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1

We Are the Cool People

Sunday, 11:30 p.m., New York City

Most people think that ostentation comes easy. Dre's life was testament to how much work it takes to get people to show off.

It was nearly midnight, and Dre's table was finishing dinner at the Downtown, a perfectly chic restaurant in SoHo. Dre was flanked on either side by half a dozen beautiful women, beautiful in the way that fashion models are: young and tall with flawless features, their clothes and high heels so stylish, they could have arrived straight from a catwalk. It is hard to look away when they enter the room.

The Downtown is a beautiful sight on Sunday nights. The decor is opulent: plush upholstered furniture, a mahogany bar, an enormous chandelier, and walls adorned with giant iconic prints from famous fashion photographers. There is no music, just the steady buzz of conversations in various European languages, punctuated by laughter and the clink of champagne glasses, immediately refilled by white-coated Italian waiters. Each table is anchored by wealthy men—celebrities and aristocrats, socialites from the gossip pages, actors and musicians and producers, entrepreneurs and bankers—dining in the company of beautiful women.

In the middle of it all was Dre's table. He held court, steering conversations, Bellinis, and plates of pasta among his guests. Whatever else he was doing, he was also always scanning the room to see who sees him, graciously doling out smiles and winks, and standing up to greet passing guests seamlessly in French or English, with two kisses on each cheek.

Dre was a thirty-eight-year-old black man with a gorgeous smile and a near-shaved head. He dressed in leather pants, a crisp white T-shirt, and a shiny new pair of limited-edition Adidas sneakers, a casual but clearly expensive look he called "rock-and-roll chic." He was one of the only black people in the place, where he casually bantered and joked with a mostly white crowd. Even as he charmed the rest of the restaurant, he was careful to keep some attention on the women at his table. He flirted with them and cuddled up to whomever was on his arm, which, for the next several months, would be me.

"I love the job of promoter, because look at all the beautiful girls I'm around," he said. "And some of them like me, which can cause problems." He winked at the woman sitting across from him. She smirked and shook her head.

Dre loved the attention. He had been hosting women in this restaurant every Sunday night for the past six years; before that, he worked in various clubs for three decades, starting in the early 1990s. In the nightlife business, Dre is known as an image promoter. This means he works freelance, contracting with multiple nightclubs and restaurants throughout the city to bring in a so-called "quality crowd," understood to consist of attractive women, rich men, celebrities, and other well-connected people. In theory, the crowd he brings in enhances the image of the club and, ultimately, attracts wealthy clients and their money. Each Sunday, the Downtown's management paid Dre a handsome fee, somewhere between \$1,200 and \$4,500, depending on the bar spend, from which he took home 25 percent for his five hours of work.

It is a dubious profession. Promoters are widely criticized as pimps and "model wranglers," for whom the fashion industry's surplus of underpaid newcomers, known as "girls," are easy pickings.¹

Sometimes called “PRs” (as in “*PRomoter*”) for short, these men are reviled by modeling agencies, and every few years they are the subject of high-profile exposés in the press.² At the center of their work is an uncomfortable reality: they are intermediaries in the profitable circulation of women and alcohol among rich men. Dre knew that his work was disreputable, but it was lucrative. He was making over \$200,000 a year. Though his income paled in comparison to those of the rich men around him at night, he was confident that the gap would shrink. Working alongside this segment of the new global elite, he believed, would enable him to one day become one of them.

“Ça va?” he said to a passing gentleman in an expensive suit. Dre stood up to shake hands and speak a little; as he sat back down, he whispered in my ear, “That guy’s from a Saudi family. A *billionaire*.” He winked to a woman sitting at the bar, supposedly the princess of a small nation-state known for offshore banking. As another man approached the table, Dre whispered to me, “He’s really rich, his family. Really rich.” Dre gave him a playful shoulder punch and fist bump. “A girlfriend of mine asked if there are any hot guys here tonight,” Dre offered, followed by a calculated pause. “I said yes when I saw you walk in!”

This is the elite in Dre’s world. It’s not the 1 percent, he told me, “but the 0.0001 percent. That’s the crowd I want around me.”

The women who flank Dre, like myself, only need to *look* rich, not to be rich. Thankfully so, since it’s unlikely any of us could even pay tonight’s dinner bill. Cocktails, plates of pasta, fresh veggies and salads, fish and steaks, and now desserts and espressos arrived without any of us checking the prices. At the Downtown, I know from my own furtive glances at the menu, one cocktail costs about \$20. A salad with beets and goat cheese is \$24. I ate dinner here a dozen times over the course of roughly eighteen months researching VIP parties, and I never paid for anything.

As “girls,” our drinks and meals were comped; the endless plates and glasses came to us “compliments of the house.” To host our table, Dre paid a tip to the wait staff, usually about 25 percent of the bill.

Each Sunday night, the Downtown forwent over \$1,000 just for the pleasure of our company. But in the long run our presence generated far greater value to the Downtown, to the men who dine here, and to Dre himself.

Dre's guests tended to be women with fledgling careers in fashion modeling, or they were students, or looking for work in fields ranging from design to finance. The main criterion for sitting next to Dre was that you look beautiful. Indeed, earlier that afternoon, Dre had sent me two playful text messages ensuring that I looked the part: "Dress to impress, Ash," and then a few minutes later, "High Heels."

Or maybe they weren't so playful. He was full of compliments when women looked good, and icy when they didn't. He would turn his back toward women whose looks did not meet his standards—unless they were rich or important in some other way. Once he told a woman of average height, "Go stand over there," referring to a corner away from his table.

I often felt uneasy in these places and out with Dre, even then as I sat beside him in a new silky dress and four-inch heels. When Dre first agreed I could shadow him in clubs for sociology research, in 2011, I began carrying a hand-me-down Chanel handbag from the 1980s. The bag was a loaner from my sister, who had bought it on eBay for \$200, and it was in bad shape. I bought leather patches from a shoe smith and glued them onto the worn-out corners; before long they started to peel off. I kept the bag tucked behind my back, displaying only the signature gold-and-black chain across my chair, playing dress-up with the 1 percent.

But I was not alone: Dre was also playing dress-up with the elite, albeit with far greater ease. He came from a suburban middle-class family in France, the second-generation son of a professional family from Algeria. He dropped out of law school in Paris to pursue a music career in Miami, and when that went bust, he waited tables. For a short stint he was homeless, something you would never have guessed then, as his conversations regularly showed off his connections and entrepreneurial potential. He always boasted about the five or six projects he had in the works—his career as a pop singer, his movie production company, branding for a tech company, the reality

television show he was developing, the food shipping company “in Africa” (among the most vague of his ventures), the car service company. The list changed depending on the week, but his essential optimism was always the same. Dre described his business model for the car service as follows: “You start with one car. It becomes two. Then ten. That’s the American way.”

A typical text message from him, when I asked what he was up to on a given day, might read: “I am working on a major business deal! Wish me luck . . . Within 2 days top I’ll know!! Millions of \$ deal.”

“I love nightlife,” he was fond of saying. “You never know what’s gonna happen.” But like a lot of things with Dre, this was just talk.

