater harm of visiting sex-oriented entertainment clubs on females than on males in general.

What accounted for these gender-based perceptual differences? We suggest that traditional Chinese cultural values, which are more tolerant of males frequenting sex-oriented entertainment venues, may provide an explanation. Many people living in Chinese societies such as Taiwan accept that men patronize entertainment clubs to conduct business. This mindset may underlie a key finding of this study—that the more often men go to adult entertainment clubs, the less the negative influence they perceive on males. In contrast,

most people consider it immoral for women to visit adult entertainment clubs, fearing that women may be easily corrupted. This double standard stems from the influence of traditional Chinese values, which explain why patronizing adult entertainment establishments is perceived more harmful to females than to males. Previous research rarely considers the role of culture in self–other comparisons in perceptions and judgments about controversial issues. The findings of this study suggest the influence of culture is a worthy path to explore.

Further, the study found that the frequency of patronizing adult entertainment clubs has an impact on the perceived negative influence of such patronage. The more frequently respondents patronized sex-oriented entertainment clubs, the less harmful they perceived that patronage to be on self and others. Thus, it is likely that they would care less about the consequences or harm from patronizing adult entertainment establishments. This finding is consistent with the desensitizing effect in pornography research.

It is worth noting that the desensitizing effect has a consequence. Men who perceive patronizing adult entertainment clubs as having a less negative impact are less likely to support restrictions on these clubs. On the other hand, women and men who seldom patronize adult entertainment venues tend to perceive a greater harm, and are found more likely to support restrictions on adult entertainment establishments. The finding on a desensitizing effect is consistent with research on direct effects of undesirable media content such as pornography (Zillmann, 1998; Zillmann & Weaver, 1989).

The theoretical thrust of this study follows the self–other comparisons in perceptions of media power or risks. Recent research such as the general model of presumed influence (Gunther & Storey, 2003) suggests that a general influence on others might be a more productive independent variable than the self–other perceptual discrepancy. This alternative approach provides a new direction for further research in exploring the indirect influence of the sex trade. This study has some other limitations. The measures of support for restrictions on adult entertainment establishments relied on three items that may not capture the full dimensions of the effects. Future research can strengthen the measure to include more items. Also, actual frequency of patronage was never measured; only self-reports of such behaviors were measured. Given the topic on sex-related issues, social desirability bias may be present. Results should be read with caution.

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