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# Thai Massage and Commercial Sex Work: A Phenomenological Study

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## Abstract

*Many researchers have suggested that commercial sex work in Thailand has gone into massage establishments. This paper explores how the experience of receiving massage in Thailand differs by four types of establishment (street front, massage schools, spas, and high-end resorts) and whether or not unsolicited sexual services are offered. The current study aims to expand our understanding of both massage and prostitution in Thailand and the relationship between these activities. In order to explore this research question, we utilize a phenomenological approach and aim to relate the essence of the massage experience and whether or not unsolicited sexual services were offered. In total, 100 massage establishments were visited in major resort cities in Thailand over a period of several months. We suggest that massage establishments, especially street front establishments, offer clients more than massage especially if one requests an oil massage. Sexual services are much less likely to be offered to massage clients at spas and high-end resorts; however, the massage experience at these establishments is perhaps not as authentically Thai as at other venues. Further work might explore how sexual services differ within street front massage establishments as well as how much discretion therapists have in declining to participate in such activities.*

Keywords: Massage, Thai Massage, Prostitution, Massage Setting, Phenomenology.

## Introduction

Many researchers have suggested that commercial sex work in Thailand has gone into massage establishments. The paper explores how the experience of receiving massage in Thailand differs by four types of establishment (street front, massage schools, spas, and high-end resorts) and whether or not unsolicited sexual services are offered. First, we look at the history of massage, then the nature of sex work in Thailand, and finally Thai massage.

Massage therapy is an ancient healing art. The first references to massage appeared 2000 B.C. Forms of massage therapy, bodywork, or somatic therapy were part of the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, China, Japan, and India (Field, Diego, & Hernandez-Reif, 2007). In 1850, two physicians introduced massage in the United States; however, it was not until the mid-1980's that massage emerged as a popular healing modality. Athletes

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were among the first, in the United States, to appreciate the healing benefits of massage therapy (Ayers & Kronenfeld, 2010).

There are more than 80 types of massage therapy. Massage typically involves the application of various techniques to the muscular structure and soft tissues of the body. Types of massage include Swedish, deep tissue, trigger point, Shiatsu, and Thai massage to name a few. Therapists use their hands, fingers, forearms, elbows, and feet to manipulate the soft tissue of the body. Massage therapy helps treat chronic disease, neurological disorders, injuries, and alleviates tension and stress in the human body. Given that 80–90% of disease is thought to be stress related, the benefits of massage are notable in any wellness program (Ayers & Kronenfeld, 2010; Smith, Sullivan & Baxter, 2009). Still, a 2002 survey of American's who used Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) revealed that only 5% reported that they received a massage in the past year (Field et al, 2007).

While the benefits of touch have been widely documented, few individuals receive touch in their adult lives (Lund, 2000; Sharpe, Williams, Granner & Hussey, 2007; Donoyama, Munakata & Shibasaki, 2010). The growth of massage therapy, as a legitimate healing modality, has been adversely affected by an association between touch and sex (Wahnschafft, 1982; Nicholls & Cheek, 2006). There is a lingering wonder about non-sexual therapeutic touch. Around the world, perhaps this problem is most apparent in Thailand.

### **Commercial Sex Work**

A critical issue facing Thai massage therapists is the link many place between massage and the selling of sexual services. For example, Rojanapithayakorn (2006) maintains that sex work in Thailand was establishment based, or in direct sex establishments, like brothels and inexpensive hotels (see Farley 2009). However, since the onset of the AIDS epidemic, Tharawan et al. (2003) argue that sex workers moved into non-establishment (or indirect sex establishments) spaces such as bars, nightclubs, cafés or restaurants, and *massage parlors* (emphasis ours). In indirect sex establishments, clients negotiate for sexual services that will take place at another location. In Thailand, many associate massage with sex (Wahnschafft, 1982; Cohen, 1988; Taylor, 2005).