Soon Dre ordered an espresso, as he always did, before inviting his guests upstairs to the nightclub. “Girls, what do you say we go upstairs for the party?”

Jenna, an unemployed blonde in her twenties searching for a job in finance, stood up with a sigh, and under her breath she mumbled, “Let’s go dance for our dinner.” Jenna rarely went out—she had met Dre a year earlier, when he had noticed the pretty college student on the street and stopped to introduce himself. Jenna didn’t have many college friends, and she found Dre to be an interesting character, whom she would eventually consider a friend. Dre convinced her to come to the Downtown tonight to have a nice dinner for free. “You never know who you might meet,” he said to her, a standard enticement among promoters to get a woman to come out with them. Jenna agreed, hoping to meet someone in finance that could help with her post-college job search.

The club upstairs was small and intimate like the restaurant, but darker, louder, and drunker. We repositioned ourselves around a banquette, a long, curved sofa adjacent to two small low tables brimming with bottles of Perrier-Jouët champagne, Belvedere vodka, carafes of orange juice and cranberry juice in silver ice buckets, and neat little stacks of glass tumblers. The table is right next to the DJ booth, where Dre played emcee to his weekly karaoke party. From 12 to 3 a.m., he sang, danced, and cajoled others to do the same, all to ensure the party had a good vibe. As the evening went on, the room turned sweltering hot, as more and more people crowded

around the small tables. Women in high heels grew even taller as they perched on top of the sofas, and Dre poured bottomless glasses of champagne and vodka from his table. Models sang Russian pop songs and laughed, businessmen unbuttoned their tailored Italian dress shirts and pulled down their suspenders, and Dre wrestled the mic from an overly drunk “Brazillionaire.” Through it all, people jumped up and down to the music. This was the Downtown’s famed Sunday night party that Dre made happen every week.

While Dre was paid well for the night’s work, his female guests, here and elsewhere, were not paid.³ Instead they were *comped* in two senses of the word, with freebies of food and drinks, and with the compliment of being included in an exclusive world that did not otherwise welcome people with mediocre status or money, and that prized good looks. Most of the “girls” understood these terms of exchange, as I would learn in interviews with them, though they rarely discussed them when they were out.

Meanwhile, VIP establishments like the Downtown generate large profits. The Downtown is part of a global chain of restaurants in Manhattan, London, Hong Kong, and Dubai that pulls in well over \$100 million a year. That’s small change, however, compared to the fortunes of the Saudi princes, Russian oligarchs, and run-of-the-mill tech and finance giants who buy bottles here and at other exclusive clubs around the world.

“There’s so much money in this room,” Dre told me, smiling and shaking his head. He often gestured to me to take notice when a sparkler-lit bottle of Dom Pérignon champagne floated by, held high above the head of a scantily clad waitress. Each one cost about \$495.

The bottle buyers were men from the global economic elite. A notoriously difficult population to study and even define, the “elite” here refers to people who command demonstrably large economic resources, irrespective of their influence or political power.⁴ The VIP party circuit appeals to mostly young and new money for whom a \$495 bottle at the Downtown is the equivalent of a Starbucks coffee for someone like middle-class Jenna, who was now standing nearby Dre’s table, swaying listlessly to the music, eyes scanning the room.

Like most of Dre's girls, she usually stayed close to his table and only occasionally mingled about the room. After an hour, she left, not having found any job opportunities amid the loud music and flashing lights.

Everyone in this room has power. Some of it is fleeting—like women's beauty, a short-lived asset that gets them into the room, but not recognition as serious players once inside. Some of it is blunt financial capital, like that of the big spenders, whose sheer pecuniary might is put on full display for everyone to see, and sometimes to criticize. Some of it is convertible, like the promoters' connections to elites around the world. Rich in social capital, Dre could do anything and climb anywhere—or at least that's how it always seemed to him from his vantage point as emcee, concierge, jester, and sometime friend to the world's new global elite.

The New Gilded Age

Maybe you've passed by a nightclub at some point, noticed the long queue behind the velvet rope, and wondered what was going on inside, who gets in, and how. In the various earlier manifestations of New York City's nightclub scenes—be it the discotheques in the 1970s or the legendary downtown dance clubs of the mid-1990s like Palladium or Tunnel—the rules were basically the same. After paying a cover charge, all visitors shared the same space with anyone else who had \$20 in their pocket that night, and everyone jostled together to get an overpriced drink at the bar.⁵ Most clubs also featured a small, roped-off “VIP” section, where celebrities and friends of the owner could party in visible seclusion.

By the 1990s, the city was in the midst of a major transformation, from the urban blight that characterized downtown Manhattan throughout the 1970s and 1980s to a resurgence of economic investments and cultural growth. More clubs began opening as rates of violent crime fell and the volume of money in the city spiked. In the 2000s, nightlife and entertainment venues began to sprout up in the Meatpacking District. The formerly industrial neighborhood's giant

warehouses underwent renovations by fashion agencies, art galleries, and club owners.⁶ By the early 2000s, commercial rents in the Meatpacking District had risen to about \$80 a square foot, triple what they were in the 1990s.⁷

While New York underwent its renaissance, the global distribution of wealth shifted toward the very top of the economic ladder. The share of money ballooned among the top 1 percent of wealth holders, such that by 2017, the richest 1 percent owned half of the world's wealth—a record level of \$241 trillion. Within that top fraction, there emerged vast differences too.⁸ The wealth share among the top 0.1 percent skyrocketed from 7 percent in 1979—a year when Studio 54 co-owner Steven Rubell famously refused to let in anyone without enough style—to 22 percent in 2012, when Dre was marveling at all the rich bankers and tycoons buying bottles around him.⁹ Sometimes called the “superrich,” the top 0.1 percent of families in America now own roughly the same share of wealth as the entire bottom 90 percent.¹⁰ Ours is an era of wealth concentration as extreme as the 1920s, when Jay Gatsby's fabulous parties symbolized the excesses of the Gilded Age in *The Great Gatsby*.¹¹

Not only is the share of wealth different; the source of it is, too. America's top 1 percent, for instance, holds nearly half of the nation's assets in the form of stocks and mutual funds.¹² Income is increasingly a source of wealth as well, for those working in the right industries. Sociologist Olivier Godechot has noted the rise of the “working rich,” whose fortunes come from booming industries like finance, real estate, and technology, where incomes and bonuses can outpace investment gains among the wealthy.¹³ As the financial industry's role in the economy grew, Wall Street workers' pay swelled, leaping six-fold since 1975, nearly twice as much as the increase in pay for the average American worker.¹⁴ The average bonus for anyone working in financial securities in the late 1980s was around \$13,000. By 2006, just before the Great Recession hit, it was \$191,360.¹⁵ That year at Merrill Lynch, a twenty-something analyst with a base salary of \$130,000 collected a bonus of \$250,000. A thirty-something trader with a \$180,000 salary got \$5 million.¹⁶

Against this backdrop of rising financial fortunes, downtown Manhattan was transforming, as new luxury leisure services emerged to cater to the newly rich. As the amount of money on Wall Street shot up with each passing year, in came more young financiers with huge pools of disposable money who could afford a thousand-dollar bar tab.

New York had long been a destination for moneyed consumers, but as globalization and local policies expanded the city's key economic drivers—finance, real estate, insurance—it became a destination for international millionaires, affluent tourists, and rich businessmen.¹⁷ By the time the financial crisis hit, in 2008, the Meatpacking District had become a millionaire's playground. Posh clubs, designer boutiques, famous galleries, and upscale restaurants and hotels had popped up on seemingly every corner.¹⁸

Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that amid this surge of wealth, club owners began to approach their spaces like real estate. With increasing rents, operating a huge club on door and drink prices couldn't turn a profit like it used to. The dance floor and the crowded area by the bar remained the same, open to whoever was willing to pay the cover charge and high drinks prices. But the real profits of a club now came from individual tables, which club owners started to "rent" to people with money, who would pay for the right to occupy one for a few hours. After some negotiation at the door—concerning their required minimum spend, for instance—table customers get whisked behind the velvet rope and led to their table. Some clients make reservations to secure a table in advance, while others simply lay down the right credit card at the door to signal their seriousness about spending. Bottles of alcohol are brought to them, and they can serve themselves from their own private space in the club. Everyone else has to stand at the bar and get jostled.

Table service had been the norm in the 1980s at select clubs in Paris, where New York club owners first saw it; in the 1990s they imported it to New York as a way to expedite serving drinks. The club Marquee on Tenth Avenue in Manhattan is often attributed

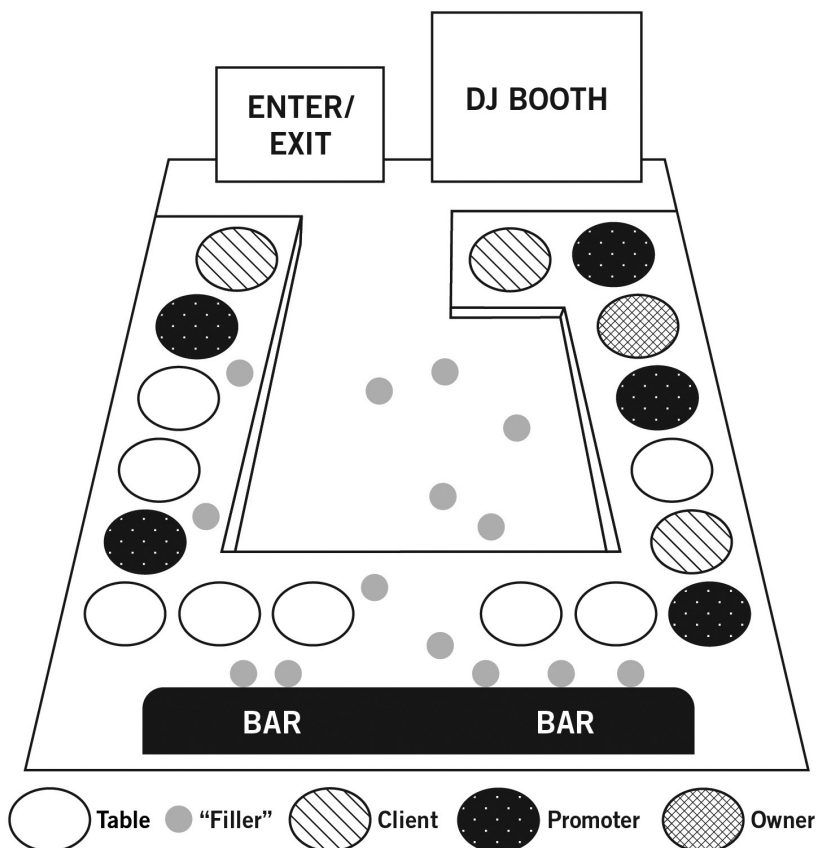
with pioneering bottle culture by hiring image promoters to bring models to attract spenders.¹⁹ Marquee was launched in 2003 by two former promoters, Jason Strauss and Noah Tepperberg, in a 5,000-square-foot former garage. The lounge area adjacent to the dance floor featured thirty-six tables, with couches, ottomans, and banquette sofa seating. Promoters occupied about a third of those tables, which were strategically located throughout the room, placed in the corners and next to big spenders, giving guests the impression they were surrounded by models.

Clubs had long used “mass promoters” to mobilize high volumes of people, at least fifty and usually a mix of men and women, who might get discounted entry or drink tickets. Mass promoters keep a club from looking empty, but they don’t attend to the minutiae of looks. Image promoters, by contrast, focus their efforts on “quality” over quantity in terms of the female bodies they bring, so that clubs can attract big spenders. The business model of image hosting is simple: “Let in ten groups for free so fifty will pay,” as one manager put it.

In most clubs, tables are placed between the dance floor and the walls of the room, with a bar to one side and the DJ booth usually elevated above the dance floor. Below is a graphic of the interior layout of a typical high-end club in Manhattan’s Meatpacking District. This club is on the small side, with a capacity of three hundred people. To sit at a table here, the minimum spend on a Friday night is \$1,000. Of the seventeen tables at this club, anywhere between four and eight—between a quarter and a half—will be occupied by a promoter (or team of promoters), each with anywhere from five to fifteen beautiful girls. The owner sometimes also has a table reserved for himself and his guests, often also models or celebrities. Less economically and symbolically important persons, called “filler,” order their drinks standing at the bar.

The “table” is an area consisting of a banquette sofa on which a group may sit, or more likely stand, and even dance, and several low tables on which the bottles, buckets of ice, and glasses rest. A table like the one shown in figure 2 typically holds ten to fifteen people; on a crowded night, people may climb onto the sofa’s upper back or spill over into nearby tables and the dance floor.

Inside the VIP Club



Inside a New York VIP club with a legal capacity of three hundred people and seventeen tables. On any given weekend night, the club can expect between three and five clients to purchase tables; they will hire between four and five promoters to host tables strategically placed throughout the room, with "fillers" on the dance floor and at the bar.

FIGURE 1. Inside the VIP Club

At first, bottle service was a convenience, a way for people who had money to avoid waiting at the bar, but it quickly escalated into a luxury experience. Over the course of the 2000s, prices on bottles soared and clubs began to encourage spending sprees, setting the stage for a new kind of publicly visible "very important person"