As Taylor (2005) notes commercial sex work is a lucrative business in Thailand fueled by poverty, especially in Thailand's northern rural provinces, as well as economic disparities between Thailand and other Asian nations. Women and girls from poor provinces, oftentimes with the active support of their families, opt for sex work as a way to economically contribute to their families. Further, the benefit of being a good daughter, bringing in money for the good of the family, outweighs the stigma of sex work (Taylor, 2005; Wawer, Podhista, Pramualratana & McNamara, 1996; Peracca, Knodel, & Saengtienchai, 1998). The history of bonded labor, where Thai families are economically indentured to another, also drives Thai daughters into sex work to pay off debt (Giri, 2012).

Besides economic considerations, Jackson (2003) makes the argument that Theravada Buddhism, the prevailing religion in Thailand, effectively supports the exchange of sex for money by viewing women and men within the society as not having equal rights and opportunities coupled with the concept of karma (Vejar & Quach, 2013). Further, while it is no longer legal to have multiple wives in Thailand, outlawed in 1935, the tradition of polygamy shapes Thai culture. Specifically, polygamous relationships are a part of the

culture and cater to the perceived sexual needs of Thai men (Vivatpanich, 2010; Vejar & Quach, 2013). Notably, the internal demand for sex work in Thailand is significant. Many argue that most Thai men lose their virginity to a Thai prostitute (see Monk-Turner & Turner, 1989). The objectification of women within Thai society supports the notion that women and girls exist to pleasure and fulfill the sexual needs of men (Vejar & Quach, 2013). Cultural traditions, coupled with the fact that Thailand was the designated rest and recuperation spot for the U.S. military during the war in Vietnam, solidified the demand for prostitution and sex work which continues to be an important sector of the Thai economy today.

As Vejar and Quach (2013) write, massage parlors, bars, and clubs operate under the guise of legitimacy; however, it is understood that sexual services are available. Notably, sex tourist goes to Thailand for the explicit purpose of soliciting sex acts (Montgomery, 2008; Howard, 2009). Notably, the International Labor Organization estimates that the commercial sex trade in Thailand generates annual revenues of approximately four billion dollars or 3% of the Thai GDP (see Monk-Turner & Turner, 2009).

### **Thai Massage**

*Nuad* is the Thai word for massage. Thai massage involves body manipulation and is traditionally performed on a mat on the floor (Setthakorn & Setthakorn, 2006). Since the focus is on soft tissue manipulation, clients remain fully clothed during the massage. The ideal length of a Thai massage is from 60 to 90 minutes. Through a series of hand movements, therapists put pressure on energy lines (Sen lines) and points and utilize a large variety of stretching movements. Sometimes Thai massage is referred to as a lazy person's yoga (Setthakorn & Setthakorn, 2006).

With the palms of the hand, thumbs, elbows, and feet, Thai massage therapists typically focus on 10, of the 72,000, Sen lines aiming to increase flexibility, release tension, and help the body's natural energy flow more freely. Thai massage has its origins in India and was reputed to be given to the world by a physician, Shivago Komarpaj, who was a contemporary of the Buddha. In 1776, Thailand was invaded by the Burmese and the capital of Ayutthia was destroyed along with the ancient texts about Thai massage. In 1832, the surviving texts were inscribed in stone and set into the walls of the Phra Chetaphon Temple (or Wat Po). Setthakorn and Setthakorn (2006) suggest that Thai massage is largely taught today as an oral tradition.

Traditional Thai massage therapists are taught to begin the massage with a bow to their client. Therapists place their hands together, as in a position for prayer, to make the hands warm and to focus the mind on the massage (Setthakorn & Setthakorn, 2006). Thai massage begins at the feet and proceeds to the legs, abdomen, chest, shoulder, arms and hands, ending with the neck, head and face. The four basic positions of Thai massage are the front of the body (with the client lying on their back), side (client lying on their side), back (client lying on their stomach), and sitting (Setthakorn & Setthakorn, 2006).

The client is an active participant in Thai massage. Setthakorn and Setthakorn (2006) write that Thai massage is a form of exercise for both therapists and clients. Bringing together yoga, reflexology, and acupressure, Thai massage is a "unique healing art which improves overall health and well-being" (Setthakorn & Setthakorn, 2006: 187). Thai massage promotes deep relaxation, eases tension in the human body which blocks the flow of energy, increases flexibility and range of motion, improves circulation, strengthens the

internal organs, relieves pain, improves neurological functioning and assists in easing degenerative conditions associated with aging (Setthakorn & Setthakorn, 2006).

Setthakorn and Setthakorn (2006) argue that Thai massage lost favor with the introduction of Western medicine in Thailand. However, today, with medical cost high and procedures complex, Thai massage is enjoying a reemergence especially in rural areas. The primary schools that teach traditional Thai massage are at the temple of Wat Po, International Training Massage (ITM), Institute of Thai Massage, and the Foundation of Shivago Komarpaj (at the Old Chiang Mai Traditional Hospital). There is a distinction between a “southern style” and “northern style” Thai massage. Teachers at Wat Po (in the south) offer a massage style which is vigorous and sometimes invasive. The International Training Massage and Institute of Thai Massage schools teach a gentler “northern style” technique.

### **Massage Venues**

Traditionally, Thai massage was performed by blind male practitioners. One can still locate such facilities; however, modern Thai massage is performed in small establishments, at Thai massage schools, spas, or in resorts. To open a massage establishment, at least some therapists must be certified. Patrons might see posted certificates attesting to the training of staff. Future researchers might want to investigate the authenticity of such certificates, how many establishments post certificates, and if there is any correlation between certification and the massage experience. Most therapists who work in street front establishments have not been professionally trained in a certified massage school (Setthakorn & Setthakorn, 2006). On the other hand, the majority of therapists at Thai massage schools, spas, and resorts have received professional training in massage.

Clients may distinguish a massage parlor offering traditional massage, from massage parlors that are explicit venues for prostitution, by looking for certain clues. Said clues include suggestive posters (nude photographs of women) that are clearly visible from outside the establishment to establishment names and advertising. Another clear distinction between erotic massage and traditional massage establishments is that, in the former, a client usually enters an establishment and selects a “girl,” by number. In traditional street front massage establishments, one enters and it is typically the establishment that selects the therapist who will do the massage. This does not mean that sexual services are not available in these establishments; however, the blatant message advertising such is lacking.

### **The Current Study**

The purpose of this work is to explore the experience of receiving massage at four different types of Thai massage establishments. What is the experience like of receiving a Thai massage? How does this experience differ by various types of massage venues? Further, we are most interested in whether or not unsolicited sexual services are offered during the massage experience. In Thailand, does type of establishment (street front, massage school, spa, resort) make a difference in whether or not unsolicited sexual services are offered clients?

## Methods

The purpose of this study is to provide the reader with an understanding of experience of receiving Thai massage; therefore, we decided to take a phenomenological approach. In phenomenology, the aim is to lay bare the essential nature of the experience one wants to better understand (Creswell, 2007). Little work explores what it is like to receive massage, notably Thai massage. Further, many associate sex and massage in Thailand. Is this association deserved or a misperception? Creswell (2007) writes that phenomenology demands that researchers ask two questions: what have you experienced and what situations have influenced your experience of the phenomenon. By exploring how the massage experience differs by type of establishment, and how this may shape whether or not unsolicited sexual services are offered, will allow us to develop this phenomenological study.