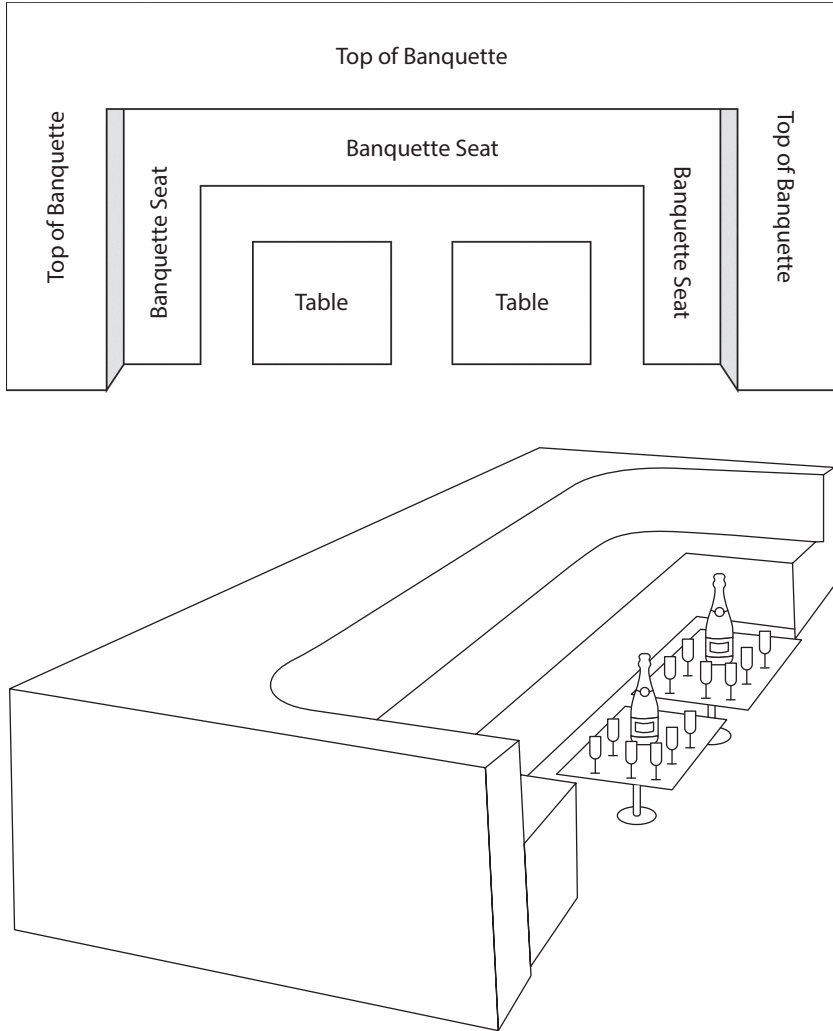


FIGURE 2A AND 2B. At the Table

to show off.²⁰ When the first bottle service appeared in New York clubs, in the early 1990s, a bottle of vodka cost about \$90. By the early 2000s, prices were up to \$500 for a bottle of Grey Goose vodka (which retailed for around \$30 at the time, a markup of more than a thousand percent).²¹ A few years ago, at Double Seven, a 2,400-square-foot space with a capacity of 175 on Gansevoort Street, the average tab for table service was “only” \$2,500.²²

Bottles started arriving at tables with sparkler fireworks taped to their necks; soon you could order champagne bottles up to six liters big; eventually gold-plated and diamond-encrusted bottles appeared on some menus. Within the velvet ropes of Provocateur, a 7,000-square-foot club at the front of the Hotel Gansevoort, on Eighth Avenue in Manhattan, a six-liter bottle of Cristal champagne went for \$40,000. With such high prices, some lamented that clubbing had become exclusively for the rich, to the point of being boring; some club owners complained that bottle service had ruined nightlife and predicted that the practice would soon die.²³ Riding the growing popularity of electronic dance music (EDM), club owners have opened larger spaces to host superstar DJs such as AfroJack and Tiësto, whose nightly fees reach six figures. While large EDM-focused clubs charge tickets to a large mass of entrants, a large share of their profits still come from price-inflated bottles of alcohol bought by VIPs.²⁴

The city, and especially the city at night, is “where the action is,” as sociologist Erving Goffman described it. Today’s clubs are the latest in a long line of urban entertainment: first the opera and the penny arcade and the promenade, then the bar, the speakeasy, and the club.²⁵ In all of these modern urban leisure spaces, there is an endless sense of possibility, the potential for unknown thrills and pleasures in the company of strangers. In the taxi dance halls of the 1930s, working-class men could hire a woman for a ninety-second dance for ten cents; sociologist Paul Cressey observed that the dance hall was just one of many wondrous leisure places in the modern city built to satisfy the human need for stimulation.²⁶ City dwellers, increasingly drawn away from home into new commercial spaces, have always gone out in search of excitement.

The bottle service club today pitches Goffman’s “action” to the world’s new elite; it encourages the rich to flaunt their riches, to display wealth for display’s sake. Bottle service clubs are predicated on *conspicuous consumption*, a term coined, in 1899, by Thorstein Veblen, the quirky Norwegian American economist. Writing in the Gilded Age, a time of vast economic inequality, Veblen viewed consumption as a competition for social status.²⁷ He argued that the nouveau riche, lacking prestigious titles enjoyed by “old money,” attempted to gain

status by flaunting their leisurely pursuits, to indicate that they did not have to work for their money. For instance, Veblen observed, among the rich, a high-class wife has delicate hands and impractical dress to indicate that she is both useless and expensive, a testament to her husband's success. The displays of this "leisure class" were often attempts to outdo one another in a never-ending show of wealth, or "pecuniary emulation"; beneath this extravagance, however, lay deep anxieties about the uncertainty of their status relative to the titled, aristocratic elite.

Today's nouveau riche differ from Veblen's leisure class in at least one important respect. Since the boom of finance-driven salaries catapulted the "working rich" to the top of the income ladder in the 1990s, there has emerged an *inverse relationship* between leisure and earnings, such that elites now have less leisure time than their poorer, less-educated counterparts.²⁸ With demanding work schedules in industries like finance, the working rich in the United States now work more hours and spend less time on leisure than Veblen's leisure class. Most of the clients I met in bottle service clubs extolled the virtues of their hard work and were proud of the long hours they logged at their jobs. Particularly important to their self-presentation was a conviction that they deserved the occasional breaks that clubbing afforded: they work hard, they said, so they play hard.

VIP clubs offer a stage for this hard-working leisure class to play out conspicuous consumption, and this form of display has spread to cities around the world.²⁹ The celebration of money in nightclubs also crosses racial lines; hardly a practice of preppy white Wall Street guys alone, the consumption of high-end champagne in clubs is a common reference in rap and hip-hop. Famously, Jay Z initially praised Cristal, until Frédéric Rouzaud, managing director of the champagne house Louis Roederer, publicly fretted over the luxury company's association with a "bling lifestyle," prompting the rapper to boycott the brand and promote his own gold-bottled champagne known as Ace of Spades, now also a fixture on menus in the high-end club scene. The global popularity of hip-hop has meant that its

celebrations of extravagant consumption have spread around the world, widely embraced by urban youth culture from London to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.³⁰

Even during and after the global financial crisis, displays of excess and ostentation continued among the world's superrich, for whom the recession had little effect on luxury spending.³¹ In 2012, Wall Street elites threw a lavish annual party in Manhattan's Four Seasons hotel with parodies making fun of the financial crisis, including a drag performance set to Abba's "Dancing Queen" called "Bailout King."³² Promoters like Dre weren't part of the superrich, but they felt that they shared their financial immunity. As Dre put it during the economic recovery: "We are fine. There's no recession." Then he filled my champagne glass and turned his attention to the girl on the other side of him. The unemployment rate in the United States at the time was about 10 percent.