Both researchers have been trained in Thai massage at ITM in Chiang Mai (one has received training in Thai massage at Wat Po and is a certified massage therapist in the United States). Given that we have spent much time in Thailand and are trained therapists, the decision was made at the outset to explore how the massage experience differs at four different types of massage establishments (street, Thai massage schools, spas, and resorts). Establishments were visited in four locations (Bangkok, Hua Hin, Pattaya, and Phuket) all popular with foreign tourists. Street front establishments include walk-in businesses that advertise massage—very common on any commercial street in Thailand. Thai massage schools teach traditional Thai massage and offer massage services as well. Clients typically need to search for this type of establishment. Spas that offer massage are independent businesses that stand alone on commercial streets. These businesses may have the term spa in their name or in a description of services offered. The cost of massage here is significantly higher than at street front establishments. The spa facility is very clean, inviting, and professionally run. Spas located in high-end resorts rival spas anywhere in the world. These facilities oftentimes emphasize a connection with nature and usually have a line of products for sale.

Utilizing purposive sampling, the researchers entered various establishments and requested one of three types of massage: foot, traditional Thai, or oil. Human subject approval was granted by the college prior to the start of the project. In order to protect confidentiality, neither the names of the establishment or the therapist were noted. No identifying information about particular massage therapists was noted. After the massage was over, notes were taken with regard to how the appointment was made, the kind of changing room (if any) offered, what kind of instruction was given, the type of room in which the massage took place, whether music was playing, if certificates were prominently displayed on walls, the gender of therapists at the establishment and how the massage was experienced by the client. All establishments were public establishments and open to the general public. In total, approximately 100 establishments were visited over a three-month period during January to March 2010 and in January and February 2015.

### Street front massage

Street front massage parlors abound in Thailand. It is not unusual to see multiple massage establishments in the same street block. Those who work in these establishments may come outside and encourage potential customers to come in for a massage. Most of those who work in street front massage parlors are women. Massage workers typically wear a common outfit; however, this may vary by time of day. In the daytime, such

workers may wear a common colored T-shirt with the name of the establishment on the shirt. At night, the same establishment may have workers change into clothing that is more sexually suggestive, in both color (red) and style (very low cut tops, very short bottoms). This change of dress was most apparent in Bangkok.

In a street front establishment, a client enters and makes an appointment for a particular type of massage. Usually, there is a clearly identifiable person with whom this transaction is done. Once the massage is booked and the price known (prices are usually posted), the therapist takes the client to have their feet washed (regardless of type of massage booked). More often than not, there is no wait for the massage to take place. The cost of massage at street front establishments varies (between \$3.00 to \$15.00); however, it is a very inexpensive Thai therapy.

The first step in receiving a Thai massage, regardless of type of massage, is to have one's feet washed. In most street front establishments, there is a common room near the entrance where this is done. Using a bucket or faucet, therapist will wash and dry the feet—then the massage begins.

Foot massage is very common in Thailand. The client is escorted to a chair usually in the front of the shop. The type of chair may vary; however, most are large reclining ones. In rare cases, foot massage is performed while the client lies on the floor. Usually the client does not change clothes; however, if they are wearing tight clothing they may change and put on a loose pair of cotton pants. A foot massage lasts, on average, for one hour. This service typically ends with a massage of the arms and upper back. Many of those who try Thai massage come in for a foot massage. Music is typically played in street front establishments and most offer massage inside only (rather than at an outside/pool location). Therapists may talk to each other, make comments about those passing by, or talk about other clients during the massage. Rarely do such establishments post certificates that workers have completed a training program. Receiving a foot massage in Thailand is a deeply relaxing experience.

Street front establishments also offer Thai and oil massage. Both Thai and oil massage last from an hour to an hour and a half. In Thai massage, clients either keep on their own outdoor clothes or change into a loose fitting cotton bottom and top. Thai massage takes place on the floor—either on a thin cotton mat or a tatami mat. The room may be a common room or clients could be escorted to a private or semi-private room (with curtains separating the space). If the room is a common one, therapists frequently talk to each other while performing the massage. The therapist goes through a series of movements utilizing pressure points and stretches. Depending on the flexibility of the client, Thai massage can be relaxing or painful. Thai massage involves stretching and movements that aim to increase range of motion. If the client is not very flexible, one must relate this to the therapist (who usually speaks a bit of English). The massage worker lets the client know when the massage is over. Either the therapist returns to escort them back to the front of the establishment or the client makes their own way back. Payment is made and the therapist often waits at the door where a tip may be offered.