Most people, including Veblen, imagined ostentation was an inherent trait of the rich. I found, however, that it takes considerable coordinated effort to mobilize people into what looks like the spontaneous waste of money, and the VIP nightclub has mastered it. The tables inside a VIP club are carefully curated and controlled. Even though this scene looks like the life of the party, it is the outcome of tremendous backstage labors—the unseen work that makes conspicuous consumption possible. It begins, like all good performances, with the right audience and the right staging.

Models and Bottles

In essence, the promoter's job is to stage a show of two types of power—wealth and beauty—embodied in the form of rich men and girls, respectively.

"Each night is a production," one promoter told me, likening his work to that of casting a theater production. "That's why there's so many players that put it together. . . . It's a show. It's a production. You're the cast," he said, pointing to me. "I'm the casting director. We all play our part."

The wealthy spenders at every VIP club, everywhere in the world, are almost always heterosexual men. Occasionally a woman comes through the scene and buys bottles, but women are the exception in this male-dominated world of sex and money.

The most central ingredient in the success of the club and the promoter's livelihood are "girls." A "girl" is a social category of woman recognized as so highly valuable that she has the potential to designate a space as "very important." While most nightclubs want more women than men inside as a matter of security, the quantity of women does not alone suffice to distinguish a place as VIP.³³ To be VIP, a club needs a high quantity of so-called "quality" women. These are the girls: they are young (typically sixteen to twenty-five years old), thin, and tall (at least five feet nine without heels and over six feet with them).³⁴ They are typically though not exclusively white, owing to the dominant preference for white women among both elite men and the fashion industry.

The most obvious physical features of the girls—beauty, height, and body shape—take primacy over their personalities or other embodied cues of class such as accent or charm, especially given the low lighting and loud music common at nearly every club, as Eleanor, a white twenty-two-year-old fashion intern who spent most of her nights out in the Meatpacking District, explained: "It's all about how you look, how thin you are, how tall you are. It's all that matters. You could have a horrible personality, and you'll get into the club if you're five nine . . . Basically, the promoters will come and find attractive girls, and tell you to bring friends that are attractive, skinny, tall, you know. And they'll bring you out, and you don't have to pay for anything."

Women in possession of this bodily capital are treated to free nights out in expensive restaurants and clubs around the world, regardless of their financial means, education, or personal qualities.

But not all girls are equally valuable. At the top of a clear hierarchy of girls are fashion models.

"Oh, no, models in New York City are, like—how can I compare them?" Eleanor continued, "I'm not gonna say they're like the royals

of England, but I guess—it's not power—but *the praise* they get, is unlike anything I've ever seen in my life."

Exploiting our fundamental human assumption that the more attractive you are, the higher your social status is, clubs and their promoters want beautiful women of a specifically rare sort: fashion models.³⁵ Or at least women who look like they could be models. Promoters and club owners prefer "real" models—those signed with a big agency—to "Instagram models," or models represented by small, unknown agencies. Of course, a famous model is the best, one that everyone will recognize from magazines and billboards. A promoter couldn't really do any better than bringing Victoria's Secret models, for they are considered the hottest, that is, physically attractive, and the coolest, because of their high symbolic status.

In this field, the model possesses symbolic capital, a particular kind of power that field insiders can immediately recognize.³⁶ The model connotes the fashion industry's high status and elevates the status of a space and that of all the people around her. Sometimes the bottle service formula is not-so-jokingly referred to as "models and bottles." Explained Claude, twenty-seven, a white male from France and a promoter for four years:

It is the quality of the woman. It's the perfect thing. It's just so beautiful to see and watch. A model is a model. She goes into a club, and she's, like, *flashlight*. She's here, you know. And the guys next to her, they'll be like, "Damn, this club is hot. Get me another bottle."

As an ironic statement on the importance of models to the industry, one promoter printed "I hate models," embossed in gold, on the back of his business cards; in reality, his business is built on the adoration of models. Most promoters aim to bring at least five beautiful girls to whichever club hires them that night, but ideally promoters will bring between ten and fifteen each. Since every high-end club hires a handful of image promoters each night, this creates serious competition for any given promoter to find models, befriend them, and get them to come out night after night. If promoters

get it wrong—if their girls are not beautiful enough or are too few in number—they’ll get reprimanded by club managers. They could even get fired.

After authentic models, the next best thing is a woman who looks like she could be a model, a “good civilian.” In addition to beauty, she has the two most important bodily cues that signal high status: height and slenderness. Malcolm, a twenty-nine-year-old black promoter in the business for eight years, defined a good civilian as a woman who is maybe a little thicker or shorter than a model, “but you bring her to the club, she look all right.” She is “modelesque”: not quite the real thing, but close enough.

Below good civilians are just plain “civilians,” language that in the military designates people who do not belong in the field. Neither pretty nor wealthy enough, they are largely invisible in this economy. Sometimes they are called “pedestrians”—the ordinary and hence relatively worthless types include, well, pretty much every woman who looks to be above the age of thirty, under five feet seven, and/or larger than a dress size six.

How do promoters and patrons even see these fine-grained distinctions among girls? One might think that in the context of a nightclub, where the lights are low and shapes are blurred, the slight differences between models and good civilians would not matter. Yet there is a palpable difference between “just a hot girl” and a model, a difference that promoters, clients, and club managers can see. Vanna herself a working model and one of the few women in the business of promotions, could easily spot a working model: “It’s the way she carries herself. The way she dresses.” Former New York club owner Steve Lewis told me that “only really sophisticated people can tell the difference between models and hot girls.” One promoter, twenty-seven-year-old Ethan from New York, likened the difference between them to buying real Chanel and Prada couture, versus the knockoffs on Canal Street. The goods appear more or less identical to the untrained eyes of the average person, but Ethan’s clients are not average. “Someone spending \$15,000 a night in a nightclub wants the real thing,” he said. “Just the peace of mind that he is now

part of that A-list, that social elite. I think that is what the actual difference is.”

Beautiful women justify the bill. Or rather, they are a part of what it covers. As any business manager knows, women’s beauty can change the mood of a place to incentivize spending.³⁷ Explained Brook, a promoter and an assistant to the doorman at one exclusive club: “So when the guys look around, they’re like, ‘Oh, shit. I just dropped my last quarter bonus in one night. It’s because I’m in a room with the most gorgeous people I’ve ever seen in my life.’” Clients are less likely to spend if they are surrounded by mere civilians. Promoters have seen clients arrive at a club teeming with “pedestrians,” take stock of the crowd, and leave for another club. One club during my fieldwork even hired a handful of “table girls,” underemployed models, at about \$100 per night, just to stand at the bar, awaiting invitations to sit and drink at clients’ tables if requested by managers, who brokered the invitations.