Oil massage takes place, usually on a floor mat or a massage table, in a private or semi-private room. Clients are instructed to take off their clothes. There is usually a towel to cover the body; however, the towel provided may not be large enough to cover all of the body. Typically, there is not as much care taken in covering the body, in such establishments, as one may be familiar with in the West. Further, it appears common

practice to massage women's breasts, oftentimes very vigorously. In oil massage, the therapist may offer a male client a "happy ending" (manual stimulation of the penis) to the massage. If the client wants this, there is an extra fee that is agreed on prior to the service commencing. The cost is relatively inexpensive ranging from \$7 to \$15 U.S. dollars during the period of this study. Still, with this service, the cost of the oil massage in Thailand doubles. After the oil massage is over, clients usually have the opportunity to take a shower in the establishment. In many street front establishments, male clients are offered an unsolicited sexual service especially when requesting an oil massage; however, Thai massage clients may be propositioned as well.

The vast majority of therapists at street front establishments are female; however, male therapists work here too. Moreover, a distinct minority of therapists appear to be biologically male yet present as female in dress and make up. Whether or not they present as female because they may believe that they will get more business this way or because street massage venues are open to those who wish to present in this manner needs to be addressed in future work.

### **Massage at Thai Massage Schools**

Services at traditional Thai massage schools differ from street front establishment in a number of ways. First, Thai massage schools usually offer foot and Thai massage—not oil massage. Therapists in such schools oftentimes wear a white cotton uniform as they perform the massage and certificates are typically posted that workers have completed a massage program. The massage takes place, either foot or Thai, like in a street front establishment. Before the massage begins, the therapist will typically say a silent prayer before starting. In traditional Thai schools, it is common to see male practitioners at work.

While some traditional Thai massage schools offer foot massage, the most common massage offered is a traditional Thai massage. The massage usually takes place in a common room; however, in some schools there are private or semi-private rooms. A client either wears their loose street clothes or changes into a cotton top and bottom. The traditional Thai massage takes place on a mat on the floor. During the massage, it is not uncommon to hear therapists talking amongst themselves. Occasionally, an older teacher will offer instructions (in Thai) to a therapist who is still learning the technique. In Chiang Mai, one traditional school offered massage in a large outside pavilion.

It is in this venue that one is least likely to hear music played during the massage. Traditional Thai massage offered at Thai schools tends to be in line with prices at street front establishments. In Pattaya, there are many massage schools and massage here may be different from massage schools in Bangkok or Chiang Mai. In other words, other services beyond massage may be a part of such schools. Future work should explore differences between massages offered in traditional Thai schools with an emphasis on how such schools in Pattaya may differ from others. In some massage schools in Pattaya, sexual services were available for sale for clients who request massage. The cost of a hand job would be comparable to a street front establishment (between \$7 to \$15 U.S. dollars). It is important to note that the quality of traditional Thai massage schools vary and that the likelihood of being offered a sexual service much less likely. Further, some traditional Thai massage schools only offer Thai massage. Thai massage schools is usually performed in a large room where privacy is lacking for performing a sexual act.

### **Spa massages**

Massages at spas differ from street front establishments and traditional Thai massage schools in cost, how the appointment is made, how therapists are dressed, and the general ambience of the experience. At spas, various services and prices are listed on menus (these may also be found on websites). One enters the establishment and typically books an appointment for a service that will take place later in time. Spas offer many massages including foot, Thai, and various oil massages. A massage at a spa will cost the client significantly more than at one of the venues discussed above.

At the spa, a client typically changes from street clothes to something more comfortable. Should one be receiving an oil massage, the client is offered a traditional robe to wear before the massage begins. The therapist will start the massage, regardless of type of massage, by washing the feet. In this case, there will typically be flowers (or some type of aromatherapy) in the water. Once this is done, the client is escorted to an easy lounge chair for a foot massage (lots of towels and cushions provided) or a private room (divided by a solid wall) where the Thai or oil massage will take place.