Like many people whose value is based on “bodily capital,” models are young and their careers are short; they start as early as age thirteen and peak by their mid-twenties.³⁸ A lot of girls in the VIP scene meet the legal definition of underage. Many of the girls that I met out were younger than the legal drinking age in the United States, twenty-one, and some were not even eighteen, the legal drinking age in Europe. Twenty-year-old Katia had no problem getting past security; she would just flash her credit card as if it were an ID card and get waved in. Hannah, a nineteen-year-old part-time model, once flashed the driver’s license of a promoter, a large black man; Hannah is thin and white. “The bouncer could barely keep a straight face,” she said, laughing. On nights that are likely to be heavily policed, or if the club has been tipped off to potential police visits, underage girls won’t get in. But most nights the girls breeze through the door, business as usual, with barely a nod from the bouncer.

Other “girls” are nowhere near the age of girlhood, but the term still applies. People inside clubs were shocked when I told them that my true age at the time of my research for this book was thirty-one

or thirty-two. I looked younger so I could pass, but it was shocking to them that an adult woman, with a career or a family, would be out with a promoter. There are certainly older women in this scene, such as guests and friends of male spenders, and occasionally there are even women clients who buy bottles. But they are far less visible or important than the girls.

Everything in this economy revolves around girls: How good the club is. How good the promoter is. How much money he can make. How much wealth and power the clients are perceived to have. And how much money they will spend.

For the duration of my time as a girl (and indeed, for several years before and after), Club X (not its real name) was widely recognized as one of the top clubbing spots in the New York exclusive club scene, where \$1,000 bottles were regularly purchased. Said Trevor, a nineteen-year-old promoter new to the scene, trying to identify why other clubs weren't as good:

Other clubs don't have the quality crowd, the girls are a little bit shorter, a little bit heavier. And I don't like that. At Club X, there'll be some shorter and some thicker women there but it's because they're there with men who are spending money.

"Girls" play a central role in elite men's pursuit of status and wealth. Sometimes, the girls at promoters' tables dance excitedly on top of the sofas and tables, or they mingle about the room in search of flirtatious encounters, or they just sit there, forming a visual backdrop to the club's high-status decor. Simply by being there and looking beautiful, they generate enormous value for the club industry, the individual men operating within it, and the larger urban economy of New York City. Their value emerges from the very specific conditions in which they are seen. Most importantly, these "girls" exist in an altogether different social category from women. And because I want readers to experience this difference, I strategically use the term "girl" from here on without quotation marks to refer to this category of women in the VIP arena. Because in this rarefied world there is an unspoken but widely understood logic: girls are valuable; women are not.

Face Control

The greater the exclusivity, the higher the desirability of the club. Door personnel screen carefully to make sure that only the right people—either beautiful or rich—get inside. In Russia, they are called “face control,” and that’s basically their job in New York, too. One club owner described his door as similar to the “Fort Knox experience.”³⁹ He meant that as a selling point.

Unattractive women, in particular, are carefully screened out.

For a promoter, the worst possible embarrassment is when a doorman turns away someone in the group that he has assembled. Girls’ constant requests to bring their friends are the bane of the promoter’s work, since girls are never as discerning about their friends’ looks as the club world is. The promoter Ethan recounted a recent incident, when one of his girls brought a friend who didn’t have the right look, because she was heavier and not as pretty as a model. Ethan was squirming in his chair during our interview as he explained how the scene unfolded: “I’ve gotta, like, kind of, like, pull my hat below my eyes when the doorman is like, ‘No, that fat bitch can’t come in here.’ I’m like, ‘*Argh*, that’s so embarrassing! Can you be a little politer?’”

Then there was that time at a top Manhattan club when, as Ethan’s girls were getting in, the doorman called out one of his girls for her toes, which poked out over the edge of her high-heeled sandals. Ethan tells the story partially laughing and again partially squirming: “The doorman called her out on it so bad. Like, she was already half-way in. He was like, ‘No. Look at your toes. Like, what is going on? They’re hawking over your shoes. Get out of here.’”

Doormen can be ruthless in their assessment of women. Marley, a black Venezuelan man promoting since 2007, remembered: “Oh yeah, some of them are horrible. I brought a girl, she’s a friend of mine. The doorman was like, ‘Marley, what the fuck is this shit? Don’t bring this fat fucking girl here.’” The doorman eventually let them pass, but Marley’s friend ended up crying.

“It was horrible,” he says. “I’m like, man, tell me after, you know. Don’t tell it in front of her face. And he knows I am always

there with quality and it's just this one time, but he doesn't want that inside."

To avoid embarrassing ordeals at the door, potential customers frequently make the decision to go to less exclusive places when they are in the company of women who don't look like models. "Sadly," said one client, himself a big spender, about Club X, "[They] don't care how much money you have. If a girl doesn't fit their look, like, it's not happening." This was especially the case at Club X, which had a strict door policy that specifically targeted women's appearance. Once I invited a girlfriend, a model who was five feet ten, to Club X with me, and the door person remarked about her shoes, "Sorry, we don't really do flats here." Other clubs in the city are less restrictive and hence, less exclusive; here tables of mixed-sex groups of rich civilians, including women of various looks, are common. But Club X had built its reputation, and achieved its status, on the harsh assessment of women's bodies.

Door personnel quickly assess a person's status by sizing up physique, beauty, race, accent, clothes, watch, dress, even handbag. Red-soled Louboutin heels signal high status, but if the girl wearing them stands below five feet seven, matching the height of the "door girl" stationed at one club, she is not allowed inside. Especially if she's a person of color.

The VIP space is a racially exclusive environment. Even if hip-hop is frequently played inside VIP clubs, on most nights out I could count on both hands the number of black and brown people present, not counting the service workers. Promoters know not to fill their table with too many women of color—a couple of black, brown, and Asian girls are fine, but the majority of tables host white bodies, and deliberately so.

Some of the clients that I interviewed, too, were subject to race-based discrimination. On one egregious occasion, a handsome French Middle Eastern man with a lot of inherited wealth and connections was out with his white male friend, to whom the "door girl" leaned in and whispered, "Your friend can't come in unless you go inside and bring out a brown person he can replace. There's too many brown people inside already."

Such outright discriminatory remarks were rare, however, because for the most part nonwhite bodies are implicitly denied on the basis of the quality of their looks. With alarming frequency, such “velvet rope racism” prohibits nonwhites from entering. But unlike its Jim Crow predecessor, this is a softer form of race-based discrimination that articulates race in terms of beauty, status, and “quality.” Clubs are careful to admit the right number of exceptions to conceal racial bias, making it much harder to legally prosecute.⁴⁰ In this way, the clubs cater mostly to white clientele and appeal to them with the bodies of mostly white girls. The dominance of whiteness is surprising in such a global scene, where we should expect its decline, both symbolically and materially, as the share of wealth continues to grow among nonwhites and non-Westerners. Perhaps because the VIP circuit I followed was rooted in the New York scene, and hence tied to American racial politics, white supremacy remained strong even as big spenders from Arab and Asian backgrounds made frequent appearances.⁴¹

Yet as much as nonwhiteness lowers the status of a potential entrant in the eyes of the door person, for girls, beauty can override it: a black fashion model, a real model, will always be welcome. A white girl of short stature or large size, on the other hand, will be told that tonight is a “private party” and she cannot come in. Or, perhaps, she will be insulted to her face.