In a spa, the foot washing may take place in the private room where the massage occurs. For couples, there are private rooms where they may get a massage in the same space. At the spa, the experience of the foot massage is not significantly different from the venues above; however, there will be music playing and therapists will not talk during the massage experience. Therapists have typically spent time in other countries to learn more about the massage experience and what clients may expect.

The experience of a Thai traditional massage, at the spa, does not differ from those offered at street front establishments or traditional Thai schools; however, the setting and ambience are much nicer. Further, the massage therapist is adorned in an attractive traditional outfit. Everything at the spa appears clean and bathrooms are in excellent working order. Bathrooms at street front establishments are varied with some working without problem while others lack running water.

A traditional Thai massage, offered at the spa, lacks the relaxed atmosphere sensed in street front and massage schools. At the spa, the massage is performed in a highly professional manner. Like at traditional Thai schools, therapists at spas will oftentimes bow their heads before starting the massage. Music is usually playing. Once the massage is over, the therapist instructs the client to change back into their street clothes and returns to escort them to the front of the establishment.

For both women and men, one is most likely to be covered during an oil massages taken at a spa. Women may still have their breasts massaged; however, the therapist at the spa is likely to ask the client if this is something they want. At some spas, clients will be asked to wear disposable panties. Care is taken at such establishments to keep the client covered at all times. Therapists will ask if the pressure is good or if anything needs to be adjusted. Therapists here easily communicate with clients in English. Besides oil massage at such venues, other specialized massages are typically available. In this work, clients who sought services at a spa establishment were not propositioned for sexual services.

### **Massages at High-End Resorts**

Massages at high-end resorts are similar to those offered by independently operated spas; however, they tend to offer a more varied menu of services and perform said services in a highly efficient manner. Services at high-end resorts are offered in an aesthetic

manner; however, they have the quality of being a bit mechanical and lacking in local flavor. At high-end resorts, clients are escorted into beautifully adorned room by beautifully adorned therapists. Therapists at both high-end resorts and spas tend to be female. They have been professionally trained—often times in the West.

Clients change into a robe (for an oil massage) or a cotton outfit (for a Thai massage) and are escorted to a private room. Sometimes this room is a private pavilion in a natural setting. Feet are washed and the massage begins. Traditional Thai music is typically played. Flower petals may be strewn across the massage table and the room. Under the massage table, a client may be looking at a flower as their head sits in a head rest. Further, aroma products are typically in the room or tucked into something on the massage table. The goal is to make the experience very pleasurable. Once the massage is over, the client may choose to shower in a private facility, sometimes outside in a private natural setting. Focus is always on nature, beauty, and ensuring that the client feels comfortable. The therapist always checks to see if the work being performed is to the satisfaction of the client.

Once the massage ends, the therapists may well serve tea or another tonic. After a bit of quiet time, the client is escorted to the front desk where they check out. Like in the West, tips are expected at this type of massage venue. At street front and traditional Thai schools, therapists surely appreciate a tip; however, they do not expect it. While at checkout at the high-end resort or spa, the client may look around the shop because there are usually products being sold. The quality of these products tends to be excellent and the range of things for sale impressive.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Utilizing a phenomenological approach, this work aimed to give the reader a sense of the Thai massage experience and how massage differs between four types of venues. Street front and traditional Thai massage schools offer foot and Thai massage that tends to be an excellent service. Still, the range of quality at street front establishments is more varied than is true for other venues. Some street front establishments have only two or three rooms, no toilet, and the linen does not appear to be totally clean. On the other hand, some street front establishments are extraordinary and rival the services offered at much pricier venues. Further, the massage experience feels like a Thai massage—something that is lacking at some spa and high-end resorts where the massage could really have been received in Thailand or a spa anywhere in the world. Increasingly, oil massage is offered at street front, spa, and high-end establishments in Thailand. The quality of oil massage at street front establishments is more varied than is the case for traditional Thai massage. Oil massage here may just be smearing as much oil as possible over the body. If this is not the service desired, the client needs to search for a more desirable establishment.