Short women are regularly called “midgets,” and heavier women are dismissed as liabilities for the club’s prestige and the promoters’ reputations. To describe a club that was perceived as lower quality, one promoter flatly stated, “The girls were fat.” Another promoter said in our interview, “I will use the term *muppets* or *hobbits* to describe the, like, less-than fortunate-looking girls.” Another referred to the women at a nearby table as “ugly dogs.”

Midget. Troll. Elf. Hideous. Disaster. Monster.

These are words club personnel use to describe women who do not meet their physical criteria. Their bodies are seen as worthless and contaminating. Their presence is perceived as draining value from the club, its management, the promoters, and their reputations. They lower the quality of the crowd, the fun of the night, and its economic potential. They are fiercely excluded.

Ask a doorman to make an exception just this one time, to let in a girl of perceived lower quality, and you will likely hear this retort: “If we let her in, you won’t want to come here anymore.”

Hierarchies of Men

Any club, whether in a New York City basement or on a Saint-Tropez beach, is always shaped by a clear hierarchy. Fashion models signal the “A-list,” but girls are only half of the business model. There are a few different categories of men that every club owner wants inside, and there is a much larger category of men that they aim to keep out.

The most valuable in this hierarchy of men is the *whale*, a term you might know from casinos and speculative finance. Whales can drop huge sums of money from their vast riches, sometimes over a hundred thousand dollars in a single night. Their reputation is legendary in nightlife.

The biggest whale at the time of my fieldwork was a Malaysian financier known as Jho Low, a name I heard often as soon as I entered the club world. Said one twenty-nine-year-old promoter, drawing on hearsay as much as established fact:

There’s—what’s his name—Jho Low, who spends throughout the world a million dollars a night just for the kick of it, just because he can afford it . . . He’s Asian, I think he’s from Korea. He’s making a shit ton of money, so wherever he goes he spends a million dollars and laughs at everyone. Like everyone is underneath him. The guy’s like twenty-six years old.

Another promoter, a twenty-three-year-old recent college graduate, spoke of Jho Low with both admiration and ridicule:

The last time I was out and I saw Jho Low, he bought a bottle of Patron [tequila] for every table at Club L. He spent over a hundred thousand dollars that night. And the guy doesn’t give a shit. He doesn’t even talk to the girls. He just sits in the back and drinks a beer. He just wants to party—he wants to be like, “Yeah, I did that.” It’s crazy.

Low Taek Jho was in fact a thirty-year-old financial investor from Malaysia involved in multiple real estate and business ventures in Manhattan and the Middle East. Low did indeed spend hundreds of thousands, even millions, per night at clubs and in private parties with celebrities, and he was even an investor in the 2013 Martin Scorsese film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*. The source of his money was often unclear to those who partied with him; one promoter thought he was an arms dealer, and another believed he was a contractor for governments' construction projects. It turns out that Low was a consultant on the state-owned investment fund Malaysia Development Berhad, which was eventually mired in corruption charges.⁴² Indeed, at the time of writing, Low had gone into hiding, wanted for laundering billions of dollars from Malaysian investors into private hands. Low is now a fugitive, and the US government has confiscated millions of dollars from his illegal spending spree, including a Picasso he gifted to Leonardo DiCaprio and diamonds to supermodel Miranda Kerr.⁴³

But for all the talk about Low, whales of his magnitude are rare. One industry insider said to the press, "A Jho Low comes around once in a lifetime."⁴⁴ Though their visits were infrequent, whales drive a lot of the action in the club and they fuel stories of excess, luxury, and excitement, stories that are essential to the club's allure. Whales raise the possibility that you, too, might witness a grand display of wealth tonight.

After whales, club owners hope to attract celebrities, another class of highly valued clients. Sometimes celebrities buy expensive bottles, part of the show of excess that will likely make it into the press, but usually they are comped, since their mere presence adds value to the club. Some celebrities even get paid to make appearances in clubs, notably Paris Hilton, a pioneer in paid club appearances who created her own celebrity through the VIP scene, which she then aggressively monetized.⁴⁵

While exciting, whales and celebrities don't account for the bulk of clubs' profits; they are too rare. Furthermore, very rich men who could spend huge sums are regularly invited to party free of charge, even if they aren't celebrities. An elaborate informal system of prices marks who is important enough to be among the VIPs, and who is

actually “very” important. Prices are negotiable, contingent upon the spender’s social status; some men pay reduced prices for tables, and some are comped automatically because of their status. In fact, the men with the most riches, either in terms of their social connections, symbolic value, or financial worth, are often comped drinks on the house. One self-described Brazillionaire explained why he rarely paid for drinks in any Meatpacking District club that knew who he was: “They think I’ll give something back,” such as investing in the owner’s next bar or club venture, or holding his next big (and lucrative) birthday party at that establishment.

Free things are a clear marker of status in the VIP world. Free entry, drinks, and dinners signal recognition of a person’s social worth.⁴⁶ “I always said, in nightlife it’s not what you spend, it’s what you get for free. That’s real power,” said Malcolm, the promoter I followed in New York and Miami. “You got a lot of money and you spend a lot, of course you get respect. But if you don’t spend a dime, that’s power.”

Most clubs make the bulk of their profits from smaller and more reliable table bills, the \$1,500 to \$3,000 sums spent by groups of affluent tourists and businessmen—your run-of-the-mill banker, tech developer, or other upper-class professional with a disposable income. While on the lower end of importance compared to whales and celebrities, they are central to the VIP scene; in fact, they bankroll it. They regularly run up high-volume tabs because they, too, want to be close to power and beauty. Unlike celebrities and higher-status VIPs, these men always pay.

Duke, a former club owner and now a real estate magnate in downtown New York, calls these people *mooks*: “You know, a mook. Someone who doesn’t know what’s going on . . . It’s the dentists that come in and buy the tables, thinking they’re in the company of the cool people, and the beautiful people.” Dentists with their own practice in New York, I should note, make considerably higher incomes than the national average. But such high-earning professionals are not nearly as exciting as the people at promoters’ tables.

One night at Dre’s table at the Downtown, a well-known music producer named Jimmy poured our free glasses of champagne. Himself a minor celebrity, he scanned the crowd around him and

observed how the Downtown was filling up with rich men, some of them accompanying “women with a lot of plastic surgery,” and a lot of girls. He explained, “You only get in if you’re really rich or really cool. That’s why we drink for free. They sell tables to really rich people who can say they were here with the cool people.”

He added, “And we’re the cool people.”

Jimmy is actually quite ordinary-looking: short and balding, he wore basic jeans and a dress shirt. Dre can’t invite unattractive people to his table unless they are very important in some other way. By virtue of his sitting at Dre’s table, everyone else will know that Jimmy is valuable; after all, he’s surrounded by striking tall white fashion models.

“If you’re not good-looking, you have to be somebody,” in Dre’s calculus. “Everybody brings something to the table. Everybody that gets in has something we want.”

At the bottom of the hierarchy is a category of men without connections or money who cannot afford even modest table rents, but they might still have something of value to offer the club. Called “fillers,” these men keep the place from looking empty. They look cool enough, and have enough “cultural capital” to be allowed in, but they have to stand at the bar and jostle for their drinks like everyone did in the old clubbing formula.⁴⁷

And then you have the “bridge and tunnel” crowd, people who might have some money, maybe even enough to buy a table, but don’t have the right look. To the bouncer of a VIP club, they look like outsiders, people from Staten Island or Queens, who lack the right cultural sense to live on the island of Manhattan. If you give off class-coded cues that make you look like you traveled by bridge or tunnel to the Meatpacking District, you are unwelcome upon arrival. Mike, a twenty-three-year-old promoter who has sometimes worked as a doorman, will call you a “goon,” like a comic villain. He described an encounter with one at the door:

He was a straight-up goon. He was, like, baggy suit, his shirt was all wrinkly, his hair wasn’t combed. I was like, why the fuck am I gonna let this kid in here? He has nothing to add. He’s not gonna add anything to the room. Like, he’s not gonna make it look better.

Also at the bottom of the hierarchy is what Dre called the “ghetto crowd, scary crowd,” invoking stereotypes that link the lower classes, criminality, and nonwhite people. Plenty of clubs in New York cater to this crowd, and while they make money in the short term, Dre would never step foot in these clubs. “You can make a ton of money with them,” on inflated prices on bottles, “but they are carrying a piece [a gun]. They start shooting and will fight. It’s dangerous, scary people.” Himself a black man, Dre took pains to distance himself from other black people, whom he understood were stereotyped as lower class, and who therefore posed liabilities for his reputation.

Bridge and tunnel, goons, and ghetto. These are men whose money can’t compensate for their perceived status inadequacies. The marks of their marginal class positions are written on their bodies, flagging an automatic reject at the door.

A clever man can try to use models as leverage to gain entry and discounts at clubs. A man surrounded by models will not have to spend as much on bottles. I interviewed clients who talked explicitly about girls as bargaining chips they could use at the door. For instance, Rhys, a wealthy financier and regular Club X visitor, considers that five finance guys in suits, “if they are older and if they are uglier,” will have to pay the table minimum, say \$2,000, to get in; it’s like paying a tax on their own low-status bodies. On the other hand, Rhys reasons, two “decent-looking guys with three or four models” will be welcomed inside with no hassles, and no required minimum to spend. They can stand on the dance floor and order drinks at the bar, as fillers, avoiding the hefty table rent.

Men familiar with the scene make these calculations even if they have money to spend: How many beautiful girls can I get to offset how I look? How many beautiful girls will it take to offset the men with me? How much money am I willing to spend for the night in the absence of quality girls?

How deeply stamped in our bodies is the status structure of a society. You can actually see this hierarchy just by scanning a room like the Downtown, which depicts a topography of embodied statuses everywhere you look. Bouncers, or security personnel, are large black men nearly always dressed in black; they are emblems

of physical power but not social status. The busboys who carry trays of empty bottles and glasses are short and brown-skinned Latinos, between five feet three and five feet five tall. Wearing plain black uniforms, they weave through the crowd carrying trays, mops, and glasses almost sight unseen. In the space they are “non-persons,” as Goffman would call them.⁴⁸ Sometimes they hold flashlights above their heads so you know they are coming through, but you can hardly see the body beneath the light, a contrast to the sparkling bottle of champagne illuminating the tall, stiletto-clad girls. Cocktail waitresses, called “bottle girls,” are tall, voluptuous, and relatively racially diverse, their dresses as tight and revealing as their heels are high; they stand for sex and, according to guys like Dre, they are as much for sale as the bottles they carry.⁴⁹ Unlike the seemingly available bottle girl, the fashion model represents not sex but beauty—a prize of far greater status. While everyone else—bouncer, busboy, filler, and even the bottle girl, except when needed—tends to fade into the background, the model is meant to stand out. Tables for models are reserved in highly visible areas of clubs and restaurants, and everyone in nightlife wants to be seen with them.

It is common sense that whales only go to clubs with a high-quality crowd. Promoters are also incentivized to bring in men who buy bottles, sometimes called “bottle clients,” for which they receive a commission of 10–20 percent on their drink purchases, which the managers pay to promoters either in paychecks at the end of each week or nightly in cash, depending on their arrangement with the club. Sampson, a twenty-seven-year-old promoter in New York for the preceding three years, put the commission sums in perspective like this, “If a guy spends \$20,000, that pays my rent. In one night.”

To be clear, to refer to a “high-quality crowd” is first and foremost to refer to the quality of its girls: that is, to a crowd full of models or women who look like models. Girls determine hierarchies of clubs, the quality of people inside, and how much money is spent. Their presence or absence has other important effects for certain men in the VIP party scene—girls make or break, especially, the reputations of promoters.

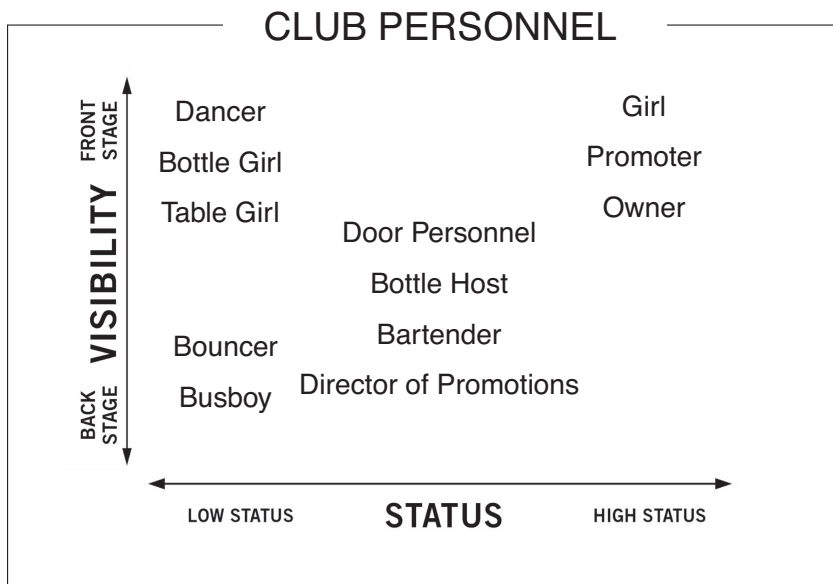


FIGURE 3. Club Personnel

With a consistently high volume of high-quality girls—between five and ten, say—promoters like Dre could demand as much as \$1,000 a night. But the kind of symbolic value girls lent to promoters made models seem priceless. When Dre began promoting at Club X, he boasted about it often. In his view, if a promoter worked with Club X, all the other clubs would want him. When Dre got wind that Celia, a rival and one of the few women promoters in the scene, was claiming to work at Club X too, he mocked her. Celia’s quality of girls was too poor, said Dre, because she brought mostly good civilians, not models. “I can bring one girl to a party and [get] more than what Celia will get for twenty girls. It’s the reputation, you see.”

Without models, promoters like Celia could get between \$300 and \$600 a night, depending on the quality and quantity of their girls, and these criteria are assessed over the course of the night as managers cruise through the club; promoters are only paid at the end of the night. A promoter makes constant loose calculations based on

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