As tourism changes in Thailand and more young people, both female and male, visit the country, Thai street front massage establishments may face a crisis of sorts. Namely, increasing numbers of tourists may search for a massage at a street front establishment and that is all that they want. Today, it appears that, if a client wants (or does not want) a sexual service, sex for sale (whatever that may be) is easily found in Thai street front massage establishments. A sexual service, especially a hand job, may well be offered by the massage person to the client after which the price will be negotiated (between \$7 to \$15 U.S. dollars). Clients may request a sexual service as well but at street front establishment sexual services, especially for oil massage, are generally available.

It is also important to note that many massage therapists who work in Bangkok and other tourist areas in Thailand are from provinces such as Isaan. Isaan makes up the northeast region of Thailand, borders Laos, and is much poorer economically than other regions of the country. It is estimated that 80% of women who work in the sex trade in Thailand are from Isaan (Manzanares & Kent, 2006). Further research might explore links between poverty, educational and life opportunities, government policy and the likelihood of entering massage work as well as the sex trade. The contrast between the life possibilities of young girls and women from Isaan and their clients is difficult to overstate.

From data gathered in this work, we argue that oil massage, especially at street front establishment, appears to be where the opportunity for a “happy ending” or offer of another sexual service exists. Clients are less likely to be propositioned at traditional Thai massage schools, spas, or high-end resorts. Perhaps this is the attraction of spas and high-end resorts among foreign clients—the desire to avoid being propositioned. Further, the cost of a sexual service at these establishments would cost more than at a street front establishment. Again, street front establishments are prevalent in major cities in Thailand. Otherwise, sex for sale appears readily available in the majority of street front massage establishments. This does not mean everyone who works at such establishments offers sex for sale, or that every establishment engages in sexual services; however, in our work the vast majority of street front establishments can arrange sexual services if that is what a client wants. One type of street front establishment we did not investigate is male only establishments—massage by men for men. Over time, these establishments are becoming more visible on the streets of larger cities in Thailand.

We found the experience of Thai massage to be very relaxing and therapeutic; however, unsolicited sexual services are offered at many street front establishments—especially if one requests oil massage. Is oil massage taken to be a code word for the desire for a sexual service? Future work might explore how both clients and therapists interpret the request for oil massage and how therapists at street front establishments present as regard to gender. It appears that a significant number of men cross dress and wear make-up in these venues. Thailand recognizes the existence of a third gender, namely “*kathoey*”, which includes male to female transgendered individuals as well as effeminate men (Aldous & Sereemongkonpol, 2008). Do individuals present in this way because they believe more clients want a “female” therapist or because massage establishments allow them to work and present to the world as they like.

Finally, how therapists at massage venues in Thailand understand the nature of their job, including the provision of sexual services to clients, would be worthwhile to pursue. How massage, especially traditional Thai massage, will evolve in Thailand may be inextricably tied to the growth of non-sensual therapeutic touch in Thailand. At this point in time, it appears that sex for sale is omnipresent in Thailand and that a venue where one can easily find this service is in street front massage establishments. Most recently, one can note the emergence of “deep Thai massage” or “deep oil massage” which costs more than a traditional service; however, these terms might be used to let clients know this is a non-sexual massage.

Some effort is being made to identify establishments in Thailand, by virtue of a special logo and certification process, which offer massage service only. In our experience, the logo that depicts this designation is rarely observed in street front establishments. Further, how effective such a logo may be and what services are actually offered in such

establishments should be explored. Essentially the problem for massage in street front establishments in Thailand is that sex for sale appears to be easily found. One does not even need to look, or ask in many cases, yet sex may be offered. The direction Thailand wants to take with regard to being an international sex tourist designation may well shape what activities take place in massage establishments.

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